

## ACOMAF Part 1: The House of Beasts (Rhys POV)

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# **ACOMAF Part 1: The House of Beasts (Rhys POV)**

by [illyriantremors](#)

## Summary

The first 13 chapters of ACOMAF told from Rhys's POV. Includes some brief details of his three months without her after he comes home from UtM and some improvised scenes, but most of it concerns his time with Feyre.

## Notes

The first chapter of this fic roughly encompasses Chapters 1-4.

\*\*\*\*\*This series does continue all the way through CHAPTER 56 of the book. Subsequent chapters are linked as a series to this Part 1. When you are done with Chapter 7 of Part 1, there should be linkage to read the next fic if you are interested. A lot of people comment on Part 1 asking for more and it's already posted, so I'm adding this note here just in case. :)

## Hello Feyre Darling (Chapters 1-4)

The mountains of the Illyrian Steppes wrought a chill through my bones I hadn't felt in years.

We flew for most of the day, listening to wherever the shadows at my brother's back directed us, until at last the sun began to set and we landed in a small clearing between the trees.

They were close. Near enough to sent them on the tendrils of wind that carried their blood and sweat through the heavy pine of the woods. Since my return, I'd lost count of the number of rogue Illyrian war bands I'd had to hunt down and confront. And that wasn't counting the number Cassian and Azriel had taken care of in my absence.

Today's hunt felt restless. The outcome had been decided the moment we left the Steppes. These primal encounters never changed even if I spent the hours flying faster towards them hoping they would.

A confrontation. An offering of second chances. Bow down and obey - or pay the debt they owed for the blood they'd spilt, the debt for using fifty years of freedom to push the boundaries however they pleased.

The Night Court would need every drop in the coming weeks that it could spare. Petty disagreements over territory, among other things, wasn't something I could deal with in the middle of a shift that sought to overthrow the entirety of Prythian.

And once Illyrian alliances shifted, they rarely shifted back.

So in blood, they usually ended.

We threaded through the trees, Cassian and Azriel silently stalking several paces out on either side of me until we hit the gap where the band made camp. It was a small legion, perhaps a dozen or so with their chosen lord in the center. An exquisite gash ran down the center of his cheek. No doubt he had been forced to earn his rank, had likely volunteered for the blood bath.

I wondered what they had done with the bodies, if they'd bothered to bury them properly in Illyrian fashion or had left them to rot in the snow.

Their heads turned in our direction as we neared close enough for them to catch our scent, but by then it was already too late. I held their minds steady from the grip of my power long before the three of us cleared the trees lining the perimeter of their camp.

My brothers strode quietly out from the trees, the swords they'd been gifted at the Blood Rite brandished in their hands in an offensive gesture, ready to strike at a moment's signal from me.

Slowly, I narrowed my eyes on the newly elected lord and approached, tendrils of darkness trailing in my wake, my wings stretched out wide enough at my back to send a jolt of fear

down even the toughest Illyrian's back.

"Do I need to bother asking?"

My voice was flat, hardly even a question as the lord looked me over once and spat directly at my feet. "*Whore*," he cursed and internally, I savored the feel of my mental claws dragging through his mind, undoing every last piece of who he was and would ever become before I let his body fall limp and ragged to the snow. I didn't even wait. Little impulses of pain trembled along his skin and muscles in those last seconds before he gave up and was no more.

All round me, the forest rang silent save for the bitter, cold wind howling my sins in my ears.

Red splattered in harsh contrast against the snow at my feet, large sloppy drops dripping from Truth-Teller's blade.

Azriel looked stoically at me as if he hadn't just shed the blood of a half-dozen men he'd once shared camp with. I often wondered how he managed to lock that darkness away so well.

Slowly, he lifted a brow as snow crunched between Cassian's heavy boots on my other side.

"Rhys?" Cassian said, dragging my attention down to my hands. They were shaking in a near violent manner.

*Whore.*

"Let's go."

"Rhys-"

I grabbed both their hands and winnowed on the spot before they could say another word.

I did not join them at the House of Wind that night for dinner.

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There was blood everywhere.

All over the three young fae hooded and kneeling on the unforgiving marble floor, the dagger I watched fall clattering to that same ground, and most especially all over *her*.

Feyre stood reaching with a trembling hand for the second dagger covered in blood. Her clothes were soaked from merely one kill that shouldn't have garnered that much evidence of her deeds. It carried onto her hands - her poor, stuttering hands that plunged themselves upon the fae woman singing herself into death's waiting arms.

Amarantha sat poised on the throne calling Feyre on with praise. It felt disgustingly wrong.

Feyre pulled the third dagger and I knew what to expect as the veil was to be lifted on the final victim. Tamlin would be waiting and then our fate would be in the hands of this small human girl none of us knew. I felt like I was going to be sick even as Feyre questioned

whether or not she could go through with one more murder - just *one more murder* , and we would all be free. Such a steep price to pay for her.

The hood lifted. Silence fell.

The blood stood out in stark relief against the resounding quiet of the room.

Feyre knelt before the third victim - before herself, her ears turned up into two stiff points, her skin smooth and blended into a soft perfection only my own breed possessed. And her body, which had become so long and elegant with its new fae gifted powers, sat strongly before her, beseeching her move forward.

And that's when I knew where I was.

I saw Amarantha up on her throne because I saw her from Feyre's eyes and not my own place on the dias where I should have been. This was nothing new. We'd been inside this prison countless times before and always we failed to get out alive.

*Murderer.*

The words chanted inside Feyre's mind as a flurry of self-loathing and hopelessness I only ever felt inside myself welled up beneath her skin.

*Butcher.*

She angled the dagger at herself and my lungs screamed inside of me to stop her as I felt her anticipate the relief that blade could give her. *No, no, never* -

*Monster.*

A relief she welcomed, craved even. It was horrifying to watch, to feel.

*Liar.*

And it killed me to think she could see herself that way, in any way other than the determined, resourceful woman I'd met Under the Mountain who had saved us all and lost herself in the process.

"Feyre!" I screamed inside her mind, as violently and brutally as I once had to stop Amarantha from attacking her.

*Deceiver.*

But it was too late.

Feyre thrust the knife into her own chest and I watched as my mate willingly committed suicide before my own eyes. Somehow, it was a thousand times worse than hearing her neck snap against her will.

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I was already half-awake when I felt Feyre wake me from her nightmare.

Maybe my body was adjusting, learning to anticipate these moments each night, waking me up hours before the day needed me.

But Feyre needed me - needed someone. And so each night, I readied myself to be stolen prematurely from sleep. If I thought it might be a welcome reprieve from my own nightmares, I was wrong. Watching Feyre suffer was infinitely worse than doing it myself.

Her mind read like an open book when she woke like this and tumbled blindly out of bed racing for the bathroom. Had it not been for her own obsession with marking Tamlin's position strewn about the sheets, willfully ignoring her distress, I wouldn't have even realized he was there consuming her energy.

But he was there and night after night I watched her pretend it didn't hurt her not to have him wake up at her movements, her tremors.

Calmly, I rose from bed and walked to my own bathing room that stretched wide and luxuriously off my townhouse. Most visits to these chambers, I indulged my wings in the freedom the space allowed, but tonight, I allowed no trace of them.

Sitting down between the toilet and the edges of the bathing pool, I felt the cool porcelain meet my back and waited for Feyre to finish retching... hundreds of miles away. Sweat coated both our brows. Feyre's brown-gold hair fell against her face, a curtain around my own vision as I blacked out the waste filling the toilet in front of her - in front of us.

I wished I could see her eyes. It was, perhaps, the cruelest and most overlooked portion of my bargain with her. The bond linking us showed me what Feyre saw, but Feyre never looked at herself. Never gazed into any mirrors or wandered past lakes or meadows or reflective surfaces of any kind that might give me a glance at her face. I knew she wasn't getting out that frequently much to my regrettable ire, so the lack of scenery in her life didn't entirely surprise me, but the fact that she actively avoided her own reflection in the privacy of her rooms spoke volumes enough.

Redness stung sharply at Feyre's eyes and at last, I felt her pull back and cling to herself, scrambling only mere inches away for the open window that revealed the night sky and she wiped the slickness away from her cheeks. Whatever remained was soon dried by the cool, crisp air kissing her skin.

Were her eyes more grey or blue tonight? I couldn't remember from when I looked at her Under the Mountain, how the colors changed with her growing distress.

*This is real* , she thought. *I survived. I made it out.*

She had survived. She was free.

But still, she huddled around herself hugging her knees to her chest as though she were anything but.

Agony sank into my stomach as I felt her sharpened nails dig into her skin at the fists she'd tightened, as she gasped for air in deep breathes I took alongside her out the open window. She struggled for air, anything to feel a stasis again and there was only so much of it the night sky could provide her.

My night sky. I felt like a failure every time the stars blinked out in front of her and she lost herself a little bit more.

*Real.*

She mouthed the word to herself over and over again.

*Yes, this is real* , I thought, but I didn't say it loud enough for her to hear.

For three months I'd sat back and watched just like Tamlin had on his seat next to Amarantha. For three months, I'd quietly convinced myself that the mask I wore Under the Mountain had become my real mask here at home. For three months, I convinced myself that the glorious emerald sitting on Feyre's finger, the tears of joy she'd cried receiving it, were exactly what she wanted - what she deserved.

Tamlin.

She had done all of this for Tamlin. Not me. She *hated* me. More than hated me. Perhaps hate was too weak a word for what she felt for me. I had to remind myself of that fact constantly even as it drove knives under my skin.

If an eternity in the Spring Court was what she wanted, then I would let her have it. Cauldron knew I had done enough to fuck up her life. Dragging her to the Night Court for pointless visitations that would guarantee she hated me more, even if it meant gaining a valuable edge in what I knew was coming, would not help her.

And all I wanted was to help her. For my mate, I would yield to this nightly poison if it meant her happiness.

And yet...

Here she sat night after night. Alone. In the dark waiting for something to answer her. It was the only time I wavered. It was the only time I questioned my decision.

But unless she asked the question, unless she made the choice and called my name, I'd leave her be. This was her peace and she'd earned it.

However much I hated every single second of it and denied my loathing in the process, I had become such a coward. *A monster* .

Feyre's noting of the pain lacing her palms dragged my attention back to her. I saw her fists unfurl revealing the sleek eye I had etched upon her left hand. She felt calmer now, more recovered from the incident that had transpired tonight. But her scowl at the tattoo and subsequent abhorrence flooding through her was dismissal enough.

And I knew those feelings all too well to ignore them.

Together, we stood. Together, we left our bathing chambers.

Separately, we returned to our own private worlds - she in hers and me in mine.

I had two weeks until I lost her, and likely the future of my court, forever.

The smooth ceiling of my room shimmered faintly in the early morning light as it poured in through the open windows of my room. Snow from the rooftops nearby reflected an extra layer of sheen to the light that would have been somehow dimmer any other time of year.

Though I hated having my wings pinned down, I rested comfortably on my back preferring to have them out and suffocated than stuffed inside myself, a further reminder of my previous imprisonment.

It was rare that a day went by in which I did not fly somewhere. Most nights I couldn't sleep and so the stars wove together to form a cradle for me instead. I had missed it, that feeling of open air and crisp cool wind that burned my skin and lungs so badly the pain became a pleasure. Not even on the rare occasions Amarantha let me out of my cells of dirt and stone did I dare attempt flying. Anyone could see. Anyone might mark me for it and use it against me later on.

I knew she knew. She had to have known about my wings. She couldn't not know after the weeks she'd spent with them pinned to the walls during the war torturing me for information. Yet it was the one part of myself she seemed to have forgotten or else casually chose to ignore while I was Under the Mountain.

*There is one person who saw your wings in that court. You showed them to her when she cleaned your room...*

I shuddered with a groan, the sheets beneath me feeling stale.

*The Mountain.*

I had to stop drowning in thoughts of it. It was too masochistic when this day already brought enough pain for me to harvest for the remainder of many winters yet to come.

Yet here I was lying wide awake in bed, my fingers tracing circles over themselves as I stared at the blank expanse of ceiling that mimicked the future I would enter into by the end of the day.

War was coming.

For three months since I'd earned my freedom and come home, my mind had been torn in two with one half dedicated to this repeated thought.

War was coming.



And the only way I could see to stop it was... just out of my reach. Barely any time into my reign as High Lord and already, I was going to fail my court miserably. Fifty years of service in those gods forsaken caves would be wiped out, forgotten among the pages of history the second Hybern figured out the key to rebuilding that damned pot that would unmake us all. I supposed if he succeeded, my lone consolation would be that all of history would be forgotten alongside whatever shitty contributions I had failed to make in a feeble attempt to go down on the side of good.

Dread knotted into the muscle fibers banding around my stomach and I didn't know if the sentiment was mine or *hers* - the other half of my pounding thoughts. Maybe it was ours both.

She'd thought my name last night, only hours ago. Not only thought it, but said it.

*Then you don't know Rhysand very well at all .*

The words had floated casually into my mind in a sea of emptiness I'd blocked out most of the day, startling me into pleasant surprise.

She *never* thought my name unless she could help it. The only time her mind dared to wander down that dark and drunken alleyway was in the middle of her nightmares, when she'd stare at that eye tattooed upon her skin and curse my name for it.

A curse. That's all it meant to her. A cauldron damned curse.

Which was why it shocked me so thoroughly to *feel* it spoken off her lips, the bond opening like a chasm deep and wide for that brief moment to let me in.

*...Rhysand...*

She had so little control over her mind. There were times it was wide open and I flipped her thoughts over as one would the pages of a book, easily taking my time to peruse as I saw fit, something I preferred not to do if I could help it.

There were other times that it was closed. When she was so distracted by how bored or idle she was that ironically her mind felt it had nothing better to do than shut against me, entirely unaware of what she was doing.

But last night, she'd spoken my name. Spoken it and cringed even as she showed me through her vision those around her doing the same, including Ianthe, that frigid High Priestess better suited to a brothel than a temple altar.

Reflexively, I stretched my fingers wide allowing the stretch to pull the curse out of me. I had no love for Ianthe and her schemes, but it shamed me all the same to condemn her to the same names I had resorted to for the sake of my court.

*Whore .*

Perhaps that was what my mate called me in her mind when she tried not to think my name. She certainly hated me enough to use it. Everyone else did. My name was sure to be a curse

inside her mind, one she would spend the rest of her life avoiding, already did avoid every time she stared at her tattoo and prayed I had forgotten her with such loathing and desperation, I sometimes forgot my place and plummeted straight out of the sky.

I avoided her name too. Avoided it like the plague. It was a reminder of what I could not have even if I was prepared to sit by for an eternity and watch her myself through the bond she thought was nothing more than dark blue ink on her arm and a broken bone I'd once mended.

Most days, I succeeded at keeping her out save for those moments her emotion become so strong she was practically at my side screaming at me. The only time I couldn't seem to avoid it entirely was when -

A knock rapped curtly at my bedroom door. My eyes flickered close with a deep sigh. Speak of the devil, I should have known this would be coming.

"Come in, Morrigan," I said, not bothering to sit up in greeting as my cousin walked briskly into my bedroom. "As if you needed an invitation." My voice did not come out pleasantly.

"Good morning to you too," she said with a small frown. "I'll try not be too hurt by your underwhelming reaction to seeing me."

She plopped herself down on my bed lying next to me, her arms tucked behind her head teaming with long golden locks that grew brighter in the increasing sunlight streaming in from outside. She had on a pair of dark leggings and a deep blue blouse, a color that suited her well.

I turned my head enough to look at her and spoke plainly.

"I told you weeks ago not to check in on me anymore."

She pulled one hand down to examine her well manicured nails and flicked them off without a word.

"Morrigan."

"When are you going to stop pretending that everything is fine? I'm not an idiot. I know what day this is."

"Everyone in Prythian knows what day this."

"Not everyone, including Cassian, whom you stormed out of training with yesterday after insisting you were *fine* when he asked you why you want to get shit faced tonight for no apparent reason."

She lifted her brows daring me to deny it. I shrugged. "I see no reason why it's any business of his - or *yours* for that matter - if I want to get drunk with my friends for the hell of it."

"For her, you mean. For Feyre."

*Feyre.*

And there it was. Morrigan was the one constant in my life capable of always dragging the truth out of me. She didn't even need the aid of her magnificent gifts or charm to do it. Sheer will and nagging were enough alone.

"And I think you mean friend, singular, not friends, seeing as how no one else was invited to your little escapade tonight."

I snorted and a ghost of a smile almost graced my face. "I suppose that's why you're here now, is it? To tell me how much you long to take care of two sick puking Illyrian males for the evening. And you can spare me the trouble of trying to convince me Azriel actually wants to be there for that."

My brother would sooner have dinner alone with Amren than turn up to watch me become a morose drunk. Azriel spent his life among the shadows. He didn't need to deal with my self-indulgent pity party on top of that.

"Azriel can take care of himself anywhere, as you damn well know," Morrigan said, her eyes hard as steel, ever ready to defend her preferred Illyrian. "And he'd be there in a heartbeat," she drummed her fingers on my chest for emphasis, "if you asked him and you know it. As I would too."

I sighed, but didn't say anything, my attention returned to that blank, blank ceiling above us.

Because of course she was right. That's what was so annoyingly perfect about her and why we had all clung to her like honey for the better part of near on six hundred years.

"Rhys," Morrigan said, propping herself up on one elbow, her voice softening. "It's not too late, you know. She doesn't marry him until sundown." I didn't have to ask who she'd spoken to for that intimate piece of information. "You could go and get her."

"And say what, precisely? 'Remember me? The man who got you drunk for three months, tortured you, taunted you, and pushed you into a bargain you didn't want when I could have just been *nice* and saved you without asking anything in return? We're mates and I'd love it if you didn't marry the High Lord of Spring that you risked everything for. How does that sound?'"

Morrigan pursed her lips and bobbed her head a bit considering. "That's an... *interesting* way to do it, but you might find a more subtle approach to yield better results."

"Your suggestion, oh Queen of my wretched court?"

Mor smirked like a tiger. She liked that one and it seemed to put the next idea in mind.

"Why don't you try starting with 'Hello, Feyre darling.' Someone once told me that one garners quite the reaction out of her."

"Why do I tell you these things," I said shaking my head. "You are impossible." Morrigan laughed.

"So are you. Must run in the family."

I was too miserable to return the laugh.

“Sundown.”

“Sundown,” she confirmed even though I already knew that detail, had been given every detail of this wedding right down to the lace design of the doilies they would set the tea kettles on. Azriel had given me all of that and more.

She would marry at sundown, when I’d go find Cassian and likely watch Feyre marry herself away, taking the easiest, albeit still perilous, path towards stopping an impending war away from my court along with my mate. In my drunken state warping the barriers of my mind, I’d likely see everything as it happened and hopefully forget it all by morning.

The Cauldron was cruel.

Perhaps a night of obnoxious drinking with my brother wasn’t such a good idea after all.

Sunlight filtered the room in full force now. Morning was here which gave me a long time to decide how much revelry I would be up for come nightfall.

“Morrigan.”

“Yes, Rhys,” my cousin replied thoughtfully.

“What are you doing today?”

“Hmm,” she said, a little hum in her throat. Her hips gave a scoot on the bed knocking into mine teasingly. “Hanging out with your sorry ass, I’d imagine.”

If only Feyre was never this alone. She might be here already.

Despite how much I liked to complain about my dear cousin, having Morrigan around for the day was more comfort than I cared to admit.

The only one who knew. The only one I’d told. Not even Amren knew everything that had transpired under that rock of dirt that cut Prythian in half.

By now, my inner circle knew strictly the facts. Feyre was a mortal who had willingly come into the lion’s den and offered herself already dripping in blood and bait to save Tamlin and break the curse on our world. After defeating three brutal tasks to free the fae she had grown up despising, she solved Amarantha’s riddle only to be killed at the fae queen’s hands anyway and wind up miraculously remade into one of our own. A High Fae lady among us with the spark of seven High Lords in her blood where once a human huntress had been.

And that was where the knowledge stopped. No one knew who she was to me. No one knew how deep the bargain on her tattooed hand now ran. No one knew what torment those three months had wrought on her still human heart, the one keeping her sane despite what she thought.

*Feyre Cursebreaker* was whispered throughout Prythian. Even the fae of Velaris, my own sanctuary I had struggled for centuries to keep hidden from the world, spoke of her. Their savior, she was hailed and rightfully so.

But never their Lady. Never *their* queen. And certainly never my mate.

I knew the second I saw Morrigan waiting for me on that balcony when I came home that I would keep it all locked away from them. I told Morrigan because I had to. I had to tell someone and she just happened to be there for me, the right person when I'd needed her. Had it been anyone else...

The relief at seeing her was... overwhelming, to say the least.

The words fell out of my mouth in droves I couldn't contain. We didn't move until I'd spat the entire story out at her, her eyes grown wide from shock as she watched me fall apart. I hadn't even given her time to embrace me before I was gasping *She's my mate, my mate, my mate - she's my mate* at her over and over again and she had no idea who I was even referencing.

The last time I'd seen my cousin, I'd been dressed in my finest mask, the essence of power and might and all that I ever was and I'd returned home to her a mess. She had pleaded to go with me, had said I needed someone at my side that night to keep me from ripping my hair out all evening. I'd almost let her come. I would have been utterly fucked if I had.

And I vowed never to let the others see it. The second my story was done and I let Morrigan winnow us home to Velaris, I felt a hole inside of me close for none to pass through. Close, but a gaping pit remained beneath it waiting for the stitches holding it shut to burst open.

I wouldn't let it.

We spent most of this day in quiet silence, content to remain at the townhouse for most of the morning before taking to the streets of Velaris and breathing in the fresh air. We walked for hours, never saying more than was necessary. Her presence was enough.

Occasionally, Morrigan would touch my wrist or squeeze my shoulder, but she never pried. Not once.

Not until we came home and stood on the rooftop watching the sun begin its descent towards the tips of the horizon. It was nice to stop and be idle for once. A day of walking had wormed a sick, nauseated feeling into my gut that was becoming harder and harder to ignore the longer we went.

"Cassian will be here soon," I said. I stood stiffly with my feet apart and arms crossed over my chest.

"Is that a dismissal?" Morrigan said with little inflection. Stay or go, she would accept my request.

"It's never a dismissal. You know that."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and smirked up at me. "I'll try to remember that the next time we bicker over dinner or you get invited to a big party in someone else's court."

"That's your own doing and you know it."

Morrigan leaned up and kissed my cheek before turning for the door. "Say hello to Cass for me." Her voice darkened and I felt her grow deadly serious. "He's worried about you, you know. We all are. Your mask doesn't fool everyone, Rhys. And this isn't Amarantha's court anymore. You needn't always be so guarded."

"I'm not so su-"

*"Feyre?"*

The words died in my throat. The barriers of my mind cracked open like lightning ripping the heavens apart as I saw through her eyes miles and miles away from me.

Tamlin was standing feet from Feyre, his arm outstretched towards it as she struggled in vain to convince her to take his offered hand.

*Help me, help me, help me*, she begged - pleaded so pitifully in her mind, her body begging her tongue to make use of the thought and turn it into some kind of action. I saw through her eyes, took advantage of the window she'd opened for me and surveyed the scene.

High Fae - hundreds of them - sat around her gawking whilst red rose petals that Feyre couldn't stop staring at screamed at her from every corner.

Blood boiled in my veins. Darkness spilled out of me like waves on a turbulent night sea. I couldn't see it through the fog I traveled within between our minds, but I could damn well feel it.

The bastards. The *fucking bastards* had recreated her damned trials all over again.

With Feyre, I saw them the way she did. This was not an assembly of Prythian's finest turned out to celebrate a blessed union *with* her. This was a human standing in a pit of mud and bone and grime while those same people pretending to be her friends now stood around the perimeter of her cage and watched her fight a creature from the bowels of hell itself that she could never hope to kill. This was a girl who had no education, had never learned to read standing before a riddle she could not decipher while her only friend cried out behind her and these fools applauded feet above her head. This was the girl who had stained her soul with blood and death for the sake of the man she loved and earned only the cruel snap of her neck in return.

*Save me - please, save me. Get me out. End this.*

This was Under the Mountain all over again. Feyre was relieving it in the full light of day, but this time, the mask was pulled off and she was forced to see it as a blessing.

But her happiness, her happy ending... no one moved to help her and the solution sat there dangling before my eyes and I couldn't move even as my heart tore itself to shreds watching

her panic rise to a breaking point. I couldn't take her future away from her, not unless she -  
*No.*

Tamlin stepped forward and Feyre recoiled. *No - no.*

That was all I needed. That one little word. That was all I had *ever* needed.

I made my decision. Tamlin might be content to sit idly by and not do anything, but I would not. I would never keep quiet any longer. I would never - could never - let her suffer an eternity like this. I was shamed for how long I'd already let it go on.

“Rhys?”

Morrigan's voice became a dull, distant memory in my mind as I winnowed on the spot. I wouldn't have been surprised if Velaris had been plunged into darkness and storm with the rage that flew off me and swirled itself into thunderous applause as I landed in a cloud of smoke and shadow in the middle of the Spring Court. Starlight flecked the dust around me and when it settled, I stepped out of it giving a brisk shirk to the lapels of my jacket, now formal and elegant compared to the casual tunic I'd worn most of the day.

I had no idea of the chaos erupting around me. I spared the guests no thought as my eyes plucked over them one by one like the strings on a violin looking for her.

And then, there she was. Standing mere feet away from me.

And she was absolutely horrified at my appearance, but I didn't care. Seeing her there standing in that dress that drowned her out and stole her voice, I felt a flicker of happiness for the first time in *months* .

My mask - that cruel mask of the wicked High Lord of Night hated and despised by all - was fitted tightly around me once more, but after fifty years of wearing it and three months of struggling to remember who I was without it, it felt like a comfort, a road I knew how to navigate that would get me... somewhere. Anywhere that was closer to her.

I looked at Feyre dead in the eye and the words sprang immediately to my lips in a rich, soothing purr that felt immediately familiar.

“Hello, Feyre darling.”

All around me, everyone screamed.

# I Dare You (Chapter 5)

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which he rescues Feyre from her wedding and brings her to the Night Court for the first time.

The sentries moved at once, all of them braced in a half step forward with their hands poised at the glimmering hilts resting on their hips, the beginnings of the silver blades beneath just beginning to show. Tamlin and Lucien took up the front, a delightful mixture of outrage and confusion I'd never tire of seeing muddling on their faces.

They wanted to attack. They wanted to attack so damned badly, I could *smell* it on them. Feyre likely did too even if she hadn't honed her senses well enough yet to figure it out.

So much male aggression and it fell entirely flat against the Illyrian towering in their midst.

So much magic... and it felt like a shallow ripple above their lovely little lakes, delicate and dainty against the surge of venom hissing in my veins.

I held a single hand up and marked Ianthe, the only one with any sense among them, backing down.

"What a pretty little wedding," I mocked, the taunting persona coming back to me with ease. Tamlin and his sentries froze and I felt Feyre go still with dread beside me.

I pressed my hands deep into my pockets and contentedly turned to Feyre when the guards didn't dare move.

They'd been there. They'd seen me Under the Mountain. Lucien especially. I'd held his mind without so much as clicking my fingers at him. They wouldn't dare move against me until I allowed them the courtesy and they knew it.

And Feyre.

Feyre standing there in a dress that positively drowned her out, the layers of tulle and gosselin piling up until every ounce of skin had disappeared save her face.

And then there were the gloves, lurking over her skin just up to the elbows where the lone mark - the lone trace of *other* lingered. Naturally, they'd seen fit to cover it up and Feyre had... let them do it.

Out of spite, I clucked my tongue disapprovingly at it and felt Feyre stiffen.



“Get the hell out,” Tamlin growled. His claws snapped out of his hands revealing the beast within.

Of course his instincts inclined him towards violence as the most natural answer for dealing with the situation. He hadn’t learned anything in fifty years, not in fifty lifetimes.

In all the time that he’d known me - the most powerful High Lord to be born, heir to the Night Court, an assumed vicious and monstrous territory, and an *Illyrian* to top it off - never had he seen me as the savage he thought I was. All of my moves were made in carefully crafted words and twice concealed actions. If Tamlin hadn’t seen that by now, hadn’t seen me shudder away from the wings and talons and animalistic forms that came out so naturally in him, than he was a damned shade more foolish than I’d hoped.

And yet still his first instinct in anger was to shift, attack. Ever born from noble causes, still, he would have made a reckless trainee unable to survive the Blood Rite if he’d been born in the cold peaks of my homeland.

And here Feyre lived in the midst of his pathways daily.

I sent a reminder of that stupidity with another click of my tongue. “Oh, I don’t think so. Not when I need to call in my bargain with Feyre darling.”

No way in seven hells was I leaving her with *this* for life’s great answer to love. I’d been a fool not to have seen it sooner.

And yet, her stomach physically recoiled at my demand, the bond breaking her so open I could feel the clench of her insides against me. I was too livid to bother caring how much she loathed me, just so long as I could get her out when the evidence of her suffering was written all over her from head to toe, mind to mind.

I’d deal with my own issues later. Feyre first.

“You try to break the bargain,” I said in reply to her silent objection, “and you know what will happen.” The guests began disappearing, some of them winnowing on the spot while others merely clawed tooth and nail over their chairs to scamper off. I wanted to laugh at them, how easily they bought my lies. They did half the job for me.

Feyre for her part remained rooted to the spot, but her arms shook - terribly so.

“I gave you three months of freedom. You could at least look happy to see me.”

I said it just for her, low and injected with enough mockery that she could have... assessed it for some of our previous banter had she... had she wanted to.

All Feyre did in response was shake further. No flicker of rebuttal. No words to hurl at me. No fight left in her at all. The lowest blow she could have laid at my feet.

Shoving the groan building in my chest aside before it could grapple too aggressively with the wrath that seethed, I turned towards Tamlin.

“I’ll be taking her now,” I said, a statement, not a request.

“Don’t you dare,” he snarled.

“Was I interrupting? I thought it was over.”

And as I savored the look of Tamlin all alone up on that dais, his sentries gone and Ianthe escaped, no one but Lucien to call help, I suddenly found myself temporarily back in Amarantha’s hall the first night I’d brought Feyre out and he’d seen the tattoo glinting on her arm, a mark of the bond forged between us that neither of them understood.

I’d felt a glory then in taunting him. And I felt it now all over again tenfold.

The smile that dripped off my lips as I looked back at Feyre was unprecedented, full of the venom and majesty I allowed to fill my court.

And maybe it was cruel, in that moment, to... savor it so much. To relish the joys of being the masked madman they all deigned to fear if it meant that I understood Feyre more than they ever could. She would have said no. She would have objected and they would have forced her up on that dais anyway until the wrong words came out of her lips and likely made her believe it was her choice in the end.

She was just as misunderstood as I was.

“At least,” I concluded, “Feyre seemed to think so.”

“Let us finish the ceremony-”

“Your High Priestess seems to think it’s over too.”

I didn’t have to look at Tamlin to see him still. In the silence that poured momentarily over us, I heard the tiny scratching of his claws retreating.

“Rhysand-”

Civil at last. And here it was his wedding day. I should have hated to see how long it took to tame the damned beast on his deathbed.

“I’m in no mood to bargain,” I said, cutting him off, “even though I could work it to my advantage, I’m sure.” I tugged along Feyre’s elbow not entirely kindly and she jolted. I tried to tell myself it was from not expecting the gesture than from my touch itself. “Let’s go.”

And cauldron damn me into the earth until I died, I had half a hope that she would acquiesce. That she would go willingly - begrudgingly, of course. But that she would accept a way out even if it was the least of what she would have chosen to do.

But she didn’t move. She didn’t accept me or fight me. Still, she chose *him*.

“Tamlin,” she said and instantly, her beloved moved, finally desperate enough to take a single step.

*How long did it take you to move before her neck snapped...*

“Name your price,” Tamlin said.

“Don’t bother,” I crooned, sliding my arm around Feyre’s with merriment I didn’t feel as she again recoiled from me.

Her mind raged with anxiety.

*The Night Court .*

Scenes of Under the Mountain played out to an unimaginable extreme filtered into her head and though I could understand the sentiment given the fury she’d endured from Amarantha under the guise of my court, it was rather outlandish.

And I hated it.

“Tamlin, please,” she said.

“Such dramatics,” I replied lingering on her open, gaping thoughts. I pulled her closer waiting for the final offer, but...

And finally, those hands of Spring that Tamlin bore were pure and whole, the beast done away with, though not gone; only caged.

“If you hurt her-”

“I know, I know. I’ll return her in a week.”

How utterly boring. Even if no one else seemed to think so.

At last, I slipped my arms around Feyre’s waist and holding her in close to me, whispered at her ear, “Hold on.”

And as we winnowed, I finally allowed myself to realize some of my own sorrow at how dejected she felt clinging to me for a safety she didn’t feel in my arms, how hated and despised I was that even giving her the perfect scapegoat for her refusal at the altar, she wanted nothing more than to push our bodies away and plummet into the void of wind and shadow through which we flew.

We landed, not in Velaris where my secrets slumbered, but in my palace estate high in the snow capped mountains of my court. The darkness lifted and Feyre blinked up at me and then... and then...

There was starlight. Glittering, glimmering, shining everywhere for her to see. It reflected off every surface from the moonstone columns that built the infrastructure to the celestial swirl of colors built in to the fabrics shading the open scene. A hint of jasmine wafted between the currents of air cascading over the room.

And just as when I'd met her on Calanmai and she'd first seen me, a single thought sprang immediately to her mind:

*The most beautiful place I've ever seen.*

The softest reassurance she could unknowingly give.

I set her down gently and murmured, "Welcome to the Night Court."

---

It took her a while.

I don't think she realized it.

For several long moments after I'd backed away, she just stood there taking it all in. A part of me stood back in a self-satisfied manner. My court *was* glorious and in that moment, however brief, however small a glimpse of this home she received, Feyre saw that glory and delighted in it against her better judgement.

I took in the scent of jasmine with her, letting it calm the heaviness in my soul as I stared at Feyre. Against the stark white of her dress, the bold depth of reds and blues hanging from the gossamer curtains seemed to reflect against her. The lantern lights added a warm glow to the open, airy space that tilted slightly towards her in the wind, welcoming her.

To come.

To stay.

Shit - she was *here*. Feyre was here *in the Night Court*.

In my court. In my kingdom, and she was feeling the majesty of my lands imbue her with the sort of awe and wonder I only ever dared dream for her to have.

And still her ears were filled with imaginary screams she anticipated to hear at any moment.

"This is my private residence," I said finally, just to break the silence and calm the fears lingering about her startled eyes.

Her attention turned carefully towards me and took in my appearance, noted the changes my body had made in complexion just as I took her in properly for the first time in months.

No indication one way or the other as to whether my darkened skin attracted her or not, she at least seemed... pleased to see me in one piece.

Enough that it brought the smirk back to my face, and promptly snapped the facade on us both that we'd found in those first few blissful moments of arrival.

"How *dare* you-"

I cut her off with a snort. It was too wonderful, too hilariously familiar how fast we sunk back into our rhythm from the start.

“I certainly missed *that* look on your face.” Stepping nearer again, my focus narrowed in on her. “You’re welcome, you know.”

She looked absolutely scandalized that I would even imply it.

“For *what?*”

“For saving you when you asked.”

“I didn’t ask for anything.”

As fast as the peace had found me, it left, amble and quick, carried away by the wicked wind licking about us. The venom leftover in my blood from the Spring Court *hissed* .

No, Feyre hadn’t asked for anything.

Oh, she had begged for freedom of her Tamlin, of Lucien, of Ianthe. Even if freedom should never have been obligated to be an answer to a question in the first place. But of those three, she had asked the world and received nothing.

But of *me* she would go down to her death denying she had asked anything even when I would offer her everything.

The pure frustration of being so misconstrued that my mate should not only shy away from my advances just to help her *live* again regardless of who and what we were to each other but also deny that she had even shouted into that void of desperation at all, was an assault so vicious against my heart that my body rallied as the temper engulfed my mind.

My hand shot out and Feyre’s body went rigid beneath my touch, her eyes wide as the moon on the fullest night.

Snarling with what little control I had left, suddenly exhausted by the facade I’d relished only minutes ago, I ripped the gloves right off her and felt her flinch as I held her tattooed palm in my hand, caressed the eye I’d left there to watch over her.

“I heard you begging, someone, *anyone* , to rescue you, to get you out. I heard you say *no* .”

“I didn’t say anything,” Feyre insisted and again, it was an effort not to rage.

Not at her. But with her. With her against all the backwards misconceptions she’d been given.

To think that Tamlin had let her sit by for three months broken and beaten and left to assume help would never come, so why bother asking? Why bother trying? To the point that she couldn’t even accept it nor see it when it stared her plainly in the face for the sake of social facades...

Cauldron damn me if I didn't throw centuries of diplomacy and careful training out the window to go back south and rip that beast to tatters for damning her so.

Turning that eye up to stare blatantly at the pair of us, I tapped the pupil aggressively and insisted, "I heard it loud and clear."

Feyre tore her hand away, her own rage seeping into her skin. I would never get used to her recoiling from me. "Take me back. *Now* . I didn't want to be stolen away."

The truth.

She wanted out, just not to be here.

At least, here she was safe. But she would hate me for it. Always, always she would curse my name for stealing her. Always, always I would hate she had learned herself as a prize to be stolen.

I shrugged. "What better time to take you here? Maybe Tamlin didn't notice you were about to reject him in front of his entire court - maybe you can now simply blame it on me."

If Feyre wanted a scapegoat, so be it. I would mold myself into whatever she needed even if it tore us apart, made my blood pull tightly in my veins and my muscles scream for the skies.

"You're a bastard. You made it clear enough that I had... reservations."

"Such gratitude, as always."

Feyre drew breath and her body trembled with the effort as she stared me down so defiantly even in her exhaustion to defend her choices. "What do you want from me?"

"*Want?*" The word snapped from my tongue like a reproach in the Illyrian camps for disobedience. Any minute now, I would feel the lashings against my back. And then I earned my sentence with the words toppling out of me in a rolling current. Control was an idea long since lost on me today.

"I want you to say thank you, first of all. Then I want you to take off that hideous dress. You look..." Disgusting, I wanted to say, as I eyed her up and down. A lamb sent to the slaughter. "You look exactly like the doe-eyed damsel he and that simpering priestess want you to be."

"You don't know anything about me. Or us."

*Mother above, help me .*

Tightly, I smiled, some small semblance of the mask left between our crumbling facade. "Does Tamlin? Does he ever ask you why you hurl your guts up every night, or why you can't go into certain rooms or see certain colors?"

Feyre went positively still as knife after knife came hurtling off my tongue.

I did not care that I hurt her. I cared too much that I hurt her. I was vile and vicious and cruel and all the things she expected me to be, so I let myself be them to see if it would wring the truth out of her. I already suffered for how I had failed to her this point.

*Cauldron, let me suffer again.*

“Get the hell out of my head,” Feyre barked at me, thinking of her Tamlin and how I ought to leave him be.

Always, she would think of him. Never would she give her heart - her love, her every first thought - to me. Her own mate...

“Likewise,” I said, backing away. Stay out of her head. Stay out of *my* head. Stay out of my heart for all it’s killing me.

And suddenly, it was all just too much. Too, too much.

Her being here. Having her so close and knowing she was still so far. Knowing she would never willingly choose this life, would never think my Court safe.

That my mate was my enemy. Worse yet - the *lover* of my enemy. We were, perhaps, a match more ill fitting than the Cauldron had seen fit to design.

My father would have laughed.

My mind collapsed.

“You think I enjoy being awoken every night by visions of you puking? You send everything right down that bond, and I don’t appreciate having a front-row seat when I’m trying to sleep.”

Another nail in the coffin as Feyre spat “Prick” at me and rightfully so, I was earning it, twisting on my heels in retreat with a near cackle, growing maddeningly drunk on the horror this had become. How far we’d fallen when we should have never jumped to begin with...

I was done. I needed out. Needed to *breathe* again that salvation of the skies.

Having Feyre here, i thought it would be a mercy and in some ways it was knowing I was guaranteed at least one more week of her alive because I knew she’d be cared for.

But it hurt just as much, to see her in that dress, to feel her so close and know that our souls couldn’t be farther apart even with the bond - the bargain, whatever the fuck it’d been distorted into.

“As for what else I want from you... I’ll tell you tomorrow at breakfast. For now, clean yourself up. Rest.” I eyed that monstrosity of a dress she wore, felt herself flush from the stare I pierced her with, and took my direction as much for myself as for her. “Take the stairs on the right, one level down. Your room is the first door.”

I edged around for the door, but there was one last nail to hammer into my deathbed before Feyre would let me go.

“Not a dungeon cell?”

Would there ever come a day she saw my Court as something other than the ghastly vision she saw of it Under the Mountain?

I couldn't even fully face her to give her an answer.

“You are not a prisoner, Feyre. You made a bargain, and I am calling it in. You will be my guest here, with the privileges of a member of my household. None of my subjects are going to touch you, hurt you, or so much as think ill of you here.”

Something in that open room emptied out then. For all that the space was light, was relaxed, was *void*, an awful pressure filled Feyre's chest and caved in on us both as she approached her next question, a sense of dread and panic filling her to the brim.

And I understood.

In all my arrogant anger... I understood.

“And where might those subjects be?”

“Some dwell here - in the mountain beneath us. They're forbidden to set foot in this residence. They know they'd be signing their death warrant.” With painstaking focus, I forced the anger to the back of my mind and met her eyes, so crisp and clear as the blue bit through the grey fog to see me and know that she was safe in my care.

*Feyre.*

“Amarantha wasn't very creative. My court beneath this mountain has long been feared, and she chose to replicate it by violating the space of Prythian's sacred mountain. So, yes: there's a court beneath this mountain - the court your Tamlin now expects me to be subjecting you to. I preside over it every now and then, but it mostly rules itself.”

“When-” and she stumbled on the word, trying to shove those horrifying images out of her mind as they rattled through the weariness in her bones. “When are you taking me there?”

She looked so tired. So starved for some semblance of truth to see the light by. The ache in my core that cursed and praised the anger as one quieted into a darkness as I looked at her.

*Feyre. Oh, darling. My -*

“I'm not,” I said, rolling the thoughts off my shoulders. “This is my home, and the court beneath it is my... occupation, as you mortals call it. I do not like for the two to overlap very often.”

Feyre's brows rose surprised. ““You mortals’?”



I felt a light glimmer along my skin, the eye of the storm perhaps, we'd reached.

She was so innocent still, even of her own Making.

"Should I consider you something different?"

For a brief moment, I saw the consideration dance behind her eyes, take my challenge in and breathe it right back out. Coming to terms with her own fae existence - a debate for another day.

Still, my lips gave a tug and Feyre scowled as she deflected, "And the other denizens of your court?"

"Scattered throughout, dwelling as they wish. Just as *you* are now free to roam where you wish."

"I wish to roam home."

I laughed and finally deigned to leave her, though still my body made instinctively for the open veranda that sat beneath the stars where it might recuperate while Feyre left. "I'm willing to accept your thanks at any time, you know," I called over my shoulder.

A shooting star blinked through the space behind me between where Feyre and I stood, the bond between us going taut with steely rage that boiled and burned. A shock of pain crashed into the back of my skull that I immediately gripped and whirled to find Feyre... and the shoe she'd struck my head with lying at my feet, her other already in her hand gripped tightly.

It took me so aback, so off guard... I'd never expected it, and yet, here we were. I felt us both slip out of the eye of that storm and back into the belly of the beast.

I was the High Lord of the Night Court. If Cassian could have seen this, I didn't even want to think of it -

"*I dare you,*" I snarled, lips quivering over my teeth, partly just to see what she would do.

Feyre through the shoe as hard as she could - harder, I dared imagine, than she had the first and it pissed me off to no extent. I snatched it straight out of the air and as I lowered my hand from my face, I met Feyre's eyes with determination to see this through to the end. The shoe shriveled into a black ash that fell from my hand now thrumming with power, carried away in bits and pieces of dust on the wind.

I looked Feyre over. No trace of her own power. No trace of anything *more* than her fae senses. No trace of the talons I sometimes glimpsed in her waking nightmares or anything... or anything else I suspected she might have.

Just pure hatred and venom in one powerful throw.

And yet.

And yet...

I felt her presence fill the open space like a mighty wind ripping through a canyon. Somehow, I had to find a way to wake her up.

An impossible task if this continued.

“Interesting,” I said.

And that was it. I left her and she left me, making for her new chambers for the week. I just heard her opening her door when -

“So, *that* went well.”

Even I had not anticipated the snarl that rang viciously out of my throat as my cousin spoke in that delighted way of hers. Morrigan, for her part, did not look entirely appalled, although always she would be irritated.

Naturally, she’d seen fit to follow me here from Velaris after my trip through Tamlin’s springtime festivities.

“She’s got some bite in her,” Mor said. “You two deserve each other.”

“It’s not funny,” I spat.

Mor’s lips twitched. “It’s a little funny and you deserve it for how much you push and poke at her, though I can’t say I don’t blame you given the circumstances. You’ve always been something of a jackass at the best of times.”

“You should be working.”

“And miss the show?” Mor made an indignant *pft!* noise with a dismissive hand gesture. “Not a chance. I wanted to catch a glimpse of my new sister-in-law and I am not disappointed by any means if that little display between you was anything to go by-”

*“She’s not mine and she’s not your anything!”*

Morrigan opened her mouth to say something further and I merely... retreated, until my back hit the balcony railing and my hands went to my knees. A sick, nauseated feeling sank into my gut.

I couldn’t even try to hide it anymore, the physical and mental reactions this woman wrought on me. Feyre was simply inescapable.

My vision blurring slightly, Mor took a wary step towards me and I shook her off.

Feyre explored her room with that blasted bond still a wide open chasm between us. With each new feature she found, sorrow rose with the awe, depression swallowed her with the inspiration. She hated and loved it at the same time and all she wanted was to go, as far away as she could because though the palace was lovely, *I* was not.

My mate found me disgusting - a hollow shell encased in beautiful adornments and nothing more.

I was *empty* to her. Empty to my mate.

A gasp heaved out of me just before my knees smashed cracks into the marble floor, as I realized the full weight of what I'd done to her, not just in bringing her here, but in everything I'd ever done. Morrigan moved at once.

"Oh, Rhys," she said, her voice no longer bright and amused, but grown soft and warm, the one that could make my Commander stand down at the worst fight and my Shadowsinger find peace without shadows on the rainiest, darkest day.

But her skin was not the skin I wanted to feel. Her voice was not the one I wanted to hear. She was not my mate, though I was glad she was here all the same.

I needed her. The only one who saw it all.

"She hates me," I breathed.

"She does not," came my cousin's adamant reply.

"Yes, she does. Don't deny it. She hates me and she's dying. My mate is suffering a fate worse than death and I don't know how to fix it."

Mor was quiet for a long moment, the gears in her head turning before she sighed and gave my arm a squeeze. "We'll figure it out. We'll find a way to get her back. Get *Feyre* back. We've all been to the brink at some point or another and had to claw our way back. This time will be no different."

"Stay" I said as I shook on the marble floor, darkness beginning to leak back out of me.

"Take the week off from court. Your father can wait and I have enough business to attend to with the rogue war bands and temples without Feyre's added visit that I could use the extra hand."

Morrigan nodded and sat herself beside me rubbing circles on my back. She understood.

For all the spirit that poured out of her in constant droves, Morrigan was nothing if not dutiful and compassionate.

It was enough to almost get me through the moment. *Almost*.

When Feyre tore that wedding dress off herself and threw herself into bed, sobs tore at her throat, screamed their way out of her until her pillow was drenched within the darkness as she descended into the depths of the hatred she bore me.

And in the darkness, I cried too.

---

The early morning dawn brought a stillness with it that quieted the noise in my head.

I slept with the window shut, lest the darkness leak out of me to excess and disturb whatever visions wandered about outside. Lest Feyre or Morrigan wake to any thrashings I might have and see the worst of me.

Naturally, my first thoughts jumped towards Feyre and brought the buzzing back to the forefront of my mind.

She hadn't woken from any terrors of her own in the middle of the night, but then again... I sensed she hadn't slept much to begin with. And I didn't want to fight anymore, though I was sure it was inevitable to some degree.

The bond between us was still, though I sensed a dull throbbing behind it even in sleep that was sure to follow Feyre when she opened her eyes. She would need help.

Nuala and Cerridwen were already instructed to wake Feyre and attend to any of her needs, so long as she was awake and okay by morning. I'd seen to them last night after Mor carted me off to my rooms and spent half an hour fussing over me. By the time Feyre slipped into her bath and that throbbing I'd felt slightly intensified, I was already dressed and sitting patiently at the breakfast table.

I gave her time to just be, trying my best to stay out of her head. Despite the tension knotting in her skull, she was relatively peaceful. Quiet. It made staying back somewhat easy as I considered what I needed her to do.

And *how* I was going to manage it.

She wasn't going to be thrilled, but if I started small, then maybe... I might stand a chance.

A chance of keeping my court safe. I anchored myself in the truth of my purpose, of why I was here, what I was made to do. The Cauldron had seen fit to instill me with powers vast and fortified for the sake of my court and I would not yield to the temptations or threats that would drive me down.

If I could not have Feyre as my mate, then perhaps at the least I could have her as my ally to keeping my court safe in the storm yet to come. And that started today.

Perhaps the Cauldron had not seen fit to mate us as lovers, but as political acquaintances, equals who might join strength and will to keep a land safe. I'd never deserved a partner in love, not for nearly six centuries. It seemed fitting fate would not fold on its hand to me now.

The flicker of comforting heat from her bath licking deliciously about in her mind finally startled the bridge between us. I felt warm - happy, knowing she felt something similar even if distantly so while she stayed here. The fact that she could still enjoy a simple pleasure, some small gift I could give her, brought amusement to my features.

I leaned back in my chair closing my eyes. My thumb trailed idle circles over my glass on the table as I reached out, careful not to see through her too much.

Just a tug, a simple pull to say *good morning* was all I sent.

Feyre glowered and I felt the heat of the bath rise a little higher through the bond as she sank deeper into the water. Chuckling, I tugged once more.

*Come find me* , it seemed to say.

Feyre did not enjoy being sent for. Understandably so, but even as soothing as those moments of self-care were, I also knew I could not let her sink so far down that she drowned in the despair of her thinking either.

Her displeasure rang hollow between us as she dressed and I waited for her at a table laden with food, every dish imaginable for her to choose from. My spread was not normally so lavish, but Feyre would need to eat and I hated that I didn't know by now what she would prefer.

Outside the open airways and passages, the mountains of my home were capped thickly with crisp, white snow. The morning sun shone off them like glass beaming with light and warmth.

Even as Feyre approached and paused behind me teaming with the impulse to turn back around and crawl anywhere but here, there was something oddly at rest about this morning.

"I'm not a dog to be summoned," she said by way of greeting.

I took a steadying breath before slowly turning to look at her. We'd see how long this rest would last.

She stood wearing the fashions of my court - a pale peach set of trousers and matching blouse, cut to bear her midriff and ending in gold cuffs. Her fists curled in cold irritation at me as I took her in... and frowned, frowned at how thin she'd grown since I'd seen her. Not even Under the Mountain after weeks of abuse and malnourishment from Amarantha's wrath had she ever looked so feeble.

There was something oddly comforting and horrifying to see her standing there, looking at home in the colors of my lands as her body threatened to waste away into dust.

Calling her out on it would only have inspired a fight and I was desperate to have some semblance of peace between us, even if it was the shallow flirting I'd shielded us with Under the Mountain. Thus weakly, I spoke, "I didn't want you to get lost."

The throb I'd felt earlier pulsed behind her eyes and her gaze crested over the silver tea pot steaming in front of me on the table. She quickly looked away, lest she be tempted.

"I thought it'd always be dark here," she said, straining.

"We're one of the three Solar Courts." I gestured towards the table, unwilling to deny her what she wanted, what she *needed* . Mercifully, she sat. "our nights are far more beautiful, and our sunsets and dawns are exquisite, but we do adhere to the laws of nature."

"And do the other courts choose not to?"

So much she still had to learn. I was constantly reminding myself.

“The nature of the Seasonal Courts is linked to their High Lords, whose magic and will keeps them in eternal spring, or winter, or fall, or summer. It has always been like that - some sort of strange stagnation. But the Solar Courts - Day, Dawn, and Night - are of a more... symbolic nature. We might be powerful, but even we cannot alter the sun’s path or strength. Tea?”

Feyre dipped her chin with admirable restraint. My heart ached for her that she felt so repulsed here, she would not even take basic nourishment from me with any ounce of emotion.

“But you will find,” I pressed on as I poured her tea, as I served her, “that our nights are more spectacular - so spectacular that some in my territory even awaken at sunset and go to bed at dawn, just to live under the starlight.”

Feyre added milk and I watched her thoughtfully. Question after question spilled out. She was nothing if not inquisitive.

“Why is it so warm in here, when winter is in full blast out there?”

“Magic.”

“Obviously.” The effort of repressing a self-relieving gasp at the first sip of tea was all that momentarily paused her from going on. “But *why*?”

“You heat a house in the winter - why shouldn’t I heat this place as well? I’ll admit I don’t know *why* my predecessors built a palace fit for the Summer Court in the middle of a mountain range that’s mildly warm at best, but who am I to question?”

Feyre went quiet, content to just sip her tea and lessen the burden of her headache. I had to bind up every impulse in my body that urged to throw food upon her plate until she found something pleasing to eat as I watched her. At long last, she set her tea aside and chose some fruit from one of the nearest trays and I let out a sigh I hoped she wouldn’t hear.

Breakfast thus far had been... pleasant.

A gentle reprieve from the waves that rocked between us constantly on the best of days. So long as we stuck to facts and principles, these tangible qualities that grounded us to the earth and taught us basic truths, we remained on stable terms with one another.

That peaceful middle ground between us was what gave me enough courage to dare speak again, dare tempt fate that we might bleed with our anger at each other once more.

“You’ve lost weight,” I said, quietly so as not to rattle her.

“You’re prone to digging through my head whenever you please,” she said. “I don’t see why you’re surprised by it.”

I smirked. The comment was not entirely unkind, but the way she stabbed at the piece of melon on her plate warned me enough that she was still up for sending a little fire at me when she wanted.

“Only occasionally will I do that. And I can’t help it if *you* send things down the bond.”

Indeed, she was the source of most of what I saw whether I wanted to or not.

“How does it work - this *bond* that allows you to see into my head?”

Just the way she placed the emphasis on that word - *bond* - terrified me. Enough that I stalled with a sip from my own teacup.

We were so near and yet so far.

“Think of the bargain’s bond as a bridge between us - and at either end is a door to our respective minds. A shield. My innate talents allow me to slip through the mental shields of anyone I wish, with or without that bridge - unless they’re very, very strong, or have trained extensively to keep those shields tight. As a human, the gates to your mind were flung open for me to stroll through. As Fae...” I shrugged halfheartedly, not even sure myself of the answer. “Sometimes, you unwittingly have a shield up - sometimes, when emotion seems to be running strong, that shield vanishes. And sometimes, when those shields are open, you might as well be standing at the gates to your mind, shouting thoughts across the bridge to me. Sometimes I hear them; sometimes I don’t.”

Feyre’s hand clenched tightly on her fork. “And how often do you just rifle through my mind when my shields are down?”

So she hadn’t realized just how open and susceptible she’d been to me all these months. She didn’t like how vulnerable it made her either and I didn’t need to read her mind to know it.

Feyre watched me, watched me not just frown, but deflate as the darkness settled between us and I told her the first of these most awful truths we shared.

“When I can’t tell if your nightmares are real threats or imagined. When you’re about to be married and you silently beg anyone to help you. Only when you drop your mental shields and unknowingly blast those things down the bridge. And to answer your question before you ask, yes. Even with your shields up, I could get through them if I wished. You could train, though - learn how to shield against someone like me, even with the bond bridging our minds and my own abilities.”

Quiet agitation rolled through her as she ignored my offer. I didn’t like that I’d have to make her train when she didn’t want to, but lacking this skill could kill her.

“What do you want with me?” she finally asked. “You said you’d tell me. So tell me.”

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms preparing for the fight sure to come. Our quiet, relaxed morning would be over after this and just as when I’d first deceived myself

putting that mask back on at her wedding, I felt a gentle joy bloom in my chest for the match play to come even knowing it may once again send me to the slaughter in the end.

A match play I knew just from looking at Feyre, dressed so wonderful in the fashions of my court that added color to her cheeks and a highlight to her eyes, I could never resist indulging in.

Staring innocently at Feyre, I casually, finally revealed the seeds of my grand schemes.

“For this week? I want you to learn how to read.”



# Shove Me Out (Chapter 6)

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 6 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which he gives Feyre her first reading lesson and reveals that war is coming to Prythian.

“No, thank you.”

Feyre’s incredulous expression as she gripped her fork with far too much intensity for what breakfast food deserved was enough to rile me into a bit of mockery.

“You’re going to be a High Lord’s wife,” I said casually. “You’ll be expected to maintain your own correspondences, perhaps even give a speech or two. And the Cauldron knows what else he and Ianthe will deem appropriate for you. Make menus for dinner parties, write thank-you letters for all those wedding gifts, embroider sweet phrases on pillows... It’s a necessary skill. And, you know what? Why don’t we throw in shielding while we’re at it. Reading and shielding - fortunately, you can practice them together.”

I could practically feel the steam rolling off of Feyre, her irritation was quite palatable.

This, I could work with. This, I knew.

“They are *both* necessary skills,” she said, jaw clenching with every word, “but *you* are not going to teach me.”

Of course I wasn’t. Should I ever have expected any other objection but this?

“What else are you going to do with yourself? Paint? How’s that going these days, Feyre?”

*How do you like it?*

“What the hell does it even matter to you?”

“it serves various purposes of mine, of course.”

“What. Purposes.”

“You’ll have to agree to work with me to find out, I’m afraid.”

The letter sitting on my desk in my study flashed through my mind. I still hadn’t had the nerve to send it since writing it shortly after waking. Feyre was still too unhinged, too much of a wild gamble to take on sending that letter prematurely. If she wasn’t the person I thought she was, I’d have to find another way of infiltrating my neighbors to the deep south.

Feyre nearly asked my own question for me when her fork snapped between her fingers, the prongs jabbing into her skin to draw out a pain I only seemed to agitate in her.

Such a special bond, this mate thing between us, was becoming.

“Interesting,” i said with a chuckle, noting how easily the metal bent around her slender fingers, those fingers I once watched paint to keep myself alive.

“You said that last night.”

“Am I not allowed to say it twice?”

“That’s not what I was implying and you know it.”

Carefully, my eyes slid over her considering and she watched me with a pained, tense regard, waiting for me to render some hidden verdict I must be mulling over.

How much did Feyre know? How much power had she shown, if any? How far would Tamlin have gone to hide it from her if he knew?

How far dare I pry?

My eyes rested on the fork next to Feyre’s plate, a perfect opposite to the pristine one resting in front of me.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re rather strong for a High Fae?”

“Am I?”

“I’ll take that as a no.” I sucked on a piece of melon and debated. At least Feyre was forthcoming about her ignorance of the fae world, I would haven’t to fight her pride on it to solve every mystery. And I knew then she would tell me the truth if I asked. “Have you tested yourself against anyone?”

“Why would I?”

“Because you were resurrected and reborn by the combined powers of the seven High Lords. If I were you, I’d be curious to see if anything else transferred to me during that process.”

And it was true. Her lack of curiosity about her own potential was... unsettling given how much she craved knowledge of the rest of Prythian, even as I had spent considerable time hesitating at my own powers when I first came in to them. Still, I had wanted to know...

But I also hadn’t been nearly as *distracted* as a child learning to be the High Lord’s heir as Feyre now was by the consequences of her time Under the Mountain.

“Nothing else *transferred* to me,” Feyre said. Her horror spun right down the bond, shocked I would even think she had power. Her modesty and downright outrage that she could be such was absurdly endearing to watch.

“It’d just be rather... interesting if it did.” I threw in a smirk for good measure.

“It didn’t,” Feyre insisted, “and I’m not going to learn to read or shield with you.”

“Why? From spite? I thought you and I got past that Under the Mountain.”

“Don’t get me started on what you did to me Under the Mountain.”

Now it was my turn for my blood to chill.

I felt every ounce of my body still, the muscles pulling taut with the sensation of feeling the knife Feyre would rip across them.

It was one thing to feel her endless hatred rippling across that bond. Part of me was able to stomach the implications of it - the name calling, the crude gestures, the outright venom in her voice every time she spoke and her eyes glared at me sharp and full of reproach.

But to hear her say it? To hear her speak of the memory that haunted her day and night to the point that her own thoughts ran away from it so she wouldn’t have to suffer in the daylight, just to spite me... was another new hell entirely.

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. I could hardly sit in the chair and share bread with her lest she see the devastating mess I’d become at her tongue, her stare.

I leaned forward, my breath coming in pants as the muscles at my back let loose looking for a release I only ever found in the skies. Just something to quiet the turbulent violence in my mind while I tried to find a way to apologize, to erase the past with some kind of sincerity that would let us go on, but-

I choked on the words, not knowing what to say.

*Don’t get me started on what you did to me Under the Mountain.*

A sharp pain split in two running parallel lines down my back and I felt a weight escape, a weight that I masked in smoke and ash behind me. I was on the verge of unraveling completely as I opened my mouth to speak, terrified of what might come out or what she might say, when I heard the faint clicking of heels across the marble floor approaching.

My body released and with it went the wings that had almost manifested. I felt my mask slip back in place as the relief allowed my lazy, cool smile to reappear that seemed to confuse Feyre before she heard the footsteps too.

“We have company. We’ll discuss this later.”

“No we won’t,” Feyre said, but then Morrigan was breezing into the room like a cool summer breeze, grinning ear to ear. Feyre’s eyes widened.

“Hello, hello,” Mor practically sang into every crevice of the room.

“Feyre,” I said, “meet my cousin, Morrigan. Mor, meet the lovely, charming, and open-minded Feyre.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Mor said and my stomach instantly tensed. She walked straight up to Feyre, who held out her hand and found Mor swiping it away so she could crush her in a body binding hug instead. If I thought Feyre’s eyes had widened earlier, they were a pair of moons now as she sank into my cousin’s embrace.

Mor released her and took a spot between us at the table, but that red lipped mouth of hers kept on running, much to my chagrin.

“You look like you were getting under Rhys’s skin,” she said with no reservations whatsoever, ever the fiend at my back. “Good thing I came along. Though I’d enjoy seeing Rhys’s balls nailed to the wall.”

Mor shot me a wild, vicious look that I returned with equal fervor, brows near up to my forehead.

*You’re supposed to be on my side*, I seemed to say. In truth, she was supposed to be working, but that seemed to be the least of her concerns.

My eyes slid back to Feyre and caught her straightening herself up, the first I’d seen her give any indication of caring. “It’s - nice to meet you,” she said.

“Liar,” Mor said. “You want nothing to do with us, do you? And wicked Rhys is making you sit here.”

She was all brutal honesty today and likely just to spite me for going against her wishes to tell Feyre the truth about the mate bond - about everything.

And it drove me *batty* that she might just decide to one up me and do the job in my stead.

“You’re... perky today, Mor,” I said. Her eyes flashed at me again.

*I’m on her side, dear cousin*, the look said and I wanted to scream.

“Forgive me for being excited about having company *for once*.”

“You could be attending your own duties...” *Like I’d asked you too.* The strain in my voice started to crack me all over again, but Feyre seemed to be enjoying the back and forth. Either she was upset and I was a flirtatious pig, or I was irked and she was happy.

So be it.

“I needed a break,” Mor said, surveying the spread of foods and seeing what her never ending stomach felt like having for a mid-morning snack. “And you told me to come here whenever I liked, so what better time than now, when you brought my new friend to finally meet me?”

*I am working, charming the socks right off your mate where your sorry ass failed to.*

She wouldn't even look at me, but it was written all over that smile, that bright glowing skin Feyre couldn't stop staring at.

Feyre's attention idled between the two of us and I wished for just one moment it would stop on me long enough to linger in quiet ease the way she did for Mor. However much my cousin loved digging thorns in my side, I had to admit she had a way of pulling a brightness out of the darkest people.

A brightness I saw spark for a moment in Feyre that felt warm and comfortable.

"You two look nothing alike," Feyre suddenly announced.

She wasn't wrong.

It wasn't just the way Morrigan's bright turquoise clothes fashioned in the same style as the ones Feyre wore contrasted so sharply against the dark fabric of my tunic; it was everything else. From the bright sunshine gold of Mor's hair to my near black strands flecked with blue, the sun-kissed hue of her skin against the deepening tan of my own, her slender build framed with muscles that shaped her against the larger build I held.

And that wasn't to mention the differing ways we carried ourselves, our personas, even if we shared a common interest in fine wine and orchestrated music.

We were different in just about every way excepting all the ones that mattered. I supposed it made her my third for a reason.

"Mor is my cousin in the *loosest* definition," I explained. Mor's smile blazed fiercely across the table even through a mouthful of tomato and cheese. "But we were raised together. She's my only surviving family. And as my only remaining relative, Mor believes she is entitled to breeze in and out of my life as she sees fit."

Somehow in the span of four sentences, Mor had inhaled her plate and added two good sized muffins to the mix before ignoring me plainly as she cut them and said, "So grumpy this morning."

I was ready to bite at that when Feyre jumped in with a question I wasn't ready for. "I didn't see you Under the Mountain."

And Mor, as casually as stating the weather outside, was more than willing to answer - honestly.

"Oh, I wasn't there," she said, "I was in-"

"Enough, Mor," and I hated to admit even to myself how dark my tone went with her in that moment. Mor didn't protest further, seeming to know there was a line we were too near crossing and Mother above, she let me have this one.

I still felt shivers down my spine tracing fear and anxiety along the bones. The truth could main like that when killing wasn't an option.

I set my napkin aside and stood, signaling an end to our breakfast and deciding to let Feyre in on a kernel of truth surrounding Morrigan's appearance, that she hadn't just appeared out of thin air quite so magically.

"Mor will be here for the rest of the week," I said, "but by all means, do not feel that you have to oblige her with your presence."

And to that, my dear cousin stuck her tongue out at me in blatant disregard. I rolled her eyes and felt another flicker of amusement from Feyre, this time directed at *me*. It was enough that my tongue sharpened in defense.

I was so backwards, constantly craving her affection or at least her attention and then stumbling over myself in idiocy when she gave it to me.

"Did you eat enough?" Feyre inclined her head. "Good. Then let's go. Your first lesson awaits."

"If he pisses you off, Feyre," Mor said behind me as I strode from the table, "feel free to shove him over the rail of the nearest balcony."

I flipped her off over my shoulder and could feel the grin burn onto my back.

*See, you're on her side too*, it said.

"Enjoy your breakfast," Feyre said and was up out of her seat trailing me.

"Whenever you want company, give a shout."

Ah, Morrigan. Ever the dutiful friend.

To the very end.

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Feyre sat at the wooden table tucked inside the cozy alcove of the study with little resistance, having come around to the sensibility of the tasks at hand rather quickly after our quick morning chat with Mor.

But while Feyre was every bit the pragmatist, it was the stubborn iron-willed fighter that had cleaved bones in two to hurl at her enemies and made me fall in love with her who sat down to study.

Relief sank into my chest.

Feyre - my Feyre - was still there, somewhere.

"I know my alphabet," she said. "I'm not that stupid."

She eyed every book and piece of paper I set before her with hot disdain, her tongue cutting me like a razor with the way she spat the words out.

“I didn’t say you were stupid,” I replied. “I’m just trying to determine where we should begin. Since you’ve refused to tell me a thing about how much you know.”

“Can’t you hire a tutor?”

But for Feyre, even this level of discomfort felt a bit excessive given what she’d endured in front of me before. Reading compared to drunken parties spent half naked and many a night bathed in blood seemed like nothing.

And sitting there, itching to claw my eyes out in that vibrant set of clothes that added so much color back to her cheeks the way her Spring Court attire never did... it was kind of hot.

This woman could have eaten me alive if she had wanted to and she wasn’t the least bit aware.

“Is it that hard for you to even try in front of me?” I asked.

“You’re a High Lord - don’t you have better things to do?”

*What do you think I’m doing, darling?*

“Of course,” I said instead. “But none as enjoyable as seeing you squirm.”

And certainly nothing of my real job was as pleasurable as her company, even if her fingers didn’t twitch to pull her shoes from her feet and hurl them with that considerable fae strength of hers right at my head again.

“You’re a real bastard, you know that?”

I laughed dryly, happy to hear some of the snark returning. It suited her. “I’ve been called worse. In fact, I think you’ve called me worse.” I tapped the paper I’d set in front of her on the table, the one I’d written privately out of sight as soon as I’d left the breakfast table, just before she’d caught up with me. “Read that,” I instructed.

All at once, Feyre’s head swam. The letters on the page blurred before her, but I sensed it was more from the fear that made her reluctant to even try than any failings of actual effort.

“I can’t,” she said and her voice came out strained. But she was wrong.

“Try.”

Feyre stared longer and harder at the paper the second time around, but still she deflected. And it was just enough to chip away at some of the flirtation I’d managed to build between us and redirect the energy towards our earlier frustrations.

*My* earlier frustrations. At everything at stake for us both if she pushed herself back too far.

“What *exactly*, is your stake in all this?” she asked. “You said you’d tell me if I worked with you.”

"I didn't specify *when* I'd tell you," I said as she scooted away from on her seat. I shrugged. I wasn't going to let her quit on herself no matter how terrified she was.

No matter how dispensable she found herself.

To me, Feyre was worth the effort. In every way.

She just didn't see it.

"Maybe I resent the idea of you letting those sycophants and war-mongering fools in the Spring Court make you feel inadequate. Maybe I indeed enjoy seeing you squirm. Or maybe-"

"I get it," she said by way of cutting me off, and I snorted, half amused and half proud.

"Try to read it, Feyre."

Her hand snatched so violently at the paper it almost ripped in two between her fingers. She studied the first word for a long time and then finally - "Y-You... look.."

"Good," I said gently, but even that was too much for her.

"I didn't ask for your approval."

So much pride in that busy little head of hers. I couldn't stop the stupid grin from eating up my features nor the chuckle that toppled out of me.

"Ab... Absolutely... De... Del..." She paused considering the word and my insides danced, anticipating her reaction when she looked at me for help - the first she'd asked of me - and I purred the answer low against her face.

"Delicious," I said.

Feyre's face burned. Her head whipped to the paper, worked out the rest of the sentence and sent a stream of curse filled emotion down the bond towards me.

"*You look absolutely delicious today, Feyre?! That's what you wrote?*"

Time for the second half of the day's lesson to begin, now that she was good and riled up for it. Hopefully, the emotion would help.

Without warning or word, my mental claws sank right into the wide open doorways of Feyre's mind and took hold. I leaned back in my chair, making it look easy, showing her the proof she needed to realize what was at stake if she didn't put the effort in to learning these skills. Without them, she could very well die and that wasn't a chance I was willing to take even if she was.

*It's true, isn't it?*



I spoke directly into her mind. And even if it made me a filthy prick to her, I meant it. Despite how unhealthy she'd grown since I'd seen her last, I couldn't get the image of her in those bright shades of fabric out of my mind, an image that would haunt me weeks after she'd left for the week.

Feyre jumped, her chair sliding beneath her, and she screamed back at me, "*Stop that!*"

*The fashion of the Night Court suits you*, I said as I dug my claws in deeper, paralyzed her body with unyielding confusion she couldn't possibly escape.

*This is what happens when you leave your mental shields down. Someone with my sort of powers could slip inside, see what they want, and take your mind for themselves. Or they could shatter it. I'm currently standing on the threshold of your mind... but if I were to go deeper, all it would take would be half a thought from me and who you are, your very self, would be wiped away.*

Feyre's skin grew slick with fear, but still she didn't move - didn't try, and still I pressed her.

*You should be afraid. You should be afraid of this, and you should be thanking the gods-damned Cauldron that in the past three months, no one with my sorts of gifts has run into you. Now shove me out.*

She did nothing. Did not move with her mind nor her body, didn't even think herself capable of it and that alone pissed me off to no end.

My Feyre was *more* than capable. I just had to find her.

*Shove. Me. Out.*

I ground the words into her skull until she felt me closing in on her when in reality, I was at a reasonably safe distance. In time, with enough practice, she'd see that. But until then...

Feyre's mind ran - in too many directions and all at once.

She slammed into her own mental barriers and I hummed a laugh across the bridge connecting us, guiding her towards it. *That way, Feyre*.

Just as she had when she'd birthed her plan for the Middengard Wurm, Feyre's eyes sparked and she ran, not just as the open path to escape, but at some hidden agenda gaining traction in her mind. And then before I even saw it coming, that cunning little warrior girl hurtled her entire *essence* at me and my claws retracted, even if I still had to half force them to.

"Good," I said. But even while Feyre slumped in her chair, content to just quit, that demon inside of me reared again to spur her on to finish it. "Not yet. Shield. Block me out so I can't get back in."

Feyre's mind gave half a lean towards sleep and the quiet comfort of her bed before my claws traced the outskirts of her mind and she started at once. A wall of thick, black adamant slammed against the tips of my nails and I retracted them, this time out of necessity instead of force or willing defeat.

Even half dazed for sleep, she hadn't given up. Not entirely.

I had never been prouder yet.

"Very nice," I said grinning ear to ear. "Blunt, but nice."

Feyre, it seemed, felt differently even if there was no doubting her quick progress. She snatched my *delicious* paper up and tore it to shreds.

"You're a pig," she said, a little less testily due to her fatigue.

"Oh, most definitely. But look at you - you read that whole sentence, kicked me out of your mind, *and* shielded. Excellent work."

"Don't condescend to me."

"I'm not. You're reading at a level far higher than I anticipated."

Feyre's cheeks burned bright as the sun. I counted my lucky stars Cassian wasn't here to witness this. "But mostly illiterate," she said.

At that, I settled myself for her. "At this point, it's about practice, spelling, and more practice. You could be reading novels by Nynsar. And if you keep adding to those shields, you might very well keep me out entirely by then, too."

I had meant it lightly, another flirtation meant to spur her into our games, our banter that kept her awake - kept her *alive* it seemed, or at least *going* until the next.

But Feyre's mind quieted more than I expected, her thoughts shifting elsewhere.

"Is it even possible - to truly keep you out?"

"Not likely," I said, sensing something else brewing behind the question. "But who knows how deep that power goes? Keep practicing and we'll see what happens."

"And will I still be bound by this bargain at Nynsar, too?"

Blank. My mind went utterly blank. Lifeless, even.

Feyre turned to stare at me when I failed to answer her.

*Don't get me started on what you did to me Under the Mountain.*

She sat up a little straighter and leaned towards me, the most intent and focused I'd seen her since she arrived. I couldn't look away for anything, not when she deigned to look at me so.

"After - after what happened, I think we can agree that I owe you nothing, and you owe *me* nothing. Isn't it enough that we're all free?" Her hand fell to the table rattling my bones, the tattoo upturned to stare daggers at me in a way she meant for me not to escape. "By the end, I

thought you were different, thought that it was all a mask, but taking me away, *keeping* me here...”

I swallowed as her mind poured over Cauldron knew what words to torment me with next, but she’d done enough.

*Isn’t it enough that we’re all free?*

*I owe you nothing.*

*I thought you were different...*

I was different. Fuck - I *am* different. I just needed her to let me have a shot in hell at proving it to her.

“I’m not your enemy, Feyre.”

“Tamlin says you are. Everyone else says you are.”

On the table, her tattooed hand fisted, covering that eye right up.

But I didn’t give a shit about Tamlin anymore.

“And what do *you* think?”

I leaned away, craving a little bit of space just to think, but there was no going back from the turn the conversation had taken now.

“You’re doing a damned good job of making me agree with them.”

“Liar,” I said and it wasn’t even hard to say it. “Did you even tell your friends about *what I did to you Under the Mountain* ?”

Feyre almost flinched and stopped me at once. “I don’t want to talk about anything related to that. With you or them.”

At last, we were getting somewhere.

“No, because it’s so much easier to pretend it never happened and let them coddle you.”

“I don’t *let* them coddle me-”

“They had you wrapped up like a present yesterday. Like you were *his* reward.”

“So?”

“So?” My insides felt ready to explode - to peel and shred and melt until I was disintegrating from the inside out. She had no idea - no, she *had* an idea. She knew exactly what they were doing to her and even if it would have been okay to admit she wasn’t ready to face it, she wouldn’t go anywhere near even admitting the problem was there in the first place.

And suddenly, I didn't care if Feyre owed me nothing - and truly, at the end of the day, she didn't. I didn't care if I became a monster to her or if she thought this week a prison sentence. And really, I knew she didn't feel it was.

The home she longed for was the real prison and I would keep her out of it as long as I could if it meant the chance for her to realize what that bastard beast was doing to her day in and day out.

If it would give her a chance... to get better. To breathe and live and understand that being here could be a freedom more infinite than any prison.

"I'm ready to be taken home."

She said it with some degree of ease, not unlike the masks I'd worn for years on end.

"Where you'll be cloistered for the rest of your life, especially once you start punching out heirs. I can't wait to see what Ianthe does when she gets her hands on *them*."

"You don't seem to have a particularly high opinion of her."

*"I heard you like to play games. I think you'll find me a diverting playmate..."*

A flash of bare skin, a seductive smile, and the vile, violated feeling she'd once given me swept over me in a wave of icy wrath.

"No, I can't say that I do." I tapped the fresh sheet of paper in front of her. "Start copying the alphabet. Until your letters are perfect. And every time you get through a round, lower and raise your shield. Until *that* is second nature. I'll be back in an hour."

"What?" Feyre stared at me, perhaps slightly in surprise that *Ianthe* of all things had done the trick.

"Copy. The. Alphabet. Until-"

"I heard what you said."

*Prick. Prick, prick, prick.*

For the first time, her curses burned at me rather than amused and I snapped.

"Then get to work," I said, springing to my feet with a sleekness I didn't think I possessed in that heat. "And at least have the decency to only call me a prick when your shields are back up."

And without another word from her or me, I winnowed into thin air.

---

In the hour I disappeared from Feyre's side, I found Morrigan still at the breakfast table eating merrily away while rifling through papers she'd brought with her.

Papers I recognized.

“Did you really have to be such an ass about my joining you this morning?” she asked without looking up. “Or did you actually mind that I interfered?”

My eyes fluttered shut briefly before i walked across the room to one of the open airways and inhaled the scent of fresh air and snow capped mountains deep into my lungs.

“No,” I said, with a heavy sigh. The sound of papers shuffling behind me ceased, replaced by the crisp crunch of an apple being freshly bitten. “I just wasn’t expecting it, though I certainly should have. I am... glad you were there. Feyre seems to like you.”

“Of course she did.” No modesty whatsoever. “It’s only you and dear Cassian I can’t seem to charm.”

That wasn’t entirely true and it didn’t escape my notice she quietly left Azriel’s name off that list.

“Tell me about the Hewn City,” I said.

“Talk about grumpy...”

Mor proceeded to fill me in as flustered thoughts I had shoved to the back of my mind in the last week of magical objects and enemies I’d long thought dead consumed me for the proceeding hour.

---

Feyre was hunched over the wooden table when I returned. Her face scrunched and crinkled unpleasantly every so often, but she was trying and doing remarkably well from what I could sense. Her innate curiosity about the world and determination to learn, to be practical, made her a quick study.

It was nothing short of impressive.

I approached slowly, allowing her to note my presence in a way she sometimes did not have the luxury of doing with others, until I was standing over her shoulder. The letters she scripted on the pages in front of her were neater and clearer than the ones born on the pages she had shoved aside from the start.

“Not bad,” I said, allowing a simple trace of pride to lace my voice, lest she roar at me again.

Even better than her letters was her mind. My claws scraped along the perimeter of that beautiful black adamant she’d locked in place, pushing and testing and continually coming up short. Feyre’s face scrunched at each push in the same way it did when she wrote a particularly difficult word or letter and it made my chest relax.

“Well, well,” I purred when I’d finished perusing her progress, “hopefully I’ll be getting a good night’s rest at last, if you can manage to keep the wall up while you sleep.”

*Prick!*

The word blasted through my mind like lightning between folds of wind, so fast and vicious and gone in a wink that Feyre had her mental shields back in place before I even blinked at her. Behind my own shields, an electrifying pulse I wanted to feel again and again if it meant seeing this kind of life pour out of her swept over my being.

“Prick I might be, but look at you. Maybe we’ll get to have some fun with our lessons after all.”

I shouldn’t have been at all surprised she would insist on walking so far behind me as I led her up one of the tallest towers in the palace and on towards the room that held the first answers I had promised her.

The answers that could save or damn us both.

The room we entered was circular and carved from stone, maps of our world hanging about with markings and pins denoting cities and territories both known and unknown to those outside my circle.

And at the center sat a large black stone with the most important map of all. A simple map of Prythian and Hybern. Feyre’s eyes glanced over both but didn’t seem to note any particular distinctions between the territories. But I knew she was looking - really *looking*. I wouldn’t bring her here for nothing and she knew it.

When Feyre looked up, I raised my brows waiting.

“Nothing to ask?”

“No.”

She it so casually, with such feigned innocence, that feral teasing smirk of mine slipped out.

“What do you see?”

“Is this some sort of way of convincing me to embrace my reading lessons?”

It was then that I felt a wave of her exhaustion slip over her. We had not even made it to noontime.

“Tell me what you see.”

Feyre looked at the map again and promptly answered with the easiest, most obvious reply. And it just so happened to be the right one.

“A world divided in two.”

“And do you think it should remain that way?”

Her head snapped up, eyes glaring - a snake ready to strike lest I do harm.

“My family-”

“Your human family,” I corrected, “would be deeply impacted if the wall came down, wouldn’t they? So close to its border... If they’re lucky, they’ll flee across the ocean before it happens.”

“ *Will* it happen?”

Every nerve in her body pulsed with fear, the first real, incredible fear she’d felt since being here with me.

Since leaving that Mountain.

I held her gaze. “Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Because war is coming, Feyre.”

# No One's Subject (Chapter 7)

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which Feyre concludes her first week with Rhys in the Night Court and returns to Tamlin.

Feyre spoke immediately without any room to trust me, her emotional fear for her family's safety gutting her like a fish freshly hauled along a slick boat deck. And at once, I was the culprit holding the knife.

"Don't invade," she said, her voice coming in great, disheveled breaths. "Don't invade - please."

The level to which she was prepared to beg me to spare her and her sisters - already was begging me - tightened my throat with fear.

"You truly think I'm a monster, even after everything."

A statement, not a question. But Feyre delivered the answer that flayed me alive nonetheless.

"Please," and her voice dropped even lower. "They're defenseless, they won't stand a chance."

"I'm not going to invade the mortal lands."

I cut her off, unable to bear another word off her tongue as the disappointment crashed over me.

Three months under that rock together.

Three months she saw me torture her cruelly, parade her before her worst enemies, sneer at her love, and threaten her life if she did not commit to a bargain she would not have needed to survive in the end.

Had I really been so foolish to assume that pain would be erased by ten minutes of screaming for her on the throne room floor as Amarantha's power - *my* power - knocked me down; as I *bled* for her and sobbed when I pulled her into myself to keep from hearing that awful sound of bone snapping from ringing in my ears...

Feyre's sense of weightlessness as her mind started to dizzy and she felt the world let go so she could fall into fear and beggary at my feet was my condemnation.



“Put your damn shield up,” I growled, not even caring that it was harsh. I didn’t want to feel one more damned shred of proof from her that I deserved this villainy in spite of my miserable, continued hope. Not right now, at least. Not in front of her.

But all Feyre could think about were her sisters living unprotected and powerless in that mansion beyond the wall, how tired and weak she felt to do anything about it.

She still didn’t see herself as a soldier, as a weapon, as powerful or sleek as the billowing night - the way I saw her. That needed to change - immediately.

“Shield. *Now.*”

My voice was firm, halting even.

And it worked.

A momentary glimpse into her head of her family needing her to save them one more time and then... I saw and felt nothing from her. Her shields were replaced.

*Good girl.*

“Did you think it would end with Amarantha?” I asked.

“Tamlin hasn’t said...”

Of course he hadn’t said anything. I cursed inwardly and prepared to ready Feyre as one would a soldier on the battlefield staring the eye of death in the face.

“The King of Hybern has been planning his campaign to reclaim the world south of the wall for over a hundred years,” I said. “Amarantha was an experiment - a forty-nine-year test, to see how easily and how long a territory might fall and be controlled by one of his commanders.”

And it had given him all the bright, shining answers he’d longed for. In our blind, trusting ignorance, we’d fallen like dominoes, pawns across the chess table replaced by dirt and blood rather than queens.

“Will he attack Prythian first?”

I pointed to the map between us on that cold stone flat and Feyre followed my gesture, her fingers fidgeting a bit on the ends of the display.

“Prythian is all that stands between the King of Hybern and the continent. He wants to reclaim the human lands there - perhaps seize the faeries lands, too. If anyone is to intercept his conquering fleet before it reaches the continent, it would be us.”

Feyre didn’t wait even a moment when I’d finished before she passed to one of the chairs a few feet away and sunk down. Her knees shook horribly to the point that I was slightly surprised she’d managed to walk the short distance her trip took.

But the first lesson any soldier learns on the battlefield is that even when all seems lost and as dark and treacherous as it might go, there is always room for an ensuing blow.

And it is best to learn that lesson swiftly.

“He will seek to remove Prythian from his way swiftly and thoroughly. And shatter the wall at some point in the process.” From the chair, even with her shields perfectly in tact, I felt Feyre’s blood run cold. “There are already holes in it, though mercifully small enough to make it difficult to swiftly pass his armies through. He’ll want to bring the whole thing down - and likely use the ensuing panic to his advantage.”

Feyre wouldn’t look me in the eye when she spoke, which she did with a shaking stuttering breath I didn’t think she quite registered. She was lost inside that head realizing the reality at hand - even unto herself.

“When - when is he going to attack?”

“That is the question and why I brought you here.”

At that, Feyre did look up.

“I don’t know when or where he plans to attack Prythian. I don’t know who his allies here might be.”

“He’d have allies here?”

Genuine shock, but beneath it all, Feyre’s curiosity was a treasure that continued to pump a lifeblood into my hope that my plans were achievable, even if torn from the frays of lunacy.

“Cowards,” I said, nodding in reply, “who would bow and join him, rather than fight his armies again.”

Just as they had when Amarantha took power and half my wretched court had joined her.

*My own court lost... forever damned on the pages of history to terror and torment...*

“Did...” Feyre looked at me thoughtfully, although unsure whether this question was allowed. “Did you fight in the War?”

Such an honest question... and perhaps the first personal question she’d bothered to ask me. For a moment, I was struck speechless by it, the idea that she cared even that much to learn some trivial fact about my past amidst a backdrop of increasing loathing for me.

Or perhaps it was merely her curiosity getting the best of her again.

Either way, I would have that personal invasion at once. Let her take whatever pieces great or small of me that she would have.

I nodded and then stepped to the adjoining chair where I sat, removing my general’s helmet in the process so she could hear my story for what it really was. Back then, I was just a

soldier too, like she was now.

“I was young - by our standards, at least. But my father had sent aid to the mortal-faeries alliance on the continent, and I convinced him to let me take a legion of our soldiers. I was stationed in the south, right where the fighting was thickest. The slaughter was...”

On some distant instinct of my past possibly, I stared at the map on the wall and traced the route I’d taken that day, away from the home I’d grown up in, towards the pin that still marked the southern city I’d fought in. Images - most of them violent and horrible and something worse than my nightmares flashed before my eyes. It was an effort not to shudder.

So many lost...

“I have no interest in ever seeing full-scale slaughter like that again.”

Feyre’s silence, her willingness to both learn and listen, was what reeled me back in and calmed the carnage inside me enough to return to simpler truths rooted in the here and now.

My mate, and I chuckled darkly to myself, who even without meaning to could temper my restless, wandering spirit with nothing more than her simple agreement to hear my pain and not flinch.

“But I don’t think the King of Hybern will strike that way,” I continued, “not at first. He’s too smart to waste his forces here, to give the continent time to rally while we fight him. If he makes his move to destroy Prythian and the wall, it’ll be through stealth and trickery. To weaken us. Amarantha was the first part of that plan. We now have several untested High Lords, broken courts with High Priestesses angling for control like wolves around a carcass, and a people who have realized how powerless they might truly be.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Feyre’s voice had grown very, very thin.

I schooled my features, into as much neutrality as I could beneath the cold casting my skin into stone as I stared at her and finally crested the peaks of what truths I needed to get out of her.

“I am telling you for two reasons. One, you’re... close to Tamlin.” That sentence alone tasted like ash in my mouth. “He has men - but he also has long-existing ties to Hybern-”

“He’d *never* help the king-”

I held up a hand, both out of further disappointment she thought I’d assume he would and because there was a very great chance she was wrong regardless of what I thought.

“I want to know if Tamlin is willing to fight with us. If he can use those connections to our advantage. As he and I have strained relations, you have the pleasure of being the go-between.”

“He doesn’t inform me of those things.”

“Perhaps it’s time he did. Perhaps it’s time you insisted.”

Our gazes went to the map hanging on the wall - the little village marked where Feyre's sisters sat in dangerous territory waiting...

Feyre offered me no further objection. Some small seed of desperate hope it was that she would approach her once betrothed. I had confidence she would at least try.

"What is your other reason?"

I looked Feyre over, looked at how strong she was beneath her skin that had already lost a tinge of the pale color it carried from nights of throwing everything up. She was powerful. So, so very powerful.

"You have a skill set that I need. Rumor has it you caught a Suriel."

Feyre's lips twitched and I had the distinct impression she wished to roll her eyes, shrug off the observation. "It wasn't that hard."

"I've tried and failed. Twice. But that's a discussion for another day. I saw you trap the Middengard Wyrms like a rabbit," and look damned fierce and brave and beautiful doing it, I wanted to add, enough to make me feel - I shook the memory off. Not now.

"I need you to help me. To use those skills of yours to track down what I need."

"What *do* you need? Whatever was tied to my reading and shielding, I'm guessing?"

I could have told her then. About the War. About how it had ended and who had done it, what a mess was left in its wake that might very well ruin us all still.

About the lost magical objects causing uprising and mayhem all across Prythian that nearly always resulted in the death of more fae - my fae.

But...

*She's not your mate, she's not your anything.*

My mind twisted away longing for those caves of darkness and despair where I had only shadows for friends.

"You'll learn of that later," I said simply and Feyre didn't protest, seeming used to my vagueness by now. But she was on to the next argument, the next way out.

"There have to be at least a dozen other hunters more experienced and skilled-"

"Maybe there are. But you're the only one I trust."

Feyre blinked, momentarily stunned I would trust her. Truly, I could see she didn't want to believe it was real that I would feel that for her. Again I watched three months of lost time burn behind my eyes.

"I could betray you," she said, slowly and addled with frustration, "whenever I feel like it."

“You could. But you won’t.” And I believed it. Word for word. Despite her hatred for me. She was too smart to let the world burn over petty differences and personal sins. “And then there’s the matter of your powers.”

Feyre glowered at once, a whole new form of anger. “I don’t have any powers.”

“Don’t you? The strength, the speed... If I didn’t know better, I’d say you and Tamlin were doing a very good job of pretending you’re normal. That the powers you’re displaying aren’t usually the first indications among our kind that a High Lord’s son might become his Heir.”

“I’m not a High Lord.”

Fact in her mind, not opinion.

But a lie nonetheless.

A greedy, selfish kind of joy rolled through me as visions took shape, visions I’d had planted there for weeks since I’d seen her on that balcony and felt the bond between us snap me in two. The depth of the roots those images had taken in my mind were toxic and alluring, one of the few that once I allowed myself the immeasurable pleasure of birthing them, I could hardly tear myself away.

*Feyre kneeling on the dais, head bowed low, never in submission, but in preparedness for the glory and majesty to come...*

“No, but you were given life by all seven of us. Your very essence is tied to us, born of us. What if we gave you more than we expected?”

*Her dress a sweeping, stunning drapery clinging to her skin before fanning out behind her in swirls of shadow and smoke, power dripping from her pores...*

“What if you could stand against us - hold your own, a High Lady?”

*The blue of her eyes sparkling like diamonds swept across the heavens, none above her to crush her down ever again as the crown is placed upon her head and she swears the words that bind her to her court forever... a High Lady among us.*

“There are no High Ladies,” Feyre says at once, but too late. I see her now, even sitting in the chair next to me, I already see the future she could have if she wanted it, willed it with the blood gifted to her.

“We’ll talk about *that* later, too,” I said, shaking my head to dismiss the ridiculous notion she was resigned to her present state, never to be lifted up. “But yes, Feyre - there *can* be High Ladies. And perhaps you aren’t one of them, but...”

*The crown would touch her head and unending, triumphant Night would gleam from her hair, her skin, her every piece of soul she possessed as I lifted her up hand to hand and proclaimed her sacred and eternal for the entire world to see.*

*My mate.*

*My everything from once 'not anything'.*

*To me and Prythian both. The savior who bound us all together with infinite power and existence. The key not just to our surviving, but to our living as well.*

“What if you were something similar? What if you were able to wield the power of seven High Lords at once? What if you could blend into darkness, or shape-shift, or freeze over an entire room - an entire army?”

Feyre did not utter a single word, but I could see it in her eyes, that creeping chill that took hold in her heart and whispered the possibilities to which she might reply with some small flicker of honest desire.

Even just that brief promise, it was *radiant* to behold.

“Do you understand what that might mean in an oncoming war? Do you understand how it might destroy you if you don’t learn to control it?”

“One, stop asking so many rhetorical questions,” Feyre said, jerking her out of her quiet contemplation. “Two, we don’t know if I *do* have these powers-”

“You do. But you need to start mastering them. To learn what you inherited from us.”

“And I suppose you’re the one to teach me, too? Reading and shielding aren’t enough?”

“While you hunt with me for what I need, yes.”

She shook her head equal parts amused and affronted, but I was unabashed. Work with me. Use me. Save me - and Prythian. I’d waited three very long months to offer her that place.

And of course, it all came crashing back to this one horrifying mentality of hers that would plague me to the ends of the earth if it didn’t kill me first.

“Tamlin won’t allow it.”

“Tamlin isn’t your keeper, and you know it.”

“I’m in his subject, and he is my High Lord-”

“You are *no one’s subject*.”

Power rippled off my body in thick, black shadows that flashed what I knew were the threat of wings at my back. I hadn’t shown them to her since I fled the mountain, but when it came to Tamlin and his death grip over Feyre’s free will, it was hard not to... break hold completely.

“I will say this once - and only once,” I said with a deadly purr meant just as much for that fool who caged my mate just as much as I did for Feyre who I left behind at her seat while I stalked to that map on the wall. “You can be a pawn, be someone’s reward, and spend the rest

of your immortal life bowing and scraping and pretending you're less than him, than Ianthe, than any of us. If you want to pick that road, then fine. A shame, but it's your choice."

It was more than a shame really, but no one gave Feyre the option of doing anything but that, so rather than be accused of doing the same to her - shoving her into one type of person even if my disdain was obvious for the alternative - I gave her the freedom to choose regardless of what it meant for me.

I had to.

And it was threatening to kill me to do it.

"But I know you - more than you realize, I think." *Cauldron, so much more.*

A flash of hands in a wooded patch, in a dimly lit room smudged with paint, or chasing fire on a dark night in Spring all flashed behind my eyes.

The huntress.

The artist.

The adventurer.

All of these magnificent things she'd lost.

"And I don't believe for one damn minute that you're remotely fine with being a pretty trophy for someone who sat on his ass for nearly fifty years, then sat on his ass while you were shredded apart-

"Stop it-"

"Or you've got another choice. You can master whatever powers we gave to you, and make it count. You can play a role in this war. Because war is coming one way or another, and do not try to delude yourself that any of the Fae will give a shit about your family across the wall when our whole territory is likely to become a charnel house.

"You want to save the mortal realm?" I turned to find Feyre staring at the map, right at that pin that damned her family to hell. "Then become someone Prythian listens to. Become vital. Become a weapon. Because there might be a day, Feyre, when only you stand between the King of Hybern and your human family. And you do not want to be unprepared."

She was deadly still. Preternaturally quiet.

But inside, I could hear her body rage, her breath come to her out of the barest necessity.

"Think it over. Take the week. Ask Tamlin, if it'll make you sleep better. See what charming Ianthe says about it. But it's your choice to make - no one else's."

It wasn't even hard to say.

For I was done playing games.

---

I didn't see Feyre for the rest of the week. Made it a point not to.

Not until the morning before her week was up and I would have to take her back. The anxiety over that departure roiled through my gut with disturbing levels of destruction.

If I wasn't careful, I'd soon be entirely unhinged and that was a risk I couldn't take.

I'd offered her a partnership, something I hoped she would consider neutral middle ground where we could come together, eventually without the bargain forcing us to, and put our considerable powers together.

Tamlin included.

There was no such thing as forgiveness between him and I. There never would be. But we had one thing in common that made an alliance not only plausible, but imperative: we both loved Feyre, dearly and possibly to the point of death.

Where there was blood and feuding between us stood a war ripping the fabric of our mutual hatred for one another to pieces. I always knew that Feyre would refuse to work with me alone, so I asked a great burden of her, one more to rest atop the pile I placed upon her shoulders the second I met her on Calanmai.

Fill the gap between her great love and myself, the one left in place of our feud that war would wipe out.

I'd asked her to think about it, to take the week alone with her work and her thoughts. I wasn't going to disturb that or allow further fuel to be added to the fire that might incline her towards refusing.

Even after I took her back...

Even after I took her back, there was an overwhelming chance she would still say no, that the scars between us were too insurmountable to heal and I would be more vulnerable than I wanted to be.

But I had to try.

So I let her be and threw myself into my work in the process.

The week passed by sluggishly. I left Mor to confines of the palace lest Feyre call for company; I could have heard her call for me even from another court if she'd tugged hard enough, though I sincerely doubted at every moment that she would ever willingly *want* for my company.

But Feyre never called and her nightmares never consumed her so horribly that she didn't wake of her own accord and soothe herself back to sleep.



It wasn't until that morning before she was to leave that I finally saw her again. Always before she took up her place at her study table, I left her day's work without lingering long enough for her to catch me.

"Azriel would want to know that," Mor said, lounging on the sofa that sat lovingly in the cool breeze floating inside from the wide open balcony over which I paced.

That scent of her - *Feyre* - tickled over my nose. A sharp cut of grass and pine with a hint of acrylic lurking just behind it, likely from her many paints long ago, hung loosely in the air, but she might as well have been standing inches in front of me, the scent was that potent to my blood.

Yes, Azriel would want to know. About Keir. About the murmurings in the Hewn City, the whispers of secrets and betrayals. About all of it.

Azriel who knew everything including what I last ate for dinner and what time I woke in the morning. My brother knew everything and with good reason to.

But right now with war rising up on one side and my mate decaying on the other, I didn't care one damn bit about Azriel.

"Azriel can go to hell," I said with a bite cutting my words. Feyre was leaving soon. "He likely already knows, anyway."

"We played games the last time," Mor replied, trying to keep a level calm. She knew where my agitations came from on both ends. "And we lost. Badly. We're not going to do that again."

"You should be working. I gave you control for a reason, you know."

I didn't hear Morrigan say anything and realized as Feyre's scent picked up that my cousin had spotted her. I wanted to look at Feyre and feel hope - just for once, some inkling that it was okay. But Feyre stared at me with her own skepticism and doubt. "Say what it is you came here to say, Mor."

Morrigan offered none of her usual optimism for me. Just that cool, queenly address that won her allegiances in every court and blood on every battlefield the world over.

"There was another attack - at a temple in Cesere. Almost every priestess slain, the trove looted."

My blood turned to oil within my veins, Mor's words the match that would light them on fire. And when I demanded answers of her, the lone word passing my lips was no mere ember, but a towering pillar of smoke and fire and destruction burning towards the skies.

"Who."

"We don't know," Mor answered without leveling. "Same tracks as last time: small group, bodies that showed signs of wounds from large blades, and no trace of where they came from."

and how they disappeared. No survivors. The bodies weren't even found until a day later, when a group of pilgrims came by."

All I heard before the darkness took hold was Feyre's cracked squeak of shock and revulsion.

*Hybern.*

Hybern had done this. He hadn't even taken prisoners or hostages. Nothing but unending carnage in his quest to win the world. He'd already done it several times over, hopping from temple to temple and not just in the time since Amarantha's demise. When I'd come home from her court, Azriel had given me a list a mile long of different temples and holy cities that had been burned, hidden caves and islands trashed that no man nor fae would ever have found or dared disturb excepting a fearless, limitless shadowsinger and a bloodthirsty madman from the east.

For several long moments, I was engulfed in the rich black of Night, the darkness that shreds and pains, before the skin at my back tore painlessly in two clean slits and for the first time all week, I gave form to those great membranous wings that bore me across the sky. And it felt like some missing piece of the puzzle had come back to me even if other pieces were missing. The wings grounded me into the earth with purpose. I took one look off that balcony and knew what I needed, needed in a way nothing and no one could ever give me.

"What did Azriel have to say about it?" I asked knowing that he was likely the one who delivered the news in the first place.

"He's pissed," Mor said while Feyre sat silently by listening. I was glad she was here for this, to hear evidence give weight to the arguments I'd lain at her feet earlier this week. "Cassian even more so - he's convinced it must be one of the rogue Illyrian war-bands, intent on winning new territory."

"It's something to consider," I said, even if it wasn't entirely true. "Some of the Illyrian clans gleefully bowed to Amarantha during those years. Trying to expand their borders could be their way of seeing how far they can push me and get away with it."

Mor stood and cast an apologetic look at Feyre before turning to me. "Cassian and Az are waiting - they're waiting in the usual spot for your orders." I watched the clouds roll by the mountain peaks in great thunderous heads, wind chasing them on and I too longed to hunt them. Needed it. "Winnowing in would be easier," Mor concluded, tailing my gaze.

"Tell the pricks I'll be there in a few hours," I said.

Mor didn't bother arguing. My cousin vanished and I knew I'd find her waiting for the three of us in Velaris this evening when we got back from Cesere's ruins and possibly the Illyrian mountains too if it was in fact needed as Cassian suspected.

While I knew Hybern was behind the temple, the Illyrians had been restless.

"How does that... vanishing work?"

Feyre's soft voice was full of that wondrous curiosity again I so loved to hear. My soul quieted, but I knew one look at her and I might shatter from the thought of tomorrow promised in her eyes.

"Winnowing?" I said, finding the words came easily to me. "Think of it as... two different points on a piece of cloth. One point is your current place in the world. The other one across the cloth is where you want to go. Winnowing... it's like folding that cloth so the two spots align. The magic does the folding - and all we do is take a step to get from one place to another. Sometimes it's a long step, and you can feel the dark fabric of the world as you pass through it. A shorter step, let's say from one end of the room to the other, would barely register. It's a rare gift, and a helpful one. Though only the stronger Fae can do it. The more powerful you are, the farther you can jump between places in one go."

And then, despite the technicalities and the anxiety threading between us, despite everything, Feyre offered me that endless, brilliant compassion she served so freely to any and all who came to her, a rare gem that I treasured in that shattering moment of dismay.

"I'm sorry about the temple," she said gently, "and the priestesses."

When I turned around to look at her, there was no distaste, no fight. Only a shared understanding of loss and something that was broken.

"Plenty more people are going to die soon enough, anyway," I said.

"What are... What are Illyrian war-bands?"

My outright frustration with the pricks of my youth masked my amusement at how she tried to distract me from pain, almost as though she...

"Arrogant bastards, that's what." My wings flexed rigidly behind me in the sunlight as though taking my reply as a personal offense against their heritage. "They're a warrior-race within my lands. And general pains in my ass."

"Some of them supported Amarantha?"

"Some. But me and mine have enjoyed ourselves hunting them down these past few months. And ending them."

And we had. It was enough to keep Azriel and Cassian off the real scent of war coming and it provided a welcome distraction for me while the three of us took care of unruly problems within those cursed mountains that needed dealing with anyway.

"That's why you stayed away - you were busy with that?"

Part of me wanted to read into that, to dare wish she asked because she liked the idea that I was forced away from her rather than chose it, but it couldn't have been further from the truth.

Tomorrow, though... Tomorrow, I would be forced away from her whether I liked it or not.

*I was busy staying away from you lest I drown and never come back .*

“I was busy with many things.”

I didn't say goodbye before I plunged myself off that ledge and flew through the thick of the oncoming storm to join my brothers in the cold of the Illyrian Steppes.

---

The temple had been a disaster. Enough that I didn't indulge Azriel and Cassian on a trip to hunt down potential war-bands on our flight back to camp.

We landed in the middle of the night as storm clouds settled over the mountains peppering them with fresh layers of snow, and spent a half an hour discussing the ruins we'd found, the bodies that had been strewn about the dirt and stone like trampled weeds. There had been blood everywhere.

Whatever prize the ran-sackers had sought, they'd found it and left no stone untouched in the process. Everything about the temple had been destroyed beyond recognition.

It burned a hole inside my soul to see something so sacred to our realms and in the northern heart of *my* court ripped to shreds.

My brothers wanted me to stay the night or at least winnow back to the palace to avoid the storm. Even Cassian threw a wary eye out the window once the rain started to fall and the winds howled through the cabin. The front door burst open without me so much as touching the handle.

But Feyre.

Feyre, Feyre, Feyre.

She was waiting and she was leaving.

I flew all night to get to her.

I wasn't stupid enough to think I couldn't winnow if the wind and elements became too much for me to handle, but by the time I reached the outer ridges of Illyrian territory, most of the storm had passed. I wondered if the temple would be washed clean by morning with the direction the clouds were rolling, further and further north.

And the whole time I flew, it was an effort not to think of what was coming, what I was flying back to.

The disgusted looks. The biting remarks. And one million questions about what would play out in the next three weeks as I waited to go to her again.

She was so brave. So beautiful. But Tamlin had her at his mercy every second. There was not a thought in her head that didn't pass his inspection first before she let it past her lips.

There was no need to ask if he would love her, care for her, give her the basics she needed to survive. But now all I wondered was how she would respond. Was what I offered her enough to make her *live* ?

The palace glimmered in the waking sunlight far below me, the snow along the rooftops glinting. My wings snapped at my back, tucking in tight against the muscles rippling beneath my open wrinkled shirt.

And I fell. Fell so far and so hard with an empty sensation rattling through me that when my wings snapped back open to stop me crashing hard against the rocky cliffside, I thought they nearly broke off from the impact.

Silently, I glided onto that open balcony Feyre had seen me fall from hours before and crashed into one of the chairs.

The remaining hours ticked silently by as I stared out at my court. The drink I'd summoned which was the last thing anyone should have been drinking for breakfast did nothing to soothe the dull ache thudding in my chest. That miserable, icy depression that sunk me down.

For the first time, I wasn't even foolish enough to think we could part amicably the way we had Amarantha's court. For the first time, I didn't hope there was some small portion of me she'd see as an enemy or that she might have found something of her time here worth coming back for.

Feyre's feet shuffled lightly on the marble floor. I listened to her all the way from her bedroom.

"It's been a week," she said, a bold demand, no hesitations whatsoever. "Take me home."

My cup went straight to my lips for a long sip. "Good morning, Feyre."

"Take me home."

Beneath my skin, my muscles, I felt my bones chip with shards of glass carving against them.

Feyre wore a set of teal and gold clothes set in a similar style to what she'd worn all week. She looked right at home in them even if she didn't feel as such. The color pulled out the blue in her eyes. With the morning sun streaming through the open air ways, dancing on her skin and playing with the gold cuffs to her wrists and ankles... she was stunning.

*Not your anything.*

"That color suits you."

"Do you want me to say please? Is that it?"

The scowl on her face was what set me off.

"I want you to talk to me like a person. Start with 'good morning' and let's see where it gets us."

“Good morning.” It was the most obvious, dismissive *goodbye* I’d ever heard in my life.

I smiled, having no other way to deal with it and Feyre seethed.

Good.

“Are you ready to face the consequences of your departure?”

Feyre went rigid like she hadn’t thought about the bad things that might be waiting for her in the flowery fields of Spring. But I had. I had thought of just about everything when it came to Feyre while I flew home.

The danger she was in.

The fight she riled in herself to keep what and whom she loved safe.

The glint in her eyes when she swore at me that made her whole face light up, even if it was born of anger.

The way her hair played against her neck and her fingers swam softly over her skin when she tucked a lock behind her ear.

The countless freckles on her face...

“It’s none of your business,” she said.

“Right. You’ll probably ignore it, anyway. Sweep it under the rug, like everything else.”

“No one asked for your opinion, Rhysand.”

“Rhysand?” It was worth a chuckle. I’d once said in front of her that only my enemies called me Rhysand. I wondered if she remembered or if it was just my ill-fated life led by the Cauldron that made her say it. “I give you a week of luxury and you call me Rhysand?”

“I didn’t ask to be here, or be given that week.”

“And yet look at you. Your face has some color - and those marks under your eyes are almost gone. Your mental shield is stellar, by the way.”

*Look at you as I do. Look at you and see the brilliance, I beg you.*

Feyre looked at me, a crack in her eyes as if she could read the thoughts I hoarded away from her like gold. “Please take me home.”

I shrugged to hide the immeasurable pain aching inside me as I stood.

*You’re giving her back. Back to that beast. She’ll be paraded and pampered and bred for slaughter...*

“I’ll tell Mor you said good-bye.”

“I barely saw her all week.”

“She was waiting for an invitation - she didn’t want to pester you. I wish she extended me the same courtesy.”

And it was true. Mor had kept a careful distance all week, but she was never more than a few doors away from Feyre wherever she decided to reside each day as she woke and did her lessons. Mor whined about her isolation every night over dinner in between politics and the Illyrian pricks at our backs.

“No one told me,” Feyre said, but she looked slightly crestfallen.

“You didn’t ask. And why bother? Better to be miserable and alone.” I stepped forward as Feyre’s eyes swept over me. It was the most disheveled she’d ever seen me, even including the Mountain perhaps, and I doubted she had any idea why. I begged of her one final time. “Have you thought about my offer?”

“I’ll let you know next month.”

More than I’d expected. More than I deserved.

“I told you once, and I’ll tell you again.” I swallowed tightly. “I am not your enemy.”

Feyre met my gaze with steely determination dead set in her eyes. “And I told you once, so I’ll tell you again. You’re *Tamlin’s* enemy. So I suppose that makes you mine.”

“Does it?”

We stepped nearer each other with every word.

“Free me from my bargain and let’s find out.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

*Both.*

I held out my hand. “Shall we?”

Barely a heartbeat after she grabbed my hand, her enthusiasm slipping through cracked shields I didn’t feel like reprimanding her on, we were engulfed in darkness, carried by the fabric of the world towards the bright, sunny days of Spring. Feyre reached for me through the turbulence and though it was just as agonizing for her to cling to me as it has been when I’d winnowed her the first time, I savored those few moments holding her close. The only touches I might ever be allowed to spend with her.

She bolted the moment we touched down on those perfect little flagstones surrounded by perfectly manicured acres. Birds chirped in the branches of the huge oak looming over us.

This court could have been lovely, once.

But I grabbed Feyre's wrist before she got more than a step away. My thumb ran over her wrist as Feyre looked up at me with confusion that threatened to boil over into something else if I didn't let go soon.

I glanced at the mansion.

Then back to my mate and all that I was relinquishing her to.

*Not your anything .*

"Good luck," I said.

"Get your hand off me," she said a near snarl.

I chuckled at that raging spirit only I seemed to elicit from her and let go. "I'll see you next month."

And with that, I let her be, and found myself once more ensconced in clouds of darkness and wind and smoke until I was dropped out of the skies and flying free over my city - my home.

Velaris.



## Fine is Great (Chapters 8-10)

### Chapter Summary

Chapters 8-10 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which Rhys angsts without Feyre for three weeks and then returns to the Spring Court for her second visit, only to find that she is reaching a breaking point.

Velaris.

There was no city on earth like it.

Beneath me fanned out in an array of color and movement stood my city - my home. It was early enough that not many had started their day yet, but I could smell the spices from the many restaurants as the Fae inhabitants began their day's cooking, could see children running down the streets while their parents lingered inside pouring a final cup of tea, could hear the breeze rustle through trees and over the water as the city slowly woke up.

Weight sinking into my back as my wings flapped in great heaving strokes, some of the tension drained out of me.

Some - but not all.

I landed on the rooftop of my private townhouse ready to sleep for the next three weeks straight. I wouldn't have the chance to do so quickly, though, as I walked in and stumbled upon two hulking Illyrians in my living room.

Cassian's large frame, outlined in corded muscle and rugged hair, leaned against my bookshelves with his arms crossed. The general didn't look so friendly as his usual demeanor would suggest.

And Azriel - Azriel sat back quietly in one of the chairs that was open enough to accommodate his wings, elbows sat squarely on his knees while his chin rested pointedly atop his interlocked hands. Behind his back, I caught a glimpse of Truth-Teller, the silver hilt gleaming in the early morning sunlight coming through the window before a sly shadow slid over it and the sword disappeared from view.

That shadow snaked around his back, up his neck, and curled into one ear.

They were both still dressed in their leathers, beads of water from melted snow dripping over their boots over my carpets. They hadn't bothered changing. Hell, the pricks had probably left after I had and knew just where to wait for me.

Azriel narrowed his eyes - at me. I bit back the urge to snarl.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be in the camps,” I said maintaining the leash on my voice. Feyre had just left. I was in no mood to be poked and prodded, even from them. I hadn’t told them I’d called the bargain in this week, but I could tell they knew.

“Funny,” Cassian said, always the one content to do the talking between them. “We could have asked the same thing of you. You look great, by the way. The shit-faced look really works for you.”

“I am not shit-faced-”

“Could have fooled me.”

“He isn’t drunk, Cassian,” Azriel said.

“No, but he might as well be.” Cassian pushed off the bookshelves and took two careful steps towards me. “Flying home in the middle of that gods-forsaken storm we had last night? Really, Rhys?”

I gritted my teeth. “How are you even in here?”

Azriel flicked his brow up. Offending him wasn’t easy to do and I’d just done it in the space of six words.

“You’re lucky you didn’t break your wings and splatter yourself all over the mountainside.”

“Cassian.” My cousin’s pert voice cut him off as Morrigan strode out from the kitchen with a glass of something that smelled wonderful burning in her hand. But even her voice sounded clipped.

Cassian ran a hand through his hair. “We’d have waken up to find your body in pieces and then we’d all have been utterly *fucked* . What the hell is wrong with you?”

“ *Nothing - nothing is wrong with me.* ”

The words came out in a tense growl as I stepped forward to meet him, our wings flaring out in unison.

“That’s *enough* ,” Mor said and it was enough that Azriel whipped his head to face her.

“Rhys,” she said, handing me the glass and putting a hand on my chest to back me away from Cassian - the brother whom I loved and yet, stood by cursing all because I felt the need to lie about how shattered I’d become.

But I couldn’t let any of them know. Not the truth. Morrigan had already taken too much upon herself and she barely knew the half of what had happened in Amarantha’s court. I couldn’t bear the thought of adding that burden to my brothers too, not when -

*Skin grazed his thighs, his stomach - one hand dragging over him up towards his chest, a blanket of thick gleaming hair that shone like dark rubies falling to meet him at his face as her lips parted in a decadent moan while she clenched around his -*

I closed my eyes, commanding my mind to will the nightmares away.

Azriel. Cassian.

*Me .*

It didn't matter. I saw all of us on a near-nightly basis. Telling them would only make the horrors in the night too real in the daytime.

Slowly, with a steel grip so my hand wouldn't shake, I brought the glass Mor had given me to my lips and drank feeling the wash of liquid burn down my throat and savoring the hint of pain.

My family was watching me when I opened my eyes. "I appreciate the concern," I said throwing every ounce of sincerity I had in to my voice so they'd know I meant it, "but I am fine."

"Oh sure. Fine is good - fine is great," Cassian said with the most sarcastic, shit-eating grin I'd ever seen on him. I tried to hold his gaze, but my eyes betrayed me when my gaze flicked away to Azriel.

The Shadowsinger stood. "Tell us what to do."

Not a request for information. Not a plea to force me into the light. Azriel knew darkness the way darkness knew itself, was cut from the same cloth and swallowed whole by it to whatever end.

"Go visit Tarquin."

"The Summer Court?" Mor looked skeptical at the instruction.

"Yes - the Summer Court." My gaze went back to Azriel. "Tell me what you see."

Azriel checked a quick glance at Cassian before nodding at me and walking towards the open door where he held back. Azriel never *held back* from anything, especially not an order.

Cassian rolled his eyes with a heavy sigh. "Do I get special orders too?" he chided, but the bite was gone from his voice.

"Cassian-" Mor started.

"It's fine," I said. "I suppose to some degree I deserve even if you are a filthy bastard, Cass."

Cassian released a breath. "That's more like it. Rhys," and he stepped towards me, clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Why didn't you just tell us she was here?"

*Because I love her. I love her so much, it's going to kill me and I didn't want us to lose each other all over again. Not me or her or you or Az or Mor or any of us ever again.*

*Because I am weak and I do not know how to be strong.*

“Because she holds the key,” I said. “And I didn’t want to let that information out until I knew exactly what would be within our reach to do with it.” The use of *our* instead of *my* seemed to appease him, though his look remained questioning. “She’ll be back in three weeks. I’ll know more then.”

Cassian sized me up and his regard was painful for me to look at even as I held my own and lied about all the ways I was failing him - failing myself. Finally, he sneered. “Got any more of that drink, Mor?”

“Oh, I’m sure I can find something,” she crooned. “Why?”

“Because I think Rhys needs to feel just as shit-faced as he looks.”

“I’m tired-”

“So am I.” Mor produced the bottle - whiskey - out of thin air and handed it over to Cassian, my brother who would not let me fall, would stand by me when I was at my lowest and allow me to pretend I was okay. “Cheers, brother - to you and the girl.”

We clinked glasses. “Now drink, *you filthy bastard* .”

Mor scowled and walked towards the guest room she enjoyed occupying as the only person privileged with the right of staying here or winnowing directly in, muttering something about *men* under her breath as she went.

We took our shots and when the alcohol had finished it’s initial detox, we found ourselves grinning at one another and I could tell that even without saying it, Cassian just somehow *knew* , maybe even about everything.

When I looked at the doorway, Azriel was gone.

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Feyre.

Now that she had returned miraculously to my life, there was no more denying her. She consumed my thoughts, my dreams, and all of my nightmares to the point that I stayed at the townhouse to sleep so the others wouldn’t see how unraveled I’d become in her wake.

And in return, I took up no space whatsoever in her thoughts. Her mind had gone eerily quiet, her mental shields so thick that most days I could have questioned her very existence.

She was as silent as the grave.

And it terrified me beyond reason.

It quickly became a habit, a pattern practiced over and over again as I ticked down the days to that blessed week I could bring her back.

Every morning when I woke up and every night before I went to bed, and as few times in between as I could stomach it, I would reach out and caress what I could of that bond

between us just to make sure it was still there - that *she* was still there. The most worrisome part of it being that without the mate bond between us and the bargain, I didn't think I would have been able to feel her *at all* .

I had no idea if she was okay. But I concentrated on the fact that if she was strong enough to hold me out so well after only one week of training, she had to be doing okay. Perhaps my visit had been enough to scare her Tamlin shitless and force him to do *something* for her, though I sincerely doubted it.

Azriel returned from The Summer Court a week after I'd sent him, not entirely long for one of his usual missions.

We met with Amren, the firedrake who coiled in her lair far from the House of Wind, refusing to live so high up on a rock when she could be nestled in her own private cave. My second was nothing if not fiercely reclusive.

Her narrow eyes that belonged more to a snake than a High Fae examined me more than my brother as Azriel reported. Most of the details were nothing new nor surprising to me, but there was plenty concerning the High Lord of Summer's regimen and council that were of the utmost value to me.

"He's mostly taken to repairs to the city thus far," Azriel said.

"What of his treasure troves?"

Azriel expressed mild interest. "Nothing. What of them?"

"Does Tarquin seem interested in cataloguing them anytime soon?"

"No, he doesn't. He's too concerned with his people and keeping morale up now that the war is over. He takes to the streets daily."

An uncomfortable feeling settled in my stomach. He was well loved then, Tarquin, if he was spending his days more often outside the palace of Adriata than within it. He had dreams, hopes for his people. It was the foremost reason I wanted his alliance - and friendship. And the foremost reason I hated driving a knife in his back.

"What about Cresseida, his other-"

Pain, blinding and inexhaustible, roared through my mind in endless supply. It was not of the physical variety as I felt Feyre's thoughts crack open like an egg, her thoughts slipping freely down the bond to congeal in my head.

Tamlin was ripped apart from her viciously, shouting her name. Feyre only barely registered the shattering of furniture and the violence of color around her before magic exploded out of her skin.

Fear rattled through me, adrenaline screaming at me to winnow on the spot and interfere, but then I heard Tamlin barely rasp her name - "*Feyre*" - before her shields snapped back up

perfectly in place. She probably wasn't even aware they'd dropped and that I'd seen anything at all.

My vision shifted and I was left with Amren smirking over a glass of her usual poison while Azriel leaned ever so slightly towards me, his hands in a tight grip on the belt of his flying leathers.

I cleared my throat.

"What about Cresseida?" I asked again.

Azriel waited a few careful seconds before beginning. His face was thick with shadows. I didn't have to tell him where to send them. "I think Cresseida fashions herself the High Lady of Summer. Tarquin seems equal parts amused and aggravated by it."

I snorted. That little minx undoubtedly did see herself in charge.

But as Azriel plunged on, the details became increasingly muddled in my mind as all I saw - all I could here or think or feel - was Feyre.

---

Azriel reported nothing amiss, though it was evident that something had happened. But so long as Feyre was physically in one piece, I couldn't do a damned thing and I wasn't going to risk her decision to help me woo Tamlin's alliance in a war with Hybern over my interference in her affairs with him.

The agitation that ensued the rest of the month scratched and clawed at my skin every day. It became harder and harder to control and I found myself longing for that week with her outside Velaris just so I wouldn't have to hide it so much anymore.

That fact alone nearly gutted me to pieces - that even Velaris no longer felt like a safe and steady refuge.

The first real breath of air I drew was winnowing into those fields and flowers of Spring. I took to the exact spot under that oak tree where I had deposited Feyre upon her return trip. Tamlin's wards were nothing to me now as I landed, his magic a complete failure next to how easily I ripped the wards apart.

They might as well have not been there in the first place.

I entered the manor and crept easily through it. I knew these walls well, even after centuries of distance between us. But even if I hadn't known it, Feyre's scent was a bait that I stalked after, guided by it right to her rooms like a beast hungering at the altar for a sacrifice.

My mate was in these rooms and when I stepped outside her door and came face to face with Tamlin, and that horrid scent of his sex mixed with hers oozed off of him in waves, a vicious feral grin spread over my lips.

Up until this point, I hadn't allowed myself to entertain the idea of him with Feyre, not past the flashes of heat I'd sometimes receive in the middle of the night when Feyre was so

uncontrolled underneath him, her arousal was enough to crack through my nightmares.

I hated those nights. Shoved them so far out of my thoughts I could pretend they weren't there. Because every time I woke up with the faint sounds of her moans and his name on her lips ringing in my ears, it was an effort not to run to the toilets *myself* and vomit.

There were several nights that I did.

But now standing here in front of their nest knowing that Tamlin *had* her, all of her in all the ways that aggressive, primal male in me craved as her mate, knowing he didn't damned deserve it... It was such a powerful blow that I wanted to rip his throat out as he had Amarantha's and be done with it.

I chose my feline approach instead.

"I've come to collect," I said coolly, allowing that wild grin of mine to seep over him. The snap of his face into his usual snarl was reward enough, nevermind the claws that peaked through his knuckles.

"Get out," he said sharply. I walked closer, right in front of the door. *Her* door, I noted tracing the scent off of him down to his room where hers did not follow. "I'll say it one more time-"

"You can say it as often as you like," I said, cutting him off. "It will not change anything." I dipped my head and allowed my grin to stretch, taunting him every second. "You know that."

The door creaked suddenly open. My eyes slid to Feyre and, and-

The mask slipped.

Feyre stood wrapped in nothing but a blanket. Though Tamlin was near naked himself, he looked like a god standing next to her, put together and groomed.

But Feyre - oh, my Feyre.

*Not your anything, look at her - smell her. Smell him .*

Feyre's entire body was so weak and thin, one breath from me and even across the room, she would have fallen over from the light force. I could count the ribs down her chest, could see her hip bones jutting out at her waist sharply. And her eyes rang painfully hollow, rimmed with red and such hopeless exhaustion.

My mate.

My mate.

*My mate, my mate, mate - he'd fucked my mate and left her for dead .*

"Feyre," I said, her name emanating in a heavily restrained gasp. "Are you running low on food here?"

My eyes snapped to Tamlin who had the audacity to feign ignorance. “What?”

In my mind, I imagined that moment where he’d charged Amarantha and sank his teeth into her flesh. Only I wanted him up against that wall, my wings pinning his useless hide against the stone while my talons ripped into his chest and the fangs of my beast snapped his head in two until he was beyond recognition.

But Feyre loved him.

For her, I would not cave.

For her, I had to be strong.

*For her, for her - always for her.*

“Let’s go,” I said, extending my hand out to her, but Tamlin with his endless nerve stepped straight into my path barring me from her. “*Get out,*” he said, pointing towards the stairs I’d just come up. “She’ll come to you when she’s ready.”

Tamlin undoubtedly thought he was brave, protecting his lady love as he dutifully should have. With cold, dead malice in my eyes that could have tossed an ocean, I reached mere inches in front of me and flicked a non-existent piece of dust off his shoulder. Feyre’s mind cracked wide open.

She was... awed.

*Had Tamlin’s teeth been inches from my throat, I would have bleated in panic .*

My eyes shot to her riding that wave of crimson anger. “No, you wouldn’t have,” I said and her eyes went wide. “As far as your memory serves me, the last time Tamlin’s teeth were near your throat, you slapped him across the face.”

Her shields shot into place at once.

“*Shut your mouth and get out.*” Somehow, Tamlin found even more space to occupy between Feyre and me.

I took one step back - just *one* .

My hands went smoothly into my pockets. “You really should have your wards inspected. Cauldron knows what other sort of riffraff might stroll in here as easily as I did.”

Feyre looked positively scandalized. But as I looked her over, again taking in her starved appearance and feeling the depression roll out of her despite her mental shields, I wasn’t going to budge an ounce until we were safely back in the Night Court.

“Put some clothes on,” I said, to which she promptly bared her teeth at me and slammed the door shut on my face after Tamlin followed her into the room.

At least she had fight in her still. That was a good sign I didn’t deserve.



The sound of opening and closing drawers met my ears in between their hurried conversation.

*“How did he get in here?”*

*“I don’t know. He just - it’s just part of whatever game he’s playing.”*

*“If war is coming, maybe we’d be better served trying to mend things.”*

I froze, the comment such an unexpected gift. I hadn’t been sure if I’d really expected her to try talking to him about what I’d said. The fact that she had -

*“I’ll start mending things the day he releases you from your bargain.”*

*“Maybe he’s keeping the bargain so that you’ll attempt to listen to him.”*

*“Feyre, why do you need to know these things? Is it not enough for you to recover in peace? You earned that for yourself. You earned it. I relaxed the number of sentries here; I’ve been trying... trying to be better about it. So leave the rest of it-”*

A pause.

*“This isn’t the time for this conversation.”*

Of course it wasn’t.

Of course.

Baldly, I coughed in the hallway - very, very audibly so.

The door opened by a moment later and there stood Feyre.

*Not your anything .*

She glanced at me with little concern, the displeasure written all over her face. But still, she had asked him...

It was something I had only hoped and prayed for and it was... a start.

Casually, I offered her my hand. She took it, only for Tamlin to promptly appear and push my hand down. For the first time, genuine desperation overtook everything about him from the look he gave me right down to the pitiful begging in his voice.

*“You end her bargain right here, right now, and I’ll give you anything you want. Anything.”*

*“Are you out of your mind?”* Feyre said. I could both hear and feel how his offer shocked her. Even she knew it was a grim, foolish decision.

Lucky for them both, I was not one for fool’s errands.

“I already have everything I want,” I said. And it was true. There was nothing short of Feyre offering herself wholly to me that could have possibly tempted me to accepting him and we all knew that was never going to happen.

As casually as I’d flicked at him moments ago, I stepped around Tamlin and found Feyre’s hand. We disappeared into a blink of dust.

# Fight It (Chapter 11)

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 11 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which Rhys deals with a dejected, dying Feyre during her second visit to the Night Court and finally glimpses the first flickers of her many powers.

I didn't even wait for the darkness to clear before my anger at Tamlin shifted into the offensive to see where Feyre was at.

And Feyre, I felt as I set her down and saw the agony in her eyes, was dying.

"What the hell happened to you?" I said.

"Why don't you just look inside my head?"

Nothing.

No emotion. No sting. No spite in her voice.

Nothing.

"Where's the fun in that?" I winked for good measure, but Feyre only slowly turned away from me eyeing the stairs that would lead to her room. I'd never seen her this deflated. "No shoe throwing this time?"

Again, no answer. This time she really did move for the stairs, ignoring the intention behind my words that was plain as day.

My skin crawled. My insides twisted horribly in pain. My heart wrenched.

My mate was dying and she didn't *care*. Feyre did not care. Not for me. Not for her. Barely ever for Tamlin any longer.

All that power gifted to me since birth - the killing power, the darkness of Night, the ability to bend space and travel through thought and none of it made one damned difference because I was going to lose her.

My muscles trembled beneath my skin aching to let out some kind of release that would catch her, break her fall, but I was so *fucking useless* to do anything. And she was so horribly pale...

"Eat breakfast with me," I sputtered. In the five seconds Feyre had her back turned, my mask was so far removed it had never existed in the first place. I was so absolutely unhinged.

The fabric of her top fell over one of her shoulders as she turned to face me again, revealing how pronounced her collarbones were. And still her voice sounded dead when she spoke.

“Don’t you have other things to deal with?”

“Of course I do,” I said, shrugging as casually as I could to maintain some kind of stasis for her because my words were about to fail me. “I have so many things to deal with that I’m sometimes tempted to unleash my power across the world and wipe the board clean. Just to buy me some damned peace.”

Perhaps, I dared hope, offering her that one piece of myself that let her know I was just as wretched and twisted inside as she was would help her understand me more.

But Feyre didn’t move, so I yielded all to her.

I grinned, nothing short of my usual arrogance even as my chest heaved to cover how badly I wanted to shake, and bowed at the waist deep and low as only she could merit. “But I’ll always make time for you,” I said.

Sweet, merciful relief flooded me so strongly when Feyre motioned for me to lead her to breakfast that I could have released a sob had I not wanted to trouble her.

*Just stay* I begged inside myself. *Just stay. Just live. Feyre, please just live.*

Her feet dragged across the floor as we made it to that heavy breakfast table well laid out with food. “I felt a spike of fear this month through our lovely bond. Anything exciting happen at the wondrous Spring Court?”

It was very easily too testy of a question to throw at her given her current emotional state, but I had to know - had to be sure Tamlin wasn’t going to drive the knife into her heart himself.

“It was nothing,” was all she said.

Nothing.

Because the shouting, the crying, the fracturing world around her - meant *nothing* to her now.

And it was his fault.

Feyre looked at me, then quickly away. I didn’t let the rage stop from pouring out of my gaze, a rage so strong the depths of that vicious court beneath me churned in agony.

Feyre’s voice turned icy, the first real flicker of emotion, as she sank into her seat and I joined her. “If you know, why even ask about it?”

*Because I adore you, and I abhor the thought that you would suffer and not tell me, even if it is me.*

“Because these days,” I said, my voice somehow impossibly smaller than what I fashioned for my persona, “all I hear through that bond is nothing. Silence. Even with your shields up

rather impressively most of the time, I should be able to *feel* you. And yet I don't. Sometimes I'll tug on the bond only to make sure you're still alive."

The magic inside my soul twitched as I hit the words, denying the flood of memories of the last time she died. It was complete torment to consider it happening again.

"And then one day, I'm in the middle of an important meeting when terror blasts through the bond. All I get are glimpses of you and him - and then nothing. Back to silence. I'd like to know what caused such a disruption."

Feyre casually ignored me as she piled food atop her plate and merely said, "It was an argument, and the rest is none of your concern."

My next words snapped out of me quickly.

"Is it why you look like your grief and guilt and rage are eating you alive, bit by bit?"

"Get out of my head."

"Make me. *Push* me out." The words were so pained off my tongue. I just wanted her to react, to do something, to acknowledge the problem, but it was like pulling teeth. I vaguely wondered how far down she hid the truth even from herself, what it must really be like to be inside her own head. Did my own grief and burdens even compare?

But then I thought of Cassian. And Azriel. My family who had watched me shoot into the sky in the middle of a storm that Cassian was right, could have killed me. I hadn't cared then. Feyre didn't care now.

So they pushed me to care. Until I saw it even if I lied daily on the surface about every single emotion I felt. But still, they made me care.

Feyre *needed* to care.

"You dropped your shield this morning - anyone could have walked right in."

Her eyes met my challenge... and willingly threw in the towel. "Where's Mor?" she asked, her voice fading.

*Working underneath this fucking rock like I asked her to when I should have found an excuse to drag her back here for the week.*

But this was about Feyre.

"Away. She has duties to attend to. Is the wedding on hold, then?"

She stopped chewing for the briefest moment and barely whispered, "Yes."

"I expected an answer more along the lines of, ' *Don't ask stupid questions you already know the answer to,* ' or my timeless favorite, ' *Go to hell.* '"

She didn't say anything. Feyre - fuck, please say *something* .

She reached for a tartlet on one of the shining silver platters and her eyes flickered over my hands when darkness shot out of me reaching for her, ready to claw my way across the brief distance that separated us between our plates.

"Did you give my offer any thought?"

I watched her while she ate. Ate her way through an entire plate of food like she had never eaten anything in her life before she answered me.

"I'm not going to work with you."

And just like that, the Night sucked me in.

"And why, Feyre, are you refusing me?"

"I'm not going to be a part of this war you think is coming," she said, an edge of defensiveness lacing her tone as she avoided my gaze pushing fruit around her plate. "You say I should be a weapon, not a pawn - they seem like the same to me. The only difference is who's wielding it."

"I want your help, not to manipulate you," I snapped. This was about my *court* , not abusing her in the same selfish way Tamlin and these other cursed High Lords would seek to. Feyre's eyes shot to me immediately, cutting through my anger the way an Illyrian blade could cut through diamonds.

"You want my help because it'll piss off Tamlin."

My shoulders gasped. Shadows swarmed. I could have been my very own Shadowsinger for how entirely encased I was, but nothing could stop the endless heartache wrenching through me as word after word, stare after stare, silence after silence, she cut me down and refused to even exist outside the grief I *knew* was lingering just below the surface of her thoughts.

"Fine," I said after several long moments during which I gathered myself into the High Lord who sacrificed all for his court, for history. "I dug that grave myself, with all I did Under the Mountain. But I need your help."

When Feyre *again* offered me less than nothing, I gave her everything - the barest, most raw truths of who I was.

"I was a prisoner in her court for nearly fifty years." Feyre raised her eyes to me tentatively with each word. "I was tortured and beaten and fucked until only telling myself who I was, what I had to protect, kept me from trying to find a way to end it. Please - help me keep that from happening again. To Prythian."

We stared at each other for a long while. I couldn't feel my own heart beat once.

And when even *begging* at her feet was not enough, Feyre resumed eating without so much as a backwards glance.

We spent the rest of breakfast in resounding silence.

---

She didn't come to dinner.

She didn't come to breakfast the following morning.

I was half a step from going up to her room just sit by her bed and keep watch lest I go insane waiting for her when I felt the bond stir as she woke up. Patiently I waited and at length, she came to the study where I waited with her day's lessons.

Feyre did not return my amused expression as she entered the room and I motioned her towards a set of sentences I hoped would bait her. "Copy these sentences," I said, not bothering with hellos. We seemed to be past that now.

Feyre didn't bother arguing. Just sat down, picked up the papers, and read, bored to tears.

*"Rhysand is a spectacular person. Rhysand is the center of my world. Rhysand is the best lover a female can ever dream of."*

Every single word was pronounced perfectly, read with flawless accuracy and not once did she stutter. Even better was her penmanship when she copied them in exact measure on the clean pages I'd set out.

She shoved the papers at me and my claws sprang out, pouncing at her mind and not bothering to be gentle about it - but that wall of adamant greeted them and they sprang back at once.

I blinked at her.

"You practiced."

Feyre stood up and didn't bother looking at me as she walked away, done for the day with her lessons, with *me*.

"I had nothing better to do."

---

*She won't even see me.*

*I don't blame her.*

*Not helping.*

*What do you want me to do about it? I'm stuck here for the next two weeks dealing with Keir and weeding out the cretins who defected and who stayed. You did that or did you forget?*

I cursed, my head hitting the backboard of my bed as snow fell outside the windows over those glorious mountains.

*What do I do? It is not just that she won't see me. She won't even see herself.*

*Give her space. I could use your help here anyway and the peace and quiet without you strutting around with your wings in her face every five seconds might help her relax.*

*I do not strut.*

Mor didn't reply.

*Fine. I'll be there in the morning.*

*Good.*

I had just sat up from the bed when a second sheet of paper fluttered through the air in front of me, Mor's curling script blazing upon it with insistence.

*Bring those chocolate chili muffins with you.*

I rolled my eyes and knew wherever my cousin was, she was poised on a throne with a gleeful triumph on her face.

Since Feyre wasn't in the habit of speaking with me, I didn't bother her with goodbyes. I perched outside her door in the early hours of the morning, so early it could have still been considered night, and left a stack of books at her door with a note.

*I have business elsewhere. The house is yours. Send word if you need me.*

Six days.

Not one word.

Not so much as a flicker.

After the first night when I woke up drenched in sweat, Night consuming the room as Amarantha's face beamed at me while she twisted Feyre's neck until I felt every single bone break along her spine, I took to winnowing to the townhouse in Velaris when it was time to sleep.

I didn't tell Mor.

---

Feyre sat in a stream of golden sunlight reading for most of her final day. Only reading.

Just like before, her skin had a little extra color to it making her features more relaxed. But since she had come here worse off than her first trip, her recuperation only seemed to catch her up so much.

I shoved away the thought of how bad it would be the next time she visited.



Still, she seemed almost peaceful sitting there, her book open contentedly in her lap. I didn't bother to notice if it was one I'd chosen for her or one she'd found on her own as I approached.

"Since you seem hell-bent on a sedentary lifestyle, I thought I'd go one step further and bring your food to you."

Feyre looked up at me as I slid between the cushioned chairs and set two plates piled with food on the table in front of us, taking a seat adjacent her. Her eyes widened at the food ravenously.

"Thank you," she said.

Simply.

Plainly.

*Empty, empty, empty.*

I laughed, just a small laugh, hoping this could be played off, but... "*Thank you? Not 'High lord and servant?' Or: 'Whatever it is you want, you can go shove it up your ass, Rhysand.'*" How disappointing," I finished with a click of my tongue.

But even after a week - a week that had earned me civility and a polite greeting of sorts that didn't result in her walking away from me again - Feyre didn't say anything. Only reached for the plate.

I drained.

My magic reacted on instinct, took over for me where I could no longer help myself and I was willing to let it.

A light current of air dragged the plate from Feyre's grasp and when she pushed ahead a little more, it jumped back again.

"Tell me what to do," I said. If I had to flat out beg her for the answer to helping her, so be it. "Tell me what to do to help you."

Feyre kept still as my power continued to pour out of me with each word. I couldn't have helped it if I'd tried. "Months and months, and you're still a ghost. Does no one there ask what the hell is happening? Does your High Lord simply not care?"

Feyre's eyes glittered with ice as she spoke with enough control, I only just caught the frost behind her words. "He's giving me space to sort it out."

Space.

Space like I'd given her all week and look where that had landed us.

If Tamlin wouldn't help her -

“Let me help you. We went through enough Under the Mountain-”

Feyre nearly jumped out of her seat at the mere mention of that place and I leaned in closer to her, just desperate to feel her close in some way, close enough to know there was still someone in there who heard me even if she tried so hard not to.

“She wins,” I gasped. “That bitch wins if you let yourself fall apart.”

*She wins if any of us do .*

There were nights during which that thought alone was all that kept me on the fringes of reality. When my face became my brothers and I woke with the sound of Feyre’s neck snapping in my ears, the only thing pulling me back this frustrating idea that Amarantha would want me to cave to it - all of it.

The nightmares, both in sleep and waking.

Feyre’s uncontrollable vomiting, her fear of who she was.

Even Tamlin and his inability to stop his shortcomings from dominating his every move right down to the claws he lived and died by daily.

We would all let her win if we didn’t fight. If Feyre didn’t -

*Conversation over.*

Her walls collapsed and rebuilt so quickly, the words flying through the bond between us like an arrow to a deer. She grabbed her book, content to starve if it meant denying the truths I flung at her constantly, and I snarled at her openly.

“Like hell it is.”

*Something - just give me something, I beg of you.*

Her book snapped shut. That one *tiny* little act had a tide of glittering, towering rage gushing beneath her skin - a rage that was icy and sharp as glass, piercing as -

*Snow.*

Feyre hurled the book at me before I could blink and I deflected it, but not before I saw the frost covering the bindings - and her hands. My magic reacted instinctively to hers - whether because she was my mate or purely from the thrill of sensing someone of equal capability within reach, someone to play with and live by, I didn’t know.

Maybe it was both.

And it thrilled me to no end.

“Good,” I said, a bit ragged. “What else do you have, Feyre?”

She glared at me as that ice on her hands melted into molten fire, untempered and hot as the burning sun of Autumn. Beron would fuck himself if he knew...

Feyre looked at me and she knew what I was feeling, could see the sense of relief taking over as the shadows at my back retreated and the darkness surrounding us filled with stars instead of that endless, empty void.

*She's alive. She's alive...*

The flames on her hands disappeared. I didn't care how she did it, pleased enough in the fact that she had at all.

"Any time you need someone to play with," I said, pushing the plate towards her and prepared to offer her much more than she might have realized she would one day need, possibly even *want* if she were to ask, "whether it's during our marvelous week together or otherwise, you let me know."

Feyre cleaned her plate faster than I'd ever seen her before.

The next morning, Tamlin's greeting was more an order I might give in the Illyrian camps than a gentle *hello* to someone he loved.

"Get inside," he practically barked at Feyre. She made no move to argue, but I could already feel the sinking weight creeping into her gut as I set her down and took a step back.

But Tamlin didn't know what I knew, did not understand that Feyre could be a soldier when she wanted to be, one who was deadly and focused and determined.

I turned that same authority on her that Tamlin enacted, but I filled it with purpose for her to cling to, direction for her to consider, a challenge for her to rise to rather than die from when the world tried to suffocate her.

"Fight it," I said, a cold gleam in my eye.

Feyre stepped back towards this man she shared a bed with, this man and this court whom she loved. I didn't have to wonder what it would feel like for her if she let herself die for that man and that court that did not love her back in the same way, sometimes did not love her at all or perhaps too greatly. For Feyre, I already felt that death every single day.

Leaving her to whatever she should choose, I disappeared and returned home without her - this woman whom I loved to the very ends of the earth.

# Take Me With You (Chapters 12-13)

## Chapter Summary

Chapters 12-13 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV in which Rhys and Mor rescue Feyre from the Spring Court after Tamlin locks her in the house and Rhys decides to take her with him to Velaris.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The screaming - the screaming was horrific.

Barely a week passed by and on a day that should have been otherwise bright and shining with sun in the days of Spring, I felt Feyre descend into the bowels of hell itself.

Her mental shields were still perfectly in tact. I slammed against them in a rough collision as they kept me out of her mind.

But the screaming. It was agonizing and it never stopped. Over and over her cries came cracking the sun in two so the moon might take over and even then, there would be no light.

A brief flash of darkness and flame and ice combined into a netherworld filled with chains and ragged breath in her ears that sent shivers down her spine until she bled and her cries greeted me across the bond.

*He'd trapped her - locked her up.*

I grabbed my cousin's hand, allowed the vision to fill her up for herself until I heard her breath cut off with a choke, and then winnowed.

And I thanked the fucking Cauldron as I went that I had Morrigan with me on the spot.

We landed directly on the doorstep of the manor. I was hit at once with an absurdly thin shield veiling the mansion like mist over a meadow - there, but damn near easy to move through.

I sliced with barely an inkling of thought and Mor *moved* with swiftness and surety. "Get her out," I snarled and sent one final thought - a location she was already well aware of - before I winnowed, leaving before I could make the situation much, much worse.

The Summer Court was welcoming to me as I landed among its rolling, grassy plains far, far from the cities its High Lord would find me. I only hoped the Court would be half this

welcoming to me when I visited with invitation - and I would. Otherwise, Tarquin was in for a far nastier shock than he realized and I hated to do it to him.

Mor took less than ten minutes.

She appeared with the warm Summer heat baring down on her like a halo - an angel of mercy and deliverance carrying Feyre in her arms. Feyre clung to her, her fingers digging in to her skin and clothes unwilling to let go.

A snarl beat out of me before I could help myself. Seeing Feyre like that, so utterly wounded and exhausted from what that mongrel had done to her - there was no escaping that kind of simultaneous wrath and relief.

“I did everything by the book,” Mor said. She held Feyre towards me and I took her into my arms. Cauldron, she felt so small, so fragile, but so, so vital. Like she was meant to be next to me all along.

But she was struggling, barely even able to breath when I wanted to see her stand and never, never fall again.

“Then we’re done here,” I said.

Wind raged and I allowed my darkness to descend upon Feyre in full force as we winnowed. But not that same terrifying darkness that she had lived and suffered in for so long. Rather, I applied it like a balm, the soothing quiet of night that finds a stillness and a shelter for the soul when all around crumbles into dust and ash.

Feyre fell into sleep before we even landed at the palace.

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I watched her sleep. For hours and hours she slept, never stirring once.

Feyre kept preternaturally still. If it hadn’t been for the steady sound of her heart beating that my fae senses allowed me the mercy of hearing, I would have thought she was dead. It was enough to force my gaze out the open windows and on to the snowy mountains colored with morning light, lest I find myself slipping back onto that marble floor where I had screamed her name over, and over, and over as Amarantha thundered above us both.

Eight days. She’d been left there for eight days and I had let her - let her drown. What the hell would have happened if it’d gone, if I’d left her there the full three weeks with that -

The distinct sound of her swallowing met my ears and my head snapped to her attention. She blinked her eyes open wearily, looking like she needed an eternity more of sleep.

But she was *okay* . Alive, if nothing else. And she was safe - free, Mor had said.

I felt the threads inside me that had been spun around the bobbin, coiled far too tight, unravel across the floor all at once.

*She was alive.*

“What happened?” They sounded like her first spoken words ever, they came out so cracked and dry. She vaguely thought of screaming, her shields lowered and for once, I didn’t care one bit.

“You *were* screaming,” I said. “You also managed to scare the shit out of every servant and sentry in Tamlin’s manor when you wrapped yourself in darkness and they couldn’t see you.”

I remembered that darkness. Feyre did too. It rivaled my own and to think, she hadn’t even trained.

The thought presided over us as Feyre choked out in tense anxiety, “Did I hurt any-”

“No,” I said immediately. “Whatever you did, it was contained to you.”

“You weren’t-”

“By law and protocol, things would have become very complicated and very messy if I had been the one to walk into that house and take you.” I stretched my legs out in front of the chair, trying to sink into some of the relief I was now allowed to feel, and watched Feyre study me curiously. “Smashing that shield was fine, but Mor had to go in on her own two feet, render the sentries unconscious through her own power, and carry you over the border to another court before I could bring you here. Or else Tamlin would have free rein to march his forces into my lands to reclaim you. And as I have no interest in an internal war, we had to do everything by the book.”

Her face scrunched, a pause, but then - “When I go back...”

I rubbed at my temples. I wasn’t ready for this part. Hours waiting and pleading silently with the Cauldron to let her wake up, let her be *fine*, and now I would have to stand the chance she’d still rather be with *Tamlin* after everything than here with me.

“As your presence here isn’t part of our monthly requirement, you are under no obligation to go back... unless you wish to.”

Not a statement, but a question.

Feyre did not offer a *yes* or a *no*, but her reply spoke volumes. “He locked me in that house,” she said with pained breath.

So weak. So broken. So damned *exhausted* was my mate all because of that vile and wicked *beast*.

Shadows danced around me seeking vengeance. “I know,” I said, each word costing me a new price I had not known I could physically and emotionally pay. “I felt you. Even with your shields up - for once.”

Feyre stared hard at me. “I have nowhere else to go.”

That she could say that - could even *think* it after our time together, despite it all. Feyre -

But it was just as much a question and a begging as my own had been. She... *wanted* to stay. I could feel it. My darkness settled.

“Stay here for however long you want. Stay here forever, if you feel like it.”

“I - I need to go back at some point.”

“Say the word, and it’s done.”

*Say the word and seal my death along with your own. Say the word, and I’ll die with you. It’s your choice. Whatever you want. No matter to what end it be, I will not only let you do it, but I’ll keep you company while you go.*

Feyre didn’t speak, but finally - finally, she offered her silence for contemplation rather than punishment.

“I made you an offer when you first came here: help me, and food, shelter, clothing... All of it is yours.” I’d have given it to her regardless. But Feyre’s thoughts jumped towards beggary and I brushed that notion right off. “Work for me. I owe you, anyway. And we’ll figure out the rest day by day, if need be.”

Feyre guarded her silence, but not her thoughts. She turned towards the window, considered those sleeping giants in the snow, moved to see past them towards those sweeping hills and valleys where her love had buried itself in thorn covered roses. There was a longing for the closure she might only get in going back...

But even greater was the ache, that terrible burden of knowing that a return to Tamlin’s arms would leave her in shackles when she pulled away.

I almost didn’t quite believe the words I was hearing when she turned back to me. “I’m not going back.” Cauldron, I never - *never* thought she’d say it. She wasn’t choosing me, but she was choosing against *him*. “Not - not until I figure things out.”

And though she was certain of her decision, it did not escape my notice how her touch brushed over that bare spot around her finger where a beautiful, burgeoning emerald had once sat, its own form of imprisonment.

Even that small symbol, too close to Amarantha...

“Drink it,” I said, summoning a biting cup of peppermint and licorice tea.

We sat in comfortable silence like we never had before as Feyre drank and mused herself to death. When she felt enough time had passed or maybe it was just that her tea was getting cold, the questions spilled out of her.

Always her curiosity would save her in the end.

“The darkness,” she said. “Is that... part of the power *you* gave me?”

“One would assume so,” I said, successfully masking the considerable degree of pride I took in saying so.

Feyre drained the remainder of her tea in one go. “No wings?”

“If you inherited some of Tamlin’s shape-shifting, perhaps you can make wings of your own.”

Feyre danced off the shiver raking over her and a shower of pleasant curiosity bloomed. “And the other High Lords? Ice - that’s Winter. That shield I once made of hardened wind - who did that come from? What might the others have given me? Is - is winnowing tied to any one of you in particular?”

Ice, wind, winnowing - not to mention the flames and darkness. She was considerably gifted and that was just the start of it. “Wind? The Day Court, likely. And winnowing - it’s not confined to any court. It’s wholly dependent on your own reserve of power - and training. And as for the gifts you got from everyone else... That’s for you to find out, I suppose.”

“I should have known your goodwill would wear off after a minute.”

*Beautiful - she’s do damned beautiful. Sharp and cutting as all her abilities spoke to.*

I chuckled, a low dark murmur. Standing was near painful from the hours I’d passed, even worse that I had to go. I’d left Cassian and Azriel in a shit show of a meeting that Mor was probably failing to clean up as they pawed at her for attention and explanation.

But Feyre looked like sleep would be a welcome reprieve to her muddled thoughts.

“Rest a day or two, Feyre,” I said. Her brow rose ever so slightly. “Then take on the task of figuring out everything else. I have business in another part of my lands; I’ll be back by the end of the week.”

We watched each other for several long moments. The sunlight played delicately on her hair in a soft pink and amber hue that made her eyes stand out like crystals. Those little freckles of her dark against her pale skin.

She looked better already, vastly so.

With a short nod, I turned to leave, but Feyre’s voice caught me at once, a startled whine that stopped me dead in my tracks. “Take me with you,” she said.

I turned, the gossamer curtains folding around me as I stared at her disbelieving and stammered the first excuse I could find to affirm she didn’t really want to go with me. How could she?

“You should rest,” I said.

“I’ve rested enough.” She stood and probably thought the world was spinning from the way she struggled for balance, but she found it quickly enough before she was staring me down



with an absolute plea in her blue-grey eyes. “Wherever you’re going, whatever you’re doing - take me along. I’ll stay out of trouble. Just... Please.”

In my wildest dreams, if I’d been told I’d be standing on this threshold at some point, ready to tip right over the edge of a jagged, rocky cliff from whence there is no going back, with Feyre steadfast at my side, I would have laughed so hard at the Cauldron for delivering yet another cruel lie unto my door.

But Feyre was absolutely serious. She wanted to come, to be and to *do* . Which meant, she’d have to know... *everything* . And even if it was Feyre, it was such an enormous secret.

And one, I realized standing there looking at my mate in the morning sun, that I trusted her with completely.

I stepped nearer, as near as I dared, and made absolutely certain she was aware of how serious this decision was. “If you come with me, there is no going back. You will not be allowed to speak of what you see to anyone outside of my court. Because if you do, people will die - *my* people will die. So if you come, you will have to lie about it forever; if you return to the Spring Court, you *cannot* tell anyone there what you see, and who you meet, and what you will witness. If you would rather not have that between you and - your friends, then stay here.”

She didn’t even have to breathe, have to blink, before she’d considered and knew the surety of her answer. And I believed her wholly in it too. “Take me with you,” she said. “I won’t tell anyone what I see. Even - them.”

Those words were a glorious, burdenless freedom I’d longed to feel. Not even for me, but all for her.

Her choice. Her actions. Her own empowerment.

A soft smile spread over my lips that was so unlike the feline grins meant to bait her that Feyre was used to seeing. “We leave in ten minutes. If you want to freshen up, go ahead.”

“Where are we going?”

My smile widened into a grin of immense pleasure, pleasure I hadn’t realized I felt until I said the startling revelation out loud. “To Velaris - the City of Starlight.”

I was taking my mate home.

---

Feyre looked like a new woman when she met me at the main atrium gleaming in all its moonstone and light. She wore a fresh set of Night Court attire and she smelled exquisite. Her bones still protruded at sharp angles here and there, but the lightness in her step did wonders for it. One day, I’d see her through it - all of it.

“That was fifteen minutes,” I teased casually, offering her my hand.

We exploded into the night of stars and embers, shooting, hurtling towards that sea and citrus of home. Our hands held tightly onto one another, our skin burrowing into skin, our touch anchoring the hold until we landed in my townhouse's main foyer.

She looked down first at the red carpet, traced patterns in its intricacies that led her towards dark wooden bookshelves lining the walls at every inch, the blazing marble fireplace, and the sweeping dining set.

Nothing in my life compared to that moment of feeling Feyre step the furthest yet into my personal life - into *me* - and feeling her walls stay down for it, watching her sink into the fabrics and colors and tattered corners in ways she never had in the Spring Court.

She *liked* it. More than liked it, possibly.

I let go of her hand and stepped back, enjoying the way a stream of sunlight poured over her face in an intimate bath.

At long, long last, Feyre was home.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! The journey with Rhys isn't quite over. If you'd like to continue reading my version of Rhys in ACOMAF, it's linked as subsequent parts in a series to this fic through Chapter 56 of ACOMAF. Parts 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, & 3.1 continue the fun with our bat boy. Enjoy! :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!

## ACOMAF Part 2.1: The House of Wind (Rhys POV)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10361988) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10361988>.

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# **ACOMAF Part 2.1: The House of Wind (Rhys POV)**

by [illyriantremors](#)

## Summary

Chapters 14-27 of ACOMAF from Rhysand's POV.

Starting with Chapter 14: Rhys brings Feyre to Velaris after saving her from Tamlin's prison in the Spring Court. His inner circle crashes their brief landing in Rhys's townhouse, sending Feyre upstairs. Downstairs, Rhys chats with his family and learns about another temple raid from Azriel.

## Notes

The second batch of chapters is here! Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and supporting this fic. I have already started the next set of chapters, so hopefully those won't take me quite as long to post. Enjoy, friends!

## Chapter 14: You Are Safe Here

"Welcome to my home."

It was a damned miracle to watch Feyre survey my townhouse, the most private space I occupied. And here she was suddenly *inside* it.

The moment was so surreal, that I had to lean against the oak threshold separating us from the sitting room to keep myself steady. Feyre, despite what I could tell was a decent amount of surprise at where she'd landed and a considerable amount of concern for what she might find beyond these walls, didn't miss a single detail. From the plush fabrics lining the furniture to the woven carpets and open windows, to worn bookcases and soft sounds from outside, she saw it all.

And I wondered if some part of her registered that she was really seeing a glimpse of *me* .

The palace she had spent two weeks in miles and miles away was easily representative of one half of me - the calculating, regal half that delighted in luxury without apology. But that portion was also who I was as a diplomat, the *High Lord* .

Here, I was *home* .

And she was still apprehensive.

"What is this place?" she asked and she sounded almost disbelieving, like any moment she might wake up.

"This is my house. Well, I have two homes in the city. One is for more... official business, but this is only for me and my family."

Feyre kept a sharp eye as her gaze flicked immediately away from me and stared down the hallway behind her questioning. The house replied with a warm, open silence - an invitation of sorts.

"Nuala and Cerridwen are here," I said. "But other than that, it'll just be the two of us."

I waited for her to say something, but her biting commentary never came. Mercifully, it wasn't the silence I'd come to expect that cried out hatred upon my back when I left the room or slashed at my soul with cuts and sneers to keep me out. Feyre was simply frozen in time and space as she stilled to look at the walls. I only hoped it was more from shock than any actual discomfort. Being here - I needed her to be okay with it, with even just this one small part of me, the most honest and normal portion there was. And also, the most *human* - the most like her.

Too long a stretch of silence passed. I took a careful step towards her, ready to explain further, when a shock of sound slammed into the fogged glass of the atrium door that led outside. I didn't have to look to know who was behind it.

“Hurry up, you lazy ass,” Cassian barked behind the glass. Feyre’s head whizzed to the sound. She looked exhausted just by the very idea she might have another guest to deal with let alone two more. I knew for Cassian to be here this early, he wouldn’t be alone.

“Two things, Feyre darling,” I said, interrupted by another pounding.

“If you’re going to pick a fight with him, do it after breakfast.”

*Azriel .*

Feyre’s brow peaked as if she could feel the shadows that cocooned my brother day and night even with a door between them. Knowing Azriel, he was likely experiencing something similar himself thanks to his smokey friends.

“ *I* wasn’t the one who hauled me out of bed just now to fly down here,” Cassian said tartly before sneering at Az, “Busybody.”

The exchange was so brief, and yet, when Feyre slid her gaze to me at the end of it, it was hard not to laugh - to smile. Even if only a little bit.

The reality of the moment hit me then in full force. Feyre was little more than a handful of steps away from my brothers, my family, my city - people and places I thought she would never see except maybe on a battlefield or in a court room with sentinels from an entirely different court at her side.

And yet, here we were. Cassian complaining about being dragged out of bed at an ungodly hour like I knew he would, Azriel dutifully pushing him here to do it. And Feyre hadn’t even met them yet but she was so close to seeing them, seeing it all.

The thought made me rather... giddy inside.

But she was tired. The hollows under her eyes were a deepening purple and her shoulders sagged at her sides so that her back and neck slumped. One would have thought she’d never slept a day in her life, never mind the hours she’d spent in bed only thirty minutes ago.

“One,” I said, making sure to shirk off the smile threatening to break free so she could understand that she needn’t worry here, “no one - *no one* - but Mor and I are able to winnow directly inside this house. It is warded, shielded, and then warded some more. Only those I wish - and *you* wish - may enter. You are safe here; and safe anywhere in this city, for that matter. Velaris’s walls are well protected and have not been breached in five thousand years. No one with ill intent enters this city unless I allow it. So go where you wish, do what you wish, and see who you wish.”

Another pounding sounded at the door and again, it was an effort not to give in to Cassian’s inexhaustible ability to dig at me.

“Those two in the antechamber,” I continued, ready for the snide remark sure to follow, “might not be on that list of people you should bother knowing, if they keep banging on the door like children.”

I didn't bother lowering my voice so they wouldn't hear me outside, but I hadn't raised it either, and all the same, Cassian still pounded relentlessly on the door and added, "You know we can hear you, prick."

A little thrill went up my spine that I stood solidly firm over to hide it. They were so close - both halves of my life. So, so unbearably close that the anticipation of it was just as much a nuisance to lock down as a happiness to feel.

"*Secondly*," I said casually, with just enough emphasis to piss Cass off and with any luck earn a long suffering sigh from Azriel, "in regard to the two bastards at my door, it's up to you whether you want to meet them now, or head upstairs like a wise person, take a nap since you're still looking a little peaky, and then change into city-appropriate clothing while I beat the hell out of one of them for talking to his High Lord like that."

Feyre looked at me in bewilderment. Her shields were in perfect tact. I didn't want to rifle through her head for every little emotion and thought, not at the cost of her personal space. But I would have been lying if I'd said it would not have been nice for this to have been one of those beautiful moments where she let me in on her mind's turbulent seas to understand her better. What I would have given to know what she was thinking just then and here I was too scared out of my mind to ask while I waited for a decision, even as the adrenaline begged me to...

Her face appeared easy at first, some of those muscles in her tired body relaxed as she surveyed my face in a way I'd never seen from her before. And then it fell, miserably low and I thought she might yawn or fall over on the spot.

"Just come get me when they're gone," she finally said. It was an effort not to let my disappointment show. Part of me wanted everyone I loved to meet then and there and be done with it, but her peace was more important.

Then again, that peace might never be possible if Feyre found my family wasn't one she could be a part of, if she found them too -

"You Illyrians are worse than cats yowling to be let in the back door." Amren's razor thin voice cut the silence between Feyre and I sharply. I heard the handle of the door jingle harshly as she tried it. "Really, Rhysand? You locked us out?"

Whatever was in Amren's tone today was not one Feyre was ready to face apparently because she immediately dismissed herself without another word and made for the stairs where I knew Nuala and Cerridwen would be waiting to intercept her. I listened for her footsteps, waiting until she was well out of the danger zone, before I opened the door and my entryway was flooded by my hulking brothers and the short, blunt woman who somehow outsized them both.

Cassian clapped me on the back, shaking the chill off of him as he strode past me towards the warmer air. "Welcome home, bastard," he said by way of greeting. "I sensed you were back. Mor filled me in, but I-"



Amren stepped directly into my path, cutting Cassian off with an annoyed glare. “Send your dogs out in the yard to play, Rhysand. You and I have matters to discuss.”

But while her displeasure had been directed at Cassian, it was Azriel who replied with that cold, deadly insistence, the only one who dared go toe-to-toe with Amren for my attention. When it came to political matters, at least.

“As do I,” Azriel said and there was no mistaking his meaning. Amren didn’t so much as move.

“We were here first,” Cassian said, much more casually than Az. “Wait your turn, Tiny Ancient One.”

Okay, maybe Azriel wasn’t the *only* one willing to play with Amren. The snarl that ripped from between her sharp teeth was low, but perfectly clear.

Mor startled me when she rounded the corner from the kitchen, a steaming cup of tea between her hands and wearing a lazy set of loose pants and a sweater that said she could have just woken up. I wondered whether she’d stayed the night here after forewarning Azriel of the last day’s events or if she’d met him this morning and winnowed in without bothering to change.

“Why is everyone here so *early* ?” She said, still sleepy. “I thought we were meeting tonight at the House.”

Everyone stared at me waiting and for a second, seeing my house full of people with nothing but complaint while Feyre went through her own mini-hell adjusting upstairs was tiresome. “Trust me, there’s no party. Only a massacre, if Cassian doesn’t shut his mouth.”

Cass blew me off. “We’re hungry. Feed us. *Someone* told me there’d be breakfast.”

Az’s lips gave a tug as he chose a plush backless seat to lean over, ready as ever to get straight to business.

“Pathetic,” Amren said. Never one to be outdone, she took her own seat across from the shadowsinger. “You idiots are pathetic.”

“We know that’s true. But *is* there food?” Mor flashed that insatiable grin of hers that won the hearts of men and women up and down Prythian, but Cass cut across her with a derisive snort.

“You’re the one who just came from the kitchen,” he said.

“That was for tea,” she said raising her mug and shaking it faintly in his direction. “And you know I don’t cook.”

“*Can’t* cook, you mean,” Azriel said. Their eyes met across the room and held some kind of quiet, teasing exchange the rest of us were never privy to.

When the shadows informed him that Mor's eyes weren't the only attention he held, Azriel cleared his throat and spoke in that cool stoicism of his. "So what's the plan?"

"Hold on, hold on," Cassian said. "I'd like to know what *prompted* these oncoming plans before we actually get in to them. Some of us don't have shadows and personal secretaries to inform us of every little movement Rhys makes." He gestured between Azriel and Mor. It was Mor who replied.

"Some of us," she said, staring pointedly at Cassian, "need to learn the value of minding their own business and a little patience. And I thought we were eating first?"

"By the Cauldron," I said, snapping my fingers. The coffee table filled with fruit and muffins. Mor squealed, reaching for her preferred chocolate muffins, Cassian not far behind taking a fat pomegranate, their conflict temporarily forgotten. Amren eyed the food with clear disdain.

"Miserable though this is," Amren said, "I too would like a full account of recent events and the plans to follow." Amren gave me half a heartbeat before her eyes lifted slowly to the ceiling above us where Feyre undoubtedly stayed, hopefully fast asleep between the fresh sheets of her new bed.

Everyone followed suit and I sank in to a chair, taking a nut muffin for myself with a few bites, and then let the incident in the Spring Court unfold.

"So she stays here from now on," Azriel asked. I nodded. "And you're content to trust her with the knowledge of this city - with Velaris?"

"Obviously," I said. "She's here, isn't she."

"You know what I mean, Rhys."

"Azriel isn't wrong," Amren said. "This is a considerable step, Rhysand."

"One that hasn't been weighed without a great deal of consideration, *Amren*," I replied and she eyed me stonily. I didn't appreciate the full use of my name.

Though I'd only taken a handful of seconds before acquiescing to Feyre's request to join me here, there had never been a doubt in my mind that she could handle keeping this secret or even that she would if she chose to assume the burden of it. I trusted my mate with that secret - and so much more, really.

"Feyre is now in a period of transition," I went on. "She has survived a great deal in her return to the Spring Court alone and it has cost her almost everything. For that and because of certain... understandings with her, she is to be afforded the rights of this court until such a time comes where she chooses to no longer be apart of it. And even then, her word is good that she will not betray us." Azriel's shadows tightened tensely around his body as if searching for the validity of my statement. "None of you have reason to doubt me on this."

I didn't need to add that that was final. "And now?" Azriel asked.

“You’ll meet her tonight and have your fun, and then tomorrow we work. So long as Feyre resides in Velaris, we know she is safe. But if she should leave this city, Tamlin is bound to have every sentinel and guard in his court trying to find her whether she wants it or not. And not just Tamlin.”

Mor shuddered and swallowed the bite of fruit she’d been chewing. “You think others will be looking for her? Our enemies?”

“And Tamlin’s.”

“Because of-”

“Amarantha? Yes. Anyone who sided with her and managed to get out of that mountain alive will almost undoubtedly be looking for her.” My mind flicked through the suspects, from the Attor to creatures of a much darker sort. “If they’ve allied with Hybern, then it’s almost a guarantee. Tamlin might be foolish enough to think no one will suspect Feyre of being more than just another High Fae noble, but I am not.”

“You think she is more than what she appears?” Cassian asked, genuinely intrigued - enough to stop chewing, at least.

“I already know she is, and will discuss it another time. For now...” I looked at Azriel. He had information, but his eyes narrowed, the shadows flickering over his face in a haze that told me to wait. “For now, eat your food and make my life a living hell like you always do.”

Cassian huffed a laugh and swiped another piece of fruit off the table, this time an orange. He threw a blueberry that stuck in Mor’s hair and I thought she might light his leathers on fire.

They stayed for most of the morning. For the most part, we chatted about strategies for keeping Feyre safe from the enemies who might try and snatch her if the time came for her to leave while at the same time scheming how to use that to our advantage if it was Hybern or one of his cronies behind any attacks. And then there was general conversation about the war itself, the Illyrian war-bands constantly harping at me from the North, the temples, Tamlin...

It was exhausting. As excited as I’d been having them arrive and share the same roof as my mate, part of me would rather have joined Feyre upstairs and taken a good, long nap away from the endless chatter about subjects hell bent on killing me.

Amren pulled me aside onto the outdoor patio midway through the discussion to give her own private report. She left as soon as it was over and Azriel took her place.

“Any news yet?” I asked. Azriel didn’t have to ask what I meant as he eyed the balcony to Feyre’s room just above us.

“Nothing,” he said. “Tamlin put the entire court on lock down almost as soon as he realized Feyre was missing. The gap was open for a short time and likely only because he wasn’t home when Mor got her out. I’m not sure he realized right away what had happened.”

“His wards are weak - even for him.” Something that was deeply unsettling. For a High Lord intent on protecting what was owed to him, he sure missed one hell of a show from Feyre for all her trouble should have alerted him to what was happening in his own home. An explosion like that... he should have met Mor and I at the gates.

“Keep an eye on the court,” I said. “Go back tomorrow yourself and see if you can’t get anything out of it. She’s only been here a day and Tamlin’s not going to let this go even if Feyre shows up and puts a knife in his heart herself.”

Azriel nodded. A cruel shadow twisted off his lips as if it spoke the order itself to whatever eyes and ears awaited him tomorrow in the Spring Court - that they should be watching. Azriel didn’t move.

“Spit it out,” I said.

“It’s happened again,” he said with that cold, unyielding blade of a voice he had.

I sighed. “Tell me.”

And I already knew what was coming.

His face cracked just the slightest, knowing the blow he was about to deal.

“There’s been another attack. Same as the rest - priestesses slain, the place ransacked, and *something* missing even if it’s not apparent what.”

Relentless, icy rage glittered in my veins. Had I not wanted to leave Feyre to possibly meet my little entourage for the first time alone, I would have shot straight up into the skies and flown until sundown.

“Where?” I asked instead.

But just as before, I already knew the answer. Knew the doom it spelt. Knew that another clue to the riddle I suspected I’d already solved was coming.

Azriel’s lips tightened into a hard line before he answered, his eyes cold and screaming with the same rage I felt.

“The Temple at Sangravah.”

*Cesere...*

*Sangravah...*

And countless others.

My mind flashed to the war room I’d shown Feyre, and the maps strewn with marks and figures.

War was coming.



# Chapter 15: Don't You Ever Think That

## Chapter Summary

Rhys takes Feyre for a short tour of Velaris, her first of the city, and discovers just how far into depression she's fallen when they hit the Rainbow. He later flies her to the House of Wind for dinner and asks to know what she's thinking.

I assumed that it was no coincidence that Feyre waited until everyone had left before she tip-toed down the stairs to meet me some fifteen minutes after the fact. I hadn't really done much other than stand there waiting restlessly for her anyway trying to get the blood in my ears to stop from hollering at me as I counted the number of priestesses who were likely now dead in Sangravah.

Priestesses were a fickle, questionable breed throughout Prythian, especially now that Amarantha had fallen. But every drop of fae blood was a waste when slain. Our numbers, despite vast cities and territories, were few compared to the Mortal Realms, which bred like mice.

And besides, those priestesses had been innocent. As innocent as Feyre who approached me now with quiet feet and the same undeserved punishment in her eyes.

I looked her over and swallowed tightly before she could catch my eyes. The cream sweater she wore complimented her pale skin, but it hung low enough on her chest that I could see how sharp her collarbones had become. And while the blue coat she wore, the same color as the crisp clear sky I'd seen outside while talking to Azriel, should have brought out the blue in her eyes, they remained dull - lifeless.

And yet, she was still stunning somehow with her hair artfully braided around her head and a rich brown hue in her pants that reminded me of the dirt and forests I'd first glimpsed her in, where she was home and in her element.

Alive or half-dead, Feyre was perfect. Seeing her look so comfortable in regular clothes my own court had provided even if she didn't feel okay in her own skin... Cauldron, I just wanted to touch her, to bring her close and hold her until it was okay or less not okay, if such a thing existed anymore.

"Those two certainly like to fuss," I said instead.

Feyre didn't react much as she followed me out the door and I couldn't blame her, not when all of Velaris stood before her to steal her inquisitive attention.

Just as she had when she'd first entered my townhouse, she took in every detail. It was a time before I joined her just outside the little gate running the perimeter of the yard.

Fae - lesser and high alike - strode casually up and down the lanes. Spices wafted richly through the air attracting Feyre with closed eyes as she followed the various scents, until the shouts of children laughing as they played games begged her open her eyes back up and pay attention.

But the sea, stretched out of that snaking river the Sidra that wound through the city, was what really caught her attention, made her see the city as one collective tableau beyond the brushstrokes she initially spotted.

Velaris was such a dynamic, varied city. It was one reason I adored it and thanked the Mother every day my predecessors had seen fit to keep this city secret and safe above all others. There were just as many stretches of even, flat land to roam as there were mountains to climb, and the sea offered a never ending adventure to escape to. I grew up inhaling the salty, fresh scent of it deep into my lungs every morning until it was just as ingrained into my being as the wind and air were at my wings.

Feyre followed the wind as it took her over the many rooftops that clustered the city's hillsides until she spotted the massive cliff side carved of red stone and her breath hitched.

Her mental shields were shut as I approached, clamped down tightly, so I couldn't tell if she was impressed or curious or something else entirely.

"The middle peak," I said softly, trying not to scare her, but she still jumped to face me, "that's my other home in this city. The House of Wind." I spotted Cassian and Azriel over Feyre's shoulder flying toward the topmost reaches of the House, two blurs of black and danger carried on the wind to remind me of what was at stake. "We'll be dining there tonight."

Feyre cut away and took one more sweep of the city. We had barely stepped outside my townhouse and I already felt this horrible sense of dread that she would be displeased, would find it taxing and tiresome to be here as the city raged with life.

A city - this city. This damned city I never thought I'd see again, never thought I'd get to show her.

"How?" Feyre asked.

And I knew she was really asking how it even existed.

"Luck," I replied.

"Luck?" she said quietly, too quiet. But with enough steely force behind it to knock the wind from the skies and render me silent. "Yes, how lucky for you that the rest of Prythian was ravaged while your people, your city, remained safe." She paused to survey me, a glint of malice in her eyes that was quickly lost in the sea of rage and emotion she was slave to these

days. “Did you even think for one moment to extend that *luck* to anywhere else? Anyone else?”

*Every damn day for fifty years*, I wanted to say. Not at her - but at me. At my own stupid inability to act.

“Other cities,” I said, trying to explain as much to myself as to her, “are known to the world. Velaris has remained secret beyond the borders of these lands for millennia. Amarantha did not touch it, because she did not know it existed. None of her beasts did. No one in the other courts knows of its existence, either.”

“*How?*”

“Spells and wards and my ruthless, ruthless ancestors, who were willing to do anything to preserve a piece of goodness in our wretched world.”

A piece of goodness that *I* was willing to preserve - by whatever means. It was an argument I had given myself daily under that cursed rock while I remained there, trying forever to convince myself that sealing this city up to keep it safe while the rest of Prythian went to hell was worth it.

And if Feyre didn’t eventually see that, it would be failure in bringing her here and would mean that I was wrong, had lied to myself for fifty years in vain. I didn’t think there was any coming back from that, to fail my court...

When Feyre replied, it felt like the hot venom hissing from her was directed as much at me as it was for the demon who had enslaved us to her rule. “And when Amarantha came, you didn’t *think* to open this place as a refuge?”

For a moment, I went blind. Blind with panic and anger at how difficult Amarantha had made this, to even be here in this situation. I had made the choice that would keep my *court* safest as every other High Lord had done to their own abilities and I would *not* be sorry for it.

“When Amarantha came,” I said, gritting on the words, “I had to make some very hard choices, very quickly.”

Feyre shoved away from me, her eyes dragging with disgust towards the sea, something I assumed was far more pleasant to look at just then than my unyielding face. “I’m assuming you *won’t* tell me about it.”

Dinner. Just a few more hours and then we would be at dinner with my brothers - with Mor. And then maybe we could...

“Now’s not the time for that conversation.”

It wasn’t likely what she wanted to hear, and I hated myself a little bit for shutting her out the same way Tamlin had at every turn. But right now... she needed to see the city, need to see and feel and live it to understand just what was at stake.



As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, Feyre stared at the Sidra and asked, "So what is there that was worth saving at the cost of everyone else?"

I met her eyes with relentless dedication and loyalty, the ideologies that bound me blood and soul to my court.

"Everything."

---

I tried to explain as much of the city as I could, but it was... difficult doing so. Feyre rarely replied to my commentary and her gaze was bland as she took in details at every turn.

We reached the Palace of Thread and Jewels - the first of our four main market squares - and I found myself taking trips into the various jewelry shops just for a reprieve from my one-sided conversation with Feyre. I had needed a gift for Amren, anyway.

A gift I honestly could have purchased in the first shop, had Feyre not decided to stay outside and the time alone provided me with space just to think of what to say to her. But the first shop was full of rings, all beautiful and glimmering with golds and silver and every kind of gem imaginable, that reminded me too much of the one ring I was most anxious to retrieve. With any luck, I'd have it soon.

I glanced from the display out the shop window to where Feyre stood, her head constantly turning, and walked out the shop with a quick word of goodbye to the shop keep. By the time I had bought something for Amren, I was content to shove the small bag into my pockets and leave my hands there to cut some of the tension riding my nerves.

Feyre was so, so silent. I'm not sure what I had expected the first time I showed her my city, but it wasn't quite this.

We wandered for a long while and I said less and less as we went, keeping a few steps from Feyre who didn't seem to want to be near me regardless. Occasionally, someone would stop to say hello, maybe shake my hand, but for the most part, passersby kept to silent nods and waves.

We'd made it through the Palace of Bone and Salt - a spice and meats market - when the first flecks of color cut my vision in the distance and I knew the test we were nearing. A jolt of adrenaline crashed through my stomach like lightning in the middle of a still and peaceful desert.

Feyre stopped dead in her tracks the moment she spotted the first shop and realized what it was, realized that before her lay a minefield of memories.

"This is what Velaris is known for," I said keeping a low voice as she stared into the art shop as though it were a torture chamber she might find my spymaster working in. "The artists' quarter. You'll find a hundred galleries, supply stores, potters' compounds, sculpture gardens, and anything in between. They call it the Rainbow of Velaris. The performing artists - the musicians, the dancers, the actors - dwell on that hill right across the Sidra. You see the bit of gold glinting near the top?" I pointed and barely, she followed my direction and I wondered if

this was a mistake. “That’s one of the main theaters. There are five notable ones in the city, but that’s the most famous. And then there are the smaller theaters, and the amphitheater on the sea cliffs...”

Feyre’s eyes glossed over as they trailed away uncaring or - something. My explanation died. All life inside of me seemed to die. Her shield dropped for the first time that day and I was once more standing before the ghost who had visited me for two weeks out of obligation.

I knew she hadn’t wanted to paint, knew that color and creation sometimes rotted the very bones she stood on. But I had not thought - had not realized that her passion had been so deteriorated, so tainted by what had happened that even the very core of who she was had become dead inside.

Through her now opening mind, there wasn’t even a faint glimmer of that desire and it was crushing to feel the hollow ache that now took up occupancy inside that human heart of hers. Cauldron, even on my darkest nights under that mountain, I’d still wanted to *fly* ...

“I’m tired,” Feyre said. It was barely audible.

“We can come back another day,” I said, because of course I wasn’t going to give up on this, nor let her give up on herself. She *deserved* these passions, these pursuits. We’d just have to wait. “It’s almost time for dinner, anyway.”

I took our walk back up and Feyre moved with me, but each step seemed to crack her walls open ever wider as her anger, insatiable and roaring and gutted beyond comprehension, drowned her out and took me with it.

It wasn’t just the sight of her former love sitting at every window behind us as we strode away. It was every single person she saw smile, heard sing, or laugh, or chatter merrily on that burned her.

And I understood because I wanted it too. Wanted a life that was carefree so damned *badly* that I sometimes thought I would burn the world to ash just to have it, even if it meant being alone with the darkness crackling in my blood from when my powers had first awoken. That roaring had never stopped since despite dimming somewhat over time.

And now I felt it roaring inside of Feyre, ascending towards a breaking point. The last time I’d felt that snap inside her, she’d -

“Easy,” I said gently and felt her turn to look at me hotly. I wondered what would come out of her this time if she broke. Ice? Fire? More darkness, perhaps. Nothing she would want to expose so publicly and nothing my court deserved the ire of. “My people are blameless.”

Without any pause whatsoever, Feyre drained of all emotion and I staggered a bit to look at her. The rage - it was gone, blinked out of existence as if it were never there in the first place.

A harsh numbness fell over her that I hated to feel. That favorite sentiment of the ghost that so loved to inhabit her mind and steal her away from the world as she reiterated with the most defeated look, “I’m tired.”

I felt like I'd failed her. I'd shown her Velaris. Shown her the jewel of my court and what I'd most hope might inspire her in all the ways I couldn't and she felt... empty again.

It was an effort not to cry as my throat went raw. "Tomorrow night, we'll go for a walk. Velaris is lovely in the day, but it was built to be viewed after dark."

Like Feyre. Like myself.

Desperate. I was so fucking desperate. A miserable fool right back in that sitting room trying to pull something - anything, out of her.

The effort of walking up the hills back towards the townhouse grated on Feyre as she mustered some energy to hold the conversation. "Who, exactly, is going to be at this dinner?"

"My Inner Circle. I want you to meet them before you decide if this is a place you'd like to stay. If you'd like to work with me, and thus work with them. Mor, you've met, but the three others--"

"The ones who came this afternoon."

I nodded. "Cassian, Azriel, and Amren."

Cauldron, would they be enough? After our tour through Velaris, I wasn't so sure anything would be anymore. That momentary giddiness I'd felt this morning at having Feyre *so close* to meeting them vanished.

"Who are they?" she asked and I puzzled over how to best explain my court.

"There are tiers," I said, "within our circle. Amren is my Second in command." Feyre's eyes widened incredulously. That she had not been expecting. "Yes. And Mor is my Third. Only a fool would think my Illyrian warriors were the apex predators in our circle."

Feyre mused trying to make sense of the cheery, sunny woman she knew with the powerful warrior Mor had to be to have earned her keep as my Third. The thought made me smile inwardly, but Mor wasn't who I was so concerned with Feyre meeting, not after the brief flare up we'd just gone through...

"You'll see what I mean when you meet Amren," I continued. "She looks High Fae, but something different prowls beneath her skin. She might be older than this city, but she's vain, and likes to hoard her baubles and belongings like a firedrake in a cave. So... be on your guard. You both have tempers when provoked, and I don't want you to have any surprises tonight."

"So if we get into a brawl and I rip off her necklace, she'll roast and eat me?" Feyre asked, and she was actually a little genuinely curious about my Second and her mysterious nature. The scene that sprang to mind of Feyre trying to steal from Amren was comical.

"No," I laughed, "Amren would do far, far worse things than that. The last time Amren and Mor got into it, they left my favorite mountain retreat in cinders. For what it's worth, I'm the

most powerful High Lord in Prythian's history, and merely interrupting Amren is something *I've* only done once in the past century."

I meant it to come out offhandedly, a simple way of explaining the depth of Amren's power. But the gates to Feyre's mind burst full and free, latching on to that one phrase: the most powerful High Lord in *history* ...

And Amren, with her seeming ageless existence.

The city went very quiet then. Everything narrowed down to Feyre as my every thought disintegrated into the empty, empty starving void that was her mind, a mind that looked at my friends - looked at *me* - and decided it didn't even have an impulse to *want* to try anymore, that death might be better.

My hand snatched her chin and I willed myself not to dig in to her skin lest I hurt her. But I pulled her towards me, unable to go any longer without touching her and affirming that she was still real, was not this ghost haunting her skin, was still here alive and breathing even if she didn't want to be.

Fuck, she had to be.

*She wins. That bitch wins if you let yourself fall apart...*

"Don't you *ever* think that," I said. "*Not for one damned moment.*"

And I yanked hard on her mind. I hadn't quite meant to, but I was so worn down from watching her not care, watching her waste away and gladly do it that I felt compelled to do *something*. I couldn't - fuck, I couldn't lose her. Not again. Screaming for her on the floors of that mountain had been enough to last me lifetimes.

But tugging on her mind was like hitting a reset between us. One moment, we were standing in the middle of the Velaris with the Sidra on one side and pleasant shops on the other. And the next...

The next, I was on that balcony Under the Mountain, feeling the bond snap into place with tautness between us before Feyre dragged me even deeper, back to the moment she had died and the only way to save her was to fold her into myself. She saw through my eyes - saw herself standing there under the glittering sun of Velaris, how hollow her eyes were, how sharp her cheek bones stood out, how loosely her clothes hung from her body.

And she was broken. We both were. Crying out in mourning for how far we'd fallen. At how much she had lost. Her humanity gone right along side her passion, her drive, her fierce courageous spirit. All of it seemed lost in those moments of staring at herself for what she'd become. It broke her to the point that she released the bond and fell into the chasm of that incredible despair while I scrambled for purchase on the bond itself, clinging to it if it meant it would keep her alive.

And if it didn't. Fuck, if it didn't...

I pushed my desperate screaming out of my ears from when Amarantha had hurled herself at Feyre and I'd heard her neck snap, heard my heart die alongside her. "Was that a trick?" Feyre said, dripping with contempt.

"No," I rasped, my head tilting to one side to study her. "How did you get through it? My shield."

Bond or no bond, it shouldn't have been easy to get inside my head to the point of co-habitation like that. Shit, this meant that was -

Feyre blazed past me, no longer content to stand about sluggishly, though she remained dejected. She was running away.

Carefully, I grabbed her elbow and held her back. "How many other minds have you accidentally slipped into." The answer flashed through her mind faster than her brain could put words together to articulate thought. "*Lucien?*" I snorted at that, no love lost for the Fox of Spring. "What a miserable place to be."

Feyre returned my short laugh with a vicious snarl. "*Do not* go into my head."

"Your shield is down," I said, watching proudly as she hauled it right back up, *cared* enough to do it. "You might as well have been shouting his name at me. Perhaps you having my power..." I stared at her, chewing my lip.

It was too perfect. Everything I'd been hoping for in terms of her abilities, assuming she agreed to use them with me, was staring me in the face. All of the evidence that this crazy plan could actually work was appearing like wildfire. If she said yes tonight...

A cottage some hundreds of miles away deep in the forests of Prythian flashed briefly through my mind.

It was a dream, my turn of luck. I couldn't believe it, to the point that I snorted a laugh. "It'd make sense, of course, if the power came from *me* - if my own shield sometimes mistook *you* for me and let you slip past. Fascinating."

I'd tell her why that was fascinating later. After she had decided whether or not to work for me.

Feyre glared at me and some of the old fire returned to her features, the fire that danced and played and bantered with me for sport, not hate. "Take your power back. I don't want it."

*Mother above, thank you.*

I smiled coolly. "It doesn't work that way. The power is bound to your life. The only way to get it back would be to kill you. And since I like your company, I'll pass on the offer."

We resumed walking and I gave her a few paces before I brought the conversation back to less savory details to her.

“You need to be vigilant about keeping your mental wards up. Especially now that you’ve seen Velaris. If you ever go somewhere else, beyond these lands, and someone slipped into your mind and saw this place...” The impact of that happening never failed to distress me as I repressed a shudder. “We’re called daemati - those of us who can walk into another person’s mind as if we were going from one room to another. We’re rare, and the trait appears as the Mother wills it, but there are enough of us scattered throughout the world that many - mostly those in positions of influence - extensively train against our skill set. If you were ever to encounter a daemati without those shields up, Feyre, they’d take whatever they wanted. A more powerful one could make you their unwitting slave, make you do whatever they wanted and you’d never know it. My lands remain mystery enough to outsiders that some would find you, among other things, a highly valuable source of information.”

Feyre snapped. It seemed her newfound abilities were just one more thing to hate about herself or me - maybe both of us.

“I take it that in a potential war with Hybern, the king’s armies wouldn’t even know to strike here?” She waved generally at Velaris all around us, her voice cold and sharp. I didn’t want to argue again, not when I’d just gotten her back, not when - “So, what - your pampered people... those who can’t shield their minds - they get your protection *and* don’t have to fight while the rest of us bleed?”

She was out of my reach and storming up the street before I could even blink at her. But she needn’t have bothered. Her words were so clipped, so chaotic, I knew they were shallow attempts at angering me, pushing me away. But beneath them stretched that dark wasteland where I had spent fifty years convincing myself everything was worth it.

I stayed well behind Feyre as we made it back to the townhouse. I didn’t need her shields to drop - which they didn’t - to tell me what kind of empty void she’d fallen back into where colors had faded and life itself stopped existing.

My own life felt colorless. Felt bleak. How long had I been pushing Cassian’s blunt attempts to call me back away? How long had been avoiding Azriel and curtly rushing out on Amren when the conversation didn’t call for my attention? How long had Mor been watching me wake up and pretend I wasn’t still sleeping all through breakfast?

We were both lost, Feyre and I. I just hoped by the end we could find our way back to whatever life was calling us home.

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The remainder of the afternoon was quiet.

Feyre went upstairs to get ready for dinner, though I imagined she was stewing just as much as I was. I made quick work of the brooch I’d purchased, wrapping it in a plain white box adorned with a thick silk ribbon and sending it off to its recipient. I had a feeling I wouldn’t have to wait long to see it worn.

Dinner.

My stomach churned in response. Not at the thought of food, but... the conversations and the people to come. And - Feyre.

What she would think.

After how turbulent her emotions were today, I had no idea what to expect she'd make of this evening.

I took a steadying breath as I searched my closet for the right tunic to wear, something simple - black, with silver threading, carrying that note of elegance that I enjoyed indulging in. Not all of my High Lord's mask was a lie. The fabric was soft and cool along my skin.

It didn't take long to dress. I was outside waiting for Feyre on the balcony minutes later as the sun went down. Lights winked into existence over the stretch of Velaris all the way down to the Sidra, across it, and beyond. A city that slept in the day and waged life in the night.

A city I never thought I would see again.

A city, I might lose in a matter of weeks and months.

That vicious chain of nerves rattled in my bones shackling me to the earth. My wings burst free in gentle reprimand, strong and independent and yearning for the skies. For home. For that wildness that belonged solely to me.

I wanted to *free* again. Of everything.

There was music growing steadily louder like a heartbeat in the throws of fear except that the music was happy, was jubilant as it carried its notes to me and grounded me in this place.

Always torn in two - two feet on the ground and one head in the skies content to remain that way if it meant another night like this, teeming with possibility. Feyre might agree to stay tonight, might choose to spend her days with me even if only in a political capacity. She would choose whether to be a part of my court.

She would meet my *friends* .

A smile blossomed on my face. My eyes closed as I scented her approach. Somehow the idea of taking her up there wasn't so terrifying as it had been. Or at least, where it was worrisome before and still was, now it was also somewhat hopeful.

Feyre cleared her throat and I turned, my breath hitching at the sight of the spectacular dress she'd selected. The length of the skirt and sleeves complimented her thin frame and the color - a swirling midnight blue like the depths of a pool of starlight and the dust of the heavens that one might fall into, sparked a soft glow in her blue-grey eyes. My eyes followed the deep plunging vee of her neckline, falling into that pool down, down, down...

"Rhys?" Feyre quirked her brow up at me and I realized I was still smiling like a lost fool at her. I brushed it away, but the sentiment behind it remained locked in my core.

She was lovely.

*Feyre* was lovely.

Feyre was hope and wonder and the future. The only person who made me feel normal anymore.

She straightened and let out a breath of air glancing up at the night sky, perhaps seeking some similar brand of comfort.

“Shall we?” I asked.

Feyre nodded and half turned for the door when I held my arms out and her body stiffened, registering what I intended. Her eyes went wide and I didn’t know it was possible for her skin to grow even paler, but it did.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “No.” Her tone was perfectly clear.

I crossed my arms and let my wings convey the bulk of my meaning as they rustled behind me, stretching and flexing with the moonlight around us in that courtyard.

“The House of Wind is warded against people winnowing inside - exactly like this house,” I explained. “Even against High Lords. Don’t ask me why, or who did it. But the option is either walk up the ten thousand steps, which I *really* do not feel like doing, Feyre, or fly in.” I didn’t bother adding that I didn’t feel like walking up all those damned steps just as much out of a desire to hold her again - properly - as a desire to be lazy.

Feyre seemed to realize something similar about the position this would put us in as she glanced over me, over the wings that would carry her high into the skies, and swallowed hard. That grin slowly stretched back across my lips like a cat prowling out to play.

“I promise I won’t drop you,” I said, a luxurious purr.

Feyre was near to dancing on her toes as she dropped down to examine her dress, her fingers fidgeting with the thin fabric at either side. She looked up and stared at me hard. “The wind will rip the gown right off.”

And then she’d be -

The hard, agitated feeling that had been rolling in my gut all afternoon went loose becoming a warm, delectable energy I hadn’t been sure I could still enjoy. But clearly, it was there as Feyre took one look at the feral grin I’d let slip and bolted for the door.

“I’ll take the stairs,” she said with an edge of annoyance. My wing snapped out and blocked her path, forceful enough that she couldn’t get away, but smoothly, without anger, for her to not feel threatened.

Feyre stared at the membrane of my wing for a long time almost as if she could see through it to the safety and comfort her room inside the townhouse provided. I wanted her to feel that way with me so near. Her shoulders rose and fell with her breath as she considered... something.



“Nuala spent an hour on my hair,” she said. I wondered what that hesitation really translated to. If it was me, our proximity, or the same nervous weight I carried for the meeting she would have in the next five minutes with a host of new information that might easily overwhelm her, even if I didn’t doubt for one minute she could deal with it if she really wanted to.

Gently, I brought the wing towards Feyre and she turned to face me, one step closer. A light breeze pushed at those delicate curls resting against her face and neck, one annoyingly skirting her cheek. “I promise I won’t let the wind destroy your hair,” I promised, staring at that lone rebellious curl. The desire to reach out and just *touch* it rose so suddenly in me that I was paralyzed to go through with it.

“If I’m to decide whether I want to work against Hybern with you - with your Inner Circle, can’t we just... meet here?”

“They’re all up there already. And besides, the House of Wind has enough space that I won’t feel like chucking them all off the mountain.”

Feyre swallowed and stared at the stretch of space - of hollow distance - between us and the House. “You mean,” she said quietly, nervous, “that this town house is too small, and their personalities are too big, and you’re worried I might lose it again.”

I brought my wings in a little closer, not sure how she’d react, but then... she took another step toward me and she didn’t brush off my wings at her shoulders.

Cold. She was so cold. But standing so close to me near enough that we could share breath now, that it felt like she might trust me for two damned seconds, I felt inexplicably warm. And suddenly, so too did she.

“So what if I am?” I asked. I wouldn’t have minded seeing more of her power, if I were truthful.

“I’m not some broken doll,” she said, but she wouldn’t quite look at me when she said it.

“I know you’re not.” And I meant it. She was strong and fierce, a storm that commanded the skies and tossed the seas about in their scurrying. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll throw you to the wolves. If you meant what you said about wanting to work with me to keep Hybern from these lands, keep the wall intact, I want you to meet my friends first. Decide on your own if it’s something you can handle. And I want this meeting to be on *my* terms, not whenever they decide to ambush this house again.”

“I didn’t know you even had friends.” She was suddenly sharp, but I didn’t quite mind. The moment felt too intimate, too honest to bite out a retort.

“You didn’t ask.”

We stood close enough now that I slid my arm around her waist, enjoyed the feel of her weight leaning into me. We shared too few precious heartbeats before her eyes locked on to my wings and I felt her back stiffen beneath my hold.

Friends.

Flight.

*A cage .*

My wings snapped back, but my arm stayed true, wrapping more tightly around her. To hold her. To keep her safe. To live when she lived and die when she died.

*I will not let you fall, Feyre. I will not let you go it alone.*

Feyre knew what was coming. Knew there were no ten thousand steps to take tonight. Her fingers clutched nimbly at my tunic searching for somewhere to stop the shaking from coming on.

“You say the word tonight,” I breathed, “and we come back here, no questions asked. And if you can’t stomach working with me, with them, then no questions asked on that, either. We can find some other way for you to live here, be fulfilled, regardless of what I need. It’s your choice, Feyre.”

Her body went still, but for once it wasn’t with paralyzing fear that crippled her into the shadows. It was the stillness that readies for war, that stands tall and proud and marches into the shadows willingly to cast them down before they can swallow a person whole.

Feyre’s eyes slid around me, looked at my wings with something like readiness, and a jolt of adrenaline went through me. To touch her, to hold her... to *fly* with her, with my mate. Every ounce of instinct the Illyrian man I was made of threatened to burst out of me waiting for her to say the word. And then -

“Please don’t drop me,” Feyre whispered. “And please don’t-”

Those instincts exploded.

Up, up, up we went into the deep waters of the velvet night sky about us surrounded by stars and music and laughter. Wind whipped by our faces in a glorious triumph, drowning out the small yelp Feyre gave as we ascended into speed and a blur of color. I tucked my arms securely around her torso and legs.

And Velaris.

Velaris was a paradise below us of diamonds and onyx sparkling, dancing, moving through the night. Feyre could hardly take her eyes off it as we flew higher towards the House, the wind settling into a gentle breeze upon our skin giving us the space to think and hear once more.

And it was heaven. We had only a few minutes before we would land and this would all have been some lovely dream, but it was a few minutes with her that I could have lived in for eternity.

We shot up into an updraft and Feyre coiled into my chest, fisting herself in my tunic with chilled fingers. Her head was tucked just below my neck so that when I leaned down to murmur in her ear, I could smell the fresh scents coming off her hair of grass and sun and even now some of those old familiar notes of paint that might not ever leave her no matter how long she resisted the practice.

“I expected more screaming from you. I must not be trying hard enough.”

“*Do not*,” she hissed at me, but there was a lightness in her eyes as she watched the city, a lightness I had been waiting for since I first took her from the Spring Court. The lightness that only flying and freedom could bring.

Feyre was too captivated by the city to notice the soft smile I bore as I watched her.

“When I was a boy,” I said, “I’d sneak out of the House of Wind by leaping out of my window - and I’d fly and fly all night, just making loops around the city, the river, the sea. Sometimes I still do.”

“Your parents must have been thrilled.”

“My father never knew - and my mother...”

*My mother would have loved to see this, to have met you...*

“She was Illyrian.” *And she loved to fly.* “Some nights, when she caught me right as I leaped out the window, she’d scold me... and then jump out herself to fly with me until dawn.”

“She sounds lovely,” Feyre said and my heart wrenched that she would never get to find out for herself.

“She was.”

We flew the rest of the way in silence and I may have let an imagined pocket or two of turbulence in the air force into a few maneuvers that took extra time in getting us to that great stone balcony at the House. But finally, we landed and Feyre spared the interior dining room through the great glass doors half a thought before she was once more at the balcony railing staring out at the city, at the night.

I held her for a moment until she had her balance and then stepped away as she shook me off. Her face was blank, but not that empty void that wasted away. Just silent, contemplative as she considered my court, had been doing all night and all day.

“Out with it,” I finally burst, leaning against the railing next to her. She lifted a brow at me. “You say what’s on your mind - one thing. And I’ll say one, too.”

Instantly, for whatever reason, Feyre shook her head and turned back away. And the not knowing was what snapped the words out of me. Her shields were up and I wasn’t going to pry anyway, not anymore, but I was so desperate to know if she approved or if she was hating this whole affair or if she was okay.

Mother above, just tell me she was okay.

“I’m thinking,” I said, feeling Feyre’s focus on me even as she stayed staring in the other direction, “that I spent fifty years locked Under the Mountain, and I’d sometimes let myself dream of this place, but I never expected to see it again. I’m thinking that I wish I had been the one who slaughtered her. I’m thinking that if war comes, it might be a long while yet before I get to have a night like this.”

I looked to her, glad to see her looking back, and waited. But Feyre only said, “Do you think war will be here that soon?”

“This was a no-questions-asked invitation. I told you... three things. Tell me one.”

*Just tell me one thing - one piece of yourself that is real, that is honest, that isn't just to spite me. Tell me one piece of your soul, Feyre, and you can have all of mine...*

Feyre took a breath in which she seemed to inhale the entirety of Velaris and breathe it back out with her words.

“I’m thinking that I must have been a fool in love to allow myself to be shown so little of the Spring Court,” she said quiet, raw. “I’m thinking there’s a great deal of that territory I was never allowed to see or hear about and maybe I would have lived in ignorance forever like some pet. I’m thinking...” Her voice broke. I thought she might cry and I was one second from finally brushing that damned curl away from her cheek when she shook and pressed on. “I’m thinking that I was a lonely, hopeless person, and I might have fallen in love with the first thing that showed me a hint of kindness and safety. And I’m thinking maybe he knew that - maybe not actively, but maybe *he* wanted to be that person for someone. And maybe that worked for who I was before. Maybe it doesn’t work for who - what I am now.”

I wanted to tell her how proud of her I was.

I wanted to tell her that I understood all of those things and more and that they were perfectly valid.

I wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked standing there with her head held high, speaking her truths that pained her to her very core even if they were necessary now in order to think and feel again.

Most of all, I wanted to smack the stupid grins on Cassian and Azriel’s faces as they paused in the glass doorway and snickered at me.

So close...

“That was five,” I told Feyre, stepping back so that she was alerted to my brother’s appearance. “Looks like I owe you two thoughts - later.”

Feyre turned and caught sight of the males smirking at her and for a moment the world stopped.

We were finally here.



## Chapter 16: You Do What You Love, What You Need

### Chapter Summary

Feyre has dinner with Rhys's inner circle and decides that she will work with them to defeat Hybern.

I pushed off the balcony and walked towards my fate with my hands shoved deep into the plush fabric of my pockets. The motion only seemed to sharpen Cassian's grin. There was no going back now.

Feyre stayed behind, but Cassian was quick to chomp at the bit wasting absolutely no time. "Come on, Feyre," he said, his voice all playful teasing, a wolf ready to pounce. "We don't bite. Unless you ask us to."

Feyre jolted forward. Her instant reaction to his commentary had me biting out, "The last I heard, Cassian, no one has ever taken you up on that offer."

Azriel snorted as Feyre stepped within proper viewing of my brothers and took her first real look at them and... quietly surveyed with a hint of awe ghosting her face.

Cassian stood slightly taller than Azriel with a longer crop of hair that fell to his shoulders compared to Az's blunter cut. They both had that deep, tanned skin that marked the Illyrian people - and the hazel eyes, but beyond that... Cassian was all muscle and brute force, fashioned from the ground up, while Azriel was folded into smoke and darkness itself, the shadows crafting his form from the hollows of secrets themselves.

Day and Night, my brothers. Fire and ice. Stone and sword. A match and an opposition in every way.

The two briefly did something of the same to Feyre, Azriel lingering on her form a tad longer as Cassian looked me up and down with disapproval. "So fancy tonight, brother," he told me. "And you made poor Feyre dress up, too." He gave Feyre a wink and I wanted to smack him into the mud upstairs.

It wasn't flirting, but it was enough of that banter I'd been anticipating since Feyre arrived in Velaris that the insufferable itch I'd known was coming, the one that would determine how this night ended for better or for worse, tugged along my skin.

Mercifully, Feyre didn't give Cassian much thought as she slid her gaze to Azriel first, deciding he was the easier of the two to get along with. She held herself upright, stiff, as though she sensed the darkness that prowled beneath his skin, but she wasn't afraid.

"This is Azriel," I said, by way of introduction. "My spymaster."

“Welcome,” Azriel said and extended his hand, which Feyre took and shook carefully. Feyre’s eyes flitted briefly over the brutal scars twisting along Az’s hands like ivy growing along a wall of stone ruins that had been warped and aged with time and war. The brief glance escaped none of our notice, most especially Azriel’s I was sure, though he gave no indication he’d felt her brief curiosity.

Feyre released Azriel’s hand, but her eyes didn’t move from the leathers he wore, nor Cassian’s when she shifted her gaze back to him. They didn’t often wear anything other than fighting leathers, but I’d asked them all the same to wear them tonight rather than a more casual ensemble. If Feyre was to work with us, she needed to see everything and all up front, and that included the painful bloodshed we were always one breath away from at all times.

“You’re brothers?” Feyre asked glancing between us.

“Brothers in the sense that all bastards are brothers of a sort.”

She looked at Cassian, tone tight. “And - you?”

Cass gave a shrug, forcing his wings to constrict behind him. “I command Rhys’s armies.”

Feyre gave a start, one I should have expected given that any mention of the war to come narrowed her focus and heightened the intensity of her thoughts, her feelings.

And Cassian - Cassian was watching her with utter delight already imagining all the ways he might play with her. Her movements. Her reactions. How he might teach her, which had been another of my requests for the evening. With how much Feyre was holding herself back just then, I wondered if it had been a mistake. If this all had been one giant mistake.

I went utterly quiet, forcing myself to let this play out as it would and it was Azriel who dealt me the mercy of ending the torment having not missed a single second of the exchange going on. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he knew the tension it was wringing over me either.

“Cassian also excels at pissing everyone off. Especially amongst our friends. So, as a friend of Rhysand... good luck.”

Cassian shoved Azriel aside immediately, which Az didn’t look entirely thrilled with, but he stepped back all the same.

“How the hell did you make that bone ladder in the Middengard Wurm’s lair when you look like your own bones can snap at any moment?”

My insides froze and waited to shatter, to see how Feyre would take it. The *prick*. Azriel waited too standing near assessing every move she made as if he could read the thoughts behind them, bond or no bond.

Cassian just stood back expectantly and I knew that while he wanted to see what Feyre was made of just as much as Az, there was a genuine part of him - the warrior who had survived years in the cold with little-to-nothing inside him - who was truly curious how this fellow survivor, this fellow victim, had made it.

Feyre wouldn't give him even that much.

"How the hell did *you* manage to survive this long without anyone killing you?" she spat back, fire in her blood roaring at that beast in front of her. I half expected her to inform him that next time he'd have to say *please* if he wanted anything from her.

A brief flash of a bone cleaved in two, a javelin hurled at a red-headed queen, and Cassian's laughter ringing in my ear - both then *and* now. And I breathed.

Feyre could take him.

Azriel snorted once before the shadows consumed him into darkness and Feyre drowned in that darkness looking for answers herself, my inquisitive, curious little -

*Not your anything .*

Mor's breezy waltz to join us on the balcony interrupted Feyre's silent searching of me. "If Cassian's howling, I hope it means Feyre told him to shut his fat mouth."

"I don't know why I ever forget you two are related," Cassian said between Mor and I as she approached. At that, I rolled my eyes. "You two and your clothes."

Mor ambled right up to Cassian, who looked like he might attack her if she made one more comment about his *fat mouth* , and mocked him with a glowering bow as the skirts of her red dress flared out around her, the gold cuffs flashing a sort of wild, antagonizing grin at us all.

I stepped back, content to let my cousin take over from here and admittedly relieved that she did.

"I wanted to impress Feyre," Mor said, flashing Feyre a gleaming look, all bright bubbling champagne for this woman she already spoke to me of like a sister. "You could have at least bothered to comb your hair." I was half surprised she didn't run her hands over Cass's head and ruffle it up more.

"Unlike some people," Cass said, his feet digging into the stone, Azriel's gaze not far behind, "I have better things to do with my time than sit in front of the mirror for hours."

Mor tossed her hair and I knew, one word and she would gladly go to war with Cassian if it meant winning this little game our family constantly played.

"Yes, since swaggering around Velaris-"

"We have company," Azriel said at last, his long suffering patience and anxiety winning out over watching his friends snip at each other.

Cauldron, we hadn't even gotten to Amren yet.

Azriel stretched his wings wide to herd us forward, and indeed the leathery membranes were enough to sweep us all up a few times over as together we made it inside. Mor alone darted out of that pen created by the great wings, marching straight up to Feyre, but not before she'd



placed a hand on Az's shoulder and murmured to the shadowsinger softly enough that it felt an intrusion to overhear, "Relax, Az - no fighting tonight. We promised Rhys."

And then she was gone, grabbing Feyre by the hand and leading her inside while Azriel's face softened, his shadows momentarily gone in that brief solace he found in the sun.

That sun that filtered through the entire room as I watched Mor lead Feyre further inside by the hand like a dear friend she hadn't seen in ages. A rough force shoved into my shoulder.

"Get your hands out of your damned pockets," Cass hissed at me and then nodded in Feyre's direction. "And stop sulking. She's *fine*. Fine is good, remember?"

My eyes went up with great care, but I would not let them roll as Cassian snorted at me and moved on. Azriel clapped me on the back. "Fine is *great*," he said and I shoved him off me.

"Okay - *shit*," I said low, glad Feyre had been distracted enough by Amren's entrance not to see the exchange, and indeed Amren was *quite* the distraction.

Easily the shortest one in the room by a heavy margin, Amren stood the tallest of us all, her sweeping presence overshadowing the power surrounding her by miles. Those silver eyes looked ready to dance as she beheld Feyre, swirling with what seemed like the mists of the ancient realms that had birthed her one cursed morning into ours.

Mor sank into one of the chairs at the dining table with a simpering moan, undoubtedly disappointed her private time with Feyre was so short. She poured herself a glass of wine and tossed the bottle at Cassian who sat across from her at the table, the two of them content to spend an evening in such close proximity if there was enough liquor between them. Azriel alone stood with me.

"Your taste remains excellent, High Lord," Amren announced to the room at large, flashing the beautiful silver-and-pearl broach I'd picked up for today with Feyre. She'd get to her in a moment.

I waved my hand as if it were nothing and truly, after centuries of plying Amren with gifts she didn't really need to keep the firedrake happy, it was, and inclined my head. "It suits you, Amren."

"Everything suits me," she said with quiet, subtle precision. The entire room was silent. Finally, those dusty eyes alive with ancient wisdom fell on Feyre. And I was proud to see her stand tall and confident at Amren's hard stare. I wondered if that was any indication of how she felt or if she was squirming as much as I was inside.

"So there are two of us now," Amren said. Feyre gave a small flicker of confusion and Amren went on unfazed. "We who were born something else - and found ourselves trapped in new, strange bodies."

Quick as lightning and equally as punishing, Amren directed Feyre to the chair beside Mor's and took the seat opposite her. Azriel and I were left with no choice but to take the remaining seats which placed us next to them.

“Though there *is* a third,” Amren went on with the air of someone who shared a very great secret none else were privy to. “I don’t think you’ve heard from Miryam in... centuries. Interesting.” Amren’s cunning silver eyes slid to me, two swirling orbs ready to prophesy me a future in war and bloodshed.

“Please just get to the point, Amren,” Cassian said decidedly bored. “I’m hungry.”

The table went silent save for Mor choking on her wine. Feyre stiffened and I wondered if she recalled what I’d told her about interrupting Amren. Cassian wasn’t usually so testy.

But Amren shot my general a wry smile that was ready to cut him into pieces for her to feast on. “No one warming your bed right now, Cassian?” she asked slick as a serpent. “It must be *so* hard to be an Illyrian and have no thoughts in your head save for those about your favorite part.”

“You know I’m always happy to tangle in the sheets with you, Amren,” Cassian replied, leaning in closer to her and refusing to drop her stare. Amren looked ready to pounce and Cauldron boil me, I didn’t know who would move first - me or Azriel. “I know how much you enjoy Illyrian-”

“Miryam,” I said, cutting off exactly where I knew that sentence was heading, “and Drakon are doing well, as far as I’ve heard. And what, exactly, is interesting?”

But rather than return her focus to me, Amren’s eyes slid to Feyre and my mind buzzed in excitement all over again trying to ready for what was coming, what Amren would... assess, as I knew she inevitably would at some point during the course of the evening.

Amren studied Feyre for a long pause and this time, none interrupted her as we waited. “Only once before was a human Made into an immortal,” she said finally. Feyre sat straighter in her chair just as intrigued as the rest of us, seeing an equal of sorts before her. “Interesting that it should happen again right as all the ancient players have returned. But Miryam was gifted long life - not a new body. And you, girl...” I tried not to let the clipped *girl* grate on me as Amren tilted her chin up and sniffed the air coming off Feyre, and gave a start, that smokey gloss in her eyes clearing into surprise. Her head snapped to me and it felt as though my heart had leapt into my throat.

*Mate.*

Amren knew. Not just about what she announced to the room next, but about the bond. She questioned it in her stare. I merely nodded and averted my gaze where I caught Mor grinning into her wine glass, glancing at me out of the corner of her eyes.

I’d be hearing about this later.

“Your very blood,” Amren went on again addressing Feyre, “your veins, your bones were Made. A mortal soul in an immortal body.”

Amren and I had discussed this theory many times since I’d returned from the Mountain. In some ways, it had seemed more important to her than all the rest. Perhaps she saw something

of herself in Feyre or at least the potential for it, if Feyre didn't disappoint her as nearly all fae creatures did.

But we didn't really have time to discuss it as a group. Mor snapped her fingers and announced in that chipper way she had of dismissing grim subjects, "I'm hungry." And our table filled with food. She started piling her plate high prattling on as if Feyre were the only person in the world actually present. "Amren and Rhys can talk all night and bore us to tears, so don't bother waiting for them to dig in. I asked Rhys if *I* could take you to dinner, just the two of us, and he said you wouldn't want to." I held back a groan. That hadn't been *quite* how I'd phrased it. "But honestly - would you rather spend time with those two ancient bores, or me?"

"For someone who is the same age as me," I said, "you seem to forget-"

"Everyone wants to talk-talk-talk," Mor cut me off and stared pointedly at Cassian who had been ready to throw in with me. Anything to cut the queen down a notch and throw a tally up on his half of the scoreboard. "Can't we eat-eat-eat and *then* talk?"

And it was Azriel - Azriel who laughed quietly at Morrigan and her incessant love of life and food and friends, and dissipated the subtle tension floating about the room. Mor's lips quirked a quick smile at him before carrying over to Feyre, whom she filled a wine glass for and set in front of her plate. "Don't let these old busybodies boss you around," she said. The girls drank cheers to that.

"Pot. Kettle. Black." Cassian pointed his fork at Mor with each word, but she didn't deny it. Only started eating. Feyre had started eating herself and though the first few bites had been tentative, her plate rapidly diminished. I wondered with each bite how many would come running back up her stomach before the night was over, if the nightmares would chase her from sleep or if my friends would be enough to trap them down in merry conversation and pleasant meeting.

"I always forget how bizarre that is," Cassian said grabbing Amren's plate and dumping half of the food onto his own. Azriel immediately scowled, but... did not entirely hesitate from taking his half of the plate.

"I keep telling him to ask before he does that," Az said quietly to Amren, half an apology.

Amren vanished the plate away with cold indifference. "If you haven't been able to train him after all these centuries, boy, I don't think you'll make any progress now."

Finally - *that* was what made Feyre speak. "You don't - eat?"

Amren's smile was all teeth and venom. "Not this sort of food."

"Cauldron boil me. Can we *not*?" Mor took a huge gulp of wine, her shoulders rising up to her chin in a shudder.

So much for merry conversation and pleasant meeting. And Feyre's face - she looked like she'd just watched a cow sent to the slaughter and wasn't sure how she felt about it yet. I

stifled the chuckle I let out from bursting into a fuller, deeper laugh. "Remind me to have family dinners more often," I said.

And at last, I felt settled. Tense as fuck, but still settled.

These were my friends - my *family* - and Feyre hadn't looked at me once with so much as an inkling of flying straight back to the townhouse to give in to the solitude. The bantering, I could handle. Had handled for close to six centuries. But our brand of love layered in sharp jibes and wounded histories was unique to adjust to. Feyre continued eating, watching my companions in the longest stretch of silence we'd had yet, and Mother above I wanted her to find that adjustment tonight *so badly*.

But... if I could only have one night of this before she... said no, and resorted to the occasional dinner with Mor in the city while never seeing Cassian or Azriel or Amren again, then it was worth it. Because watching her sit there next to me in that dazzling blue dress that flowed around her body like water made from silk, looking to each of my companions and not flinching or backing down, it was something only my most bright and brilliant dreams were made of. And also, because it meant we were both pondering the same thing - what it would be like if she joined us. What it would be like if she called them family too.

And I realized they were waiting for her. That the silence around us as we ate was an open invitation for Feyre to choose where this started. I'd asked them to let me have this one night. Not all of them knew flat out the depth of the importance of it to me, but then again they really *did* know, didn't need to be told what Feyre... *being here* meant. And not only had they given me that, they gave it to her too, yielded the choice and the comfort and the terms to my mate to figure out where this went.

And I don't think I had ever loved them more than I did right in that moment.

Azriel, as it turned out, was where it started. Feyre's gaze turned to the shadowsinger bathed wholly in smoke as though it were sunlight, and halted on the cobalt stones atop his hands that mirrored the ruby colored ones atop Cassian's.

"They're called Siphons," Azriel said, lifting his hands to afford Feyre a better view. "They concentrate and focus our power in battle."

"The power of stronger Illyrians tends toward 'incinerate now, ask questions later,'" I explained. "They have little magical gifts beyond that - the killing power."

"The gift of a violent, warmongering people," Amren concluded.

And though he agreed, the shadows constricted around Azriel to the point that they could have been physical roping binding him down. Cassian's eyes narrowed at our brother who dismissed him at once. Always dutiful, always self-sacrificing, was Azriel.

"The Illyrians," I pressed on, trying to give Az some space as we headed into meatier discussion on less savory topics for dinner, "bred the power to give them advantage in battle, yes. The Siphons filter that raw power and allow Cassian and Azriel to transform it into something more subtle and varied - into shields and weapons, arrows and spears. Imagine the

difference between hurling a bucket of paint against the wall and using a brush. The Siphons allow for the magic to be nimble, precise on the battlefield - when its natural state lends itself toward something far messier and unrefined, and potentially dangerous when you're fighting in tight quarters."

Azriel's shadows lessened considerably, especially once Cassian jutted his hands out, Siphons on full display, and flexed like a peacock strutting about. "Doesn't hurt that they also look damn good."

"Illyrians," Amren muttered. Mor gave silent agreement that fell away in disgust as Cassian grinned ear to ear, damned proud.

I looked at Feyre and found her lips quivering slightly, her brow knitted together.

*Adjust, please adjust. Please be okay*, I silently begged the Cauldron.

When she spoke, it was all at once in a great rush that she kept trained on Azriel, the easiest to approach by far. "How did you - I mean, how do you and Lord Cassian-"

She was cut off by a howling cackle from Cassian that masked my own snort. A cackle that sent wine spewing all over Mor's dress.

"Mother's tits, Cassian - you ass!" Mor shot up out of her seat and glared at Cassian who didn't give a shit that she was pissed, he kept right on laughing. And within seconds, Mor's dress was clean and Cassian's flying leathers decidedly dirty with the stains of wine.

Feyre blushed crimson, sitting as far back in her chair as she possibly could. I felt an instinct I'd never experienced before, one that had been locked away deep inside of myself waiting for her perhaps, incline me towards her chair to cup her face between my hands and kiss her cheek. To care for her, to share the joke in ways I'd never been intimate with anyone. Not like this.

I remained rooted to the spot instead knowing how she would recoil if I ever so much as moved one inch toward her.

"Cassian," I said, "is not a lord. Though I'm sure he appreciates you thinking he is." Sure enough, Cassian wiped tears from his eyes in affirmation. "While we're on the subject, neither is Azriel. Nor Amren. Mor, believe it or not, is the only pure-blooded, titled person in this room."

Feyre's embarrassment shifted quickly into confusion as she examined me and perhaps just as she had when Amren had scented her earlier, I felt somewhat... exposed underneath that stare. "I'm half-Illyrian. As good as bastard where the thoroughbred High Fae are concerned."

"So you - you three aren't High Fae?"

"Illyrians," Cassian said in between his remaining fits of laughter, "are certainly not High Fae. And glad of it." He pulled his hair back so that the rounded tips of his ears showed.

“And we’re not lesser faeries, though some try to call us that. We’re just - Illyrians. Considered expendable aerial cavalry for the Night Court at the best of times, mindless soldier grunts at the worst.”

“Which is most of the time,” Azriel chimed in.

There were a few lingering smiles and chuckles sent around the ring of us before Feyre cut us cold, her question silencing us deeper than the grave. “I didn’t see you Under the Mountain,” she said.

No one knew quite where to look, but the answer was apparently everywhere but to myself. Which was good because... I didn’t know what to say. Not when Feyre’s words from this afternoon when we’d fought still clanged through my consciousness, dragging me through hell and back.

“Because none of us were,” my savior of a cousin said at last.

Feyre’s gaze slid to me and I kept my face a mask. If I cracked, even a little bit... there might not be any coming back from this conversation. It was one thing to fall to pieces in front of her, and a part of me had started to want that in some twisted way. What a privilege it would be to become a trembling, shattering mess in her arms. But to do so in front of the others, to lay that burden at their feet... there might not be any coming back from that, not when I knew what my leaving and their staying had cost them too.

“Amarantha didn’t know they existed,” I said, willing myself forward into territory I knew would come up eventually between us. “And when someone tried to tell her, they usually found themselves without the mind to do so.”

Feyre shuddered and I resisted the impulse to do the same, knowing it meant she likely... despised me for what I’d done, what I had saved at the cost of so much else.

“You truly kept this city, and all these people, hidden from her for fifty years?”

“We will continue to keep this city and these people hidden from our enemies for a great many more.” Amren. Sharp. Shrewd. Resolute. Unyielding as stone.

This was it. I could feel it in the silence that reigned over us all. This was the moment where Feyre decided. This right here. It wouldn’t be the end of the night when she’d taken the full measure of every person at this table because just then, she saw everything she needed to make her decision.

Cassian’s hard stare at the plate in front of him, his anger raging across his skin, so palpable we could feel it.

Azriel’s cocoon of shadows storming over his person, wrestling with a desperate, icy rage even now months after my return that longed to go and slaughter every cretin creeping in the mountains who might have once held me to my prison and escaped detection when Tamlin ripped Amarantha’s throat out.

Amren's cruel defiance, her refusal to bend law or deed to fit anyone else's approval so long as her city and High Lord were held to the justice they deserved in this world.

And Morrigan.

Morrigan's quiet, shattered heart that had flown at me when I came back, had waited patiently to cry buckets against me after my own grief was finished pouring out. Morrigan who had poked and prodded and kept to companionable joy at my side since we were kids. Morrigan who took every burden I had unjustly hurled at her and spun it into brilliant resilience so like her very own.

Morrigan, who now looked at Feyre with redness stinging her eyes, lips tight, and said, "There is not one person in this city who is unaware of what went on outside these borders. Or of the cost."

Not one person - including these four, my Inner Circle. My blood. My family.

For them, I had sacrificed everything. For them, I would stay Under that Mountain. For them, Amarantha was a gift to delight in if it meant keeping them safe.

If it meant her hands on me, groping and teasing and testing until I was hard and cursing my own body and had no choice but to fuck her until she...

Feyre was so quiet, I missed the moment when she asked a question that must have been something to do with our meeting. She was staring at me. Cassian was too. It was his reply that made me understand what direction she'd shifted the conversation into.

"We all hated each other at first," he said. I could hear a faint smile in his voice. It was not until Cassian had drawled on considerably that Feyre took her eyes off me. For the first time, I didn't desire them back. "We *are* bastards, you know. Az and I. The Illyrians... We love our people, and our traditions, but they dwell in clans and camps deep in the mountains of the North, and do not like outsiders. Especially High Fae who try to tell them what to do. But they're just as obsessed with lineage, and have their own princes and lords among them. Az," and he pointed in our brother's direction, "was the bastard of one of the local lords. And if you think the bastard son of a lord is hated, then you can't imagine how hated the bastard is of a war-camp laundress and a warrior she couldn't or wouldn't remember. Az's father sent him to our camp for training once he and his charming wife realized he was a shadowsinger."

I cleared my throat, realizing Feyre still had no idea what a shadowsinger was and needing to... reclaim my part in the evening. I might remain lost otherwise if my thoughts were left to fester. "Like the daemati," I said, "shadowsingers are rare - coveted by courts and territories across the world for their stealth and predisposition to hear and feel things others can't."

I had half a mind to assume Feyre would jump right in with that insatiable curiosity of hers to ask Azriel exactly what that meant, but one look at him wrapped in his shadows with stone cold silence bringing predatory stillness over his face and I was glad, for his sake, that she chose not to.

Though Azriel had grown more comfortable with his past over these many centuries, it was seldom a topic we ventured in to. Some demons come back too easily.

Which was why Cassian was the one who continued talking.

“The camp lord practically shit himself with excitement the day Az was dumped in our camp. But me... once my mother weaned me and I was able to walk, they flew me to a distant camp, and chucked me into the mud to see if I would live or die.”

Mor snorted. “They would have been smarter throwing you off a cliff.”

“Oh, definitely,” Cassian said, agreeing with her for once. There was a shared understanding that passed between them then, the torment of families gone terribly wrong. The common thread connecting us all together. “Especially because when I was old and strong enough to go back to the camp I’d been born in, I learned those pricks worked my mother until she died.”

The tension born of that admission unleashed an awful silence once more. The anxiety and scars flickering on Cassian’s face stirred some of that same icy vengeance Azriel carted around within myself.

“The Illyrians,” I said, taking Feyre’s attention away, “are unparalleled warriors, and are rich with stories and traditions. But they are also brutal and backward, particularly in regard to how they treat their females.”

“They’re barbarians,” Amren amended. “They cripple their females so they can keep them for breeding more flawless warriors.”

Mor’s incessant nodding to the left caught my eye, but she was staring straight at Azriel, worry creasing her brow as he wouldn’t meet her gaze, nor any of us. She bit her lip and waited for him to look up at her anyway.

What Amren had said was nothing short of true. My own mother... Cauldron, only earlier I’d thought of flying with her, of introducing her to Feyre. My mother and my mate...

“My mother was low-born,” I said, wanting Feyre to know her in some way where she couldn’t in real life. “And worked as a seamstress in one of their many mountain war-camps. When females come of age in the camps - when they have their first bleeding - their wings are... clipped. Just an incision in the right place, left to improperly heal, can cripple you forever. And my mother - she was gentle and wild and loved to fly. So she did everything in her power to keep herself from maturing. She starved herself, gathered illegal herbs - anything to halt the natural course of her body. She turned eighteen and hadn’t yet bled, to the mortification of her parents. But her bleeding finally arrived, and all it took was for her to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, before a male scented it on her and told the camp’s lord. She tried to flee- took right to the skies. But she was young, and the warriors were faster, and they dragged her back. They were about to tie her to the posts in the center of camp when my father winnowed in for a meeting with the camp’s lord about readying for the War. He saw my mother thrashing and fighting like a wildcat and...”



And...

*“Be glad of your human heart, Feyre,” I said. “Pity those who don’t feel anything at all.” She simply nodded and with her mind locked, I didn’t know what she thought of me. It was agonizing not to know. “Well, good-bye for now,” I said hating that I had to go with this question mark left between us.*

*I bowed low for her, a gesture only Feyre could ever merit from me, and then began to fade away. But as my wings returned to my body and I rose back up, my eyes found hers and my entire body seized. My blood raced through my veins with the scent of her, of Feyre and everything that she was. Her mind, her body, her soul, I felt all of it and I wanted every ounce and then some. She was radiant, like hope and joy made manifest and my life felt complete just looking at her. It shocked me so thoroughly that I fell backwards, all of my usual grace utterly gone.*

*Feyre.*

*The name curled around my heart and I was lost. The entire world was her and she was me and if I didn’t have her now, I would go mad.*

*My mate. My mate. My mate.*

*Feyre had very clearly noticed my reaction even if she didn’t understand what it was due to. “What is-” she started to say, but the sound of her voice was a new frenzy, a war cry thrumming in my body to take her then and there, something I knew could not happen. And so I winnowed, without a word of explanation.*

The recollection was clear as day, as if I had been there that day my father first saw my mother in all that grief and despair, and known precisely how he had felt. Like nothing else in the world mattered except saving that precious flesh and blood before him.

I swallowed.

“The mating bond between them clicked into place. One look at her, and he knew what she was. He misted the guards holding her.”

“Misted?” Feyre asked.

Cassian’s faint laughter was signal enough of his recovery that I enjoyed floating the lemon wedge off my plate to dance in front of Feyre before I clicked my fingers and barely registered feeling my power shred the lemon into a citrus-scented sheen in the air. There was something oddly satisfying about it and knowing how much I would have liked to have done that every day my mate had been forced to suffer Amarantha’s court, I could imagine my father had felt a similar satisfaction the day he met my mother.

“Through the blood-rain, my mother looked at him. And the bond fell into place for her. My father took her back to the Night Court that evening and made her his bride. She loved her people, and missed them, but never forgot what they had tried to do to her - what they did to the females among them. She tried for decades to get my father to ban it, but the War was

coming, and he wouldn't risk isolating the Illyrians when he needed them to lead his armies. And to die for him."

"A real prize, your father." Mor's voice was low, but full of malice that I imagined was directed elsewhere just as much as it was my father's memory.

"At least he liked you," I offered. But when I looked at Feyre, she still seemed confused and I knew precisely why. And it was ironic, really, given what we were to each other that I should be here explaining it to her in a different way while she was unaware of the truth between us. I didn't dare look at Mor, lest the guilt sink in fresh.

"My father and mother, despite being mates, were wrong for each other. My father was cold and calculating, and could be vicious, as he had been trained to be since birth. My mother was soft and fiery and beloved by everyone she met. She hated him after a time - but never stopped being grateful that he had saved her wings, that he allowed to fly whenever and wherever she wished. And when I was born, and could summon the Illyrian wings as I pleased... She wanted me to know her people's culture."

"She wanted to keep you out of your father's claws," Mor said. The sound of her voice seemed to snap the life back into Azriel who looked up from his silent reverie and trained his thoughtful gaze on Mor as she swirled her wine about testily in her glass.

"That, too," I affirmed. "When I turned eight, my mother brought me to one of the Illyrian war-camps. To be trained, as all Illyrian males were trained. And like all Illyrian mothers, she shoved me toward the sparring ring on the first day, and walked away without looking back."

"She abandoned you?" Feyre looked near outraged and I cringed at what memories of her own abandonment this might be conjuring up for her. If I ever met her father...

"No - never," I said with a firmness that was resolute. My mother never - *never* abandoned me, nor my sister. "She was staying at the camp as well. But it is considered an embarrassment for a mother to coddle her son when he goes to train."

Feyre didn't seem any bit more appeased by this piece of information. It brought a snarky laugh hustling out of Cass. "Backward, like he said," Cassian told her.

"I was scarred out of my mind," I said. As if it had been yesterday, I felt the quick, sharp course of adrenaline that had flooded me that first day and every day afterwards for a long while. Thinking about it now was almost comical. "I'd been learning to wield my powers, but Illyrian magic was a mere fraction of it. And it's rare amongst them - usually possessed only by the most powerful, pure-bred warriors." Feyre's eyes went right to the Siphons sitting on Cassian and Azriel's hands, questioning. "I tried to use a Siphon during those years and shattered about a dozen before I realized it wasn't compatible - the stones couldn't hold it. My power flows and is honed in other ways."

"So difficult, being such a powerful High Lord," Mor crooned. Azriel looked rather smug.

I rolled my eyes, but on the whole ignored her. "The camp-lord banned me from using my magic. For all our sakes. But I had no idea how to fight when I set foot into that training ring

that day. The other boys in my age group knew it, too. Especially one in particular, who took a look at me, and beat me into a bloody mess.”

*Cassian* .

The filthy prick shook his head with such smug arrogance. Had it not been for Feyre, I would have dragged his ass outside to settle the matter just for the sport of it, for the fun. Something I had not done since - since...

I couldn't remember the last time we'd had a go just because we could.

“You were so *clean* ,” Cass said pulling me away from - whatever direction I'd been going. “The pretty half-breed son of the High Lord - how fancy you were in your new training clothes.”

“Cassian,” Azriel chimed in, now that the brutality of Illyrian origins had passed, “resorted to getting new clothes over the years by challenging other boys to fights, with the prize being the clothes off their backs.”

Cassian started chuckling, no hint of darkness lingering, but Feyre... Feyre stared at him hard, so hard that I don't think she really noticed anyone looking at her, at how sharp the planes of her face had become. Cassian saw her, saw the honesty and agony written on her face not just for what he had done, but for the simple fact that he'd *had* to, to survive.

Just like her...

Fire ignited in Cassian's eyes as together, he and Feyre shared blood and history without saying a word. But it was a fire of life and love and understanding, something none of the rest of were a part of even if we shared those pains in other ways.

When he spoke, it was with that same amusement, that same charm that brought an ease to the ache. The same way Morrigan so often righted wrongs into triumphs.

“I'd beaten every boy in our age group twice over already,” Cassian explained without it being a bragging comment in any way. “But then Rhys arrived, in his clean clothes, and he smelled... different. Like a true opponent. So I attacked. We both got three lashings apiece for the fight.”

Amren cut off the shock and horror of Feyre's flinch. “They do worse, girl, in those camps. Three lashings is practically an encouragement to fight again. when they do something truly bad, bones are broken. Repeatedly. Over weeks.”

Feyre turned hotly to me, shifting in her seat, demanding answers. She was so outraged, the stillness in her voice was like an arrow darting through the night - quiet and deadly and full of lethal surprise you did not suspect was there until it struck you blind through the chest.

“Your mother willingly sent you into that?” Her fingers curled on the table.

“My mother didn't want me to rely on my power,” I explained. “She knew from the moment she conceived me that I'd be hunted my entire life. Where one strength failed, she wanted

others to save me.

“My education was another weapon - which was why she went with me: to tutor me after lessons were done for the day. And when she took me home that first night to our new house at the edge of the camp, she made me read by the window. It was there that I saw Cassian trudging through the mud - toward the few ramshackle tents outside of the camp. I asked her where he was going, and she told me that bastards are given nothing: they find their own shelter, own food. If they survive to be in a war-band, they’ll be bottom-ranking forever, but receive their own tents and supplies. But until then, he’d stay in the cold.”

Azriel leaned quietly across the table, but his manner conveyed that unending search for vengeance that he reserved only for when those he loved were hurt. “Those mountains,” he said, “offer some of the harshest conditions you can imagine.”

Feyre’s hand softened, but that ire was still lit in her eyes.

“After my lessons,” I said, “my mother cleaned my lashings, and as she did, I realized for the first time what it was to be warm, and safe, and cared for. And it didn’t sit well.”

“Apparently not,” Cassian said with that way he had of brushing off all too serious things as though they were inconsequential. There was a ghost of a smile on his face as he recalled the memory for Feyre, but his eyes were heavy - knowing. “Because in the dead of night, that little prick woke me up in my piss-poor tent and told me to keep my mouth shut and come with him. And maybe the cold made me stupid, but I did. His mother was *livid* .”

Cassian wasn’t wrong. I could still feel the phantom lump she gave me on the back of my head some nights when I went to sleep visiting in the camps and I thought of my time there. I don’t think she’d ever been more heated - not even at my father, so far as I’d seen up until then.

Cass’s eyes glossed over, staring into the air above Feyre’s head. “But I’ll never forget the look on her beautiful face when she saw me and said, ‘There is a bathtub with hot running water. Get in it or you can go back into the cold.’ Being a smart lad, I obeyed. When I got out, she had clean nightclothes and ordered me into bed. I’d spent my life sleeping on the ground - and when I balked, she said she understood because she had felt the same once, and that it would feel as if I was being swallowed up, but the bed was mine for as long as I wanted it.”

My mother - who was kind and compassionate even in the midst of the tempest that are the camps - had granted me a friend, even if Cass and I had shot each other vulgar gestures before retiring to our rooms that first night. The following morning had been... a struggle to say the least. It made me want to laugh thinking about it now.

I glanced at Cassian and knew he was thinking the same thing. That enduring spark still glinted in his eyes - *I can take you, you little shit* .

Feyre’s shoulders had relaxed considerably, her hands resting back in her lap. “And you were friends after that?”

“No,” I said, nearly a snort. “Cauldron no. We hated each other, and only behaved because if one of us got into trouble or provoked the other, then neither of us ate that night. My mother started tutoring Cassian, but it wasn’t until Azriel arrived a year later that we decided to be allies.”

If Cassian’s eyes had sparked for me, then they were an inferno of warmth for Azriel as he reached around Amren to clap out the sigh Azriel let loose. Everyone save for Amren seemed to smile in one way or another. Amren, who was glaring through the back of her head at Cassian’s arm and deciding how best to remove it from the back of her chair.

“A new bastard in the camp,” Cassian said, with the air of giving a congratulatory speech. “And an untrained shadowsinger to boot. Not to mention he couldn’t even *fly* thanks to-”

“Stay on track, Cassian,” Mor said swiftly, and all of us save for Cass stilled. Even Feyre, though she couldn’t have known the implications.

Mor remained casual, but even before cutting in, the little bit of light there had been kindling in Azriel’s eyes died out. Cassian removed his arm with a shrug and plowed on, but Mor gave Azriel a hard stare he wouldn’t meet even while her hand twitched uncomfortably, as though trying to reach him across the many chairs and plates and people dividing them at this table, a division too large to properly separate the pair of them.

Her hand that reached for his - covered and mangled and brutalized in those wicked scars from the flames those filthy pricks he had for a family had given him. Not Cassian’s fire - warm and soft and steady. The fires of hell that burned and incinerated and stole.

“Rhys and I made his life a living hell, shadowsinger or no,” Cassian said, ignoring or simply not noticing the brief moment of pain lingering between my cousin and his brother. “But Rhys’s mother had known Az’s mother, and took him in. As we grew older, and the other males around us did, too, we realized everyone else hated us enough that we had better odds of survival sticking together.”

“Do you have any gifts?” Feyre asked. She inclined her head towards Azriel and myself. “Like - them?”

Cassian started to grin, but Mor chimed in first, “A volatile temper doesn’t count,” and that grin spread its wings and flew to the skies.

“No. I don’t,” he admitted, but then, “not beyond a heaping pile of the killing power. Bastard-born nobody, through and through.” A complete and utter lie, though I knew certainly Cassian would forever object the way Azriel would forever deny his self-worth. I leaned forward to tell the smug little prick off for being noble the one time he had every right not to be, but he met my brief stare and plowed ahead anyhow with a curt *fuck you, Rhys* in the dancing timbre of his voice.

“Even so, the other males knew that we were different. And not because we were two bastards and a half-breed. We were stronger, faster - like the Cauldron knew we’d been set apart and wanted us to find each other. Rhys’s mother saw it, too. Especially as we reached the age of maturity, and all we wanted to do was fuck and fight.”

“Males are horrible creatures, aren’t they?” Amren said, a fact, not a question.

“Repulsive,” Mor agreed. The click of her tongue had me fetching my wine glass to drown out the temptation of a smile and a groan.

All those years. So many memories. So many truths that had led us all here. I had spent more time buried in blood and sweat than I had oils and linens in those camps, but we had been happy. It was... the start of us.

And now Feyre was here too and looking from Amren’s non-attempt at disguising her genuine disgust to Mor’s mocking disdain, to the way Cassian shrugged it all and she looked... okay, with it.

*Smile , I thought. Join us. Please.*

“Rhys’s power grew every day,” Cassian continued. “And everyone, even the camp-lords, knew he could mist *everyone* if he felt like it. And the two of us... we weren’t far behind.” He held up his hand and flicked at his Siphon. It glowed with an iridescent red in reply. “A bastard Illyrian had never received one of these. Ever. For Az and me to both be appointed them, albeit begrudgingly, had every warrior in every camp across those mountains sizing us up. Only pure-blooded pricks get Siphons - born and bred *for* the killing power. It still keeps them up at night, puzzling over where the hell we got it from.”

There was no time for pride or celebration. Azriel brought the cold reality right to the forefront. “Then the War came,” he said solemnly. I felt Feyre stiffen - felt myself stiffen. Things got tricky from here. “And Rhys’s father visited our camp to see how his son had fared after twenty years.”

Something in my blood simmered at that causing my hold on my wine glass to tense as I swirled it about.

*My father...*

Mor was glowering.

“My father,” I said, “saw that his son had not only started to rival him for power, but had allied himself with perhaps the two deadliest Illyrians in history. He got it into his head that if we were given a legion in the War, we might very well turn it against him when we returned.”

*He’s not going to kill me, mother.*

*No, but he’ll do the next best thing. You listen to me, Rhysand. You listen to me well and good. ...*

It took many years after that for certain wounds to heal properly and even then... But where my bones were still brittle from the affair, Cassian found it amusing entertainment.

“So the prick separated us,” he said with a snicker and a shit-eating grin. “He gave Rhys command of a legion of Illyrians who hated him for being a half-breed, and threw me into a different legion to be a common foot soldier, even when my power outranked any of the war-

leaders. Az, he kept for himself as his personal shadowsinger - mostly for spying and his dirty work.” The shadows around Az tightened. The stories he’d told me later, and those were just the ones he would talk about, never mind the ones he *wouldn’t*, save for... I glanced at Mor, but her face remained impassive. “We only saw each other on the battlefields for the seven years the War raged. They’d send around casualty lists among the Illyrians, and I read each one, wondering if I’d see their names on it. But then Rhys was captured-”

All thoughts of battles and missions and spying flew right out of my head at that, replaced by dread and a red-haired faced and venom snapping out quickly instead.

“ *That* is a story for another time,” I said. I felt a kernel of my power flash through me and reigned it in before the darkness could rupture out. Cassian sat back, albeit some what surprised, and was quiet.

And Feyre - Feyre alone seemed to feel that crack of power, that whip of adrenaline that had coursed through my muscles. She studied me, her innate curiosity molding into intuition that I couldn’t refuse answering somehow.

“Once I became High Lord,” I said, skipping far too many details for which I could feel guilty over *later*, “I appointed these four to my Inner Circle, and told the rest of my father’s old court that if they had a problem with my friends, they could leave. They all did. Turns out, having a half-breed High Lord was made worse by his appointment of two females and two Illyrian bastards.”

Something deep inside Feyre shivered then. I couldn’t see it, but I knew it was there all the same. “What - what happened to them, then?”

*Fuck all if I cared .*

Except, given what had come next and how the War had ended, I had been obligated to care a great deal at the time.

“The nobility of the Night Court fall into one of three categories: those who hated me enough that when Amarantha took over, they joined her court and later found themselves dead.” A task I had very much savored for fifty years and five months thus far. “Those who hated me enough to try to overthrow me and faced the consequences.” A task I had very much savored for several *centuries*. “And those who hated me, but not enough to be stupid and have since tolerated a half-breed’s rule, especially when it so rarely interferes with their miserable lives.” A task I waited anxiously to deal with every damned day. As did Mor.

“Are they - are they the ones who live beneath the mountain?”

I didn’t dare let my surprise show that she’d mentioned that place aloud. It wasn’t *the* mountain, but I knew it was close enough in Feyre’s mind. I merely nodded. “In the Hewn City, yes. I gave it to them, for not being fools. They’re happy to stay there, rarely leaving, ruling themselves and being as wicked as they please, for all eternity.”

And for all eternity I would wait in dread for the days Mor might winnow home and tell me who’s blood would stain my hands next. It was one thing to tear about the filthy cretins who

had defected, who had chosen to let their prejudices and bigotry blind them to what *my* court could have offered and instead sought after the miserable chains of Amarantha's court.

Those kills had been easier to make. Those kills had a justification on their side.

But the ones who had settled now, who stared my cousin and I in the face every time we entered that mountain and lied to us as they contemplated the risks and the benefits... those were the kills I didn't want to make because they were broken promises that stood in the way of so, so much more.

Mor was likely thinking the same thing. Her face had turned dark. "The Court of Nightmares," she said to no one in particular.

And thinking of how her light had so soothed my darkness that first day I came back, I wanted to tear apart the mountain she came from until her father and all the bastards who made her sit here now looking like this were shredded in never ending night and pain.

Azriel alone of us looked like he could imagine an infinitely worse fate for them as he stared at Mor, stared in precisely the same manner she had looked at him earlier.

Sometimes I didn't think I'd ever get used to that back and forth, even after five centuries, the little shifts.

Feyre pointed blandly at the five of us. "And what is this court?" she asked.

"The Court of Dreams," Cassian said. And in that moment, he was not the fierce warrior who led my armies, but the eight-year-old handed food and drink and a home and love at my mother's wish.

Finally, Feyre looked to Mor and Amren, her eyes ending on the firedrake. "And you?"

Amren bothered to look Feyre in the eye, but sounded so decidedly bored, "Rhys offered to make me his Second. No one had ever asked me before, so I said yes, to see what it might be like. I found I enjoyed it."

And that was that.

The second Mor leaned back in her seat, Azriel leaned forward in his for reply.

"I was a dreamer born into the Court of Nightmares," she said with vicious ease. Her curls were suddenly very interesting for one moment - too long a moment - before she looked at Feyre and mustered all her usual grace and charm to say, "So I got out."

The table was not quiet long enough for any of us to dare prompt her when Cassian nodded at Feyre and my attention snapped on her. "What's your story, then?"

A brief flicker of surprise down the bond, but nothing more.

She looked at me and it took everything I'd learned in nearly six centuries not to beg Feyre to spill her truth to me, to us, to hear it from her own lips as I'd never been able to before.



I shrugged.

*Your choice.*

She straightened, and much to my soul's sweet relief, she spoke.

"I was born to a wealthy merchant family, with two older sisters and parents who only cared about their money and social standing. My mother died when I was eight; my father lost his fortune three years later. He sold everything to pay off his debts, moved us into a hovel, and didn't bother to find work while he let us slowly starve for years."

A fire capable of rivaling Cassian's and destroying the world crackled in my skull with every word she said. I'd never heard... I'd never known... *Feyre* ...

When I'd see those brief visions of her Under the Mountain, hunting through the forest or painting quietly by a dim fire... She'd been starving.

My mate. How - how she'd suffered. How she'd *survived* .

And I realized just then what I'd known all along, since the second I saw her fall into that pit with the Middengard Wyrms and hurl herself out again, arm broken and bleeding right down to the bone, what a miracle this human woman was.

"I was fourteen when the last of the money ran out, along with the food. He wouldn't work - couldn't, because the debtors came and shattered his leg in front of us. So I went into the forest and taught myself to hunt. And I kept us alive, if not near starvation at times, for five years. Until..." her voice grew heavy and she looked down at her lap before resolving herself to the truth. "Everything happened."

Until *Tamlin* happened.

I wanted to swear. To unleash the darkness and send it hurtling across fields and skies until it found her father and demanded answers.

No one except Cassian had any idea what to say to Feyre. "You taught yourself to hunt," he said. "What about to fight?" Feyre shook her head no and Cassian sat up straighter, leaning on the table. "Lucky for you, you've just found yourself a teacher."

Feyre's mouth fell open, but then she paused staring at Cassian like she wasn't quite sure she was still sitting here, had ever gotten to this point in the first place.

I don't think a single one of us - not Mor, not Cassian, nor even myself, though if I'd reflected well enough on the conversations we'd been having these past weeks, I should have at least been prepared - could have expected the words that next tumbled out of Feyre's mouth and sent us all reeling in our seats with sorrow and bitter, bitter rage.

Not at Feyre.

But at *them* .

“You don’t think it sends a bad message if people see me learning to fight - using weapons?” Feyre asked.

Her face shattered into... grief? Guilt? Regret? I couldn’t tell. But whatever it was, I wanted to clean it up, wrap it in a box, and send it to Tamlin’s door for him to stare at before he descended into the bowels of his worst nightmares night after night.

But mostly, I just wanted to see what that beautiful face of Feyre’s might look like when the grief was stripped away and the warrior underneath shone through. The warrior I was pretty sure would claim a post here by the end of the night.

It was quiet for a long moment. I was not the least bit surprised when I heard Mor speak, her own warrior showing through the shadows.

“Let me tell you two things,” Mor said, “as someone who has perhaps been in your shoes before.” And there was no mistaking the resolution in her voice, the resilience or the *need* for Feyre to understand what it is to exist and live properly in this new world. And Feyre - Feyre was going to listen, was willing it with the way she was clinging to every word coming off Mor’s tongue. I really did hope they went to dinner together soon.

“One, you have left the Spring Court,” Mor explained. “If that does not send a message, for good or bad, then your training will not, either.” Mor stretched her hand flat on the table - a silent proclamation all its own. “Two, I once lived in a place where the opinion of others mattered. It suffocated me, nearly broke me. So you’ll understand me, Feyre, when I say that I know what you feel, and I know what they tried to do to you, and that with enough courage, you can say to hell with a reputation.”

Mor paused and I didn’t think Feyre registered the way Mor had leaned closer towards her. “You do what you love, what *you* need,” Mor said. It wasn’t until those last, quiet, soft words were out that the air around us breathed again. I had but a moment to see the corners of Az’s mouth relax into a faint, soft smile before the shadows swirled at his ear and I averted meeting his gaze.

Feyre stared at Mor for a long time and it drove me to near insanity not to see her eyes, to attest to the color of them and how they turned more grey when she was determined and blue when she was feeling overwhelmed.

And her shields were so perfect, so damn near flawless now after so little practice that I felt... nothing. Nothing when I wanted to feel everything.

So silently, I was begging. Praying and pleading to the Mother above that she would turn to me and would be okay. That I would look in her eyes and see more grey than blue, see the steel and the iron and the dawn of the next day even if she wasn’t sure how she would get there. Just one day. It was all I wanted. One more day with her so that I could help her find the desire for one more after that.

Cassian got his answer first. Feyre turned toward him and my insides clenched waiting. “I’ll think about it,” Feyre said and then her head flew in a turn towards me, almost as if she knew

what I felt, how pleased and *proud* of her I was that she would even consider strengthening herself with him.

But I still didn't know *my* answer and for that, I kept my mask in place. For *her* .

*Your choice.*

"I accept your offer," Feyre said, the words ringing out clear in the room, wrapping tightly around me so that each one could be engraved upon my bones for me to remember forever. "To work with you. To earn my keep. And help with Hybern in whatever way I can."

If she hadn't been looking at me - if they *all* hadn't been looking at me - my mask would have been nothing more than torn strips of fabric lying on the floor.

"Good," I said, keeping it to as few words as possible before the real storm descended. "Because we start tomorrow."

Feyre's jaw dropped and her brow shot about a mile high. "Where? And what?" she said in a flash.

And just like that, as I leaned forward bracing my arms on the table looking at my Inner Circle, Feyre was one of us. And the time for war was nigh.

Amren raised a wary brow as I opened my mouth and announced, "Because the King of Hybern is indeed about to launch a war, and he wants to resurrect Jurian to do it."

"Bullshit." Cassian sent his fork clattering against his plate as he fell back with a thud in his chair. "There's no way to do that."

"Why would the king want to resurrect *Jurian*?" Mor moaned, her face undoubtedly scrunching up. I was too busy to notice though, watching Azriel and Amren sit back stone-faced and still while I felt... only that quiet curiosity from Feyre. "He was so odious. All he liked to do was talk about himself."

She wasn't wrong.

"That's what I want to find out," I said. "And how the king plans to do it." Even though in that I already had my suspicions as much as I did about the rest.

"Word will have reached him about Feyre's Making," Amren said. I was surprised it took her so long to chime in. "He knows it's possible for the dead to be remade."

"All seven High Lords would have to agree that," Mor said. "There's not a chance it happens. He'll take another route." And it was with a twinge of guilt, though it had all been necessary, that I felt Mor direct her attentions to me, and we six settled in to the conversation I'd been anticipating for weeks now, that none of the others, save Amren, could have entirely guessed at. "All the slaughtering," Mor said, "the massacres at the temples. You think it's tied to this?"

"I know it's tied to this." I braced myself from looking too hard at Az. "I didn't want to tell you until I knew for certain. But Azriel confirmed that they'd raided the memorial in Sangravah three days ago." Mor's eyes widened, her lips pursing as she looked at Az. But it was nothing more than quiet surprise. "They're looking for something - or found it."

Only the sharp hitching of Feyre's breath could have pulled me away from them then. "That," she said, stumbling a beat, "that's why the ring and the finger bone vanished after Amarantha died. For this. But who..." Her face froze. She wouldn't look at me. At any of us. "They never caught the Attor, did they?"

The Attor flew. Tamlin's teeth sank. Amarantha screamed... and was no more.

And in my wretched misery of Feyre's death, my own it may as well been, I saw nothing and no one but her. The Attor walked out free as a bird. Stupid. Stupid and blind and *stupid*. That's what I had been.

And now Feyre suffered for it. We all did.

"No," I replied. "No, they didn't." And because she was the only one who would stomach telling me what I needed to hear, I asked Amren, "How does one take an eye and a finger bone and make it into a man again? And how do we stop it?"

"You already know how to find the answer," she said. "Go to the prison. Talk to the Bone Carver."

Mor and Cassian cursed in unison. Under any other circumstances, it would have been comical.

"Perhaps you would be more effective, Amren," I said, a half-tease given that I already knew the answer to this dilemma too. But Amren's face became positively wicked as she hissed at me.

"I will not set foot in the Prison, Rhysand, and you know it. So go yourself, or send one of these dogs to do it for you."

The others were ready to go to war over who would go visit the Carver straight away, Azriel piping up first. But Amren and I simply continued to watch each other, Amren leaning out of that snarling rage she'd let forth and sipping her wine because she *knew* every move I'd planned. I'd told her barely anything about my suspicions over the course of the past five months and yet, that one word alone - *Jurian* - had told her everything.

"I'll go," Azriel said. I wasn't the least bit surprised. "The Prison sentries know me - what I am."

"If anyone's going to the Prison," I interrupted, before Mor could make her pleas for her Illyrian, "it's me. And Feyre."

"What?" Mor said. It was more than a request. It was a *need*, a demand for truth.

Still, I looked at Amren.

“He won’t talk to Rhys,” my Second explained, as I knew she would. “Or to Azriel. Or to any of us. We’ve got nothing to offer him. But an immortal with a mortal soul...” Our stare broke as she looked into Feyre’s heart, listened to it hum away with all that lovely humanity I yearned to seek out and feel. “The Bone Carver might be willing indeed to talk to her.”

The Bone Carver.

Shapeshifter. Knower. Seeker. Solidifier.

Demon.

Or close to it.

A man built of sharpened knives and needles enshrining an infinite number of coveted truths within, if one was willing to pay the price to listen.

Feyre, of course, had no way of knowing what a visit to the Carver meant. He wouldn’t hurt her. Feyre was in no form of physical danger going to meet him. But it was the emotional risk we all sat back and contemplated that could be an undoing, one I would make sure she was clear of before we left.

*If she accepted.*

Finally, I broke from Amren and found Feyre staring at me. Her eyes were grey.

“Your choice, Feyre,” I said.

She shrugged. “How bad can it be?”

“Bad,” Cassian said, and I could feel the axe already falling over my neck.

As we cleared the table and ended our evening, Feyre agreeing with less reluctance than before to climb back into my arms and charge the night sky for the townhouse, there was really only one thought in my mind beyond the haze of tomorrow.

*I accept your offer - to work with you.*

She had said that. Had said that to me clear as a cloudless sky, sure as a winter wind.

For tonight, perhaps, I would let that be enough.

# Chapter 17: We Got Out

## Chapter Summary

Rhys tries to comfort Feyre after she has a nightmare on her first night at the townhouse. He then watches Feyre struggle to go near the Bone Carver's prison.

Feyre was quiet through the remainder of dinner, though she tracked the conversation with steady discipline. When the others had finished fighting over plans for the following day (which was mostly just a power play between Azriel and Amren that Cassian and Mor had little pleasure moderating), I looked at Feyre and saw the droop of her eyelids, the sinking of her shoulders.

One look and she nodded. We promptly said our goodbyes and the night sky welcomed us into its fold.

She was quiet, softer than the velvet blankets that cradled the stars. I focused on the currents of wind that guided us down into the city where music ushered us home to keep from obsessing over what she might be thinking. Her thoughts and impressions of my family were dear to me, and I hated not knowing them, but even more than that I hated not knowing if she was okay, if this was too much or if she was ready to face the challenges that staying here would carry to her feet.

Thank the Mother for flying. In the silence between us, it almost felt normal to take to the skies and feel the wind lick my cheeks whilst Feyre was tucked safely in my arms. I could almost imagine for a moment that we weren't just going back to a lodging with four walls and a roof, that it could be something more one day. A home, if she ever wanted it. And that when her hands clutched my tunic tighter, it was for warmth and love, not necessity.

It was a nice dream while it lasted.

We flew over the first of the four markets and snaked up the Sidra, music from the Rainbow sneaking down every street and alleyway to dance from one city corner to the next. I counted the measures to each song and when Feyre spoke, it startled me.

"Tonight - I felt you again," she said. "Through the bond. Did I get past your shields?"

I couldn't quite meet her gaze. Not yet. There was such a softness in the way she asked that I treaded carefully in my words.

"No," I said. "This bond is... a living thing. An open channel between us, shaped by my powers, shaped... by what you needed when we made the bargain."

When the Cauldron made *us* .

“I needed not to be dead when I agreed,” she said flatly.

“You needed not to be alone.”

Finally, I looked at her and Feyre appeared almost as broken by the honesty of my statement as I felt by how it horribly it damned me. She stared almost immediately at the oncoming cobblestone streets after our eyes met.

“I’m still learning how and why we can sometimes feel things the other doesn’t want known,” I said, and it was true. Bond or bargain, so much had become muddled. “So I don’t have an explanation for what you felt tonight.”

Silence, and then - an awful truth that was louder than any music or dance or light on any street in the city.

“You let Amarantha and the entire world think you rule and delight in a Court of Nightmares. It’s all a front - to keep what matters most safe.”

Finally. Such a small piece of quiet understanding I never thought she would gift me. It broke me to pieces to hear that much alone from her.

“I love my people, and my family. Do not thinking I wouldn’t become a monster to keep them protected.”

“You already did that Under the Mountain.”

*A monster.*

Not trapped in a prison, as Amren. Not chained and misconstrued by choice deep inside, as Azriel. Not truly evil either as those I’d defended against for centuries.

*A monster inside and out.*

*From here to eternity .*

And war was still to come.

“And I suspect I’ll have to do it again soon enough.”

The words came out dead - empty, as Feyre had once been. As if she could hear the toll it reaped upon me, Feyre asked, “What was the cost? Of keeping this place secret and free?”

I almost didn’t have a choice in the way we fell to the earth then. My body would have fallen whether I’d caught the downward wind and willed it or not.

Her emotion was genuine. A tender sympathy I hadn’t quite received from her thus far. But even as I’d spent so long craving it from her, thinking I might die without a taste of it, I couldn’t let myself take one ounce of it now. I didn’t deserve it. Not after -

“You know the cost already,” I said as I set her down and took her chin into my hands. I had to touch her. Had to feel her. The only real thing in my life. I had to know what it felt like just a little bit if we were going to go here tonight - now.

Whether she said the words aloud or shattered her mental shields with the force of the acknowledgement, I heard Feyre loud and clear as she answered me: *Amarantha's whore*.

*The Illyrian spat at my feet, the saliva mingling in the snow with the already falling drops of blood that splattered and fanned out like wilted rose petals in decay.*

“Whore...”

“Whore...”

“WHORE...”

Feyre melted as I nodded confirmation. My fingers stiffened on her cheek and bless her, she didn't pull away. Not one single inch.

“When she tricked me out of my powers,” I said, unable to stanch the flow ebbing out of me, “and left the scraps, it was still more than the others. And I decided to use it to tap into the mind of every Night Court citizen she captured, and anyone who might know the truth. I made a web between all of them, actively controlling their minds every second of every day, every decade, to forget about Velaris, to forget about Mor, and Amren, and Cassian, and Azriel. Amarantha wanted to know who was close to me - who to kill and torture. But my true court was here, ruling this city and the others. And I used the remainder of my power to shield them all from sight and sound. I had only enough for one city - one place. I chose the one that had been hidden from history already. *I chose.*” Me. This entire damnation was on no one's shoulders but my own. “And now must live with the consequences of knowing there were more left outside who suffered. But for those here... anyone flying or traveling near Velaris would see nothing but barren rock, and if they tried to walk through it, they'd find themselves suddenly deciding otherwise. Sea travel and merchant trading were halted - sailors became farmers, working the earth around Velaris instead. And because my powers were focused on shielding them all, Feyre, I had very little to use against Amarantha. So I decided that to keep her from asking questions about the people who mattered, I would be her whore.”

I still remembered it - that moment my powers fled and I cast the spell to protect the city, told my family what had happened and what to do next and received *panic* in exchange for my decision. I'd never known sorrow until that night when I realized the chaos and fear my closest friends felt was going to be magnified a hundred fold in the morning when my sweet city of starlight woke up to a new world, a fractured world. A world that burned and destroyed.

The stars listened to me that night, but they were deaf in many other ways too.

Mor had been the loudest. Amren had had enough shrewd tact to understand the role she had to step in to that her emotions were more muted and whatever she felt was beyond me by the



time it came through strong enough. I felt Cassian's fire roar to life in agony and Azriel's icy, bitter rage.

But Morrigan - her heart was the one that sang her grief aloud, had shoved my commands aside and said *Come home, cousin* and then *I'll come get you* before the gates closed and I heard no more. There were many nights I found myself inside Amarantha and clung to those words and the knowledge that my city was safe because of them to keep me from going insane.

That, and my wings. The wings I showed no one under that rock for fifty years, save for -

I staggered back from Feyre and finally released her chin, staring at the sky. I *needed* to go back up there, I realized. But Feyre - she grabbed my wrist, wouldn't let me go. Anchored me down to life and sound and music and all the things she herself couldn't grab hold of yet. Maybe through each other, we could find a way to do that again.

"It's a shame," she said, her thumb brushing over my palm. "That others in Prythian don't know. A shame that you let them think the worst."

I released her, pommeled by the blow of her words because it didn't matter what the world thought. Only her, her, *her* and she was already too much. Too kind, too forgiving, too everything after the hell I'd put her through to stand there and give me the only approval I really craved.

My wings beat great torrents against the chill winter air, already lifting me off the ground. "As long as the people who matter know the truth, I don't care about the rest. Get some sleep."

Feyre was a dot on the earth within seconds of my ascent.

---

I flew for hours. So long, I lost track. Loop after loop above the city counting the lights below, tracking the different melodies that mingled in the air when I dared dip low enough to hear them again.

The rest of the time I was too high up to remember what music sounded like. Even my own thoughts disappeared. The dinner, Jurian, the Prison, Amarantha, until...

A jolt blasted through me, a sort of frenzy shooting through my veins, like flying through wind in a storm that was built on emotions all clamoring over one another for supremacy until at long last... cold, miserable agony claimed victory.

It was worse than fear. It was sheer, undiluted terror. And it was precisely how Feyre was feeling in that exact moment.

*Feyre* .

And she was too far away.

Winnowing did not get me to her room fast enough. My wings had flown so vigorously at first hearing her, it took me a moment to snap them away and wink out of the sky, leaving the peace of the stars behind.

The scene that greeted me as I stumbled into her room was nothing short of disastrous. The flickering visions she'd sent unwittingly through the bond of her nightmares while in the Spring Court were nothing compared to how Feyre looked now.

The bed was burnt and shredded by the claws rippling from her hands, alight with flame that threatened to burn her alive in her bed. And the darkness. *Oh*, the beautiful mangled darkness. So cruel and thieving as it curled around her with the promise of decay. It consumed her.

Feyre must never have nightmared as such before in the Spring Court or else Tamlin would surely have done something... Looking at the mess she'd become atop the ash that remained for sheets, it was impossible to imagine he couldn't have.

I winnowed from the doorway to the bed, the time running would have taken too long, and forced myself over her against her ceaseless thrashing and shook her, calling her name. Her shields were fully engaged blocking her mind from me, so I had to search out where I might slip through.

"FEYRE," I screamed over and over, both aloud and into the recesses of her mind. A faint sliver appeared grasping, the smallest trace of light beaming through almost as if she heard me, as if the bond were there.

Together, we followed it - I to her and she to me. And all the while I shouted for her to come back to me. I never wanted to see her like this again.

Feyre's body went utterly still. It scared me into oblivion until I realized that she was relaxing against my grip, not giving up or losing the fight.

"Open your eyes," I said firmly, holding her slick face in my hands and she obeyed, staring up at me with the face of panic and a million hopeless questions.

Her first night. It was only her first night. Velaris had done nothing to soothe the aches disturbing her soul. And dinner - fuck, I'd put her through too much. And tomorrow... Cauldron it was only her first night.

My fault. This was all my fault.

"It was a dream," I said with a hard pant. I repeated it over and over, my mind racked with endless sadness that she had to experience this torment as I did night after night. I knew what these nightmares were and never would I wish them upon her.

But she didn't seem to really hear me, her eyes trailing up and down my exposed chest from where my tunic had torn open getting to her and taking in the tattoos inked into my skin, now equally drenched as hers in sweat. It felt like the first time she'd seen me. "A dream... A dream..." I repeated. A mantra. A beckoning home.

I knew it was coming before she did. The moment her eyes left me to take in the chaos that had erupted around her, that she had caused, I knew all too well from the countless nights she'd spent being ignored in the Spring Court how her body would react.

As Feyre ran to the bathing room and retched into the toilet, I stepped cautiously into the doorway behind her and watched my mate destroy herself. An intense longing to go to her, comfort her, filled me, replaced swiftly by an even greater fear that she wouldn't let me.

But I would sure as hell try.

Her fingers hissed against the toilet, still trembling with fire and ash, too near her face as she vomited. Gently, with enough pressure to reassure her, I pulled her long, soft hair back from her face. She didn't flinch, only heaved again. "Breathe," I said, anchoring myself to the role of damage control so I wouldn't slip with her. "Imagine them winking out like candles, one by one."

Almost all at once and completely opposite to my suggestion that she take the flames on individually, Feyre heaved and intense light collided with the heat at her hands. All that was left in their place was darkness. And not the darkness from before that had threatened to cut her to the core of her being. This darkness was radiant, the darkness that soothed and comforted, erased the aches and pains, accepted the scars.

My darkness.

One day, I wanted to show her what that darkness meant.

"Well that's one way to do it," I said. She would never fail to surprise or impress me.

She sat silent. Too quiet. The purple rings under her eyes looked like a thin surface ready to give way to an endless hollow pit at any time. Beads of sweat rolled off of her and her chest still shook with each shudder her stomach forced into her throat.

I didn't have to read her mind to know how alone she had felt since Tamlin took her back from Under the Mountain, how much these nights had wasted her. It made my bones rattle furiously for vengeance.

Mostly, it scared me, for how much that pain called to me as I watched her shudder and cling in spirit to the touches I applied along her back. She'd never had this connection. Nor had I. The pain, I had run from it for months, always making sure I slept away from the others. Seeing Feyre now... the pain scarred on her body recognized me as its own. I loved my family here in the Night Court, but none of them would ever understand as Feyre did how this felt.

And then I knew how I might save her - if only for tonight.

"I have this dream," I said, my voice thick, trying to reach her so I could shoulder the weight and unwittingly unload my own, "where it's not me stuck under her, but Cassian or Azriel. And she's pinned their wings to the bed with spikes, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. She's commanded me to watch, and I have no choice but to see how I failed them."

Still, waiting... Feyre kept silent, taking her time to flush the toilet and consider my words and I feared that perhaps I had overstepped, that she was not ready or simply did not wish to hear any more of my story Under the Mountain. So I focused on the feel of her, willing what strength I could lend her into my grip on her skin, her hair.

“You never failed them,” Feyre spoke, her voice a quiet rasp I had to crane my ears to hear. A small stone atop a mound of similar pebbles that piled among one another, building downward to larger rocks and boulders weighing in on my heart, removed itself at those four simple words. But there were many stones and pebbles yet to go.

“I did... terrible things to ensure that.”

“So did I.”

She turned, her remorse forcing her back to the toilet, the same remorse I felt every second of every day. So I dared a little further and offered a long soothing caress up and down the length of her back. I savored the touch when she didn’t turn away, when I realized it was the first open touch free of inhibitions and doubts that she had allowed between us.

“The flames?” she asked when the last of her stomach had heaved itself up.

“Autumn Court.”

Feyre sat still for a very long time, unable to reply. Never did my hands stop their comforting trek up and down her spine, a spine that I could feel so painfully through her too thin back. Never did Feyre stop me from doing so. And when her head fell against the neighboring bathtub, her eyes drifting back off to sleep, too weary to wrestle with words and simple thought, even then I continued to touch her, to love her, wishing she knew how far that love was already burning for her.

I waited until she was deep asleep to be sure she would not fall into another fit.

I waited until she was deep asleep to let any tears fall.

Only then did I allow myself the privilege of scooping her fully into my arms and tucking her safely back into bed. I magicked the sheets so that nothing but pure, soft linens free of damage were there to envelope her. And then I simply stared, sitting at her side too scared to move away lest she fall further down the pit without me there to watch over her. The funny thing was that even if she fell, I would be there to catch her because I was already deep within that pit myself. The real fear, I knew, was that I wouldn’t be able to pull us back out.

But after I’d kept watch long enough and Feyre had not stirred beyond the subtle rise and fall of her chest as she drew breath, I supposed that I had gotten us out of the pit enough at least for tonight. I stroked my thumb along her cheek wondering when she’d next let me in so close as she had tonight without her usual reproach, if ever again she would, and left her to her dreams.

The nightmares I took with me until the dawn.

---

I made it back to my room before I turned around and walked right back out the door, stopping when I reached the study. I collapsed inside.

Moonlight poured through the large window panes. Everything was always so open and full of light in this house. I hated it when it made no difference.

I sank into the worn leather chair at my desk and let my face fall into my hands debating if I could put Feyre through this tomorrow - the Bone Carver. Mor and Cassian's faces and mutual curse at dinner when I'd proposed the idea told me enough.

*One day at a time .*

That's what I had told her. Looking out at my slumbering city through the window, it had to be enough. For them and for us.

I spent the better part of an hour running through the list of things to take care of come morning before I finally took what little sleep was left. Feyre didn't utter a single sound when I paused outside her door listening.

And when the sun cracked the sky like an egg spilling yolk, my mind was still so tired.

I let Nuala and Cerridwen attend to Feyre when she woke and met her over breakfast at the dining table. A similar array of foods to what I'd presented during our brief weeks of the bargain was spread atop the table. Feyre picked at some fruit and, I suspected, forced some of the more filling breads and muffins down. The tea she drank in earnest.

She stopped and looked me up and down upon entering the room, taking in our identically fashioned attire for the day. Had it not been for how feeble she sounded, I would have been relieved when she asked, "High Lord *and* trend setter, hmm?"

"I was going for handsome, debonair warrior, what with the leather and all, but I suppose fashionable will have to do for now. Though I appreciate you thinking me fancy and forward thinking all the same, Feyre."

She grumbled incoherently and took a seat. From beside my chair, I lifted a shaft of material housing about a dozen different knives and blades and slid them across the table along with bands and straps for Feyre to affix the weapons to herself with.

She raised a brow at me.

I shrugged. "I'm anything *but* trend setting without good accessories," I said. Feyre rolled her eyes.

"Is it really - that bad?"

"Not if we stick to a few simple rules, it won't be."

"There are rules?"

“Only two,” I said, exchanging the daggers for a simpler knife at my plate, which I used to cut into my eggs. “One - never lie. Not ever. Not about anything no matter how simple or inconsequential you think it may be. He will know if you do and may likely damn us for it regardless of what he stands to lose in doing so.”

Feyre nodded slowly and took a long sip of the cup of tea she’d poured. “And the second?”

I took a bite of food to buy a bit of time. “Whatever the Carver gives you, Feyre, you will be asked to give in return. Whatever question you demand, he will want five of his own. You can not let him do this. He will likely play us against one another to confuse us and see how much he can trick us into giving, but that doesn’t help us. His goal is to ascertain as much information as possible for as little a cost to himself. The longer he keeps us giving at no risk to him, the longer he keeps us there and remains entertained. Five minutes of our time will be enough to satisfy him for months, maybe even years, and our visit will likely take much longer than that.”

“So you want me to - what? Interrogate him?”

“After a fashion - yes. No matter what happens, you have the right to demand payment of him, Feyre. If he gets a question, so too do you. Set the rules from the start and... we should be absolutely fine.”

She nodded and continued eating, not saying another word. I didn’t know if that was good or bad, so I waited until she’d finished eating, helped her strap the band of knives to her body, and took us on a brief detour to the study before departing.

“Just one more little task before we leave,” I said.

“Don’t tell me you have helmets coming, too. I’m not really a hat person.”

I snorted. “I’ll keep that in mind come the next Solstice. Just a quick letter to that merry Lord of Summer and we can be off.” I pulled paper and ink out of the desk drawer, including an early draft I’d written after her first visit to the Night Court.

“The Summer Court... Tarquin?”

“The one and only, it would seem.”

Even if Cresseida certainly thought otherwise. I was not looking forward to seeing *her* .

“Why are you writing to Tarquin?”

“Always so curious, you are.” I scribbled the last few sentences and looked the letter over to be sure it was right and winked it off to Amren for review. She would send it when it was ready. Feyre waited patiently seeming to understand I wasn’t just ignoring her.

“I want to visit the Summer Court.”

Feyre’s head leaned to one side. “And why exactly do you need to visit the Summer Court?”

“ *We* need to visit for improving diplomatic relations with them. And it doesn’t hurt that their beaches are particularly lovely this time of year.”

Feyre glowered. “Their beaches are lovely every time of year. It’s always *summer* there.”

The smirk slid onto my face before I could help myself.

“True, but just think how lovely you’d look in a strappy little beach number running toward the water.”

Feyre hugged herself tightly as if she thought she’d look anything but lovely half-naked on a beach. “Can we just - get on with it.”

I stood up from my desk and stepped around it, offering Feyre my hand. The brief pickup in mood disappeared entirely.

“Ready?”

Her touch was her only reply.

Into the wind and smoke we flew, landing in a grassy hillside with the sea falling off steep cliffs to one side and a towering fortitude of mountain and rock to the other. Feyre’s eyes snapped to that pillar of stone at once and her forehead creased. All around us, the skies were grey and the air stale.

“Where are we?” she asked.

I looked up at that mountain.

*Hell* , I thought.

“On an island in the heart of the Western Isles,” I said instead. “And that,” I pointed to the dungeon before us, “is the Prison.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“The rock is the Prison. And inside it are the foulest, most dangerous creatures and criminals you can imagine.”

The silence around us was palpable as we stared at that behemoth - and waited for Feyre to say something. She never did.

“This place was made before High Lords existed. Before Prythian was Prythian. Some of the inmates remember those days. Remember a time when it was Mor’s family, not mine, that ruled the North.”

Ancient. Powerful. And corrupted.

That was the beast before us. A slumbering dragon that would never wake, but would always sleep with one eye open hoping for the day that might change. If what I suspected of the

Cauldron and Hybern's plans came true, that might be an additional problem we would have to face.

"Why won't Amren go in here?" Feyre asked.

"Because she was once a prisoner."

"Not in that body, I take it."

*No, not one bit.*

It had been horrific the day she'd been Made. The day she'd been simultaneously freed and shackled for all eternity. A beast birthed with no other purpose but to suffer.

I smiled at what she might do - should the magic be strong enough to break this prison, it would break her free too and then the world would see her for what she really was.

"No," I said. "Not at all."

Feyre shivered. Rightfully so.

I took a deep breath of the mountain air, but even with the sea churning salt into the wind, it remained stagnant and bland. There was nothing invigorating about this island save the climb, and that was really more a punishment than a help.

"The hike will get your blood warming," I cautioned Feyre. I found her rigid and unmoving as she stared at the Prison. My soul trembled, worried. "Since we can't winnow inside or fly to the entrance - the wards demand that visitors walk in. The long way."

*A mistake. A mistake - this is all a mistake.*

*For Prythian. For Velaris-*

*She's dying and you brought her here.*

*For Mor. For Cassian. Azriel. Amren.*

*Feyre -*

"I-" Feyre choked, her voice and body shaking underneath her cold, pale skin. Even with her leathers on, I felt like I could see the bones sticking through them that the Carver would smell and yearn to lick before he could one day carve them up.

The mountain.

The cursed damned mountain. Everywhere we looked, this court held a prison to shove us back under. Nightmares at home. Cells and dungeons in the hills. My court was built to confine and torment her.

*For Feyre. For yourself.*



*For your crown and all the good that is left in the world.*

I stepped as close as I dared without worrying she'd feel trapped, and said gently next to her, trying to hold her within the steadiness of my voice, "It helps the panic to remind myself that I got out. That we all got out."

"Barely," Feyre said. Her chest rose up in a great swell and held for far too long. I didn't need her shields down to feel her anxiety attacking her. I felt it myself. My court alone kept me grounded. As it had for fifty years. As it would for centuries more until the day I released my last breath.

"We got out," I reassured her. "And it might happen again if we don't go inside."

Feyre stared at the ground hard - stared, and cracked. I barely heard her voice above the wind.

"Please," she said and in her mind and in her heart, I think it was a sob.

I grabbed her hand and winnowed immediately. It was dinner before I stood from outside her room where she'd slept since our return and went to visit the firedrake.

## Chapter 18: There Was A Choice In Death

### Chapter Summary

Rhys has a discussion with Amren about Feyre. The next day, he and Feyre successfully manage to visit the Bone Carver who confirms Rhys's suspicions about Hybern.

“Mates, Rhysand? Really?”

I hadn't even closed the door to her treasure trove before Amren was side-eying me from her desk. Amren's home was more about function than entertaining, her sitting room doubling as a work study that greeted you upon entry. There wasn't even a space to accommodate a dining table or kitchen.

“And when do you plan on telling her?” she said above the dull scratching of pen on paper. I refused to sit.

“If Mor had her way, she'd already know,” I said.

“That is not what I asked, boy.”

I was quiet for a moment, watching her write before staring at her book shelves. “She hates me, Amren.” All scratching stopped.

“Clearly not,” Amren said. She threw her pen against the desk and leaned back in her seat inclining her head toward the seat opposite her. When I didn't budge, she glared.

I sat.

“One does not agree to work for someone they *hate* unless they have ulterior motives, and from what I smelled on that girl at dinner last night - believe me, her human heart does not *hate* you.”

“Well she doesn't like me, either, and that's not enough to burden her with a mate bond.”

Amren snorted. “With *you*, you mean.”

My voice was harsher than I wanted it to sound. “Amren-”

“And what about you? What about *your* burden, Rhysand? Who takes care of you?”

“I thought that was your job as my Second,” I said to mask the increasing anxiety in my tightening lungs. I didn't deserve a caretaker.

“My job is to kill people, among other things, and you are people whom I might kill if you don’t explain what you’re doing here. It’s the middle of the night. The stars are out and the sky is black. Shouldn’t you be flying around and making darkness appear or some nonsense.”

“You’re certainly chipper this evening-”

One sharply crafted eyebrow lifted hotly, cutting me off. I sighed and lifted my hands in defeat, and then relayed what had happened that morning with Feyre.

“She’s still asleep. I waited all day for her to get up, to eat, to bathe - do something. But she hasn’t moved once. Nuala and Cerridwen suggested I find another way to occupy myself.”

Amren glowered. “You mean that shadow bastard you work with told them to tell you to get out and stop fussing.”

Fucking Azriel. I hadn’t even -

“ Yes ,” I ground out. “That may be a possibility.”

Amren rolled her eyes and stood up to fetch a glass decanter from the side table that swam with a dark, crimson liquid. She poured herself a glass. “I shall take care of Feyre.”

After she’d taken a sip, she stared casually out the window without another word. “What - that’s it? You’ll just take care of it?”

“Did I stutter, Rhysand? No, I did not. Now get out so I can go to sleep.” I stood, but my feet hardly moved, hands in my pockets as I gave the woman a curious look over.

Centuries. I’d known her for centuries and it still felt sometimes like I all I’d learnt in that time was her name and favorite jewel.

(Every jewel was her favorite.)

When she caught me staring, her eyes narrowed into slits. “I said *get out*. ”

“Goodnight to you too,” I mumbled, my foul mood growing worse, and shuffled for the door. When I turned the handle, Amren hissed one last time. “Rhysand,” she said, catching my eye. “For the record, your cousin is right.”

A gust of wind or magic caught the door and hit me on my way out.

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Feyre knocked on the door to my study early the next morning - dressed head to toe in her fighting leathers. I tried to hide my smile at the bandoliers and straps of knives she’d hooked incorrectly into the fastenings.

And around her neck was - a soft blue stone surrounded by pearls and a gold setting. A necklace I recognized, had not last seen since -

Since I’d given it to Amren years ago.

Feyre's head dipped as she watched me looking her over, probably assuming my thoughts had taken a nefarious turn. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?" I asked simply, folding my arms and leaning against the door frame.

Feyre took a deep breath. "I'd like to go back to the Bone Carver," she said, her voice wary, but steady.

I smiled proudly.

"Lovely."

---

The mist was thick upon the Prison hillside as we climbed. It crept along at a sluggish pace, globs of it rolling past us in an ooze that did little to settle the tension our visit brought.

Feyre knelt below the boulder where I stood, drinking from one of the many trickling streams we'd met. She'd had to stop a few times and there were moments I could have sworn I'd heard the faint groans and cracks her body made as her muscles and bones worked to make each step... but she was here. And she was trying. And in her quiet focus, she hadn't once asked to go back.

She pulled her hair over her neck to keep the wind from catching it as she drank, giving me a full view of Amren's necklace around her neck. In the dim morning sun shrouded by all of that mist, the blue stone looked more like an eye ready to examine me.

Feyre pulled up from where she crouched and caught me staring. "What?" she asked, standing and wiping at her mouth.

"She gave you that," I said. Amren had never given any of us *anything* .

She walked closer to the start of the rock and peered up at me. "It must be serious, then. The risk with-"

"Don't say anything you don't want others hearing," I said, and pointed below us to that smooth expanse of stone and the prison below it. The prison that ran for miles. "The inmates have nothing better to do than to listen through the earth and rock for gossip. They'll sell any bit of information for food, sex, maybe a breath of air."

Feyre glanced nervously down at where I pointed, her lips parted slightly, but she nodded all the same. "I'm sorry," she said after a beat and looked back up at me. "About yesterday."

I extended my hand and... she took it. And allowed me to help her up the stone without flinching. She'd done so all day. I savored the feel of the touch as she came level with me and wondered when next I'd feel it - if ever again.

*Strong* .

Feyre was strong and resilient and determined for being here at all.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for,” I said. “You’re here now.” Feyre’s chest sank. “I won’t dock your pay,” I added with a wink when I saw how her chest had deflated, as though agreeing to come with me was still a loss.

Feyre didn’t react, but pushed forward and so, we continued to climb.

High, high, higher still until the mist had begun to fade away and you could actually see the full stretch of that glorious grey sea surrounding the island glimmering in the ever rising sun. Our hillside had become perilously steep forming a wall of grass and stone before us over which we could go no further.

Facing that wall, I stepped towards it, drawing my sword as I did. Feyre’s brow peaked as she eyed the blade and my hand gripping it. “Don’t look so surprised,” I said.

She sounded a bit dumbfounded when she replied. “I’ve - never seen you with a weapon.”

I brought the sword whipping around from where I held it aloft and stood back. “Cassian would laugh himself hoarse hearing that.” *If you don’t marry her, you stupid prick, I will.* “And then make me go into the sparring ring with him.”

And then he would win the hand of my mate beating me into a bloody mess and I’d be fucked.

“Can he beat you?”

“Hand-to-hand combat? Yes. He’d have to earn it for a change, but he’d win.” And I’d still be a bloody mess at the end of it. The only chance I might stand winning against Cassian, no magic involved whatsoever, would be if Feyre and I mated and he challenged me.

But that was never going to happen.

“Cassian is the best warrior I’ve encountered in any court, any land. He leads my armies because of it.”

Feyre’s sense of awe was short lived, though, her expression darkening. “Azriel - his hands. The scars, I mean.” We each looked away for a moment. “Where did they come from?”

Azriel.

Cauldron damn us all - *Azriel* .

He would never tell Feyre this story, but he’d want her to know all the same. And neither Mor nor Cassian liked talking about it for lack of having someone to throttle afterward. So...

*Azriel ...*

“His father had two legitimate sons,” I said, and the softness of my voice had nothing to do with not wishing to be overheard by the sneaking creatures chained below us, “both older than Azriel. Both cruel and spoiled. They learned it from their mother, the lord’s wife. For the eleven years that Azriel lived in his father’s keep, she saw to it he was kept in a cell with no

window, no light. They let him out for an hour every day - let him see his mother for an hour once a week. He wasn't permitted to train, or fly, or any of the things his Illyrian instincts roared at him to do. When he was eight, his brothers decided it'd be fun to see what happened when you mixed an Illyrian's quick healing gifts with oil - and fire." Feyre's face went ghostly pale. "The warriors heard Azriel's screaming. But not quick enough to save his hands."

His hands.

I still remember the first day he'd come to camp and got beaten up into a bloody, broken mess same as I had on my first day. The blood was so thick over his body, none of us noticed his hands until later that night after he'd cleaned up.

My mother had insisted he stay with us and I had wondered at the time if it was because of those hands, whatever story went with them. If maybe there were some lines that even in Illyrian culture you didn't cross and that was why she commanded he was to stay with Cass and I. Even after we allied, it had been five, six years at least before Az told us where the scars had come from...

"Were-" Feyre tried, little color returning to her cheeks, "were his brothers punished."

*A startling crack split my ears in two as bone fractured - followed by another.*

*And another...*

*And another...*

"Eventually," I admitted, though it hadn't been enough. I gripped the hilt of my sword tighter, wishing I could winnow then and there to finish the job, our task at hand be damned.

"And Mor," Feyre said suddenly, "what does she do for you?"

*What doesn't Mor do for me ?*

"Mor is who I'll call in when the armies fail and Cassian and Azriel are both dead."

Mother above, save us and keep us from such a day.

"So she's supposed to wait until then?"

"No. As my Third, Mor is my..."

Counselor.

Best friend.

Nagging pain in my ass...

"Court overseer. She looks after the dynamics between the Court of Nightmares and the Court of Dreams, and runs both Velaris and the Hewn City. I suppose in the mortal realm, she

might be considered a queen.”

“And Amren?”

“Her duties as my Second make her my political advisor, walking library, and doer of my dirty work. I appointed her upon gaining my throne. But she was my ally, maybe my friend, long before that.”

And another nagging pain in my ass, I thought, looking at that amulet around Feyre’s neck and the exchange we’d held last night.

“I mean - in that war where your armies fail and Cassian and Azriel are dead, and even Mor is gone,” Feyre clarified, but it fell heavily on my ears. With the prison at our backs and bloodshed undoubtedly in our future... I’d never had to fight in a war before with my entire Inner Circle on the line.

We had each fought in the War separately, but never in waves, never one life going down before another. Always with the fear that we might lose each other, but never with the actual belief that we would.

But now, we just might. And Amren -

I blew out hot air upon the wind.

*Amren.*

I stared at the hard rock that led to the gates of the Prison, the chamber that had once housed the wicked beast herself. “If that day comes, I’ll find a way to break the spell on Amren and unleash her on the world. And ask her to end me first.”

“What *is* she?” Feyre asked and there was no curiosity behind it as usual. Only stone cold dread.

“Something else,” I said, not wanting to think of what she was before I met her. Not wanting to stomach it before I breached the Prison walls and scented her in the stone and earth we’d walk on. “Something worse than us. And if she ever finds a way to shed her prison of flesh and bone... Cauldron save us all.”

Feyre didn’t seem to want to push the subject further, for which I was glad, because she walked up to the stone before us and stared pointedly up at its height. “I can’t climb bare rock like that,” she said candidly.

My grip tightened once more on my sword as I prepared for what came next. I placed my free hand flat on the stone and both saw and felt it move, the magic in my blood singing to its keepers.

“You don’t have to,” I said before the light had finished flaring from the rock.

Feyre took a step back and stared at the gates of the Prison carved from rock and earth and *bone* .

---

Darkness loomed ahead of us. Grey and black and *silent* .

Three white orbs floated to the forefront of the channel as soon as the gates had parted, but Feyre was a pillar of stone beside me staring into that abyss. Her hand clutched at Amren's amulet and I wondered what the beast had told her concerning it to make her think it would help her now.

Tentatively, I put a hand on her lower back with a faint pressure asking her for a step - just one. And at length, she took it, but not without holding tighter to that stone at her chest.

And together - we walked inside.

The chill hit me like a bloodmist - invasive and permanent and every bit the recollection of Amarantha's madness. Feyre felt it too and shuddered at the touch of it, her body leaning back against my hand at her back until I stopped and damned my better judgment, letting my instincts take over to just be with her.

"Breathe," I whispered, leaning down to her ear and savoring the scent of her, letting her be near my own and not question for one second that I was there. "One breath."

I prayed it against her skin, her soul.

And for a moment with light behind us and darkness in front, it was just the two of us - just my mate and I standing in the black of our past.

"Where are the guards?" she said, her voice almost nonexistent. Her body still trembled. I wondered if she had noticed.

This was worse than the Middengard Wyrms, I decided. Worse than that riddle, and almost as horrible as watching her kill those three fae. What pain she'd been living with all these months that just looking at the mountain tore my mate -

*Not your anything* .

Tore my *anything* to shreds.

I grabbed her hand and Feyre threaded her fingers through mine with earnest, squeezing tightly. And then... her feet moved.

One breath.

One step.

*Only her* .

"They dwell within the rock of the mountain," I said, referring to the guards. "They only emerge at feeding time, or to deal with restless prisoners. They are nothing but shadows of thought and an ancient spell."



And those guards would help us if we needed it, but I kept my sword held firm at my side all the same.

Especially as we rounded that corner and the light from outside *died* . And the darkness before us suddenly felt... terrifying, constricting at my throat and lungs. The way Amarantha's hands had looked when she would -

*Feyre. I would get through this for Feyre.*

Feyre who was gripping my hand so hard it hurt and throwing questions at me to keep herself distracted, not knowing it was helping me too.

"Do all the High Lords have access?" she asked as the darkness swallowed us whole.

"No. The Prison is law unto itself; the island may be even an eighth court. But it falls under my jurisdiction, and my blood is keyed to the gates."

"Could you free the inmates?"

"No. Once the sentence is given and a prisoner passes those gates... They belong to the Prison. It will never let them out. I take sentencing people here very, very seriously."

"Have you ever-"

"Yes." Cauldron - yes, and hated every minute of it. And now, those prisoners sat too closely by, listening. "And now is not the time to speak of it."

Feyre's questions died off for a considerable time after that as we plunged on, and so too did sound... and sight... and all sense save a cold, tingling feeling emanating from the walls that pressed in close.

And it was awful.

A stillness and a language I didn't want to speak or understand.

And it was wholly inescapable. Where you did not see it, you felt it in your bones. And where you could not feel it, you *breathed* it. Into every muscle that pushed forward and every vein that strained against the lungs and hearts racing to survive.

It was not the terror I'd known when Feyre died, nor even that miserable depression we'd buried ourselves in after. It was that simple anxiety that only waiting could bring as the monsters prowled about unseen just before they attacked, and you did not know if you would make it out alive or not.

"How long," Feyre said, her words no more than air slipping between us. "How long was she in here?"

I didn't have to ask who she meant.

“Azriel looked once,” I said. “Into archives in our oldest temples and libraries. All he found was a vague mention that she went in before Prythian was split into courts - and emerged once they had been established. Her imprisonment predates our written word. I don’t know how long she was in here - a few millennia seems like a fair guess.”

“You never asked?”

“Why bother? She’ll tell me when it’s necessary.”

When I’m so far gone, my very existence depends upon that knowledge...

“Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know. Though there are legends that claim when the world was born, there were... rips in the fabric of the realms. That in the chaos of Forming, creatures from other worlds could walk through one of those rips and enter another world. But the rips closed at will, and the creatures could become trapped, with no way home.”

Feyre’s feet dragged slightly on the stone at that. “You think she was one of them?”

“I think that she is the only one of her kind,” I said, not daring to name her, “and there is no record of others ever having existed. Even the Suriel have numbers, however small. But she - and some of those in the Prison... I think they came from somewhere else. And they have been looking for a way home for a long, long time.”

Feyre went silent once more after that, her body still shaky as we walked, exhausted and worn out from both the trek and the escapades her mind was playing with her. We stopped frequently for her to take water, but she never once allowed me to let go of her hand.

Not that I wanted to. Not for one *heartbeat* .

It was soon enough that the path took an ever steeper angle downward, bringing us into a steep, steep descent towards hell. Towards *him* .

Feyre scented him at the same time I did, though I wasn’t sure she recognized who precisely she was discovering. Or if she was stiffening because of some other fear that only her nightmares and my cruel need to protect my court could bring her.

I squeezed her hand - a reassurance. “Just a bit farther.”

“We must be near the bottom now,” she said.

My heart sped up, anticipating. This was it. This was - our chance.

Her chance.

“Past it. The Bone Carver is caged beneath the roots of the mountain.”

“Who is he? What is he?”

“No one knows. He’ll appear as he wants to appear.”

“Shape-shifter?”

I swallowed.

“Yes and no. He’ll appear to you as one thing, and I might be standing right beside you and see another.”

It was a question that had haunted me all day as we trekked up the mountain side - the Bone Carver’s form.

Feyre was already petrified to be here. I was enormously pleased and proud to find her mental shields well in tact when we winnowed to our starting point, but how easily would they crack? What would the Bone Carver transfigure himself into that might break her?

The worst part of it all was that I wouldn’t even know. The Carver would likely show me something entirely different from Feyre and if her shields held, I wouldn’t see it. I only prayed to the Cauldron that whatever the Carver chose to show her, it wouldn’t be Amarantha.

Anything but that.

“And the bone carving?”

“You’ll see.”

We arrived at a slick stone cover hiding the Bone Carver’s den. I released my grip on Feyre’s hand, which had grown sweaty in my palm with how tight her grasp had been, and touched the smooth surface willing it to release. In the blink of an eye, the stone melted into a cascade of bones, hundreds of them, each one intricately carved to detail every scene imaginable with magnificent, gruesome splendor. Beside me, Feyre inhaled sharply.

And then, the Bone Carver spoke.

“I have carved the doors for every prisoner in this place, but my own remains my favorite.”

“I’d have to agree,” I said, stepping into the Carver’s den where I was shocked by the sight of the him.

He sat low and crouched on the dirty floor of his cell drinking in the sight of Feyre, his eyes roaming the length of her body hungry for new information. I might as well have not been there for all he cared.

Feyre did not balk, and I knew the Carver could not have taken on Amarantha’s form for her, thank the Mother. But what *I* saw, the person I watched slide his eyes to me as I magicked a bag into my hands, was the very last person I had expected and I felt foolish to not have seen it coming.

Of course, the Carver *knew* .

I felt more than saw Feyre tense beside me as I pulled the bone out of my bag and tossed it at the Carver, an offering to begin our game. “The calf-bone that made the final kill when Feyre slew the Middengard Wyrn,” I said. The Carver beamed up with delight and it disgusted me to see that smirk on the new face he wore especially for me.

“Come inside,” he said. Feyre chanced but a single step. “It has been an age since something new came into this world.”

“Hello,” Feyre said, her voice far too light, the Carver far too happy. It made my stomach feel sick knowing how he would dance with her.

I missed the feel of her hand in mine.

“Are you frightened?”

“Yes.”

*Never lie. Not ever. Not about anything no matter how simple or inconsequential you think it may be.*

The Carver stood, but did not approach, a subtle indication he would play. “Feyre,” he said, testing the syllables out on his tongue. “Fay-ruh. Where did you go when you died?”

“A question for a question,” Feyre offered and though he did not take his eyes from her, he nodded smartly at me.

*Set the rules from the start...*

“You were always smarter than your forefathers,” the Carver said in my direction before proceeding with Feyre. “Tell me where you went, what you saw - and I will answer your question.”

Feyre looked at me and I nodded, urging her to go on with the hope that she didn’t see that agonizing worry flowing through my veins that this would tax her too much. And it would be all my fault if it did.

Or worse, that she would think I didn’t believe enough in her to do it, which could not have been further from the truth. The seconds dragged on and I didn’t need to breach her shields to know what thoughts flitted through her head of pain and agony and death.

Just when the Carver began to look particularly intrigued, perhaps enough to begin taunting Feyre with her weaknesses, Feyre’s hands bundled into fists at her sides and she spoke, and with each word, words so honest and haunting that I had not expected them, I started to cleave inside.

*Just one step. One breath. One day.*

*We’ll figure it out - day by day if we have to.*

“I heard the crack,” Feyre said, my eyes abandoning the Carver to watch her instead. “I heard the crack when she broke my neck. It was in my ears, but also inside my skull. I was gone before I felt anything more than the first lash of pain. And then it was dark. A different sort of dark than this place. But there was a... thread.”

My heart sped up. She couldn't possibly have meant... when I'd thought she never -

“A tether. And I yanked on it - and suddenly I could see. Not through my eyes, but - but his...” Her hands uncurled from her fists as if a mighty weight had removed itself in admitting such a truth.

The bond.

She was talking about the mating bond, did she even realize? No, she couldn't have. But...

She'd felt it that day. The same as I had. I had thought myself alone in feeling it between us, that Feyre could never have felt the bond between us from how intensely she hated me, much less accepted it. I had thought myself alone in reaching for the bond and for her, but after everything, she had groped for it in the darkness too.

It was all we had in death - the bond between us. We had pulled on it together.

My body went sort of weightless at the confession.

“And I knew I was dead,” Feyre continued, each word placing a grip on my heart that was equal parts ice and fire. “And this tiny scrap of spirit was all that was left of me, clinging to the thread of our bargain.”

“But was there anyone there - were you seeing anything beyond?” the Carver asked.

“There was only that bond in the darkness. And when I was Made anew, I followed that bond back - to me. I knew that home was on the other end of it. There was light then. Like swimming up through sparkling wine.”

Feyre finally looked at me then and I think my soul exploded, desperate to collide with hers and restitch itself back together in fury and passion.

*Not my any-*

My mate.

*My mate. My mate. My mate.*

Soul divine, I wanted her. Wanted more than just a hand to hold in the dark, more than just a touch to push forward through the crowded passageways of death and decay. Wanted to knit our beings together until we were one and she never cried again for lack of light or love or sun.

*I can be your Light , I thought. Though I am the Night, let me be your Moon. I can reflect the Sun. Let me find the light for you, Feyre.*

“Were you afraid?” the Carver next asked. Question Two.

“All I wanted was to return to - to the people around me. I wanted it badly enough I didn’t have room for fear. The worst had happened, and the darkness was calm and quiet. It did not seem like a bad thing to fade into. But I wanted to go home. So I followed the bond home.”

Home.

*There was only that bond in the darkness...*

The thought beat a steady rhythm in my head as everything from unbounding joy to nervousness to sorrow tore at me.

To be Feyre’s home.

“There was no other world?” the Carver asked. Question Three.

“If there was or is, I did not see it.”

“No light, no portal?”

“It was only peace and darkness.”

“Did you have a body?”

“No.”

“Did-”

“That’s enough from you,” I purred, quickly resuming my persona reserved for the outside world. Feyre didn’t need to relive every detail, she had offered him enough to make him talk. And my own thoughts were selfishly running away with themselves... If I didn’t pull back now, Feyre’s story had a chance to so thoroughly wreck me to the point of never coming back. “You said a question for a question. Now you’ve asked... six.”

Mercifully, the Carver relaxed and so too, I think, did Feyre at having the power shifted back to her.

“It is a rare day when I meet someone who comes back from true death,” the Carver said. “Forgive me for wanting to peer behind the curtain. Ask it, girl.”

With renewed confidence I was glad to hear in her voice, Feyre spoke, “If there was no body - nothing but perhaps a bit of bone, would there be a way to resurrect that person? To grow them a new body, put their soul into it.”

"Was the soul somehow preserved? Contained?"

“Yes.”

“There is no way.” Knowing, I waited. “Unless...”

*There.*

“Long ago, before the High Fae, before man, there was a Cauldron... They say all the magic was contained inside it, that the world was born in it. But it fell into the wrong hands. And great and horrible things were done with it. Things were forged with it. Such wicked things that the Cauldron was eventually stolen back at great cost. It could not be destroyed, for it had Made all things, and if it were broken, then life would cease to be. So it was hidden. And forgotten. Only with that Cauldron could something that is dead be reforged like that.”

The Cauldron. My first suspicion confirmed. Along with my first nightmare.

Visions of the ruined temples I’d visited with my brothers flashed through my eyes fueling my energy to persist. This wasn’t just for Feyre, I had to remind myself. My court was on the line as well and equally important.

“Where did they hide it?” I asked the Carver casually.

“Tell me a secret no one knows, Lord of Night, and I’ll tell you mine.”

I shrugged, almost enjoying toying with him. “My right knee gets a twinge of pain when it rains. I wrecked it during the War, and it’s hurt ever since.”

The Bone Carver’s laugh barked through the air. Feyre was gaping open mouthed at me, not entirely unamused herself. Had we been under different circumstances, I might have smiled at her - real and genuine.

“You always were my favorite,” the Carver said deliciously. “Very well. The Cauldron was hidden at the bottom of a frozen lake in Lapplund and vanished a long, long time ago. I don’t know where it went to - or where it is now. Millennia before you were born, the three feet on which it stands were successfully cleaved from its base in an attempt to fracture some of its power. It worked - barely.

“Removing the feet was like cutting off the first knuckle of a finger. Irksome, but you could still use the rest with some difficulty. The feet were hidden at three different temples - Cesere, Sangravah, and Itica. If they have gone missing, it is likely the Cauldron is active once more - and that the wielder wants it at full power and not a wisp of it missing.”

*Hybern .*

My blood growled the name. I knew what I would find in coming to the Carver, but some part of me had foolishly hoped I would be wrong regardless.

“I don’t suppose you know who now has the Cauldron,” I asked, more casually still. I felt anger wash over me as I watched the Carver point a long, bony finger at Feyre.

“Promise that you’ll give me her bones when she dies and I’ll think about it.” My veins went cold freezing hell over and I stilled, the Carver chuckling at me like a cat toying with a mouse. “No - I don’t think even you would promise that, Rhysand.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said, my voice made of steel. I moved to guide Feyre out of the room. We were done with his games. Much as his affirmation of my suspicions would have been nice, I didn’t need it to really know who was responsible. He’d told me enough to begin the real work now anyway. And the subtle threat at Feyre was enough to make me wish her and I far, far away from this prison camp.

But Feyre did not follow with me. Her body froze beneath my hand pressing in on her lower back as she turned her gaze back to the Carver, sensing how to unravel him. Little did she know she would unravel me in the process.

“There was a choice - in Death,” she said. One simple phrase and I could sense without looking at him, could feel it in the scent of him, that he was rapt with attention.

“I knew that I could drift away into the dark. And I chose to fight - to hold on for a bit longer. Yet I knew if I wanted, I could have faded. And maybe it would be a new world, a realm of rest and peace. But I wasn’t ready for it - not to go there alone. I knew there was something else waiting beyond that dark. Something good.”

The Carver looked ravenous for more when he spoke. “You know who has the Cauldron, Rhysand. Who has been pillaging the temples. You only came here to confirm what you have long guessed.”

My gut twisted. “The King of Hybern.”

Silence sifted through us as we waited, but the Carver kept quiet. I felt Feyre shifting beside me, weighing her options. There was more to give, but the bastard still wanted more in return first and Feyre - my sweet, bold Feyre - was too willing to oblige him with her pain.

“When Amarantha made me kill those two faeries,” she said, “if the third hadn’t been Tamlin, I would have put the dagger in my own heart at the end. I knew there was no coming back from what I’d done. And once I broke their curse, once I knew I’d saved them, I just wanted enough time to turn that dagger on myself. I only decided I wanted to live when she killed me, and I knew I had not finished whatever...” she paused and sounded utterly exhausted, “whatever it was I’d been born to do.”

Nothing and no one could have ever prepared me for those words. I had to quickly mask the devastation written all over my face as Feyre turned that beautiful face of hers on me and caught the heartbreak in my eyes.

*Don't you ever think that. Not for one damned moment .*

That’s what I’d told her that day by the Sidra when she’d - when she’d thought of what it would be like to just... stop.

I searched my mind, my memories of that day her neck snapped. My attention had been so wholly connected with her thoughts trying to will her the last morsels of my strength just so she could keep a level head and defeat Amarantha. How had I not seen her break so entirely? To the point that she wanted to - no, I could not even think the words.



But then a vision came sweeping into my mind of Tamlin and what had really been the Attor sitting on the dais next to Amarantha as they watched Feyre slaughter the first two faeries. Realizing what was about to happen was the sole moment I'd lost my hold on Feyre's thoughts, the exact moment the veil over the real Tamlin kneeling before her was lifted, when she'd felt...

My chest sank. The guilt of how I'd failed her in that one small moment when she felt the most alone, when I had silently promised never to leave her, wrecked me from the inside out. If it weren't for the fact that it would mean reliving the horrors of that day, I'd go back right that very second and never leave her side ever again.

How she'd suffered. How she'd *lived* .

How had we all.

"With the Cauldron," the Carver said with surprising softness, "you could do other things than raise the dead. You could shatter the wall. It is likely that Hybern has been quiet for so many years because he was hunting the Cauldron, learning its secrets. Resurrection of a specific individual might very well have been his first test once the feet were reunited - and now he finds that the Cauldron is pure energy, pure power. And like any magic, it can be depleted. So he will let it rest, let it gather strength - learn its secrets to feed it more energy, more power."

"Is there a way to stop it?" Feyre asked.

"Don't offer him one more-" I started to say at the Carver's silence, but he cut me off.

"When the Cauldron was made, its dark maker used the last of the molten ore to forge a book. The Book of Breathings. In it, written between the carved words, are the spells to negate the Cauldron's power - or control it wholly. But after the War, it was split into two pieces. One went to the Fae, one to the six human queens. It was part of the Treaty, purely symbolic, as the Cauldron had been lost for millennia and considered mere myth. The Book was believed harmless, because like calls to like - and only that which was Made can speak those spells and summon its power. No creature born of the earth may wield it, so the High Lords and humans dismissed it as little more than a historical heirloom, but if the Book were in the hands of something reforged... You would have to test such a theory, of course - but... it might be possible."

Feyre nearly gasped beside me as she realized the implications.

The temples.

The Cauldron.

The Book.

*Feyre.*

“So now the High Lord of Summer possesses our piece, and the reigning mortal queens have the other entombed in their shining palace by the sea. Prythian’s half is guarded, protected with blood-spells keyed to Summer himself. The one belonging to the mortal queens.... They were crafty, when they received their gift. They used our own kind to spell the Book, to bind it - so that if it were ever stolen, if, let’s say, a High Lord were to winnow into their castle to steal it... the Book would melt into ore and be lost. It must be freely given by a mortal queen, with no trickery, no magic involved.” The Carver chuckled, amused. “Such clever, lovely creatures, humans.

“Reunite both halves of the Book of Breathings and you will be able to nullify the powers of the Cauldron. Hopefully before it returns to full strength and shatters that wall.”

Without a fight, Feyre moved with me to leave the chamber as I grabbed her hand gingerly in my own. Though she did not have the mental strength to grip my hand in return, her mere touch on my skin warmed and soothed my spirit after all the Carver had to say.

“I shall carve your death in here, Feyre,” were the Carver’s parting words and then we were gone.

We did not speak for a very long while afterwards, not until we were far away from his hideous existence. I left one awful thought or memory behind with each step, to be considered and tortured by another time. I’d had enough for one day.

“What did you see?” Feyre asked almost as soon as we’d stepped back into the sun - into the light.

“You first,” I replied, wondering if her vision would in any way match my own. But what she said surprised me.

“A boy - around eight; dark-haired and blue-eyed.”

I shuddered. It was not nearly as bad as Amarantha, but to use a child to manipulate an already abused and broken individual seemed particularly cruel.

“What did you see?” she pressed and with a deep breath, I replied.

“Jurian,” I said. “He appeared exactly as Jurian looked the last time I saw him: facing Amarantha when they fought to the death.”

Covered in blood, cackling like a madman, and vicious as hell.

It was Feyre’s turn to shudder this time.

## Chapter 19: You Are My Salvation

### Chapter Summary

Rhys and Feyre make it back from the Bone Carver only to decide the Weaver is next. Rhys faces some tough criticism from Cassian that maybe he shouldn't take Feyre.

We made our trek back down the mountain mostly in silence. Since the laws of the island demanded we forgo magic to get to the Prison, the same principles applied to leaving it. So back on our feet and down, down, down we went.

Feyre must have known I would explain everything when we returned and indeed, the silence gave me a good long while to think. About what the Carver had said. And what this meant moving forward.

Pieces I'd long since thought on started stitching together in my mind - different courts and magic and lands we would have to visit, have to manipulate and hopefully not destroy to get to the ultimate goal of finishing the Cauldron.

Each lick of the wind as we stepped through dirt and sweat was a promise we would fight hard to see those goals through.

I scented my clingy band of misfits before we'd barely finished winnowing to the rooftop of the townhouse. Feyre had held me a little tighter than normal as we whipped through the air, but she stood of her own accord when I let go.

"Amren's right," I announced, taking a patient lean against the door frame of my sitting room, eying everyone sprawled about the room. "You *are* like dogs, waiting for me to come home. Maybe I should buy treats."

In truth, I was grateful they were there. I didn't feel like wasting any more time or energy going up to the House of Wind and Feyre looked a little worse for wear taking a seat by the fire, savoring every flicker and flame it gave it.

Cassian flipped me off with Mor looking a little impatient by his side. Azriel kept nothing but shadows for company by the window. The anticipation radiating from the three of them was palpable.

Feyre seemed to want nothing to do with it, her back turned away from them, but... I knew she was listening, in her own quiet way while demons chased at her as surely as my own did for me.

"How'd it go?" Mor finally asked.

“The Bone Carver,” I said, watching Feyre and keeping casual to stem that rising sense of dread I felt, “is a busybody gossip who likes to pry into other people’s business far too much.”

“But?” Cassian sounded impatient. And indeed, his wings shook at his back.

“But he can also be helpful, when he chooses. And it seems we need to start doing what we do best.”

Silence.

And three strained glances on three very important faces.

And as always, never one to shy away from the worst of it, Azriel pushed forward, clearing the way through his shadows to confront reality. “Tell us.”

The last thing I heard before diving into our day was Feyre’s deep breath by the fire. She didn’t turn around to look at us the entire time we talked. Not once.

I avoided Feyre’s own personal details as I explained, as Azriel questioned, as Cassian sat back and swore internally. Mor said little herself, chewing her lip instead and watching Azriel carefully each time he spoke, like she could see the threads of his carefully laid groundwork weaving together behind those hazel eyes she drowned in day after day.

“I’ll contact my sources in the Summer Court about where their half of the Book of Breathings is hidden,” Azriel said when it seemed my tale was over. “I can fly into the human world myself to figure out where they’re keeping their part of the Book before we ask them for it.”

“No need,” I said, and shook my head definitely. “And I don’t trust this information, even with your sources, with anyone outside of this room. Save for Amren.”

“They can be trusted,” Azriel said. Even Feyre turned at that, hearing the the glint of malice in his voice. There was nothing Azriel liked less than thinking he’d disappointed someone at the one thing he felt born to do. But I couldn’t trust anyone, including his sources. Not with a secret so monumental and hazardous as this.

“We’re not taking risks where this is concerned,” I said, fixing Azriel with what trust I could in a single stare.

*I’ll be throwing you to the wolves soon enough, brother. I trust you - heart and soul.*

Azriel’s hands flexed once - and then released. I waited, and right on queue -

“So what *do* you have planned?” Mor asked, finally deciding to chime in. Az cut a glance at her and took a step back, his shadows relaxing. I picked at my leathers and pretended not to notice, pretended that what I was about to say would not end us all.

I felt Feyre’s gaze shift to me, watching, weighing...

“The King of Hybern sacked one of our temples to get a missing piece of the Cauldron. As far as I’m concerned, it’s an act of war - an indication that His Majesty has no interest in wooing me.”

“He likely remembers our allegiance to the humans in the War, anyway,” Cassian said and was not wrong. “He wouldn’t jeopardize revealing his plans while trying to sway you, and I bet some of Amarantha’s cronies reported to him about Under the Mountain. About how it all ended, I mean.”

Feyre dropped her hands slowly from where they’d rested gently in the air against the heat of the fireplace. Cassian looked tightly between us for a brief moment.

“Indeed,” I said. “But this means Hybern’s forces have already successfully infiltrated our lands - without detection. I plan to return the favor.”

The room tore in two, one half in the direction of feral, instinctual excitement written across the blood thirsty grins on Cassian and Mor’s faces, who would go to their deaths willingly for retribution; the other half slanting towards the quiet, calculating mindset Feyre and Azriel shared, to question and plot and plan first before jumping into the fray where danger lurked.

“How?” Mor asked, and she sounded ready enough to rip open her heart and shred the world with truth on the spot.

I crossed my arms. “It will require careful planning. but if the Cauldron is in Hybern, then to Hybern we must go. Either to take it back... or use the Book to nullify it.”

And as much as I hated to admit it, especially after a day like today that would damn me later when thoughts of Feyre and the Carver and death caught up with me, I felt... *excited* at the prospect of how stealing that Cauldron right out from under Hybern’s nose might feel.

To save my court, gain that vindication it deserved...

The Illyrian bastard in me, born for blood and savagery and everything that was not masks and finery, gloried at the thought indeed.

“Hybern likely has as many wards and shields around it as we have here,” Azriel cut in. “We’d need to find a way to get through them undetected first.”

*Remember the wolves brother? It is time for you to go and meet them .*

Azriel seemed to understand the look that passed between us. His shadows danced immediately.

“Which is why we start now,” I said. “While we hunt for the Book. So when we get both halves, we can move swiftly - before word can spread that we even possess it.”

“How are you going to retrieve the Book, then?” Cassian asked, nodding, but his expression clouded.

And that excitement flared right back up in me. I had to temper it down to keep the brute inside me from raging too loudly. "Since these objects are spelled to the individual High Lords, and can only be found by them - through their power..." I looked at Feyre, who sat very fixedly towards the fire, chin tucked to her chest, "Then, in addition to her uses regarding the handling of the Book of Breathings itself, it seems we possibly have our own detector."

Feyre squinted as she felt three extra sets of eyes slam into her skin.

"*Perhaps*," she said, "was what the Bone Carver said in regard to me being able to track things." She looked at me and I couldn't help it - she was so damned powerful, so capable. That it struck me to my core in that very moment. I smiled, knowing what I was about to ask was too much, and knowing that I would ask it anyway because of what my mother had told me long, long ago when she'd described Feyre without ever even knowing her. Someone worthy with the ability to bend rules and defy the impossible.

"You don't know..." Feyre said, her words dying as my smile widened.

Because I did know. I knew it and so did she. She was powerful and strong and she was going to find out in the most precious way possible to me.

"You have a kernel of all our power," I told her, "like having seven thumbprints. If we've hidden something, if we've made or protected it with our power, no matter where it has been concealed, you will be able to track it through that very magic."

"You can't know that for sure," Feyre said with long suffering look worthy of Azriel. She was tired. So very, very tired.

So I smiled even further to encourage her, or at least infuriate her enough that she wouldn't slip back down the void.

"No," I admitted, "but there is a way to test it."

"Here we go," Cassian grumbled. I didn't see how the others felt about the matter, my focus resting solely on keeping that beautiful heart in front of me beating and pushing and trying.

"With your abilities, Feyre, you might be able to find the half of the Book at the Summer Court - and break the wards around it. But I'm not going to take the carver's word for it, or bring you there without testing you first. To make sure that when it counts, when we need to get that book, you - *we* do not fail. So we're going on another little trip. To see if you can find a valuable object of mine that I've been missing for a considerably long time."

"Shit," Mor said.

"Where?" Feyre asked. And any one of them could have answered her because by now, they all undoubtedly knew where I was gunning for. All shared the same singular vision in their thoughts of my mother and her last remaining possession for me before she died.

“To the Weaver,” Azriel answered Feyre. I held a hand up to silence Cassian before he even parted his lips to say whatever colored admonition he wanted to hurl at me.

I knew it was unfair. I knew it was even, slightly mean, perhaps, what I was asking of Feyre. But I would still ask and give her the choice in the matter because this was... my mate and I knew as soon as she’d looked at the Carver and told him she’d wanted to die that there was still some desperate, insignificant part of my soul clinging to this stupid, miserable hope she might choose to stay here one day. Choose *me* .

And if Feyre ever did, I wanted her to have everything she deserved, everything that was owed to her and more.

And that required visiting the Weaver. Feyre alone could make that happen, so to the Weaver we would go.

“The test,” I said, “will be to see if Feyre can identify the object of mine in the Weaver’s trove. When we get to the Summer Court, Tarquin might have spelled his half of the Book to look different, feel different.”

“By the Cauldron, Rhys,” Mor said with more genuine heat than I usually got from her. “Are you out of your-”

And much to my delight, it was Feyre who cut her off, wanting to know more.

“Who is the Weaver?” she asked.

“An ancient, wicked creature.” Azriel. The shadowsinger cut me a cruel stare. “Who should remain unbothered. Find another way to test her abilities.”

His stare alone in that room, perhaps, could have cut me down enough to back off. The risk was monumental, but the payoff...

The payoff...

I shied away from Azriel’s glance and shrugged at Feyre.

*Your choice* .

Always, always her choice.

She bit her lip and studied me. And whether she saw the primal need in my eyes or simply didn’t care anymore or something else altogether, possibly, Feyre shrugged back. “The Bone Carver, the Weaver... Can’t you ever just call someone by a given name?”

Cassian chuckled on the sofa.

Feyre looked ready to mist us all away for the evening as she stared at me with those eyes that lingered ever so slightly in the grey tonight. But soon, she would drop off. And still my selfish, demanding heart required more. I’d been dreading asking this of her most of all as we descended that mountain.

“What about adding one more name to that list?” I asked.

“Rhys,” Mor hissed, trying to call me back even as I stepped past the horizon point, too far gone to be considered sane or reasonable anymore.

“Emissary,” I persisted. “Emissary to the Night Court - for the human realm.”

“There hasn’t been one for five hundred years, Rhys,” Azriel said, the perfect mask of stoicism.

“There also hasn’t been a human-turned-immortal since then, either. The human world must be as prepared as we are - especially if the King of Hybern plans to shatter the wall and unleash his forces upon them. We need the other half of the Book from those mortal queens - and if we can’t use magic to influence them, then they’re going to have to bring it to us.”

The room went quiet - waiting. Feyre tried to look away, to some other part of the world outside these walls, but my voice quickly called her back. And though she sat several feet from me, the heavy look in her eyes felt more like a call between us than my speech, like I was sitting right beside her holding her up with each word, brushing away the hair from her face and enjoying the fire at her side.

Before I asked this one awful task of her.

“You are an immortal faerie - with a human heart,” I told her, our gazes locked. “Even as such, you might very well set foot on the continent and be... hunted for it. So we set up a base in neutral territory. In a place where humans trust us - trust *you*, Feyre. And where other humans might risk going to meet with you. To hear the voice of Prythian after five centuries.”

It clicked at once. “My family’s estate,” she said. I didn’t have to confirm.

“Mother’s tits, Rhys,” Cassian cursed. His wings shot out disturbing the various objects nearest him on the sofa. “You think we can just take over her family’s house, demand that of them?”

Mor looked equally displeased, and yet... “The land will run red with blood, Cassian, regardless of what we do with her family,” she said. “It is now a matter of where that blood will flow - and how much will spill. How much human blood we can save.”

Which left it down to Feyre once again. Feyre who sat by the fire ready to hug her knees into her chest and disappear as she spoke in that low tone. “The Spring Court borders the wall-”

*No - never. Not to you.*

I wouldn’t do that to her. Not in a million years.

“The wall stretches across the sea,” I cut in before that fear could fester inside her a second more. “We’ll fly in offshore. I won’t risk discovery from any court, though word might spread quickly enough once we’re there. I know it won’t be easy, Feyre, but if there’s any way you could convince those queens-”



“I’ll do it,” she said, and sweet utter relief flooded my system. Relief - and pride. She straightened her knees back out and held her head high. “They might not be happy about it, but I’ll make Elain and Nesta do it.”

*Strong.*

*Powerful.*

*Infinite.*

Feyre was infinite. As infinite as the sea and stars. She just didn’t know it yet.

“Then it’s settled,” I said. “Once Feyre darling returns from the Weaver, we’ll bring Hybern to its knees.”

---

Feyre went to bed for the evening, and was hardly up the stairs and inside her room before the others pounced.

“The Weaver, Rhys?” Azriel said. “Honestly?” And I was a tad surprised he was the first one to speak.

“I have to go see Amren,” I said, striding for the door. “You can all yell at me tomorrow after it fails if you think it’s such a monstrous idea.”

“It *is* a monstrous idea,” Cassian said. “You seem to be having quite the streak of them lately.” He got up and blocked my path, Mor hot on his heels behind him. “First the Weaver. Now her family’s estate? Is that really necessary?”

“Yes - now *move* please.”

Cassian growled, Mor stepping between us with a hand on either of our chests to pry us apart. “Much as I know Azriel would love to watch me rip you boys to pieces and then explain it to Feyre when the roof caves in, can we *please* be civil.” Her face warped on the latter half of her statement, focusing on me and we pulled apart. “You two need to stop. This is serious.”

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” I stepped back and shoved my hands in my pockets, staring at the floor while my shoe dragged circles in the carpet on a hop.

“Cauldron boil and bake me,” Cassian said after a hot silence. “You’re *excited* about this.” My head jerked back, but I couldn’t quite meet his face. “You are!” And then he broke into an uproarious laugh, his hands clapping together as he stepped back and fell over on Azriel shaking with the breath coming out of him.

“Cassian, for fuck’s sake,” Mor said.

“It’s too good!” he yelled. He turned around and sank onto the arm of the chair next to Az, who stood beside him with his arms crossed, siphons flaring a bit in color. “You’re going to take your girlfriend-”

“She’s *not* my anything,” I growled, stepping forward. Mor’s eyes flashed.

He waved a hand through the air. “You’re taking your *whatever* you want to call her into the most dangerous part of Prythian just to prove she has your powers, something you could do literally *anywhere* else on this forsaken continent-”

“Cassian.”

“All because you want to get back her future-”

“*Enough* - shit.”

He crossed his arms. “Do you deny it?”

We stared hard at each other for several painfully long seconds, enough time for Cassian give me his biggest shit eating grin. “Didn’t think so,” he finally said.

I looked at Azriel who conveniently had decided now was a nice moment to stare at the sunset, and then to Mor. She bit her lower lip...

And then shuddered as she suppressed her chuckle.

“Oh come on,” she said, her eyes bright. I shrugged her off, determined not to give in, but my foot still danced on the floor. “She does have you rather adorably wrapped around her finger. I just can’t wait for the day she finally realizes it.”

“She does not-”

“*Feyre darling*,” Cassian mimed and this time, I didn’t miss Azriel’s smile, even if it was tight. He was likely still musing on my decision to take Feyre to the Weaver tomorrow.

I let out a loose breath. “Can we go eat now? I’m starving and could do with some food. Some of us have *work* to do tomorrow.” I looked pointedly at Cassian and made it to the front door.

“Food isn’t all you’re starving for.”

My insides tightened, some deeper part of me rising up to the surface ready to shove him off the nearest balcony and dive right over him after it. Feyre was just upstairs. If she heard *any* of this-

“Man, look at you,” Cassian said with a shake of his head. “You can’t even function just thinking about her.” He looked me over head to toe, sizing me up like he would for a fight, and it felt like my first day in the war camps all over again. “I am gonna wipe the floor with your ass the day she finally fucks you.”

Azriel’s shoulder gave a heave. He strode from the window and took Mor’s hand, guiding her past us towards the door where I stood. “Come on,” he grumbled to her. “They’re gonna be at it for a while and I actually *am* hungry.”

“Fine by me!” she chirped, sticking her tongue out at me like she did when we were kids.

They left and then it was just Cassian and I, and Feyre somewhere upstairs. Cassian’s mouth frowned as he shrugged. “Do you really have to take her tomorrow?”

Feyre.

Feyre, Feyre, Feyre upstairs and eating or sleeping or *something*. Feyre who had wanted to die, but chose to stay here instead, with me and my court to find another way. Feyre, who had told me *yes* today to so many questions I’d asked of her.

Feyre, who I would take to the Weaver bright and early to find my mother’s heirloom that she might one day have it herself.

I didn’t let the voices tell me she wasn’t my anything this time. She was my *something* and even if that something always remained an enigma and never more, I was going to fight like hell for it. Cassian was right about more than just the danger tomorrow’s trip harbored - I could barely stand just thinking about Feyre upstairs.

I gave Cassian the grim look that meant there was no further room for debate. “Yes. I do.”

---

Dinner with my family resulted in very little to cool the ball of frantic energy that coursed through me in droves, heightening with every second I got closer to dawn. Though they certainly did their best to try regardless. Mor alone seemed willing to let it go and just accept what I’d decided and no one stopped her when she bought a round of drinks.

But I hardly touched my glass all evening. Hardly slept when I got home.

I danced outside Feyre’s room early before the sun was even up, pacing back and forth down the hall, listening for her breathing to hitch. The moment it changed and I felt her mind stir, even if it didn’t let me inside, I had her door open and was gliding right in as though I could feel the wind itself at my feet carrying me along.

“Hurry,” I said, making straight for her armoire and digging through it until I’d pulled out her leathers. “I want to be gone before the sun is fully up.”

“Why?” Feyre sounded groggy as she got out of bed, blinking owlishly at the leathers I’d thrown on the bed.

*Because if we wait any longer, my insides might explode.*

Today she’d be tested in new and different ways from the Bone Carver, ways that wouldn’t have to torture her mind, but might pull at those beautiful powers of hers, would certainly test her physical capabilities that had slackened in recent months.

But today was also the first real day of putting Hybern on our scent, the first real day of war. Going to the Weaver, though it had little to do with politics in what Feyre would hopefully retrieve there, was in its own way our own declaration of war. It would make or break every move we made from here on out.

Which was why we had to get moving - for all our sake's.

"Because time is of the essence," I said, chucking her socks and boots out onto the floor. That was really all she needed, but in my frenzy, I kept digging anyway. "Once the King of Hybern realizes that someone is searching for the Book of Breathings to nullify the powers of the Cauldron, then his agents will begin hunting for it, too."

"You suspected this for a while, though," Feyre said, sounding suddenly much more alert. "The Cauldron, the king, the Book... You wanted it confirmed, but you were waiting for me."

*I'll wait for you for anything .*

"Had you agreed to work with me two months ago, I would have taken you right to the Bone Carver to see if he confirmed my suspicions about your talents. But things didn't go as planned."

I looked up to catch Feyre piercing me with a sharp eye - not of reproach, but simple understanding, before she shuffled closer. "The reading," she said. I stopped moving completely, pinned down by that magnificent, insightful stare. "That's why you insisted on the lessons. So if your suspicions were true and I could harness the Book... I could actually read it - or any translation of whatever is inside."

Two days and there was already so much she was putting together on her own, so much she was turning herself into that sparked a kindling brush I longed to watch transform into a magnificent wildfire.

And so much of it because of how hard I was pushing her.

*'The Weaver, Rhys? Honestly?'*

*'Her family's estate? Is that really necessary?'*

"Again," I said and snapped myself back into action, "had you started to work with me, I would have told you why. I couldn't risk discovery otherwise." I strode across the room to her dresser and made to open the top drawer, but I couldn't quite shake what had jumped to my mind. The guilt... "You should have learned to read no matter what. But yes, when I told you it served my own purposes - it was because of this. Do you blame me for it?"

"No," Feyre said at once. I looked over my shoulder and found nothing doubting in her expression. My stomach settled. "But I'd prefer to be notified of any future schemes," she added, her head tilting forward in a way that wasn't entirely unfriendly.

"Duly noted," I said, inclining my own head in agreement. I whipped back to the dresser and yanked open a drawer, not even remembering what remaining part of her leathers she still needed, and came face to face with enough lingerie to make my cock twitch if I hadn't been caught off guard.

I picked up the first pair I saw and held it out with a chuckle - a dark scrap of midnight blue lace. Cauldron, this would hardly cover her-

The crack of heat and embarrassment that flooded past Feyre's shield cut the thought mercifully off.

"I'm surprised you didn't demand Nuala and Cerridwen buy you something else," I said, grinning like a fool.

Feyre had the lace out of my hand faster than winnowing. "You're drooling on the carpet," she said and stalked into the bathing room. She gave a mighty slam with the door and took a particularly good while changing while I took one last, long look at the open drawer.

*'Man, look at you. You can't even function just thinking about her.'*

With a groan and a stretch of my neck, I closed the drawer and concentrated on anything but that pretty blue lace while I waited for Feyre to come back out.

When at last she emerged, strapped inside fighting leathers that were still a tad loose on her, I held up her belt of knives for her to step into. She ran a finger carefully over some of the blades examining.

"No swords, no bow or arrows," I said, conscious of the heavy sword strapped down my own back.

Feyre's gaze flicked up to me, fingers still poised on the belt. "But knives are fine?" Her fingers circled one of the loops, ready to yank it out of my hands perhaps, but that damned lace...

Cauldron she'd taken it into the bathing room with her, so was she wearing it under the leathers? There was hardly anything to it. The leathers would brush right up against her -

*Oh for fuck's sake.*

I knelt down and concentrated on separating the straps of the belt apart, tapping Feyre's right foot to step forward when I was done. She obliged and when both feet were through, I set to work on the fastenings, not the least bit enjoying the curve of her thighs every time my fingers brushed a little higher on her leg.

Not the least bit.

"She will not notice a knife," I said, "as she has knives in her cottage for eating and her work. But things that are out of place - objects that have not been there... A sword, a bow and arrow... She might sense those things."

"What about me?"

All of the blood that had been heading south for my cock stopped and went raging back up to my gut. My fingers gripped the strap I'd wound tightly at her thigh and suddenly, the feel of her muscles beneath my touch was so much more than some stupid piece of lingerie. It was her *life*.

*It's dangerous.*

Azriel had cornered me one more time before I'd retired for the evening. He wasn't wrong.

"Do not make a sound, do not touch *anything* but the object she took from me," I said.

If she didn't, we could both wind up dead, and I'd already done that with her twice. I didn't want to repeat the experience of watching my mate fail - my mate whom I would fight through hell for, whom I would defy tradition and law to take on the Weaver for should it come to it, whom I would -

I looked up at Feyre, looked up from where I knelt on my stars and court and mountains for, and wished so foolishly that I already had in my hands what I was sending her into that cottage today for. And for one brief, glimmering moment - her eyes sparked, though I wasn't entirely sure why.

I cleared my throat and continued adjusting straps on her legs. "If we're correct about your powers," I said, "if the Bone Carver wasn't lying to us, then you and the object will have the same... imprint, thanks to the preserving spells I placed on it long ago. You are one and the same. She will not notice your presence so long as you touch *only* it. You will be invisible to her."

"She's blind?"

I nodded. "But her other senses are lethal." And I swore for a moment I heard her breath shake. "So be quick, and quiet. Find the object and run out, Feyre."

*For both our sakes .*

"And if she notices me?"

*It's dangerous, Rhys...*

I willed myself not to audibly sigh, though my hands had stopped moving once again.

Az had pleaded with me to tell Feyre exactly what she was up against, but I was such a coward that she would say no and I wouldn't get my possession back - wouldn't have the opportunity to give it to Feyre one day even if I knew that moment was damned to begin with - that I ignored him until he let it go. It took all of Mor's shy smiles, the ones she reserved only for him, to get Az back to his usual even stoicism after dinner.

I rubbed one thumb over Feyre's leg considering, savoring.

"Then we'll learn precisely how skilled you are," I replied.

She glared and I got the sense she would rather I didn't finish fixing her belt, but I was in too deep now. "Would you rather I locked you in the House of Wind and stuffed you with food and made you wear fine clothes and plan my parties?"

"Got to hell," she snapped, arms crossed. So much fire. I could play with fire. "Why not get this object yourself, if it's so important?"

“Because the Weaver know me - and if I am caught, there would be a steep price.” In the form of my mother’s ghost coming back to kick my ass for breaking my promise to her.

“High Lords are not to interfere with her, no matter the direness of the situation. There are many treasures in her hoard, some she has kept for millennia. Most will never be retrieved - because the High Lords do not dare be caught, thanks to the laws that protect her, thanks to her wrath. Any thieves on their behalf... either they do not return, or they are never sent, for fear of it leading back to their High Lord. But you... She does not know you. You belong to every court.”

I finished the last strap and would rather have leaned forward and kissed my way through the leather down to the skin in farewell than let go as I held the backs of her knees gingerly.

“So I’m your huntress and thief?”

I looked up and Feyre’s face was a muddle of questions I wanted so badly to understand. But there was purpose. There was determination. And so, so much possibility - everything that stone she was going after represented.

An image of it shimmered in my mind along with the love and promise behind it. Finally, I knew the answer to that question of what Feyre was. And it brought a smile broad and ready for adventure to my face as I told her clearly, “You are my salvation, Feyre.”

She did not deny it.

## Chapters 20-21: Things You Might Not Like

### Chapter Summary

Rhys watches Feyre narrowly escape death at the Weaver's cottage and then relives some of his own abuse trauma when he shows Feyre an early memory of Ianthe.

### Chapter Notes

\*\*\*\*\*This chapter contains triggers for rape and sexual abuse\*\*\*\*\*

The damper on my powers was fully locked down as we winnowed into the wood and I could feel everything. And what there was to feel around us was *nothing*.

The air was hollow, void of all creature and movement. A sign of how dangerous and deceiving the predators lurking about this jungle really were. It was perhaps the one benefit of being so near the Weaver's cottage that we wouldn't run into *other* beasts so long as we trespassed.

Feyre, for one, didn't need the added pressure.

The moment we touched down, her body stilled and her breath came out sharply. Though my High Lord's powers were all but non-existent to avoid giving the Weaver even the smallest hint of my arrival, that lethal killing power gifted me by my Illyrian ancestors stalked beneath my skin keeping watch.

"Where are we?" Feyre said, her voice no more than a soft whisper for the ancient, gnarled trees surrounding us to listen to.

I kept my own voice steady - for her sake. "In the heart of Prythian, there is a large, empty territory that divides the North and the South. At the center is our sacred mountain." Feyre's heart sped up at that, but her feet continued moving as we began our trek through the woods. "This forest," I said, sensing her growing unease, "is on the eastern edge of that neutral territory. Here, there is no High Lord. Here, the law is made by who is strongest, meanest, most cunning. And the Weaver of the Wood is at the top of their food chain."

The silence of the wood did not refute me.

"Amarantha didn't wipe them out?"



“Amarantha was no fool,” most unfortunately. What I wouldn’t have given for a Naga to come claw her neck out in place of Tamlin forty-nine years too soon. “She did not touch these creatures or disturb the wood. For years, I tried to find ways to manipulate her to make that foolish mistake, but she never bought it.”

“And now we’re disturbing her,” and I could feel the scowl on her face, “for a mere test.”

So not only was she nervous, but she was nervous enough to be angry with me too. And that heartbeat of hers was skyrocketing.

*You can do this*, I thought, willed in strength toward her.

Feyre would need to master that panic. It was just as important to me as her coming out of the cottage we approached successfully. Her ability to track the Cauldron, the Book, would all be pointless if she didn’t learn how to see the capability in herself.

*Cruel* .

It was a cruel, wicked test. And where no one else would push Feyre to do it, I miserably would.

Along with a bit of sport to distract the pair of us, if that was what Feyre needed to see past the fear. And she was good at it - playing with me. She always had been.

I chuckled at her comment, preparing to distract her any way I could, and admitted my own shortcoming since it was on my mind anyway, “Cassian tried to convince me last night not to take you. I thought he might even punch me.”

“Why?” Feyre asked, still glancing about.

“Who knows?” I said with a bored voice. “With Cassian, he’s probably more interested in fucking you than protecting you.”

Decidedly untrue. However -

“You’re a pig.”

That temper flared right to life as Feyre’s head snapped at me. “You could, you know,” I said, helping her through a thick patch. “If you needed to move on in a physical sense, I’m sure Cassian would be more than happy to oblige.”

Slicker than oil, Feyre angling her body in front of me in ways I’m not sure even she was aware of, purred, “Then tell him to come to my room tonight.”

“If you survive this test,” I said, far, far too quickly. I knew she wouldn’t let me get away with baiting her so easily, but I hadn’t thought she’d actually - not when she knew I would never tell him... surely she...

She stepped atop a large, smooth rock and stopped, and it was not unlike that feeling I’d had seeing her trek up the mountainside towards the Prison only a day ago. “You seem pleased by

the idea that I won't," Feyre said.

"Quite the opposite, Feyre." I held her gaze as I stepped up beside her, the rock keeping us eye level with one another. That lid I had clamped down on myself flicked briefly, threatening to unleash night and wind and stars into the space around us, the mate bond plucking at my impulses like the strings of a harp. "I'll let Cassian know you're... open to his advances."

"Good," she said, and not only did I hear that word, but I felt it. Felt some essence of *her*. Right before her heartbeat slammed into me like an endless processional of drums on Fire Night - beating, beating, beating.

And maybe it was the panic, panic she had to master, and maybe it was the knowledge she would even consider being open to another male's advances - genuine or not - but when Feyre made to take one step off that rock, breaking my gaze, the lid inside me cracked *just enough*.

My hand reached out and slid easily over her neck, cupping her chin in a smooth, slithering caress. Through the crack inside, a cool burst of steam slid out and filled my vision with starlight as I looked into the blue of her eyes. "Did you enjoy the sight of me kneeling before you?" I didn't have to hear it for myself to know how the words must have sounded in her ear.

Feyre took one look at me, heard the invitation in my voice, and Mother above she *accepted*. "Isn't that all you males are good for anyway?" she crooned, slinking her chin casually out of my reach with a damn *smirk* that had my blood boiling and praying not to think of whatever blasted pieces of lingerie were under that suit.

Feyre was *flirting* back.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

But her voice - it wavered, just enough. And I knew that the flirting was little more than a pretty charade she needed maintained to keep her focus. Even if for a moment... it had felt almost... real.

So I fluttered my eyes into a midnight stare as she jumped down from the rock, and our feet tangoed to avoid nearly touching on the ground. We were inches apart by the time she looked back up, our smirks doing a tango of their own that kindled a small pool of heat in my crotch.

Just before her mind flicked back to the cottage now sitting prettily in front of us, the rooftops covered in something I would not mention to Feyre glinting in the sunlight.

"Nice try," she said, her voice strained. So I shrugged and stepped around her and enjoyed the loving irritation swimming through the bond between us.

She caught up to me quickly enough and together, we beheld the cottage, quaint and quiet and isolated from the world, it felt. Nothing stirred or gave any indication that there was life inside that hovel, all part of the Weaver's beautifully laid trap.

Even the well sitting just outside its door was laced with deceit.

The *only* sound, the one we had to strain even with our fae ears to hear, was a low, merry humming coming from within the home - from that wicked Weaver herself.

I turned to Feyre and bowed, just as much to distract myself as her from how hard it was going to be not to hear her while I waited, and gestured for her to move forward.

Her back straightened as she stepped forward, catching my eye. *Good luck* I mouthed, and glamored myself into the air when she was past.

I waited in those woods and watched her, rooted to the spot, until she'd made it all the way to the door and held herself back for just a moment. That panic rising in her throat like bile was all that tethered us together. And I wondered if this wasn't a huge mistake.

Dangerous.

So very, very dangerous.

*But you can do it*, I thought, as her hand reached out for the door. *You are strong. You are Night and Dawn and Day combined. You are infinite, Feyre. Let nothing stand in your way.*

Her fingers turned the knob. I winnowed as she stepped inside.

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Seconds quickly turned into minutes as I waited in the trees surrounding the Weaver's home - close enough to see the cottage, but far back enough to avoid detection.

I stuck to the tops of the trees, sitting within the branches never farther than a quick reach from the heavy blade weighing down my back.

That weight closely mirrored the tight line of dread Feyre felt, her mental shields closed to thought but wide open to all emotion. And I felt *everything*. Or most of it, I was fairly confident.

And with every sense of panic I encountered, I prayed to the Mother for her to understand how powerful and wonderful she was until I felt some faint recognition of it drifting through her awareness. Small and timid at first, but there nonetheless.

There as she stalked my ring - my *mother's* ring. The one meant for one person in my life and one person only.

I think we felt it at the same moment, Feyre and I. The vision of how I'd last seen the ring floating to the surface of my mind while Feyre stared at it in the present with a good deal of confusion. I couldn't see her, but I felt her reaching for it - felt it in how overwhelmingly my powers tugged at me in recognition of the object that was so, so close to being returned.

But Feyre's mind started screaming.

I closed my eyes and all I could feel and see was blood even without a viewpoint of where she stood.

Blood. Fae blood on *her* hands. Along with a dagger that could have been the one she'd used then or one of the blades she had on her now, it didn't matter.

My lips tightened, my own hand reaching behind my back on instinct, wishing desperately just to know where she stood, how she looked, if she had her - my ring, if she was getting out safely...

And then the Weaver's voice died.

And louder than thunder to my ears, I heard her cottage door *shut* .

My eyes opened scanning the wood for any sign of movement.

*Out. Please tell me she got out first.*

Before the Weaver realized she had even been there.

I grasped the hilt of my sword, ready to draw it and be gone at a moment's notice. Feyre remained a river of panic gushing over the bond, but I couldn't read where that panic went. And still the forest seemed too quiet.

Until...

A scream shattered the stale air. Not Feyre's voice - but the Weaver's. I tensed into a crouch and within seconds, saw smoke billowing up from one side of the house, too thick for me to see through.

My heart hammered into my chest as Feyre's panic raged at me, the only thing keeping me back this small kernel of confidence beating rapidly away down the bond.

I latched on to it, savoring how it felt and the knowledge that it was her own. Was Feyre's. That whatever she was doing, she was accomplishing it without me and likely kicking so much *ass* in the process.

*Please, please, please...*

Sixty seconds. I counted them down one by one in my head. And if Feyre wasn't out by the end of it, then Cassian would have a magnificent time scolding me before six High Lords came to tear me limb from limb in punishment for my deeds.

Except that I didn't need that minute. Barely any time had passed before -

*There* .

Grass. And sun. And pine.

*Feyre.*

*There you are.*

I scented her even though there was no wind to carry that perfume to me.

I released the grip on my sword scanning the ground, but only the Weaver emerged, running out of the cottage screaming her head off, demanding to know where her intruder had gone.

And Feyre was no where to be seen. Feyre was-

Coming straight at me upon the trees with an absolutely murderous look in her eyes that pinned me in place. I could have kissed her for it would it not have actually driven one of those knives glinting on her thighs deep into my chest.

And her *body* . Cauldron alive, I hoped Mor wasn't there when we winnowed back to see it. Feyre was positively covered in the ash and fat and decay of the Weaver's work, blood the only color peaking through from the scratches covering her skin.

"What the hell did you *do* ?" I asked, listening to the Weaver rage and thinking - *my mate did that*.

"*You* ," Feyre hissed, venom flying off her tongue at me.

I silenced her with a swift finger to my lips and took her into my arms, cupping her against my chest, my shoulder. She was going to hate me again in a moment, enough that even Amren wouldn't deny it.

We winked into nonexistence, the Weaver's screams stolen by the wind and sea and sky as we fell into the open air of Velaris. For a few heart-stopping moments, I let us fall, enjoying the fresh burst of adrenaline and hoping it was enough to distract Feyre from what she'd just experienced, before my wings rippled at my back wide and powerful, lifting us easily into the House of Wind.

Where Cassian and Amren saw us and promptly gaped at our appearance, Cassian's hand flying for the dagger at his side.

I set Feyre down and her eyes immediately caught on her reflection from the mirror hanging on the wall. Her eyes widened, mouth parting slowly. Her body shook just trying to even out her breathing, but seeing herself only seemed to make the task harder...

*Cauldron* , she was covered.

"You smell like barbecue," Amren said. Even the fire drake who bathed and battled in blood turned away from Feyre then. Cassian retreated from his fighting stance, but made no further move.

"You kill her?" he asked.

"No," I said, watching Feyre carefully. "But given how much the Weaver was screaming, I'm dying to know what Feyre darling did."

As though the jab was a trigger, Feyre doubled over on herself and vomited all over the floor, forcing all of us to take a jump back. Amren immediately magicked away the mess from Feyre and the floor, and Feyre mercifully didn't seem to feel inclined towards more.

"Shit," Cassian said and threw me a dark, disapproving look.

"She... detected me somehow," Feyre said, holding herself up against the table. "And locked the doors and windows. So I had to climb out through the chimney. I got stuck and when she tried to climb up, I threw a brick at her face."

*Feyre threw a brick at the Weaver.*

Slowly, all eyes turned towards me. "And where were you?" Amren asked. I couldn't tell if there was a threat beneath that question or not.

"Waiting, far enough away that she couldn't detect me."

Feyre stepped forward, anger fueling her reserves of strength. "I could have used some help," she growled at me, that same venom on her tongue when she'd seen me in the woods.

*'You.'*

"You survived," I said. "And found a way to help yourself."

Feyre studied me hard, considered what I was saying, and let fire flare inside her veins. I was almost surprised she didn't ignite on the spot.

"That's what this was also about," she spat. I didn't dare look at Cassian. "Not just this *stupid ring*," she said, slamming her hand hard against the table, "or my *abilities*, but if I can master my panic."

Her hand backed off the table and - there it sat. My mother's ring. The star cut sapphire still glittering and shining as wondrously as if it had been newly cut this morning. And only moments ago, it had been in Feyre's hand.

She'd done it. My mate had done it.

She'd retrieved the ring my mother had set aside for her - for someone worthy of my hand to find.

"Shi- *it*," Cassian said again, staring at the stone. We all did.

"Brutal, but effective," Amren stated, before shuffling back to whatever work she and Cassian had been attending to.

"Now you know," I said to Feyre. "That you can use your abilities to hunt our objects, and thus track the Book at the Summer Court, *and* master yourself."

"You're a prick, Rhysand," Cassian said, but it was soft, low in impact.

I shrugged and finally my wings saw fit to relax. “You’d do the same.”

Cassian’s expression was sharp, but he shirked and didn’t deny me all the same.

Feyre stepped closer to Cassian, her hands flexing before her as if she were seeing a ghost. And then she fixed my Illyrian general with a ready mind. A soldier at the call to enlist. “I want you to teach me - how to fight. To get strong. If the offer to train still stands.”

For the first time in a while, Cassian looked taken aback. I didn’t blame him. This wasn’t the reaction I’d anticipated out of Feyre upon returning, but it *did* make sense she’d want to train after facing death again. “You’ll be calling *me* a prick pretty damn fast if we train,” Cassian said and he wasn’t lying. “And I don’t know anything about training humans - how breakable your bodies are. Were, I mean.”

He winced and I refrained from questioning him on his hesitancy when he’d been so quick to offer his services to her at dinner two nights ago.

“We’ll figure it out,” he concluded, agreeing to work with Feyre.

“I don’t want my only option to be running,” she said.

“Running kept you alive today,” Amren spoke up.

“I want to know how to fight my way out. I don’t want to have to wait on anyone to rescue me.” I beamed at Feyre for that, for taking two days of adventure and torment, and fashioning herself into a new person already who was willing and ready to grow, to heal. But then she turned her stare on me and all pretense dropped. Arms crossed and mood decidedly sour, she barked at me and again I wondered if she wouldn’t erupt in flame.

“Well? Have I proved myself?”

*Proved yourself and more*, I thought, walking over to pick up the ring. A curious, tickling sensation sparked along my skin as I touched it and for a quick second, my nostrils filled with the scent of snow and wildflowers and all the things that made my mother the strong, warm woman she was.

I nodded at Feyre, unable to conjure up the words necessary to drown out the emotion and tell her thank you. “It was my mother’s ring,” I said simply.

“How’d you lose it?” she said, still hot, but not quite so tight.

“I didn’t. My mother gave it to me as a keepsake, then took it back when I reached maturity - and gave it to the Weaver for safekeeping.”

“Why?”

“So I wouldn’t waste it.”

*So you could find it - my mate.*

I wasn't sure what did it, but all at once Feyre's knees gave out. I caught her and exploded into flight without question as a wave of exhaustion hit me.

Cassian was right. They all were.

I was a horrible prick.

We free-fell again for a long while, enough to hopefully shake a little wind and life into Feyre so she wouldn't pass out, and then winnowed into the townhouse, straight into Feyre's room. My magic struck out and spurred her bathing chamber into life. The trickle of steaming water filling the bath tub was soothing as I set Feyre back on her feet.

She slumped forward to the tub as I leaned on the door frame, feeling that anger flicker away into weariness.

"And what about training your other... gifts?"

"I think you and I would shred each other to bits," Feyre said over the tub.

"Oh, we most definitely will." Feyre's eyes darted to me at my use of future tense. "But it wouldn't be fun otherwise. Consider *our* training now officially part of your work requirements with me." Feyre looked utterly *not* thrilled. I straightened. "Go ahead - try to get past my shields."

"I'm tired. The bath will go cold."

She didn't move.

"I promise it'll be just as hot in a few moments," I said. "Or, if you mastered your gifts, you might be able to take care of that yourself."

I thought I would die if she didn't do something to show me she was *okay* after today. That she would still tease and play with me even when I was being obnoxiously overbearing.

Feyre frowned, but in time... she pushed herself forward until I was forced off the threshold into her room two steps. I knew not what she was thinking, but power radiated in those steps charged with the heat of battle and action and blood.

I felt it.

And Feyre felt it - whether it was due to me or the violence at the Weaver's or something else entirely.

Two days. She was already so fierce and just then standing there in the bathroom hunting me down, she felt like a force that might split me apart and forge me anew.

"You feel it, don't you," I murmured, very well aware of the intimate space on which I stood. Feyre's eyes flashed wildly. "Your power, stalking under your skin, purring in your ear."

"So what if I do?"



A challenge. And maybe a promise.

But her mind remained quiet. Maybe if I offered her a reason...

"I'm surprised Ianthe didn't carve you up on an altar to see what that power looks like inside you," I said with a careless lift of my shoulders. Feyre's eyes narrowed.

"What, precisely, is your issue with her?"

"I find the High Priestesses to be a perversion of what they once were - once promised to be. Ianthe among the worst of them."

Her face blanched, the struggle gone, replaced by that marveling intrigue Feyre's mind ran rampant with constantly.

"Why do you say that?" she asked carefully.

"Get past my shields and I'll *show* you," I offered.

Feyre was quiet... but then, I felt her. Just a quiet, subtle inspection between us, like a cool summer breeze idly picking at a flag hoisted high, so high it was hard to be sure it really moved. She ran her eyes over the bond between us careful not to touch and decided when she reached the end that Ianthe wasn't worth the effort.

"I've had enough tests for the day," she said. I closed the gap between us before she could retreat and slam the door on my face. She was inches from me.

"The High Priestesses have burrowed into a few of the courts - Dawn, Day, and Winter, mostly," I said. "They've entrenched themselves so thoroughly that their spies are everywhere, their followers near-fanatic with devotion. And yet, during those fifty years, they escaped. They remained hidden. I would not be surprised if Ianthe sought to establish a foothold in the Spring Court."

"You mean to tell me they're all black-hearted villains?"

"No," and immediately I thought of the countless number I'd witnessed strewn about the stone temple floors in Cesare who died a pointless, innocent death. "Some, yes. Some are compassionate and selfless and wise. But there are some who are merely self-righteous... Though those are the ones that always seem the most dangerous to me."

Feyre leaned up on her toes, her head tipping forward slightly. "And Ianthe?"

*Come on, Feyre darling. Play with me, please .*

Behind Feyre, steam hissed up gloriously from her waiting bath.

The attack Feyre assaulted my shields with was nothing like that delicate steam. An explosion - like paint hurled upon the canvas was a more apt way of describing the force that hit me. Had it been more refined, it might have made a dent, but it repelled right off sending Feyre back a physical step with it.

Her freckles near disappeared, blurring together with how her face scrunched up in frustration. She was - adorable when flustered.

Fuck, I really was a prick.

“Admirable,” I said chuckling. “Sloppy, but an admirable effort.” She glowered at me and would have pulled away, but I took her hand and held it gingerly in mine, not bothering to lace our fingers together. “Just for trying...”

I pulled on the bond between us sharply until a clear bridge had formed. And our minds descended into darkness.

Feyre’s force was a turbulent sea on the other end approaching, raging and uncontrolled and *passionate*. Those waves reached up and licked against the wall of adamant surrounding my mind and it felt...

It felt...

Cauldron, it sent a shiver down my spine. She’d never *touched* me before. Not like this. Intimate and private and allowed between us both. That outermost shell of my mind flexed until a door cracked at the seams and Feyre stepped inside. Memory destroyed the darkness around us casting a vision that sent Feyre reeling back towards the door - the door I’d now closed.

The scene played out in real time.

*Ianthe sprawled atop a massive ivory bed, tucked deep within the heart of the Hewn City. My bed.*

*And she was naked. Completely bared to me breasts and ass and heat and all as she watched me enter the room.*

Feyre tore viciously, already as disgusted as I felt, but I urged her to stay. “There is more,” I whispered to her mind. More she needed to see - and understand.

*“You kept me waiting,” Ianthe purred along the sheets, a ridiculous pout on her lips. I fell against the door at my back. I had just walked through it, but even so it felt like a stone slab locking me inside with a wild animal.*

*“Get out,” I said.*

*Ianthe spread her legs wide shamelessly. “I see the way you look at me, High Lord,” she teased. Horror roiled in my gut.*

*“You see what you want to see. Get out.”*

*“I heard you like to play games.” Not these kinds of game, I thought. Where her hands trailed dangerously low on her stomach and traded my self-worth for whatever power it might grant her. If I didn’t stop her now, she would go door to door until she found a willing*

*participant, the ramifications meaning little to her if it got her what she wanted. "I think you'll find me a diverting playmate."*

*Kill her or send her packing.*

*She wasn't yet so important to the Priestesses that she would be missed, but there would still be a penalty to pay for splattering her useless blood all over the walls. A penalty my court would pay.*

*But after the way she'd touched Cassian last night, briefly on the shoulder when she thought no one was looking. How she'd looked at Azriel and whispered in his ear until Mor had snapped the stem of her wine glass standing next to me... those penalties might be worth it.*

*"I thought your allegiance lay with other courts," I said. A judge ready to deal out sentencing to the foulest of heathens.*

*Ianthe's cheeks blossomed into a sweet smile. "My allegiance lies with the future of Prythian, with the true power in this land."*

*That hand that had rested on her belly sank lower... lower... lower. Until her fingers brushed her clit once.*

*Darkness snapped out of me in a cruel tendril casting her hand brutally aside. She seemed unphased. "Do you know what a union between us could do for Prythian, for the world?" Her eyes were claws reaching inside my skull tearing me apart limb to limb. I'd never felt so damned violated before.*

*"You mean yourself."*

*"Our offspring could rule Prythian."*

*I bit back a dark storm of laughter. I was the High Lord of the Night Court. Not some damned piece of meat for her to fuck and feast on. And yet - she dared. "So you want my crown - and for me to play stud?"*

*The very idea of her bearing me children made my stomach sick. My power held her still on the bed, but through it I could feel her body struggling to break free, to entertain and entrance me into touching it.*

*"I don't see anyone else worthy of the position."*

*A wave of her scent rolled off her, the only weapon left in her arsenal to throw at me. I wanted to throttle her - to kill her. She'd be worth the blow. For Ianthe to be so fresh and already so crafted to the politics of this land, she had a bright future ahead of her. One that would cast a dark stain over us all one day if she went far enough.*

*Or maybe, if we were lucky and the Priestesses kept a close eye on her when I sent her back in pieces, she would fair far more friendly in the future and not forget how this little visit ended.*

*“Get out of my bed,” I said, each word a death sentence if she disobeyed. “Get out of my room. And get out of my court.”*

*I released my hold on her and Ianthe slithered off the bed and danced toward me with ease. Her nipples were pink and peaked as she stopped inches in front of me. “You have no idea what I can make you feel, High Lord,” she said, and reached her hand out to feel a hardness at my crotch that wasn’t there.*

*Everything came flooding back to me then - the present me. Fifty years of violation and submission and sacrifice. It wasn’t Ianthe I stared at... I knew it was. But my mind - the part of it locked away from Feyre whom I would have forgotten was even there had she not recoiled in horror with me - saw only red hair and a demon’s crown.*

*Ianthe was lucky not to see a blood mist reign down on her then and there distorting the truth.*

*Power struck her down instead, splintering her bones inch by inch until that hand hanging in the air before my crotch was a fracturing mess of wood beneath a butcher’s axe. Her scream was horrible enough to shatter cities as one by one I broken the tendons and shredded the muscles.*

*And when I spoke, it felt like - I wished, that it were Amarantha who heard the words.*

*“Don’t ever touch me,” I said with deadly grief. “Don’t ever touch another male in my court.” Ianthe screamed as one last fragment of bone shattered into oblivion. I stepped aside for her to reach the door. “Your hand will heal. The next time you touch me or anyone in my lands, you will find that the rest of you will not fare so well.”*

*“You will regret this,” she hissed, even as she sobbed.*

*I made a mockery of her, cackling as I threw her into the hall and sent her piss-poor excuse for clothing hurtling after her, the door a mighty whack! at her back.*

But what I felt and what caused me to end the memory in near violence between our minds was a deep, lonely emptiness in my soul. Feyre must have felt it from the way she staggered away from me in the curt severance of the bridge linking us. Her face was pale, white as a sheet.

Now my own panic rose up. I needed to leave. Get out. Get away. To fly. Do something other than sit inside and look at Feyre - Feyre who had suffered today because of my horrible, selfish ambition and pride. I’d known I’d been unkind to her today, but it didn’t really hit me until just then when Ianthe - when *Amarantha* reminded me.

“Rule one,” I said, “don’t go into someone’s mind unless you hold the way open. A daemati might leave their minds spread wide for you - and then shut you inside, turn you into their willing slave. Rule two, when-”

“When was that,” Feyre cut in aghast. “When did that happen between you?” and she looked... she looked...

*Not concerned, Rhysand* . I could hear Amarantha's voice in my ears clear as day, as if I were still Under that fucking Mountain. *Tisk, tisk. No human bitch would be concerned. Not for you* .

*Dark, dark laughter ringing against my skull* .

“A hundred years ago,” I managed to say. The words sounded dead, even to me. “At the Court of Nightmares. I allowed her to visit after she'd begged for years, insisting she wanted to build ties between the Night Court and the priestesses. I'd heard rumors about her nature, but she was young and untried, and I hoped that perhaps a new High Priestess might indeed be the change her order needed. It turned out that she was already well trained by some of her less-benevolent sisters.”

Feyre's heart pounded hard, but even the sound of her humanity wasn't quite loud enough to drown out Amarantha's hissing.

“She - she didn't act that way at...” Feyre's face tightened. I thought she might cry. She certainly felt like she might. That or be sick. Her shields were still low. Up until then, I hadn't been listening. Too distracted. But Lucien's name came to the forefront and Feyre's stomach retched.

Her friend. Maybe. Possibly. Someone she cared about in some way.

My enemy.

But victim to Ianthe's advances, no less.

Sooner or later, the Fox would have to make a choice for himself. Sooner or later, Lucien would have to see if he had the will to leave and forge his own fate.

Until then... he would rot away in the Spring Court with Ianthe on his heels night and day. Feyre and I both knew it. And enemy or not, there was no joy in my heart for what he suffered.

I knew that pain all too well.

Feyre poised to say something, but I couldn't breathe any longer. “Rule two,” I said quickly, “be prepared to see things you might not like.”

I winnowed away and returned to that free-fall of the skies far out to sea and let myself plunge down, down, down into the watery depths until my lungs forced me back to the surface for air.

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“No, Tarquin hasn't replied to your letter. And yes, I'm sleeping. Come back tomorrow.”

I found Mor catnapping on the sofa in one of the lounges at the flat she shared with Cassian and Azriel. A plush blanket covered her from head to toe even though she had the room heated to boiling to keep out the winter chill.

Sometimes I wondered if she hadn't been meant for Summer or one of the other warmer courts when the Cauldron saw fit to misplace her birth.

When I didn't say anything, Mor winked a single eye opened and looked me over. Near to drowning in the middle of all that water, I decided going home for the evening would only bring a fitful sleep and visions of Amarantha's honeyed poison licking at my ears, her nails racking my throat as she sat against my hips and rocked slowly over me.

So somehow, I wound up here looking for a distraction.

Mor closed her open eye and whistled. "You look like you could use a drink, cousin."

"You look like you're in a position to help me find one."

A slow, lazy smile tugged at her. "I will if you promise to take me out dancing after - with Cass and Az."

"Only if you promise to go to the Mortal Realms with us tomorrow."

The smile dropped, replaced by a perfectly smooth, neutral expression. "We'll see about that." Her eyes popped open. "Rhys," she said calmly. "Do I need to be aware of anything?"

I scratched a piece of sand out from under my fingernails and frowned slightly. "Not particularly." I caught her scanning me for the lie, but she didn't refute me. She did, however, whip the blanket off of her and Mother above, she was already dressed for a night out. I rolled my eyes and stifled a groan.

Mor beamed as she made her way to me, a bounce in her step.

"Then stop standing there looking like death warmed over and fly me down from this damn piece of rock. I want to dance!"

## Chapters 22-24: Can We Just Start Over

### Chapter Summary

Feyre takes Rhys, Cassian, and Azriel with her to meet her sisters in the Mortal Realms and ask them for their help delivering a letter to the human queens.

Drunk.

I was so drunk.

I hadn't been that wasted that quickly in... some time. Not even after Feyre's first visit to the Night Court. And with a looming trip to the Mortal Realms in the morning, there were considerable consequences to my decision.

Though I didn't regret the night. It was infinitely better than the one I would have had alone in my townhouse bedroom fighting sleep and dreams and terror. My bones still shook with anxiety born of the visions Ianthe's memory had brought to mind.

Mor made quick work of Cassian and Azriel and within half an hour of me finding her on the sofa, we were passing through the market squares and heading into one of our usual taverns. The liquor flowed steady and abundant with the close of the door behind us.

And for a time, it made me forget.

But not so fast that I couldn't try to persuade Mor to go with us in the morning. To which she continually objected, Cassian aiding her along while Az kept silent watch on her other side.

It wasn't that I didn't understand her objection. I understood to a degree. We'd fought that war together. I would not have wanted to go had I been in her shoes, but I was selfish. Having Mor near when dealing with Feyre was an easy crutch to lean on that helped abate some of the tension I felt ahead of our time spent together.

I relented in the end, much to my chagrin. Cassian and Mor knew it, but they helped me plan the following day out before we would be too drunk to do it. And then Azriel casually suggested Ritas, knowing Mor wanted to go, and it was all downhill from there.

She didn't even give him a chance to sit down first before she'd swept him into a fast paced beat upon entering the crowded dance hall. Cassian sat with me at the bar watching the pair of them spin. Music thrummed thoughtfully in and out our ears as the bar keep slid us two drinks.

"What?" I looked over at Cassian and found him watching me, face drawn up in amused curiosity. He waited while I looked at Mor and Az on the floor a second longer. "She's not

coming. So you might as well drop it.”

I squinted, shaking him off. “I know. I wish she would reconsider, but I won’t force her.”

“Then - what is it?”

I drew a long breath. He and I hadn’t spoken since, since...

“You really think she might sleep with me one day?” Cassian’s brow rose slightly. A knot tied somewhere south of my abdomen. “Not now obviously, but...”

“Who - Feyre?”

I swallowed. Cassian howled.

“How many times have you thought about her naked?” Cassian asked after he’d calmed down.

Again, I didn’t answer.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he chuckled. “Well for your sake, you better hope she *does* sleep with you eventually. Otherwise, you’re in for one hell of an eternity.”

I groaned and cocked my head back. And felt Cass’s broad, calloused hand grip my shoulder. He wore none of his leathers tonight. Neither did Az. Just a simple dark green tunic and casual trousers.

“Will you relax?” He grinned at me ear to ear. “It’s not so bad to be eternally fucked, you know.”

I gave him a reproachful eye. “You’re one to talk, brother.” He didn’t deny it. I held out my glass. “Here’s to being eternally fucked,” I offered.

Cass snorted and clinked his glass with mine. “Cheers.”

---

I didn’t tell Feyre until morning that lack of word from Tarquin meant we would venture into the Mortal Realms to meet her family. And by telling her, I meant I sent Mor who woke up and landed on our doorstep bright and early anyway looking to chat.

Mor came in and I went out with a pounding headache, meeting Azriel and Cassian who wanted nothing to do with me so early nor I with them.

“You look like shit,” Cassian said over his coffee as I flew inside the House of Wind. He hadn’t even looked up at me, dressed in my leathers, my sword strapped to my back. My brothers, I knew, would leave dressed in a similar fashion.

“Not half as much as you do,” Azriel said quietly, sipping his own mug of tea steeped with cinnamon and honey.



Cassian groaned, his chair creaking as he leaned back in it. “Ugh, I hate you fucking pricks.”

“No you don’t,” Az said.

“Yes. Yes I do.” He got up and announced another round of coffee, and then we sat and went over our plans for traveling to the border and keeping detail on Feyre’s family estate so long as we stayed.

Feyre herself emerged from downstairs at the townhouse near ten when we flew down to fetch her, bundled up tightly in a thick fur cloak. Her hood was down, and atop her head sat a small, simple diadem of gold that one of the twins or perhaps Mor had wrapped with her hair.

Mor herself had already dashed off. I wouldn’t have been surprised to find her curling up on Amren’s couch to discuss tactics for the coming weeks. The two really did run this court - and far better when myself and my brothers weren’t along for the ride.

Feyre paused at the bottom of the stairs when she found three Illyrian faces dressed in leathers and swords and knives staring. She flicked from Cassian to Azriel to myself and paused, giving me a once over and staring for a moment too long at my hands, before declaring boldly, “I’ll fly with Azriel.”

I could feel Cassian’s amusement dancing on my left, practically baiting me into denying her with some witty retort just so he could take a stab at me after.

“Of course,” Azriel said, nodding his head.

I grabbed Cassian, announcing I’d be back shortly, and winnowed the pair of us into the open skies far out to sea where the wall loomed in the distance and the flat, grassy expanse of the Spring Court loomed to the west.

Cassian’s wings snapped out and he shot out of my grasp catching the wind, but not before he’d thrown me a dirty gesture.

Asshole.

I winnowed back, wondering if Feyre had said anything to Azriel while they’d waited, and found the pair a perfectly respectful distance apart in thoughtful silence. I breathed easier... until Azriel spread his arms and Feyre stepped into them gracefully.

*Why hadn’t she flown with me?*

I reached out to grab Az and winnow, but Feyre looked at me sharply, noticing my displeasure. “Don’t let the wind ruin my hair,” she said. There was enough play behind it to distract me, that I snorted and winnowed without further hesitation.

Wind rushed over my face and neck, danced brutally through my hair, and kept me alive as I broke apart from Az and Feyre over the ocean and flew ahead to where Cassian had spotted us and taken off. Flying was a welcome distraction from the horrors dancing before and around us.

The wall.

Tamlin.

And lest I forget - Hybern. That island too far off to see at this distance, but a threat large enough that my body felt the thrum of its presence all the same.

It brought us our mission, the very reason we made for the human lands to bring fighting and politics and sin to innocent hands we would die mercilessly without. Knowing what little I did of Feyre's sisters, it would be a miracle to earn any level of trust from them today.

I tilted a split second before Cassian, my wings tucking in and my body darting forward into a descent towards the oncoming weight I could feel bearing down on my lungs - my power. The wall pressed over me tightening as though searching for a reason to deny me entry and finding no excuse.

The crack we passed through - it felt so much like my own betrayal, for all my crimes. All the ways I had deceived Feyre and continued to do so with the bond, the truths I sometimes withheld. And all the ways I now burdened her with my own problems, how they would plague her family too.

And none of it could be stopped.

We sank into the human lands, the weight of the wall lifting as we flew over beaches and into the woods above, the air noticeably different, the scents shifted.

All of this and more would be attacked in the coming months, but to what degree would it burn? To what end would it shatter?

I looked at Feyre as we flew lower and lower, closing in on her estate. It wouldn't be easy convincing her family to help us, but it would be far, far worse not to try at all.

Not to try to save them from the inevitable.

*War is coming .*

---

We landed in the snow within feet of the doorstep, a glamour keeping us concealed. I'd cast it once we'd come near enough to the village that we might be spotted.

Feyre stepped out of Azriel's arms keeping her head down for the most part, though she eventually gave the manor her family now kept one long look before trudging up toward it.

She stood on the doorstep while my brothers and I held back remaining hidden. Get acquainted with her sisters, introduce them to the realities of what was coming, and explain the plan. Then we would come into the picture.

Until then... it was entirely on Feyre's shoulders and as I watched her struggle to straighten them, I saw that those shoulders were suddenly very heavy.

A servant - the housekeeper - opened the door with a good degree of disdain even before she realized who was standing in front of her. "May I help..." She and Feyre stared silently.

"I'm here to see my family," Feyre said, the words coming out a little shaky.

"Your - your father is away on business, but your sisters..."

The woman's eyes went cold. I felt Feyre tense. Her hood was up, covering her delicately pointed ears to conceal her from discovery from anyone who wasn't born of her blood, but this woman... she watched Feyre with suspicion.

How many others would see her and suspect as well?

"Mrs. Laurent?"

A light, springing voice filtered toward us and Feyre drew a sharp breath, drawing back a step towards where Cassian, Azriel, and I stood undetected. I tensed, suddenly terrified this was all too much for her and that she would turn away, but then -

A reedy young woman with ash blonde hair and warm brown eyes appeared beside the Mrs. Laurent and Feyre took her retreating step back.

The girl was young, but if she was Feyre's sister, she must have been at least a couple of years older than twenty. She had a soft charm about her that felt soothing and was instantly recognizable. When she saw Feyre, tears broke out streaming down her face. She covered her mouth with her hand, but didn't go to her sister.

I suddenly realized what was happening - what I'd brought Feyre back into. Love, perhaps. But not a home.

Feyre's voice sounded like shattered glass strewn about the floor as she took her sister in. "Elain," she said.

*Elain...*

The quiet one. The gentle one. The gardener and the grower. Or so I'd been told. Which meant -

"Mrs. Laurent." A cold, piercing voice frozen in snow from somewhere in the house. On either side of me, Cassian and Azriel stood a little straighter as though even they could sense the fire shrouded by the house, the smoke escaping on Nesta's voice through the open door.

Elain and the house keeper turned toward the eldest sister, Feyre's gaze not far behind.

"Draw up some tea and bring it to the drawing room," Nesta said, a clear command, not a request. A minor flare of red on my left briefly caught my eye.

Feyre drew herself taller and beheld the sister we could not see before stepping over the threshold, the door snapping into place firmly behind her.

---

“It’s like watching mice scurry before a trap,” Cassian said, perched next to me on the roof of the enormous house Feyre’s family kept. It was really more of a chateau.

After he and Azriel had done rounds of the surrounding forests to see what beasts might have followed after Feyre looking to snatch at her, the pair had joined me in surveying the house. Azriel was already well aware of the number of occupants within those walls who would be vacating - servants, maids, chefs, and all manner of household staff.

“They’re scared,” Azriel said. “That housekeeper knows what Feyre is or she highly suspects.” A shadow tightened over my brother’s elegant face. “I would not be surprised if she had let a word of warning slip among the rest of the staff.”

“Elain’s bid to leave was surely enough to set them fast in motion,” I said watching the footmen load up the last of the carriages and help some of the lady’s maids inside. Heavy polished trunks were placed in back. “Is that the last of them?”

“One more carriage,” Azriel said and sure enough, it came around front off the trail that circled the house at once. It loaded quickly, taking Mrs. Laurent with it, who gave one of the sisters a warning glance before alerting the driver to take off.

The front door closed dully.

“Let’s go.”

We flew down to the threshold, standing precisely where Feyre had when she’d shivered and come face-to-face with her middle sister, and waited for the carriage to finish disappearing before I knocked with a heavy *thud*.

Feyre opened the door almost immediately. She’d been waiting.

And she looked - like a ghost. Or a child. Maybe the ghost of the child she’d once been. It gave me a chill.

For one heart stopping minute, I didn’t think we were in the Mortal Realms, but in the Spring Court, and I wasn’t knocking on her family’s estate, but on the door to her rooms. Tamlin might be but a step behind her.

She surveyed the three of us with an expression I couldn’t read before staring down the drive where all the servants had fled.

“You’d think they’d been told plague had befallen the house,” I said. No one so much as chuckled. Feyre closed the door behind us as we entered the house, but it did little to shut out the chill in my bones.

“My sister Elain can convince anyone to do anything with a few smiles,” Feyre explained as though this was normal, as though this was still her day-to-day and she knew her sisters well.

Cassian’s whistle was sharp and drawn out as he appraised the entryway. I spared it half a glance - golds, ornate carpeting, detailed portraiture, all the usual fineries as befitted the

upper class - before returning to monitor Feyre, who kept her arms tight around her and stared at the treasure trove with... little interest.

“Your father must be a fine merchant,” Cassian said. Feyre’s face was tight. “I’ve seen castles with less wealth.”

Feyre drew her attention away from all that ‘wealth’ and found me staring at her.

*But your father didn’t earn this, did he.*

No. This was all due to Tamlin, and anything before it was because of Feyre. What she’d hunted to keep them alive in a hovel I could probably turn to Azriel and ask him the location of only to be given it.

*Young... Mother above, how young was she when she did that...*

“My father is away on business,” Feyre informed us, “and attending a meeting in Neva about the threat of Prythian.”

That explained his absence at the door, though I hadn’t much expected him to welcome her anyway.

“Prythian?” Cassian said, leaving behind the trinkets and bobbles for the first time to tune himself to Feyre. “Not Hybern?”

“It’s possible my sisters were mistaken - your lands are foreign to them. They merely said ‘above the wall.’ I assumed they thought it was Prythian.”

“If humans are aware of the threat, rallying against it,” Azriel said, stepping up to Feyre quietly, “then it might give us an advantage when contacting the queens.”

It was as if I could see the weight that single word pressed into Feyre as Azriel said it: *queens* .

This was a mission. This was work. But it was a burden to be here for her too. Because it wasn’t just work. It never could be. This was family and blood and history and poverty wrapped up in a shiny bow that came with carriages and servants and pretty gowns with no one to bother wearing them. At least - Feyre never would.

It was... the same way my mother had looked when she’d taken me to the Illyrian camps for the first time. I’d been too distracted to notice at first, caught up in the adrenaline of just trying to survive a fight in the ring and then acclimating to Cassian one room away from me day and night.

But it had been there. A weariness written on her face that I eventually noticed and never saw it fade. An exhausted haunting that said *this is my home but it is not* . I wasn’t sure who my mother was on certain days when the sky turned grey and the snow fell fresh over those mountains.

Right now looking at the hollows of Feyre's dim blue eyes standing out stark even with her hair done up around that beautiful little diadem and her clothes comfortably suiting her, I wasn't sure she knew who she was anymore either.

She looked at me and those hollows told me everything.

"Come," I said, and I almost held out my arm to her but - not now. Not yet. One day perhaps... "Let's make this introduction."

---

Feyre's cloak was gone as she led us into the dining room paneled with shining wooden floors. Her attire was every bit befitting a queen out on a casual weekend retreat, but when her sisters eyes went straight to her glossing over the three Illyrians hulking behind her, Feyre was dominated by the shadows trailing her mind.

My own attire vanished as we walked those halls, my leathers exchanged for the same crisp black suit I'd worn on my first trip back to the Hewn City with Mor when I'd come home - Elegant. Refined. Ready to play whatever games they might propose, but very much hoping I wouldn't have to. The lone difference between then and now was the absence of my power. In the Hewn City, I wore my Cauldron given gifts like armor. Here, where fear already lined the walls as we drew near, I hid it like a secret weapon in the presence of the innocent.

Cassian and Azriel remained in their leathers. I knew every second that Azriel spent inside, he had shadows and spies beyond keeping mind on the estate and whatever might come lurking nearby.

The air in the room was already stale as the sisters took Feyre in among the clothes and the crown, giving little to no reaction - no real warmth or welcome. But the air turned absolutely dry with a thin veil of disapproval as their attentions turned towards myself and my brothers.

Elain visibly stiffened, her eyes grown a little apprehensive with a twinge of fear. But Nesta - Nesta who looked little like either sister with her tall, proud stance and reproachful stare sat atop high, cruel cheekbones - stepped directly in front of Elain, protecting what was hers.

Cassian felt it. Azriel did too. It was like watching an Illyrian guard his young or a feral male freshly mated defend his female. I knew at once what lengths Nesta would go for that girl behind her - in ways she never possibly had or would for Feyre, though I was curious to find out.

Feyre closed the gap between our parties with a tight hold on herself. "My sisters, Nesta and Elain Archeron," she said.

*Archeron.*

If Azriel had still had his shadows out for the occasion, I was sure one would be circling his ear marking the name.

As if the women knew the vulnerability of that name being suddenly unleashed, their heartbeats sped up to a dramatic new height. All that lovely considerable dead air in the room

vanished, replaced by monstrous terror as Feyre extended her hand in Cassian's direction and moved between us.

"Cassian," she said. "Azriel. And Rhysand, High Lord of the Night Court."

I stepped forward and bowed at the waist - a courtesy extended to her blood alone.

"Thank you for your hospitality - and generosity," I said, trying my best to smile kindly as the sisters leaned just perceptibly away.

"The cook left dinner on the table," Nesta said without preamble, ignoring me and my brothers entirely. Azriel was a mask suited to my own, but Cassian - I could smell the irritation rolling off of him already. He did not like being ignored even if he was not the one in the line of fire. "We should eat before it goes cold."

And then she left. Without another look. Without another word. Without a hello or a goodbye or an anything.

Elain looked ready to faint and I had hoped that she would show some of her sister's resolve even if it was wary, but... "Nice to meet you," she squeaked and then followed after Nesta like a furry little lap dog with nothing better to do than trail after the familiar, the comfortable, the safe.

Feyre already looked dead on her feet, dreading the conversation to come as she stared daggers at the pathway her sisters had taken toward the table. But... still, she went and took the seat right beside Nesta, who naturally took up the head of the table. I sat beside Feyre without taking my eyes off her once.

Azriel sat beside me and Cassian next to Elain, who sat across from me clutching her fork as though scared it might shatter lest she let go. A noticeably sized ring sat on her fourth finger, glittering and - made of *iron* .

Wonderful.

I wondered if it was the source of Azriel's faint smile as he too spotted Elain's white-knuckled hand at her plate.

With human chairs at their backs, Azriel and Cassian fidgeted now and then to make their wings more comfortable.

A deep sigh on my left from Feyre recalled my focus.

She lifted the lids on several large overbearing platters and revealed a feast worthy of a king waiting, steam wafting off the chicken and salmon with earnest. It was, undoubtedly meant to be an impressive display.

We commenced eating in reasonable silence. And I wondered if maybe this would not be so horrible after all, if we could make it through dinner unscathed and come to a mutual understanding. Feyre wouldn't have to survive because she would simply be *okay* , she'd -

“Is there something wrong with our food?” Nesta said staring down her youngest sister. Feyre had barely managed more than a bite while the Illyrians of the table were quickly clearing plates.

Feyre took one carefully measured bite, chewed, then swallowed. “No,” she said, her throat and mouth dry, and it clicked. She hadn’t had human food since she’d been *human* herself. A long drink of water followed that lonely little word.

“So you can’t eat normal food anymore,” Nesta said, imperial judgment now ringing off her tongue where before there had not, “or are you too good for it?”

My fork dropped with glittering rage to my plate. I think Elain made a noise.

My gaze slid to Nesta - Nesta, who had lightning crackling in her eyes like starlight, fire shooting down her veins to cast my mate down and condemn her for a sin she hadn’t committed.

So much disdain. So much disgust. It was hard to believe they were even sisters with the way she outright glared at Feyre when only moments before she’d been ready to go to blows for Elain if she’d needed to.

And she wasn’t the only one with that fire nesting deep inside her. Feyre had it too. Her shields were perfectly in tact, but I could *feel* her deep inside, the bond heating with so many emotions - anger, hurt, horror.

Feyre looked evenly at Nesta and, more alert than I’d seen her since we breached that wall, stared right back into that ice and snow. “I can eat, drink, fuck, and fight just as well as I did before,” Feyre said. “Better even.”

*Yes you fucking well can* , I thought, pleased that she had realized it in the first place and then had the nerve to finally say it out loud.

Cassian made a choking sound as Nesta laughed, a hollow unimpressed sound that might be taken dismissively.

Feyre’s fire grew.

As too did my own inability to command my self-control.

Grew and grew and grew and sparked and flared and seared across the bond until I was certain her skin was going to erupt into flame.

I was used to this sort of conversation. I’d been around it all my life. It was the first lesson I learned growing up. Words were weapons and political discourse the target and they would kill in a heartbeat.

Feyre was used to it to some degree too, but not with so much power suddenly available to help her fight for a change.



Her fire crossed the channel between us, reached my soul and just *licked* at me ever so. I blew a cool kiss of the night back, keeping my exterior blank, and licked the flames away until Feyre had leaned away from Nesta and was staring at me. Our eyes met but briefly before I turned to her sister, and in those eyes I saw starlight flicker in victory.

“If you ever come to Prythian,” I told Nesta as though she hadn’t acted so curtly to her own flesh and blood just then, “you will discover why your food tastes so different.”

“I have little interest in ever setting foot in your land,” she replied, looking me over with disapproval, as though Prythian were a land written across my chest, “so I’ll have to take your word on it.”

Now my own blood boiled.

“Nesta, please,” Elain said soft and low.

And mother above, Nesta ignored *Elain* too - and turned straight to Cassian who was leaning as far as his seat would allow him towards Nesta and sizing her up like a new opponent to play with. Azriel looked politely away to mark Feyre and Elain.

“What are you looking at?” Nesta said, her lip curling in a snarl - at *Cassian* . Cauldron how that gaze hadn’t made her feel all of two years old alone...

Cassian’s brow rose and had we actually been in the sparring ring, I was certain he would have cracked his knuckles. It didn’t matter that this was Nesta and she was human and breakable and ignorant of our ways. Cassian attacked.

“Someone who let her youngest sister risk her life every day in the woods while she did nothing,” Cassian said to Nesta’s unflinching face. Feyre’s chest stopped moving beside me - waiting. “Someone who let a fourteen-year-old child go out into that forest, so close to the wall. Your sister died - *died* to save my people. She is willing to do so again to protect you from war. So don’t expect me to sit here with my mouth shut while you sneer at her for a choice she did not get to make - and insult *my* people in the process.”

For a moment the room was silent. I didn’t know if I expected Nesta to shout or leave or throw something at him, but I knew she wasn’t going to fold easily. And indeed she didn’t as she merely turned her head without so much as a blink, Cassian a mere ant for her to trample on her way to more important matters.

It was as impressive as it was infuriating. And a shame she wasn’t more open to what the world had to offer her.

Cassian went taut with animal rage looking like he might really fight her in a sparring ring if she’d let him and I had no doubt she’d last longer than I had against him on my first day in the camps.

And fuck it all to the hell Nesta drew her fires from if that wasn’t the faintest hint of arousal dripping off his pores, the bastard. Definitely not something he’d felt pummeling into me during that first fight five hundred some odd years ago.

“It...” Elain said and cleared her throat, trying to find some semblance of a voice amid the rage that floated from chair to chair and chained all our voices. “It is very hard, you understand, to... accept it.” Her brown eyes found mine and pleaded - practically begged for mercy and kindness and all the things her sister had rejected. For her, I listened. And for Feyre. “We are raised this way,” she said. “We hear stories of your kind crossing the wall to hurt us. Our own neighbor, Clare Beddor, was taken.” I dropped her stare. “Her family murdered.”

*Her own family, Rhys? Is that really necessary...*

My fault. If this failed, it would be all my fault. If Feyre’s sisters died, she would have no one and nothing to blame but myself. If I saved her from one captor, I might very well drag her to the next. Already the blood of my handiwork was everywhere.

Clare Beddor.

That was supposed to have been Feyre.

What might have happened if it *had* been Feyre that day and I’d had to hold her mind in my hand and whisper sweet nothings as I did for Clare while Amarantha tortured her soul from her body and ground it into a fine dust.

But of course, I didn’t have to wonder. I already knew what Feyre dying felt like. It was an effort not to shudder in front of the rest of the table, though I was certain only Feyre was watching me anymore.

“It’s all very disorienting.”

Thank the Mother for Azriel who had a skill set that would not erupt in a thrash of fists and blood nor needed political games to glean the truth. “I can imagine,” he replied. It was all the encouragement Elain needed to turn finally to Cassian and confront his accusations.

“And as for Feyre’s hunting during those years, it was not Nesta’s neglect alone that is to blame.” Feyre looked like one more word might break her face with cracks, veined like the marble adornments throughout the estate. “We were scared, and had received no training, and everything had been taken, and we failed her.” Elain didn’t look - couldn’t look - at Feyre as she swallowed and said to Cassian, “Both of us.”

Nesta stared distantly at her plate, a silent grave of secrets and history. Not entirely closed off, but reluctant as hell to admit even half as much as Elain had.

Tentatively, Feyre reached her hand out and laid it on Nesta’s arm. I found myself wishing she had it even though I wanted this to be peaceable. But if Nesta said so much as one more foul word towards my mate and broke her spirit again, there would be hell to pay for it.

Nesta looked up at Feyre, pride in her mouth like a bit to guide her. “Can we just... start over?” Feyre asked.

It took a second, and perhaps it was Cassian's shit-eating grin chasing Nesta into reply that brought out the venomous undertone, but she agreed with a curt, "Fine."

Each of us watched another in turn as eating resumed feeling more like a prison sentence than a shared meal among family and friends. So different from the dinner at the House, even with so much strife on the table that night for Feyre to dissect.

Elain cleared her throat. And said to Az, "Can you truly fly?"

Azriel blinked. If Mor had been here, she would have given him a pointed little smirk hidden quickly behind a sip of wine. "Yes," Az answered. "Cassian and I hail from a race of faeries called Illyrians. We're born hearing the song of the wind."

"That's very beautiful," Elain said, looking almost as though she might find a fae concept pleasing to consider for a change. "Is it not - frightening, though? To fly so high?"

Feyre relaxed back into her seat.

"It is sometimes. If you are caught in a storm, if the current drops away. But we are trained so thoroughly that the fear is gone before we're out of swaddling."

"You look like High Fae," Nesta said, regaining control of herself, but not entirely unfriendly. "But you are not?"

It was Cassian who answered for Az, gesturing at myself and Feyre vaguely. "Only the High Fae who look like *them* are High Fae. Everyone else, any other differences, mark you as what they like to call 'lesser' faeries."

"It's become a term used for ease, but masks a long, bloody history of injustices," I said before Nesta could make another judgment call about our kind having such horrifying classifications riddling our social structure - that anyone should be called *lesser* as her family might once have been. "Many lesser faeries resent the term - and wish for us all to be called one thing."

"Rightly so," Cassian agreed, but Nesta again ignored him and turned a thoughtful mind on her sister - on Feyre.

"But you were not High Fae - not to begin," she said. "So what do they call you?"

Disdain, or merely some of Feyre's own curious appetite peaking through, it was too close to call.

"Feyre is whoever she chooses to be," I said, but Nesta's gaze slid up from Feyre's gaze and nested at the crown atop her head. I knew she thought it was a lie, that I had decided for her sister who she was to be by giving her a crown.

But another desperate part of myself hoped that it was something different - something more - as the lines of Nesta's face that Feyre's skin would never earn from age appraised the position her sister had attained. Did she see the potential? Could she feel the power and the strength and the sacrifice her sister had within her.

I'd never given Feyre a crown. She'd *earned* it. Earned everything.

Whatever Nesta thought, it apparently was enough.

"Write your letter to the queens tonight," she said. "Tomorrow, Elain and I will go to the village to dispatch it. If the queens agree to come here, I'd suggest bracing yourselves for prejudices far deeper than ours. And contemplating how you plan to get us *all* out of this mess should things go sour."

She froze Cassian in place with a single look, but the words - the demand that she and Elain remain protected - I knew, were for me. And damn me to hell if I failed her after bringing Feyre here.

"We'll take that into account," I agreed as amicably and earnestly as I could.

Nesta drawled on as though bored. "I assume you'll want to stay the night."

Through the windows of the dining room, night had already fallen, the servants having stolen most of the sunshine to light our way home. But if Feyre wanted to leave - then we'd go.

*Your choice .*

Feyre politely tried, "If it's not too much trouble, then yes. We'll leave after breakfast tomorrow."

The stark contrast between Elain's bright and cheery face - that she would be *happy* finally to have her sister home for an evening despite the occasion - next to Nesta's near disappointed glower set my teeth on edge. "Good," Elain beamed. "I think there are a few bedrooms ready-"

"We'll need two," I cut in as gently as I could. "Next to each other, with two beds each."

If Nesta wasn't going to play nice, then nor was I. Not entirely, at least.

Feyre peered up at me a mask of confusion. I wondered if it was the specificity of my request or if she'd registered that we'd be sharing a room that troubled her.

One room...

I pushed back the thought, ignoring the still pungent heat hitting me from Cassian's direction every time he so much as looked at Nesta.

"Magic is different across the wall," I told Feyre, and longed for the time hopefully soon when I could speak to her again and feel as though it really were just the two of chatting, even if she'd hate me for dragging her here and putting her family through further hell. "So our shields, our senses, might not work right. I'm taking no chances. Especially in a house with a woman betrothed to a man who gave her an iron engagement ring."

That beautiful beaming grin Elain had given me not thirty seconds prior vanished. "The - the bedrooms that have two beds aren't next to each other," she sputtered.

Feyre sighed, sinking in to her chair. Nesta, I could tell, took it as a signal this meeting was adjourned. "We'll move things around," Feyre said. "It's fine. This one," and she pointed at me with a tempestuous glare, "is only cranky because he's old and it's past his bedtime."

*A joke. She's making a joke, I registered.*

I chuckled, softly, wishing she'd look at me properly and remove the disdain from her regard.

*Feyre... darling, smile. Laugh - please.*

Nothing. But she eased considerably and where Feyre offered no sound nor pleased expression, the others did.

Nesta alone stood from the table unfeeling and unmoved. "If we're done eating, then this meal is over," she announced and promptly left the room. I wasn't sorry to see her go.

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Nesta and Elain kept mostly out of our way after dinner, appearing only when necessary and sticking to factual, need-to-know type information, like where to find our rooms and which study to use. It made me question how excited Elain really was to have Feyre share the same roof as her for the night if she was going to excuse herself to bed the moment she was no longer needed by her sister.

When only the four of us remained, we stayed up far too long in the study drafting our letter to the queens. Feyre was tired and sat in the plush chair her father might use when home looking like she might fall asleep at any moment. Whether from physical or mental exhaustion, I imagined it was both.

For her sake, I wrote fast, but every word counted and the minutes easily ticked by into hours by the time we opened the guest room Feyre and I were to share for the evening.

Feyre spun around to face me looking more alert than I'd seen her since dinner as I shut the door - and noticed the lone bed taking up the luxuriously decorated guest room. "I'm not-"

Magic cut her startled exclamation off, a small bed popping into existence right by the door upon which I sat and began removing my boots and socks.

Feyre relaxed and I was - sad, that she was so surprised by my gesture.

"Nesta is a delight, by the way," I said.

"She's... her own creature," Feyre replied, retreating back towards her own bed. And again, she carried that heaviness about her which stifled the air and stole breath from her heart, her lungs.

Thoughts rolled tumultuously about her head in a storm cloud ready to break free. And I was a sea below ready and desperate to feel the rain upon the waves and know what that storm thought.

“It’s been a few centuries since someone got under Cassian’s skin that easily,” I tried. “Too bad they’re both inclined to kill the other.” Quiet. “And Elain should not be marrying that lord’s son, not for about a dozen reasons, the least of which being the fact that you won’t be invited to the wedding.” I threw my boots casually aside hoping... Feyre looked aghast. “Though maybe that’s a good thing.”

“That’s not funny,” she said, sounding almost like her eldest sister. At least now I knew where that contempt for me came from.

“At least you won’t have to send a gift, either,” I shrugged. Feyre’s temper flared. “I doubt her father-in-law would deign to accept it.”

“You have a lot of nerve mocking my sisters when your own friends have equally as much melodrama,” Feyre hissed, standing taller. For a second, I thought her ready to tear the world in two. A low wave of apprehension struck me down over what particular piece of my family’s ‘melodrama’ she might have noticed.

Feyre snorted, her eyes rolling. “Oh,” she said, a near derisive laugh. “So you haven’t noticed the way Azriel looks at Mor?” My stomach tightened. *That*. “Or how she sometimes watches *him*, defends him? And how both of them do *such* a good job letting Cassian be a buffer between them most of the time?”

It was an effort not to groan. I thought of Cassian a couple rooms over, and Azriel with him. Morrigan, who had not come.

Morrigan.

Whom Azriel watched and whom she in turn waited patiently on.

*Those two morons need to stop eye-fucking each other so damned much for all the world to see except each other.*

It was a history too complex, too personal to fling casually about and I had no idea how much of it Mor had confided in Feyre, though I knew she wouldn’t hesitate if Feyre asked her about it.

Regardless, it was her story to tell. *All* of their story. Which Feyre needed to know at some point. But I wouldn’t be the one to push her into that. I hadn’t spent five hundred years letting my friends live however they chose and respecting that decision to throw the threads binding them together out the window now.

“I’d suggest keeping those observations to yourself,” I said with a very pointed look.

“You think I’m some busybody gossip?” The words were appalled, though her voice was anything but. “My life is miserable enough as it is - why would I want to spread that misery to those around me as well?”

“Is it miserable?” I asked, our eyes meeting, “Your life, I mean.” Any sense of argument about my family forgotten - an argument I didn’t think had really been brewing to begin with.

Not about them, at least. Not really.

My heart waited for her answer before jumping further in my chest between the bones of its prison.

“I don’t know,” Feyre admitted. “Everything is happening so quickly that I don’t know what to feel.”

She slumped, and those hollows that had not faded the entire day stood out in the pale lighting of the room. Hollow - the way her mind felt when she wondered what her soul felt like these days.

The way she’d been when she’d first come to the Night Court.

So I scrambled to pull her beautiful soul back out of it.

“Hmmm,” I mused carefully. “Perhaps once we return home, I should give you the day off.”

“How considerate of you, *my lord* .”

*Another joke.*

*Or maybe even -*

I laughed, thinking she hadn’t shown any of this heat with me since we’d gone to the Weaver.

Good.

I felt Feyre watching me and looked up to see her eyes trained on my fingers as I unbuttoned the fastenings on my jacket. Absentmindedly, her own fingers nudged the fabric of her clothes where they hung at her sides.

I snapped my fingers and her bed things appeared at her side - including a set of lacy unmentionables that Feyre noticed straight away with a scowl. “I couldn’t decide which scrap of lace I wanted you to wear, so I brought you a few to choose from.”

“Pig,” she threw at me and left to change.

I smiled as she exited, admiring her as she went and the way her clothes hugged around her hips, her breasts... the two places those scraps of lacy fabric would go.

I twisted my neck, flexing the muscles. “Cauldron...” And removed my jacket.

But as I shrugged the shirt underneath off, and the chill of the winter air that had crept inside the room met my bare chest, my mind wandered into the realm of questions...

What Feyre would look like shrugging her own top off. Would her nipples peak in the crisp, night air the way my own skin had shivered at the feel of it? I pulled my pants down and swapped them for something softer to sleep in, pulling them up my thighs and wondering if she was standing somewhere close by just then pulling the delicate underthings up over her

own legs to meet her hips. What that might look like. How tightly they might caress her skin...

The cold of the room was the only thing keeping me grounded as I waited for her to come back. And even though it helped abate the heat forcing a slight pressure into the front of my pants, I knew Feyre was freezing.

I crawled into the small bed I'd made for myself, letting the light die out save for the faint glow from the fireplace, and forced my back to Feyre's own bed. If I saw her when she walked in, I might... say something embarrassingly regrettable that she'd never forgive me for.

Feyre returned silent as the night and slid into bed. I thought, perhaps, that was to be it, but then she spoke. "Thank you for warming the bed," she said.

"Amarantha never once thanked me for that." The words were out before I could stop them, but anymore... with Feyre, I didn't care if she knew the truth. At least she'd understand.

"She didn't suffer enough." Anger rode between those words.

I suddenly felt incredibly uncomfortable for having thought so freely minutes ago about Feyre and whatever unmentionables she might now be wearing. Amarantha was - fuck, I didn't want to go there. Not now. Not *here* in Feyre's family home.

Her family.

Sharing a room with her.

"I didn't think I could get through that dinner," I admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"Your sisters mean well, or one of them does. But seeing them, sitting at that table..." Older. Mature. With full lives of some sort or another ahead of them with little-to-no concern even now for where Feyre's might go, as though they'd have been content to forge ahead and forget she had a future too. "I hadn't realized it would hit me as strongly. How young you were. How they didn't protect you."

"I managed just fine." It was all the explanation she offered me. All she *needed*, I realized.

Maybe Feyre had discovered how to reconcile who her sisters were with what needed to be done a long, long time ago, and now I was only just beginning. I wanted to know more, I realized.

"We owe them our gratitude for letting us use this house," I said and briefly hesitated for how she might take my next admission, "but it will be a while yet before I can look at your sisters without wanting to roar at them."

I heard the blankets shuffle and wondered if I'd said too much, if she'd lock me out from the privilege of knowing her thoughts. I'd have deserved it for bringing this day upon her if she



did.

And yet.

“A part of me feels the same way,” Feyre said. “But if I hadn’t gone into those woods, if they hadn’t let me go out there alone... You would still be enslaved. And perhaps Amarantha would now be readying her forces to wipe out these lands.”

Even the mention of Amarantha wasn’t enough to stop the force of this truth from sweeping my mind away.

This room. These halls. She’d spent so little time in them. But she was here. Even the woods around us for miles smelled of her - of Feyre. Still to this day. I noticed it the second we swept lower into the woods and I knew that was where she’d hunted. The faint scent of pine still nestled in her skin.

She’d only been *fourteen* .

Feyre had sacrificed and now she would sacrifice more under the guise of ‘work.’ A thought snapped into place.

“I am paying you a wage, you know. For all of this.”

A pitiful way to make up for her efforts, I knew.

“You don’t need to,” Feyre said straight away.

“Every member of my court receives one. There’s already a bank account in Velaris for you, where your wages will be deposited. And you have lines of credit at most stores. So if you don’t have enough on you when you’re shopping, you can have the bill sent to the House.”

“I-” her words caught, thick in her throat. “You didn’t have to do that.” A pause. “And how much exactly, am I getting paid each month?”

*As much as you want* .

Have the world and the skies and the seas for all I care, Feyre.

But my mind kept reeling back to the pine filling my nose and the small bundle of a person curled up behind me. “The same amount the others receive. When is your birthday?”

Feyre made a low, guttural humming. “Do I even need to count them anymore?” She sighed when I didn’t budge and admitted, “It’s the Winter Solstice.”

The Winter -

It was near spring. “That was months ago.”

“Mmmhmm,” she said wholly uncaring, the syllables dragged out with a bit of contempt.

I flicked through my memories of her, what she'd allowed me to see during her time with Tamlin around the turn of the Winter -

*On the longest night of the year .*

Cauldron, the fates that be were laughing at me, I was sure of it.

“You didn’t... I don’t remember seeing you celebrate it.”

“I didn’t tell anyone.” Feyre’s voice became rather faint. “I didn’t want a party when there was already all that celebrating going on. Birthdays seem meaningless now, anyway.”

Meaningless.

She thought herself meaningless. The very idea that she’d even exist or grow older unimportant to her. Didn’t matter. Pointless, now that she’d died.

But how could it be meaningless, that the Cauldron saw her born on one of the most sacred nights for my court. The hour that sang to my powers and weaved a history of seasons and renewal in the stars among the dark, winter sky?

Was it pure, simple, dumb luck that Feyre’s birthday was a day I cherished and called upon with my very blood to celebrate? Or was it fated that I would find my mate in the heart of Night where darkness joined with the heavens to form us both.

*Mates - my mate.*

*Twins.*

*Match.*

*Mate.*

“You were truly born on the Winter Solstice?” I asked. I wished I hadn’t turned my back in bed so I couldn’t see her.

“Is that so hard to believe?” she asked, well unaware of the thoughts teasing and testing my hope. “My mother claimed I was so withdrawn and strange because I was born on the longest night of the year. She tried one year to have my birthday on another day, but forgot to do it the next time - there was probably a more advantageous party she had to plan.”

Of course there was.

“Now I know where Nesta gets it. Honestly, it’s a shame we can’t stay longer - if only to see who’ll be left standing: her or Cassian.”

“My money’s on Nesta.” Feyre said it without a trace of doubt or hesitation despite the hulking Illyrian and the strength of his body and mind.

But I knew Cassian. And I still recalled that hideous arousal I'd caught lingering on him all about dinner and for a long while after.

I chuckled and agreed with Feyre, who had let me into her world tonight more than she ever had and had not once shied away or made me feel like I didn't deserve to hear pieces of her story.

"So's mine," I said, hearing Feyre's low hum sounding miles away as she stumbled into sleep.

## Chapters 25-27: I'm Sorry

### Chapter Summary

Rhys saves Feyre from an attack by the Attor while visiting her family and the ensuing fight results in Feyre's first successful attempt at winnowing, but not before Feyre realizes that Rhys has used her as bait to spur the Attor into attacking her.

### Chapter Notes

The last chapter for this round. I do plan to keep going, though, so stayed tuned! Any feedback is welcome. Thank you all for reading! :)

“I want to train.” Feyre’s voice drifted over to me as she came back to the room after she’d woken and left to change for the day. Her face was resolute. “With you - I mean,” she said and folded her arms.

Dawn had barely crested outside our window. And it was an icy cold morning.

Regardless, I snapped my fingers and wondered what had wormed into her mind that she suddenly didn’t find my request to train her so repulsive anymore.

My clean suit vanished, replaced by Illyrian fighting leathers. Thick snow boots appeared at Feyre’s feet along with a bow and quiver of arrows. I summoned my own sword and strapped it to my back as Feyre took a deep breath and started working on the boots, casually ignoring the weapons I’d given her.

I had a feeling that it wouldn’t be long before we’d both be in need of them.

When she’d finished, I extended my hand and we winnowed outside into the snow, which crunched beneath our boots as we entered the thick of trees surrounding the estate.

The wind nipped cold at my nose. And even though these forests smelled of Feyre, there was a dull, lifeless stillness to the way they sat unfriendly and unwelcome at our advance.

“Freezing my ass off first thing in the morning isn’t how I intended to spend our day off,” I told her. “I should take you to the Illyrian Steppes when we return - the forest there is far more interesting. And warmer.”

Feyre crinkled her nose. "I have no idea where those are. You showed me a blank map that one time, remember?"

"Precautions."

"Am I ever going to see a proper one, or will I be left to guess about where everything is?"

First the training, now the map, and all of it so demanding and unapologetic. Where - had this woman come from today?

"You're in a lovely mood today," I said stopping in a small clearing. A map unfolded between us, this time the names of cities written across it. "Lest you think I don't trust you, Feyre darling..."

But Feyre was glued to the map considering, trying to understand. It was hard not to think what she might have done if her family had bothered giving her a real education. She was a focused, intent pupil.

"These are the Steppes," I explained, guiding her through the northern lands. "Four days that way on foot will take you into Illyrian territory."

Feyre's brow furrowed as she understood and then seemed to recoil away slightly, uncomfortable. Her eyes flitted south on the map towards other courts and her face went very solemn.

I nearly split the Spring Court in two vanishing the map away. "Here," I said. "We'll train here. We're far enough now."

Far enough to keep the other safe lest Feyre lose control.

And far enough that anyone lurking about in the all too silent woods might get cozy enough to want to come a little nearer and see what they might make of Feyre.

I had to know.

I summoned a candle and held it to her. "Light it, douse it with water, and dry the wick," I instructed.

Feyre stared at the candle like it were a giant question mark upon paper.

"I can't do a single one of those things," she informed me hotly. "What about physical shielding?"

Red paints.

A flash of blonde hair and green eyes.

And an explosion before air had cocooned around her and kept her from... what, what would Feyre have met that day had her body not taken over for her?

“That’s for another time,” I said. “Today, I suggest you start trying some *other* facet of your power.” Something simpler and less pleasantly connected to the High Lord she feared. “What about shape-shifting?” I offered, to drive the point in.

Feyre leveled a hard gaze at me. “Fire, water, and air it is.”

She took the candle from me and stepped back. I waited, but Feyre didn’t keep long to the candle before her eyes were snaking over me from the ground up, following my legs up to my hips before the broad expanse of stomach and chest over which I’d crossed my arms.

And finally, across my wings. She avoided my face altogether.

And she... wasn’t afraid.

“Maybe you should... go,” Feyre said, swallowing.

I had to go. We needed to see who was going to attack first, but I suddenly didn’t want to anymore.

“Why? You seemed so insistent that *I* train you,” I teased. I didn’t really expect much to come of that, but -

“I can’t concentrate with you around.” Feyre stepped back still eyeing my chest, my neck. Heat flared down the knots of my stomach in a low growl as the lightest trace of - fuck, arousal hit me.

*She - is she? Does Feyre actually -*

“And go... far,” she said. “I can feel you from a room away.”

Delicious. Absolutely delicious.

I could do a lot from a room away. Twenty rooms, even.

A feline grin split my face and Feyre scowled, her disapproval and perhaps a slight twinge of something else evident.

“Why don’t you just hide in one of those pocket realms for a bit?” she asked, looking away.

“It doesn’t work like that. There’s no air.” Feyre gave me a pointed look - *Then that’s exactly where you should be* . I laughed. A room without air was probably exactly what I needed if she was going to keep looking at me that way, like she not only didn’t mind the person in front of her rippling with Night and power, but that she... *liked* what she saw.

Shit - I wanted to stay.

“Fine,” I said, willing the words into existence. “Practice all you want in privacy. Give a shout down the bond if you get anything accomplished before breakfast.”

Feyre lifted her hand, examining the eye etched upon her palm. “What - literally shout at the tattoo?”

Her fingers curled around the design, and I swore I could almost feel the touch it sent between us along that tether we shared.

I stepped close and breathed, “You could try rubbing it on certain body parts and I might come faster.”

I winnowed, just in time to miss the cock of her arm as she prepared to hurl the candle at me, but as I landed back inside our shared room imagining all the places that hand might touch, I could have sworn I felt a low groan of amusement from down the bond.

Before breakfast, I made sure to attend to a particularly cold shower.

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“What - no biting words of welcome this morning, Ms. Archeron?” Cassian’s grin was borderline indecent as we sat down for breakfast. Nesta poured tea without so much as a glance.

“It’s no wonder fae have such a horrid reputation for being incorrigible dogs with the way you flaunt yourself about,” Nesta finally said. She’d taken her usual seat at the head of the table.

She passed a cup of tea to Elain, and then herself, but none other. Cassian made sure to take the pot up next.

“Dogs we may be,” Cassian said, “but you’ll find that even the dogs have their uses, Nesta.”

She spared him a glance and Cassian winked wickedly. “I’m really more of a cat person and I think I prefer *Ms. Archeron* from you.”

Cassian lit up brighter than the sun. “Ooh, pet names-”

“Let’s not,” Azriel cut in, taking the tea pot from Cass and pouring himself a cup. He added no extra cream or sugar. It did little to abate the early morning arousal Cassian gave off. Azriel and I shared a look.

Elain looked painfully uncomfortable.

I had no right to judge really. My shower had been far too long. But Cassian and Nesta... Feyre might truly self-combust.

Feyre.

Holding that candle tighter and tighter against the palm of her tattoo, squeezing it and clenching and not unlike what I’d done in the -

Azriel cleared his throat loudly enough that I looked up from my plate in time to clear the wisps of darkness that had risen off my hands. His brow rose.

And I ignored it.

I reached for a slice of bread and some cherry jam to spread over it when a flat piece of paper winked into its place on my still clean plate. Everyone at the table stopped to stare at it, greatest of all Nesta.

*I'm bored. Any sparks yet?*

My message was written neatly across the top of the page, left behind in Feyre's pack for her find at some point when she grew restless trying to summon a spark of flame.

And beneath it -

*No, you snoop. Don't you have important things to do?*

The pen clattered to my plate. I was fairly sure Nesta made a comment that had Cassian reeling once more, but I ignored it and wrote back.

*I'm watching Cassian and Nesta get into it again over their tea. Something you subjected me to when you kicked me off training. I thought this was our day off.*

The paper vanished.

I looked up and found Azriel watching me in silent amusement over his cup of tea. And it was so like what Mor would have done because *of course* he knew what game I was playing.

Judgmental shadowsinging prick.

Feyre's reply came quickly: *Poor baby High Lord. Life is so hard .*

I smiled, Cassian well distracting Nesta and even Elain by now, and grabbed the pen. This was *fun* .

With her. With Feyre.

I hadn't had innocent fun like this for... a long time.

So I told her.

*Life is better when you're around. And look at how lovely your handwriting is .*

*You're a shameless flirt .*

I was halfway through jotting down just how shameless I could be when Feyre's shields split, the chasm opening before us for an icy blast of fear to fall through.

'*Stop, or I snap your neck.*' was all I heard before I looked at my brother and barked, "*Azriel,*" and winnowed to Feyre.

And the Attor.

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“Good,” it said at Feyre’s ear, it’s grip around her neck not unlike how Amarantha had held her. All previously sensuous thoughts flew out of my head replaced by the wrath of Night. “Now tell me-”

Darkness ensnared him, his fevered shrieks piercing the morning air and filling that horrid silence of the woods with despair.

My powers flew out of me, the damper completely released in those seconds. And it searched and it searched until it had wrapped around the Attor in thick, constricting bands that showed no mercy. When the dark cleared, Feyre was in a low crouch on the ground, a knife drawn, and the Attor was flailing against a tree where the Darkness continued to pin him.

“I’d been wondering where you slithered off to,” I said to him.

The Attor tried to shimmy free, but I shot its wings with arrows of lightning, locking him in place. Silver blood dripped from the cuts almost as disgusting as the Attor’s pitiful screams.

Feyre stood and looked as though she very much did not mind.

“Answer my questions, and you can crawl back to your master,” I said.

“Whore,” the thing spat. We could have been back Under the Mountain.

Without hesitation, I reached for the open hole gushing silver blood and flashed him the devil’s smile. “You forget that I rather enjoy these things.”

“*No!*” it screamed. “I was sent to get her.”

My finger paused. “Why?”

“That was my order. I am not to question. The king wants her.”

*Hybern .*

Of course he’d fled Amarantha and retreated back to his true master upon her death. It wasn’t that surprising really. But he knew more than he was willing to say.

“Why?” I took a further step closer revolted by his horrid discolored skin and letting him damn well feel how revolted I was. Power slid from my skin like water.

“*Don’t know, don’t know, don’t know.*”

My voice dropped, commanding his tongue. He was going to be easy to break. “Where is the king currently?”

“Hybern.”

“Army?”

“Coming soon.”

“How large?”

“Endless. We have allies in every territory, all waiting.”

Which meant even the Night Court was fallible. I’d prepared myself to learn our weaknesses as a court since birth, and the weaknesses of the Night Court were many riddled with prejudice and backwards thinking from within, but I hated to hear it all the same.

Azriel landed silently in the snow behind me. The Attor’s eyes went wide as he took in the Illyrian and Truth-Teller at his hip and the wings like my own that I’d never shown the cretin during our tenure in Amarantha’s court. His body shook.

Azriel and I traded places and it was then that I finally saw how pale Feyre had gone.

“The next time you try to take her,” I said, “I kill first; ask questions later.”

I signaled for Azriel to move. His scarred hands gripped the Attor, still chained in darkness that would follow them through the wind and folds of the universe, and then they disappeared on a wave of Azriel’s power.

“Will he kill him?” Feyre stared at the spot Azriel had vacated, her attention more on the shadowsinger’s calculating, deadly gleam than the beast that had been spiked against the tree.

“No.” Feyre shuddered. “We’ll use him to send a message to Hybern that if they want to hunt the members of my court, they’ll have to do better than that.”

Now that the Attor was gone, the anger - the *wrath* seeped properly into my mind. I wanted to kill the king for this, for hunting down my mate. War no longer seemed an adequate enough excuse to tear him limb from limb next to this.

“You knew,” Feyre said, stepping away from me. “You knew he was hunting me?”

“I was curious who wanted to snatch you the first moment you were alone,” I admitted, and readied for her venom.

“So you never planned to stay with me while I trained. You used me as *bait* -”

“Yes, and I’d do it again. You were safe the entire time.”

Let her hate me for it. The attacks and attempts to kidnap Feyre would come no matter what. Better we find out who wanted her more first - Tamlin or the king.

*“You should have told me!”*

“Maybe next time.”

*“There will be no next time!”*

Feyre lunged, a flash of teeth and nails, and shoved into me hard, so much so that it knocked me back and it was only my fae instincts that kept me upright. She was a force. A wind and a fire and a sun bearing down on me in all that glittering rage to birth a new creation.

She lifted her hands and stared at herself hard, criticizing and lamenting. The last time she'd been this upset, her powers had unlocked in full force. Looking at her now, the delicate mixture of heat still surfacing from earlier, I wanted to see more of her - see it all.

I wanted to watch her play and I would let her hate me to do it.

"Yes, you did," I said reading her still open thoughts about how she'd forgotten how incredibly strong she was. It felt like an eternity since her shields had last been down for me and Cauldron, they felt nice. *She* felt nice. So I kept pushing. "You forgot that strength, and that you can burn and become darkness, and grow claws. You *forgot* . You *stopped fighting* ."

Feyre's eyes rose and exploded with mayhem and darkness.

And hatred for all the terrible things that had been done to her.

*Come on Feyre darling, let it out. Let it all out.*

"So what if I did?" she said, a serpent striking as she pummeled into me. Glory ripped through my chest. "So *what* if I did?"

She shoved again, but I winnowed out of reach.

*More, more, more - Feyre .*

"It's not easy."

She stormed toward me in a death march and I continued to winnow, her irritation evident. I landed behind her and let my breath tickle her ear, restraining myself from leaning all the way down at nipping at the lobe with my teeth - another thought to save for later. "You have no idea how *not* easy it is," I whispered and disappeared as she spun for me, fists flying.

When I reappeared some feet away, I chuckled. Feyre's eyes flashed, but there was some kind of delight in them too, I thought. Her hair was slightly askew and there was a dark energy gathering about her person that was so powerful, so tantalizing.

If she wanted to, she could have ripped me into shreds.

And I would have let her.

"Try harder," I laughed, enjoying the way Feyre ground her feet tougher into the snow, finding the dirt hidden away beneath. Her hands sliced open, her fingernails elongating into beautiful startling claws as her fingers wrenched into talons ready to cut me open.

It was gorgeous, a beautiful disaster.

Feyre hit a tree as she aimed for me and tore the bark to pieces in her frustration.

She whirled, and I laughed, folding into smoke and wind and shadow that carried me further away. But when I solidified on the earth and spun, Feyre was right in front of me appearing out of her own mist - *winnowing* with her powers cascading around her in a frenzy.

It was the most beautiful, wonderful vision I'd ever seen.

And I loved every second of it that she let me witness before her body crushed mine and we landed in a heap of tangled limbs and grinning snarls on the snow.

---

“*Don't*,” Feyre said, her voice raw, “*ever*,” and she shoved my chest roughly, her taloned nails ripping into my leathers, “*use me as bait again.*”

Her face was vicious, ready to collect her winnings for the victory in our fight.

*Beautiful. She was so beautiful .*

*Even when she despised me.*

And she did. Just then looking up at her, she hated me again. All of the air went out of my lungs.

She was so small in my arms. Redness stung her eyes.

“You said I could be weapon,” she said, continuing to pound into my chest. “Teach me to become one. *Don't* use me like a pawn. And if being one is part of my *work* for you, then I'm done. *Done.*”

*Done.*

The worst word she could have ever said to me. I never wanted to hear it again.

My grip tightened on her, reluctant to let go. “Fair enough,” I said. Feyre stood, her talons nowhere in sight anymore, and pushed away from me. It felt more devastating than when she'd been trying to bite my head off.

“Do it again,” I said, trying miserably to will her back into the heat of fighting, into the flirtation I knew had been there, into *something* other than *done* and disgust. “Show me how you did it.”

“No,” she said. “I want to go back to the chateau.” Away from me. Away from this and what it had been. Away from *us* .

*But she had winnowed...*

“I'm sorry,” I said, rising from the snow and extending my hand. She didn't take it. Why didn't she take it?

*Not my* - Fuck. I washed the awful thought away. Not now, I prayed. Not after this, whatever the hell wonderful thing it had been, however brief.

“Why does the King of Hybern want me? Because he knows I can nullify the Cauldron’s power with the Book?”

My anger flared again. Back to politics. Back to work. Back to the only neutral space she wanted between us.

Back to the people who would torture and imprison her for what she’d become.

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” I replied. My hand still hung cold and empty between us. “I’m sorry,” I said again and Feyre finally looked at me. “Let’s eat breakfast, then go home.”

Feyre took my hand and for a second, I felt warm again. But her next words were a lashing upon my back, a curse to take with me before we winnowed back to the dining room.

“Velaris isn’t my home.”

Three days with me in the Night Court and it suddenly meant nothing.

xx

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## ACOMAF Part 2.2: The House of Wind Cont'd (Rhys POV)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10515438) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10515438>.

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# **ACOMAF Part 2.2: The House of Wind Cont'd (Rhys POV)**

by [illyriantremors](#)

## Summary

Chapters 28-40 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV.

Beginning with Rhys and Feyre's return from visiting her sisters, and following through the trip to the Summer Court and the first visit from the mortal queens.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)



## Chapter 28: Are You All Talk

I winnowed directly from the townhouse in Velaris after dropping Feyre off. I hadn't even said goodbye to her.

Azriel was waiting.

And so was Cassian, who greeted me deep below the mountains of the Hewn City. So far down in dingy cells and chambers, the only sound heard for miles were the screams Azriel elicited every so often from the Attor under Truth-Teller's sharp blade.

Feyre could wait. She'd remained icy all through breakfast - and so be it. Right now, this took precedence.

"Anything?"

Cassian picked up the pace beside me as we met in the hall and walked to the prison room. It wasn't a bar cell like the one Feyre had stayed in, but it gave me a shudder of remembrance all the same. I hadn't been down here in... a while.

"Fifteen minutes before he told us a task force sent from Hybern had infiltrated our northernmost border," Cassian informed me, his face a hard line. Still wet drops of silvery blood speckled the gauntlets over his leathers. "*Five* minutes before he admitted to closing in on Illyrian territory with a few other choice beasts."

Only five minutes.

*Damn .*

"Azriel's in quite the mood," Cass finished as we reached the door. A whimper sounded behind the wood panel.

"Lucky for us, a mood is just what the occasion calls for."

Cassian's grin was razor sharp.

---

"It's done," I said when I landed in the townhouse living room. Feyre sat on the couch, her feet curled under her as she read. But as soon as she saw me, she was up in flash, eyes all over me. Whatever that meant.

"We learned what we needed to. It's up to you, Feyre, to decide how much of our methods you want to know about. What you can handle." Feyre took a deep breath, brow drawn.

"What we did to the Attor wasn't pretty."

"I want to know everything," she said, no hesitation even if it was plain she understood the severity of the situation. "Take me there."

She stepped forward, ready to take off.

“The Attor isn’t in Velaris,” I said. “He was in the Hewn City, in the Court of Nightmares - where it took Azriel less than an hour to break him.” Feyre didn’t so much as flinch. Hard as nails, Cassian would have said. I stepped forward - just one step, giving her the space to change her mind if she wanted. But she held fast. “I’ll show you,” I offered.

And... Feyre closed her eyes.

She watched the memory with perfect ease. Her face only slightly pinched when mention of Tamlin came up, but given the fresh information there it wasn’t surprising.

I showed her the Attor, bruised and bloody on the table. Showed the details he’d let slip both before I arrived and after, including that Hybern had found a way of tracking Feyre’s movements; we just didn’t know how yet. And even went so far as to let her listen to the wails as I exited and Truth-Teller dragged along the veins of the Attor’s wings.

It wasn’t pretty.

But it was effective.

I loosened my hold on Feyre’s mind and watched her as she came out of it, looking for a hint of distress or horror or revulsion for what we’d done. But there was nothing except a glint of rage that earlier this morning had been directed at my chest in the form of talons digging through my leathers against the snow.

“What *situation* with the Spring Court?” she said, staggering back to regain her balance.

“None. As of right now,” I swiftly assured her. And there wasn’t. Everything Azriel had said about the silence of Spring was true. It was only... “But you know how far Tamlin can be driven to... protect what he thinks is his.”

And because Feyre had yet to recover her shields since vacating the premises of my own mind, I saw it: a flash of red paint bruising the elegant paneling of Tamlin’s study and the havoc that had ensued.

Feyre had been forced to block herself that day, the magic driving out of her in ways only her panic and desperation could create. She’d been all alone. Though I’d witnessed enough of it to know.

“I should have sent Mor that day,” I said, not quite able to meet Feyre’s eyes.

She read my shame and stalked toward the stairs. Perhaps she’d had enough mistakes from me for one day to have to add another to the stack.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. The casual sweater she’d changed into sagged over her shoulders. I could still see a bit of bone sticking out at her shoulder.

“Feyre,” I said, reaching... stretching for anything to get her back. She dismissed my call.

*Done .*

“I am sorry - about deceiving you earlier.”

She paused, but didn't turn around as she stared at the bottom step of the stairs. I didn't know what that meant. Maybe she was deciding if she could ever forgive me.

And then she sighed.

“I need to write a letter.”

---

*I left of my own free will.*

*I am cared for and safe. I am grateful for all that you did for me, all that you gave.*

*Please don't come looking for me. I'm not coming back.*

I read the letter three times before I willed it into the mist to find Azriel. He'd find a way to make sure it found its master regardless of borders and wards.

Tamlin would never believe Feyre had written the letter herself. It was likely he'd be in need of another newly decorated study before he'd even finished reading it, and the bill would likely come addressed to the High Lord of the Night Court - the stupid ass.

But when Feyre had pushed the paper so carefully into my hands, her eyes were grey and rested surer on her face, her shoulders back and straight.

She said she felt *cared for* and *safe* .

A lie to please Tamlin as best she could, or... the truth?

“Are you sure?” I asked her once I'd sent the letter off.

Feyre tilted her chin up determined, and did not blink once. “I am no one's pet,” she said. This time, it was her own words coming out of her mouth. Not mine.

Beautiful. Wonderful. Resilient Feyre.

“What next?” she asked.

“For what it's worth, I did actually want to give you a day to rest-”

“Don't coddle me.” Her lip curled.

“I'm not,” I said, knowing I was skating on thin ice as it was. “And I'd hardly call our encounter this morning *rest* . But you will forgive me if I make assessments on your current physical condition.”

Feyre cocked her head at me, indignant. “I’ll be the person who decides that. What about the Book of Breathings?”

“Once Azriel returns from dealing with the Attor, he’s to put his other skill set to use and infiltrate the mortal queens’ courts to learn where they’re keeping it - and what their plans might be. And as for the half in Prythian... We’ll go to the Summer Court within a few days, if my request to visit is approved. High Lords visiting other courts makes everyone jumpy. We’ll deal with the Book then.”

Feyre would likely leave it there for the night. I waited for her eyes to spit at me that it was true, my punishment from here until Tarquin permitted us entry to his kingdom for offending her. The only question that remained was how long she’d last until there was trust again.

I was just about to step out so she could leave the study and do as she willed with herself when she held my gaze with the force of the sun and finally, that gaze softened into something like the forgiveness I didn’t anticipate she’d extend me so soon.

“You told me that this city was better seen at night,” she said. I inclined my head just slightly, puzzling over the fresh cut to her voice. “Are you all talk, or will you ever bother to show me?”

How I did not stumble over myself and fall at her knees was miracle.

Her skin seemed to glow and her eyes sparkled like diamonds, and I could see the spirit breathing - suddenly *living* - behind them. It felt like a new chapter. A clean start. And one she was asking me to be a part of somehow.

I looked over her body from the tip of that curt, admonishing chin down to the bare toes that wiggled along the floor, and all the many, many landscapes in between. She did not back down from me once.

A sensational thrill went through me.

*She’s okay. Feyre would be... okay here.*

It made me smile. It made me laugh. The first true and genuine expression of how I felt about her allowed to bear witness. Feyre did not share the expression, but she was... spicy, a bite of hot cinnamon on the tip of my tongue, ready to abandon her seclusion and step out to see the world - with *me* .

“Dinner,” I said without question. I wanted her. I wanted *us*. “Tonight.” Feyre’s eyes gave that little spark again and it was all I could do not to lean right into her and crash my waves against her own. “Let’s find out if *you* , Feyre darling, are all talk - or if you’ll allow a Lord of Night to take you out on the town.”

---

Cassian’s howl rattled through the entire house. I stifled a groan. “I just can’t believe you played the *High Lord* card to get a date out of her,” Cassian said in between fits of laughter.

“Will you stop-” I started to say before Azriel cut me off. Feyre was upstairs getting ready to leave with us. Amren and Mor hadn’t arrived yet. In this tight a space, Feyre might hear anything.

“If we wish to be accurate,” Azriel said, “technically Feyre asked *Rhys* out.”

The hand covering my mouth struck out flat in Az’s direction. “See,” I told Cassian. He rolled his eyes and fell backwards onto the couch, flipping off Azriel as he did so.

“Whatever, that line is still cheesy as hell, Rhys.”

“I don’t see you doing any better,” I ground out.

He moved his thick arms to rest behind his head, a cocky look in the set of his jaw. I half-expected him to kiss his biceps. “I don’t need to.”

Azriel snorted. “Yes, because staring at Nesta’s tits all through dinner counts.”

“I did not!” Cassian flew out of his seat, his stance ready to attack. Azriel looked him over and might have stifled a laugh.

The shadowsinger held his chin up a little higher, confident of his assessment.

“Three times at dinner and *five* at breakfast,” Azriel said. “I know. I counted.”

“You little piece of shadow shit-” Cassian was barking as he swiped at Az, who dodged easily and chuckled. I stepped between them before they could put a dent in a coffee table I was particularly fond of. “I should have known,” Cassian said, straightening up and glaring at Azriel. “You’re never quite so relaxed as when you get to take the piss out of someone - even if it is filth like the Attor.”

“*Especially* if it’s filth like the Attor.” Azriel shrugged. A tiny wisp of darkness whispered at his ear. The shadowsinger smiled. “What can I say? It’s a good day.”

“Hello hello!” Mor’s voice carried like a songbird as she stepped through the door, her dress aflutter at her knees. Cassian’s head rolled back with a groan. “Lovely,” Mor said, giving him a look.

“Morrigan,” I said, nodding toward her.

“Feyre upstairs?”

“Mhm, though she won’t be for long if these dogs don’t stop barking around my living room with their tails out.”

Mor snorted. “I’m disappointed you haven’t realized the company you keep by now, cousin.”

I cleaned a spot on my jacket, brushing some piece of hair or dust away. “That company includes you, you know.”

“Yeah, but at least I’m nice to look at,” she said with her most winning smile. “And damn powerful too.” And then she jerked in the direction of Cassian, who’d fallen back over on the couch. “Unlike some people.”

“Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is Mor and prove it for a change,” Cassian grumbled, his face buried in the pillows.

The ensuing conversation Feyre walked in on was regrettable at best. A real pissing contest. The chatter had brought her downstairs to check on the status of things, and then promptly sent her right back up.

I didn’t blame her.

Cass and Mor went at it for a long stretch of time until Amren arrived, going round and round in circles over who could fly or winnow farther. Azriel stayed near the window listening, but the few times I caught him looking at his closest friends squabbling on the couch and remembered where the shadows had gone when the door had first opened...

I knew where he’d bet his money in this fight.

“I’m ready,” Feyre said quietly, her voice standing just behind me. A deep scent of grass and pine that had followed her from the Mortal Realms hit me as I turned and saw her bundled up in her thick, blue overcoat that brought out the skies in her eyes.

I smiled, and bowed my head.

And so our first night began.

## Chapter 29: Lick You Where Exactly?

### Chapter Summary

Rhys takes Feyre out for a night out with the inner circle and sees her dare to live again for the first time. Major paper flirting ensues.

### Chapter Notes

I hate naming unnamed canon characters, so I'm sorry, but you'll have to deal with the fact that I did not name the restaurant owner. :(

It was like a dream.

I had woken up to a cold, snowy morning in the mortal lands that had resulted in Feyre's body hurtled on top of mine, her face a sea of rage as she hissed at me and said Velaris would never be her home.

Now, only hours later, we were sitting under the night sky at one of my favorite cafes in the city she'd rebuked, enjoying dinner and conversation with my inner circle. And Feyre seemed pleased to be present for it.

We had walked together from my townhouse - all six of us, Amren included. It took nearly an hour with all the stops we made chatting to passerby, shop owners, pausing for a brief dance through a market square playing music Mor couldn't resist. Even Azriel seemed in high spirits.

Velaris was well alive tonight. No corner was left untouched from the magic of life and movement.

Feyre had kept quietly to herself as we made our way to the restaurant, a few casual paces behind us. Unlike our first tour together through the city, however, her silence was not a punishment or an attempt to put any of us off. It was merely contemplative, observant - maybe of all the things she had been missing for several months since Tamlin had been keeping her.

I'd done my best to give her space, let her be, but Mor caught me watching her a few times. My cousin bumped into me with a roguish grin and then skittered off to link her arm with Feyre's when we turned down the street where we'd be eating. Feyre didn't pull away.

And she ate more than her fair share of food at dinner when it was laid out - trays and trays of it. None of us ordered after the owner, an old friend of ours we'd visited frequently over the years, had greeted and sat us. She knew what we liked and I was glad to see Feyre liked it too - liked it so much, that she held back her hair when the curry was set down so she could lean forward and inhale the spices with her eyes closed. And when the meats were set at the opposite end of the table dripping with juices and fixings, she asked Cassian if he could pass it so she could have the first bite. If it had been anyone else of us who'd asked him, Cassian would have told us to piss off because that plate was *his*. But he just looked at Feyre, a twinkle in his eye, and said, "Of course."

Feyre took the plate and nearly scooped half of it onto her own before exchanging it with Mor, who stuck her tongue out at Cassian to taunt him for not getting the plate back. Azriel chuckled quietly next to me. Feyre didn't notice. She simply looked down, stabbed a tender piece of chicken with her fork, and tried not to smile as she fell into that bite. Overhead, the stars seemed to rattle into brilliant existence.

Dreaming, I'd thought.

I was dreaming.

And Feyre wasn't just eat to eat. She was eating to live.

"The traders were saying the prices might rise, High Lord," the owner said quietly to me behind my chair, after checking that the six of us had everything we needed, "especially if rumors about Hybern awakening are correct."

There was a deep seeded crease across the dark skin of her face. Whatever story Mor had been telling across from me, she paused.

"We'll find a way to keep the prices from skyrocketing," I said as casually as I could, examining my wine goblet as I did so. Amren and I would have a discussion on trade in the morning to make sure I kept my promise.

But the owner wriggled upwards on her feet a little as she replied. "Don't trouble yourself, of course," she said. "It's just... so lovely to have such spices available again - now that... that things are better."

Now that I wasn't locked away in a prison hell pit for near on fifty years, she meant. So many people Amarantha had cursed taking me under. So many people who were well protected and far, far away, but still suffered the effects of that queen's reign of terror.

I would fix it. I had to.

So I smiled kindly, hoping to reassure her, and let some of the starlight flutter in my gaze. "I wouldn't be troubling myself - not when I like your cooking so much."

She sat back on the heels of her feet and I saw the worry disappear. Mor resumed telling her story that I was only vaguely aware of as relief sank into my chest.



On a normal night, I might have perhaps allowed my mind to drift toward darker thoughts - thoughts of how many other citizens had worries and doubts left for me to quell that made this lone fae's appeasement seem insignificant. But... not tonight.

Feyre was squirming in her seat, wiggling around to get a better look at the pretty restaurant owner who was peering down at her. "Is it to your liking?" she asked, nodding to the spread.

Feyre quickly glanced over the table, taking in the near empty plates, many of which she'd polished off herself, and told the owner with a little more pride than I'd heard from her lately, "I've lived in the mortal realm, and lived in other courts, but I've never had food like this. Food that makes me..." I might have leaned forward waiting for her answer, "feel awake."

Awake.

Awake?

Food that makes her feel awake. As though she'd been asleep in the darkness for a long, long time. And there was no darkness here tonight.

Only happiness for Feyre. Here. With me and my family and food and drinks and the city and stars.

"Then I'll bring you a special dessert," the owner said, beaming at Feyre and taking off to fetch it.

Feyre had a little starlight of her own in her eyes as she maneuvered back around in her seat, and promptly caught me gawking at her like the idiot I was. Her brows went up in silent question, but I only grinned because demons and nightmares and come what may, Feyre was happy tonight in some way. Unaffected, it seemed. Like some little piece of herself had found its way home. And I couldn't stop marveling at the thought that she'd recovered it here.

Our attention to Mor's story was short-lived again as the owner returned with Feyre's dessert and a very unsightly, large goblet full of dark, ruby liquid swirling about that was set in front of Amren. My Second looked up in surprise at the owner as she realized the gift she'd been brought, better than any brooch or pearl I'd ever given her.

"You didn't have to do that," Amren said, but her voice was anything but dismissive of the gesture.

"It's fresh and hot, and we needed the beast for tomorrow's roast, anyway," was the only reply she received and was then left to either accept the treat or go home without.

Amren took a long, indulgent sip. I didn't have to see her eyes to feel the warmth and pleasure cackling through her veins at the taste. When she lowered the goblet, all that glorious blood dripped from her teeth. Mor cringed away, but not without a good degree of amusement.

"You spiced it nicely," Amren said, to which the owner glowed proudly.

"No one leaves my place hungry."

I crooked at finger at her and pushed a larger bill of cash discreetly into her hand for an amount that probably paid for the meal several times over, but was no less than the lady deserved. "Oh no, I can't High Lord-" she balked.

"Please do," I said, pushing her hands and the money away. "Thank the wait staff and the chefs in back for us."

"But I-"

"And thank *you* , for a decadently perfect evening as always."

She inhaled sharply. "Oh - you're going to go home with your pockets still full one of these nights."

"But not tonight," I said with a wink. When we left, she kissed me on the cheek in parting, same as she had when we'd arrived. Feyre looked awfully amused watching the exchange.

We made it perhaps twenty feet strolling along the Sidra before Mor danced forward in a twirl prompted by her full stomach. "I want to go dancing," she said, overtaken with excitement and sudden energy. A true creature of the night. "I won't be able to fall asleep when I'm this full. Rita's is right up the street." She pointed in the appropriate direction, face hopeful.

"I'm in," was Azriel's immediate reply, and I couldn't blame Cassian when he scoffed. He was leaving in a handful of hours for the mortal lands - to see what games the queens had been up to lo these many centuries.

"I'm going back to the restaurant and then home," Amren said with a sigh behind me, drawing my attention away as my friends sorted themselves out. "I'll leave you brats to your own amusements, delightful as I'm *sure* they'll be."

"But nothing near as delightful as the taste of freshly slaughtered lamb, hmm?" I said, crossing my arms and giving her a knowing look. Her eyes narrowed before those thin lips curled sinfully.

"I'm not sharing, Rhysand. Get your own."

I stifled a laugh and watched Amren disappear, turning around just in time to see Azriel meeting Cassian up the street while Mor chatted with some acquaintances under the city lanterns.

Feyre appeared beside me looking particularly alarmed that Amren had fled. She didn't even seem to notice that I was still standing there. "She's getting more blood in the back to take home with her," I explained and chuckled when Feyre jumped about a mile high - whether from my close proximity or the truth of Amren's charades, I didn't know. "And then she'll be going right to her apartment to gorge herself."

"Why blood?" she said, her face a little pale.

"It doesn't seem polite to ask." And I didn't want to know anyhow.

Feyre paused and sank into a glowering expression. “Are *you* going dancing?”

I wanted to laugh at the outright disapproval in her tone as she waited for my answer. I spied Mor and my brothers trotting along farther and farther away, and gave them a little wave to say we weren’t going. “I’d rather walk home,” I said. “It’s been a long day.”

A long, miserable day that had somehow righted itself by the end. It was hard to believe only a few hours prior I’d been deep underneath that plunging darkness watching Azriel carve the skin from the Attor’s bones while the horrid thing screamed. I wished I’d let him kill it instead.

Even harder to think that before that, I’d been watching Feyre nearly skin *me* alive with her own blades, shoving me off in the snow.

Now she stood by me considering, almost as though I were a friend.

“Shall we?” I offered, taking a single step forward. “Or are you too cold?”

Feyre mirrored my step and that was that. We set off. And enjoyed the view of the Sidra beside us as went.

The waters rippled in the wind, like diamonds falling in a cascade from the mines. Those ripples twinkled as brilliantly as the stars overhead. It was cold out, but the city was so alive, so gleaming, that it was hard to notice. Neither Feyre nor myself seemed to walk with much tightness that comes from such a harsh chill.

Feyre watched the Sidra move and snake along carefully. There was a soft reverence about the way she stared that put her face at ease. It was easy to understand why. The other half of the city beyond it - the Rainbow housing the artist’s square - looked richly enchanting under the lights that reflected back at it from the water.

Art. Song. Theater.

All the places Feyre had once wanted to be. She looked like she could almost imagine herself there again. If she did, it wasn’t a bad choice. The artists’ pocket of Velaris was by far the most teeming with dreams and vision, with life and love. All the things that made fighting to keep the cost of spices down and trade bustling in this little city worth it, I thought, as I paused to lean over the railing at the water’s edge.

“This is my favorite view in the city,” I admitted. Feyre came up to the railing and trained her gaze on the quarter of the city she’d balked at a few days ago. “It was my sister’s favorite, too. My father used to have to drag her kicking and screaming out of Velaris, she loved it so much.”

Sometimes, people still told me stories about it - the ones who knew me well enough for it not to feel intrusive when they spoke about my family. I could hardly blame them. It was hard not to when my sister had been such a comical, vibrant little thing in her youth, wailing about and peppering the city with stories that would remain sprinkled about the cobblestones years after she had died.

Feyre's voice was low, testing. "Then why are both your houses on the other side of the river?"

Two opposing currents of water crashed below us and then calmed into a gentle peace as I thought.

"Because I wanted a quiet street - so I could visit this clamor whenever I wished and then have a home to retreat to."

And... if I were honest, partly because the townhouse was something I didn't have until after my family died. There were no memories of them tainting those halls, those rooms, waiting to jump out at me when I came home for the night or woke in the bright morning sun. The artists quarter was entirely too much the opposite.

"You could have just reordered the city," Feyre suggested.

"Why the hell would I change one thing about this place?"

"Isn't that what High Lords do? Whatever they please?"

I turned to look at her and wondered why we weren't touching - she stood so close. Close enough that when she let out a breath and I saw it on the chill wind in front of us, I could have run my fingers through it, like children popping bubbles in the summer. Innocent and pure.

"There are a great many things that I wish to do, and don't get to," I said, finding Feyre's luminous eyes watching me.

"So when you buy jewelry for Amren, is it to keep yourself in her good graces or because you're - together?"

I burst out laughing, no idea where the question had come from. The sound was so startling, it moved those shimmering, coursing waters beside us into action. "When I was young and stupid, I once invited her to my bed," I told Feyre, who seemed genuinely unsure about Amren's place in my court. "She laughed herself hoarse. The jewelry is just because I enjoy buying it for a friend who works hard for me, and has my back when I need it. Staying in her good graces is an added bonus."

Feyre looked oddly relieved. "And you didn't marry anyone?"

My stomach tightened as I slumped down a fraction on the railing. "So many questions tonight," I said, trying to deflect from a fragile confession when the one person I would have wanted to share a life with was standing right next to me without the faintest idea. I sighed when she wouldn't drop her stare and forced my stomach to loosen the knots inside.

"Marrying me means a life with a target on your back - and if there were offspring, then a life of knowing they'd be hunted from the moment they were conceived. Everyone knows what happened to my family - and my people know that beyond our borders, we are hated."

Feyre's expression darkened.

It was the truth. A pure and simple one, and she would have to consider it if she ever... felt something for me. Mate, though she may have been, being with me would mean hardship and running and fighting like hell, skirting death at every turn.

Part of me didn't want that life for Feyre. I'd probably spend some part of every day wondering if staying in her life was a mistake or not, if only that didn't take the choice away from her. We'd left Velaris to the mortal lands for a mere day and already she'd been attacked. How much worse would the hunt for Feyre's life be if she tied herself to me explicitly for the remainder of her years?

"Why?" Feyre asked. "Why are you hated? Why keep the truth of this place secret?" Her eyes turned kind, gentle, as if she could see the pain riddled inside me - for her and my court both. "It's a shame no one knows about it - what good you do here."

"There was a time when the Night Court *was* a Court of Nightmares and was ruled from the Hewn City. Long ago." It had been a terrible time. I didn't need to be alive to know, to feel that history creeping about the walls of that awful city waiting to spring out and curse me for trying to change those horrors. "But an ancient High Lord had a different vision, and rather than allowing the world to see his territory vulnerable at a time of change, he sealed the borders and staged a coup, eliminating the worst of the courtiers and predators, building Velaris for the dreamers, establishing trade and peace."

Feyre's hand tightened on the railing as she listened with rapt attention. And I felt as though maybe she was beginning to understand, to finally see the city and its secrecy, why we'd done what we had to keep it safe these past fifty years.

"To preserve it," I continued, "he kept it a secret, and so did his offspring, and their offspring. There are many spells on the city itself - laid by him, and his Heirs, that make those who trade here unable to spill our secrets, and grant them adept skills at lying in order to keep the origin of their goods, their ships, hidden from the rest of the world. Rumor has it that ancient High Lord cast his very life's blood upon the stones and river to keep that spell eternal.

"But along the way, despite his best intentions, darkness grew again - not as bad as it had once been... But bad enough that there is a permanent divide within my court. We allow the world to see the other half, to fear them - so that they might never guess this place thrives here. And we allow the Court of Nightmares to continue, blind to Velaris's existence, because we know that without them, there are some courts and kingdoms that might strike us. And invade our borders to discover the many, many secrets we've kept from the other High Lords and courts these millennia."

Feyre studied the water churning below, as if she could see the very blood and spells that High Lord had laid to put the spells around Velaris in place. Maybe even *feel* them. Sometimes when I flew circles around the city, even so high up in the air, I thought I could feel them too, keeping me from harm.

"So truly none of the others know?" she asked. "In the other courts?"

"Not a soul. You will not find it on a single map, or mentioned in any book beyond those written here. Perhaps it is our loss to be so contained and isolated, but...." It was worth it.

Looking out at the vibrancy and music and lights surrounding us, the city was teeming with victory at every corner. I showed it all to Feyre, laid it at her feet like sand upon the shores of a mighty, endless beach. “My people do not seem to be suffering much for it.”

Silently, Feyre agreed. I wondered if she would ever question the city’s safeguards or my decisions surrounding them again. I had a feeling she wouldn’t.

“Are you worried about Az going to the mortal lands tomorrow?” Another spike of her marvelous curiosity. And one that struck upon something deeply dark and complicated as my fingers played along the railing that rose midway up my stomach.

Somewhere close by, I hoped Azriel was dancing.

“Of course I am,” I said. “But Azriel has infiltrated places far more harrowing than a few mortal courts. He’d find my worrying insulting.”

“Does he mind what he does? Not the spying, I mean. What he did to the Attor today.” We each looked away.

Not the spying - indeed. Azriel’s most dangerous moments weren’t the ones spent outside the Night Court, but the ones spent within. When he was deep within that mountain carrying someone’s life blood underneath his blade, Cassian and I at his back wondering if it wasn’t Azriel’s own lifeblood he saw pooling against the metal.

But he’d never once said ‘no’ or asked for a different job. Sometimes he even seemed to relish the terrible moments if only briefly, even if he let Mor spend a good deal of time soothing him afterward.

“It’s hard to tell with him,” I said, fighting back a tinge of disappointment, “and he’d never tell me. I’ve witnessed Cassian rip apart opponents and then puke his guts up once the carnage stopped, sometimes even mourn them. But Azriel...” Night and day - my brothers. “Cassian tries, I try - but I think the only person who ever gets him to admit to any sort of feeling is Mor. And that’s only when she’s pestered him to the point where even his infinite patience has run out.”

Feyre’s eyes lit up at that. She was so close to a smile, one that teased and pushed and prodded merrily along at the promise of possibility. “But he and Mor - they never...?”

Ah - that again.

“That’s between them - and Cassian. I’m not stupid or arrogant enough to get in the middle of it.” Feyre’s *near* -smile fell reluctantly in defeat and I suddenly wished I had told her something more of what she maybe wanted to hear of my two dizzying friends, just to get that look back from her. I pushed off the rail in an offer to continue walking and Feyre accepted.

Her steps were a little heavier the further we went on, the muscles of her legs and mind beginning to finally slack after a hard day’s work. Even the days off were full of questions and dilemmas and puzzles to piece together, it seemed.

How long would she go on like this? It hadn't been quite a week even. She seemed brighter, a little more relaxed, a little more open. And with each knot that unraveled in her day by day, my chest eased mercifully.

But I knew the weight in her heart - could hear it in the way she spoke or see it in the way she looked. One moment she would flirt and hiss and rave at me - whatever made her forget the pain long enough to remember what living felt like - and the next, she seemed to sink back into those cells Amarantha had locked her in, no hope of getting out.

I wanted that hope for her. She was allowed to be broken, but I hated to think that she would *feel* broken forever. I wanted every night to be like this instead.

My thoughts bubbled and spat so furiously over the prospect, I almost didn't realize Feyre had slowed her pace. When I turned around to face her, she'd gone utterly still, her gaze fixed on a small group of musicians playing a lilting melody across the street from us.

And my heart suddenly stopped.

I recognized that music. And I swore that it hadn't caught me sooner. Feyre knew that melody too. I swallowed, my throat gone dry. I'd sent it to her to keep her alive during the trials when she had seemed on the verge of collapse.

Images of that night flooded back to me. I had to shove my hands in my pockets to keep from shaking as I remembered with Feyre whose face was now drawn very tightly.

If I inhaled deeply enough, closed my eyes and listened only to the music, I could still feel the pain from that final night as clearly as if it were happening today.

*I couldn't go to her. Couldn't risk seeing her. I knew I'd have one last chance to see her alone before Amarantha threw her final dagger and I wouldn't waste it until it became necessary.*

*But I knew she was rotting away in that cell, dying. I could feel it pulsing through the bond we'd made to save her life - a bond that might not matter in a handful of hours. All of Feyre's fears were crashing in on her to the point of suffocation. It had hardly felt like force offering her the goblet of wine to drink from night after night, her hands had so greedily fought for it after the second trial. For the first time, I began to doubt that I was doing the right thing keeping her drunk when her mind was full to bursting with grief anyway.*

*I was alone in my room about to go insane from my inability to save her. Amarantha could sleep with a cold bed this last night. I didn't know what to do, so I simply did. I latched on to the first sensory memory I could retrieve that wouldn't cause too much risk and I hurled it at Feyre. Down the vents into her cell, across the bond between our broken hands, came music.*

*The melody was gripping, haunting, but also hopeful. It was the sound of hard-fought victory, of love and all the things that make life beautiful. It was the sound of home. My home. My sister and my mother. And a great and mighty people.*

*Velaris.*

*The melody quaked and rose, rising and breaking in great, sweeping swells that were meant to move and devour the soul.*

*I could practically feel Feyre's heart as the blood pried her center apart and restitched it, until the emotions pumped in and out of those valves with every beat. I could taste the salt as it stung her lips from crying. I could feel the warmth in her skin as she clung to the feel of her body.*

*Tears were all I had left to give, so I let them fall urging her on, hoping she would find something in the melody to inspire her, whether it was her sisters, Tamlin, Lucien, her art - anything to make her want to live. To prove that this wasn't costing her more unnecessary grief than it did to soothe her soul.*

I shuddered as the stunning vision of Velaris met my opening eyes and matched the allure of itself in the music haunting us in the winter air.

"You." Feyre breathed the word out of her, her quiet, shocked voice dragging me out of the memory I would not soon forget. She was still staring at the musicians as their chorus played on. "You sent the music into my cell. Why?"

I stood next to her, not daring to see if her face was hurt, if I'd failed her again. "Because you were breaking," I said shakily. "And I couldn't find another way to save you."

"I saw the Night Court," she said, as if it had been a haven, a foretelling. A glimpse into where she would one day stand and hear the sweet song again.

That took me by surprise, enough that I finally looked at her from the corners of my eyes. And Cauldron's mercy, she looked somewhat restful. "I didn't send those images to you." Even if I'd certainly felt them.

"Thank you," she breathed. "For everything - for what you did. Then..." and the music slowed, winding down to its beautiful end, "...and now."

The music stopped entirely and we were left with only the here and now - as Feyre had said. Perhaps the music had been a gift from the Cauldron or the Mother or some unseen force pushing us together - I didn't know. But it felt like the music had come to remind us briefly of our past purely so it could leave us with this peace between us that was a new beginning of sorts.

"Even after the Weaver?" I chanced asking. Even - "After this morning with my trap for the Attor?"

A little huff of annoyance escaped Feyre as her nostrils flared. "You ruin everything," she said, but I could have sworn she meant the opposite. And it thrilled me.

I'd drawn close to her as we'd listened to that music, enough that I could smell the pine and grass and sun in her heart again - all these lovely notes that only seemed to bloom when she wasn't so bothered. Feyre's body had angled, leaning toward me enough that when her head drooped, it fell against my chest. Her fingers clutched my jacket.



I grabbed her, scooping her up into my arms, cradling her tired body close as we shot into the sky, and was rewarded when she leaned her head willingly against me, something like peace thrumming between us.

And even though I'd dashed that smile from her lips earlier on, it felt like it was there as we flew to the townhouse all the same.

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I stared at the paper and pen sitting on my nightstand for over an hour. On my bed, I sat with my arms crossed, legs resting over one another at the ankles stretched out in front of me. The white ceiling above might as well have been a rainbow of color, it seemed so full of thoughts and wishes and doubts as I debated that page beside me.

Feyre was still awake.

*But she was tired.*

Though we were - starting over? She'd forgiven me. That much was clear. Which made this all suddenly very new and *very* exciting. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Not her head on my chest or the softness of her face as we'd flown.

*She might go to bed at any moment, and curse me if I sent her anything that disrupted that fragile new peace she gave us tonight.*

But tonight she had eaten. Tonight she had lived. She had walked and wondered and *enjoyed* . She had almost smiled. Not for me, but near enough for me to catch the effects of it.

*The effects that might utterly disappear if I pushed too far. A life of death and danger was what awaited her if I put the invitation out there. If we stared to -*

She had liked the flying. More than liked it, I had thought. I might have imagined it, but I could have sworn that at one point after hearing that music, as we'd flown to the townhouse and she'd nuzzled just a *tad* into my chest, that her shields had dropped and she'd realized she felt something good up there in the air with me. I hadn't stopped thinking about it since the moment I'd set her down and said goodnight.

*But she might-*

Fuck it.

I grabbed the paper and willed myself to slow down enough to neatly scrawl:

*I might be a shameless flirt, but at least I don't have a horrible temper. You should come tend to my wounds from our squabble in the snow. I'm bruised all over thanks to you.*

The paper disappeared, followed by the pen, and both came shivering back with lightning speed a few heartbeats later.

*Go lick your wounds and leave me be .*

My lips sucked themselves inward.

Not entirely accepting, but not hateful either. No - definitely not hateful. And there was a... curiously intrigued sense of waiting on the other end of the bond.

I left the paper on the bed and opened my door as quietly as I could, peeking down the hall to where Feyre's room was. Her door was firmly shut, but through the cracks around it, there was still a light glowing from inside.

Still awake.

I smirked and retreated back inside my room, leaving the door ajar just a hair. After far too much thinking for how sober I actually was, I finally sent her my reply and hoped very much she would squirm.

*I'd much rather you licked my wounds for me.*

The paper disappeared. This time a flicker of excitement trickled down the bond between us. The reply was every bit as good as I had hoped for: *Lick you where, exactly?*

My lips.

My neck.

My chest.

My fingers in her hair as she trailed lower, her own grazing over my thighs. My stomach would rise and fall in great beats as she reached my navel and one of us undid the ties on my pants.

And knowing Feyre, she would pause and look up at me from over my stomach with a wicked gleam in her eye, would probably tease me because Cauldron knows if the day ever came that I got to play with her, she'd be taunted to death and this was justice served right back to me.

And then those fingers could slide below, hooking into the fabric and sliding it down as her hair falls around her face, her head lowering to lick the smooth muscle at my hips, at my hard, waiting c-

I ran a hand over my face and through my rumpled hair, and wrote.

*Wherever you want to lick me, Feyre. I'd like to start with "Everywhere," but I can choose, if necessary.*

The paper was back in a flash.

*Let's hope my licking is better than yours. I remember how horrible you were at it Under the Mountain.*

Her own challenge of sorts. I chuckled darkly.

I could flip her. She wouldn't have any pants or skirts to remove, I decided. No - if I were to have my mate, I wanted her naked and exposed and spread wide for me to gaze at.

Kisses along her calves. Luxurious, slow ones up her thighs. My fingers stroking along the skin to soothe and to play. Feyre's hips rising as that delicious scent of hers drifted toward me the closer I got.

One lick - just one lick along her...

*I was under duress. If you want, I'd be more than happy to prove you wrong. I've been told I'm very, very good at licking.*

Feyre took her longest pause getting back to me yet. And when she did deign to give me a reply, it was short and to the point: *Goodnight.*

And I was still shameless and increasingly horny.

*Try not to moan too loudly when you dream about me. I need my beauty rest .*

The note did not return. Instead, I felt heat and flame dance between us as Feyre destroyed it and fizzled out the magic. A vulgar gesture flashed between us, intended for me to see or not, I wasn't sure.

I laughed, winking out the light in the room and tucking myself between the sheets for the night.

The best part about it was how fun it felt to fall asleep and know that, regardless of what happened for Feyre and I, loving someone - maybe even sharing a bed with someone - could be enjoyable for me again one day.

## Chapter 30: There Are Different Kinds of Darkness

### Chapter Summary

Rhys finds out from Azriel that finding the queen's half of the book isn't going to be easy. They then spar together while Feyre has her first lesson with Cassian and breaks down over her guilt from killing the fae in Amarantha's court.

When Feyre and I landed on the rocky outcropping above the House of Wind for her first sparring lesson, Cassian was already there wrapping his fists, an arrogant grin plastered all over his face. I set Feyre down and her brows rose slowly as she took in Cassian wearing his leathers - all however many pounds of thick, corded muscle of him.

Cassian beckoned Feyre with a single finger. "Good luck," I managed to sing into her ear before she'd gotten too far. A curt *prick* and adjoining scowl was all the reply I got.

After Cassian showed Feyre how to wrap her hands and wrists to protect the bones and muscles best, he let her finish prepping them and came over to meet me for a brief check-in.

"Are you going to tell me to go easy on her?" Cassian said.

"Not a chance," I said with a single shake of my head, hands in my pockets.

"Good," he replied, and that shit-eating grin dropped. "Go in and change into your leathers then. Az'll be back soon." I cocked my head to one side. The sun was directly overhead, barely mid-day. Cassian leveled a knowing look at me. "Mor seemed to think it was a good idea to read on the balcony not long after breakfast ended. That was not quite an hour ago."

"Ah."

"Ah indeed."

He clapped me on the shoulder and went back to Feyre who was flexing her hands in the new bandages, testing the new feel of them against her skin. "They're not paintbrushes," Cassian barked at her, making her jump. "Get in the ring." Feyre's eyes narrowed with a sharp edge to them. I chuckled and took my leave, excited to see how much of Cassian was left standing by the time I came back.

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"Shit."

I spat the ground behind me before whirling in a quick spin to meet Azriel's second blow. His sword came down brutally this afternoon.

We'd been going at it for a good hour, possibly even more, Azriel showing no signs of slowing down any time in the near future. To our right, Cassian corrected Feyre on her punches, something I was only vaguely able to pay attention to as Azriel brought his sword against me with ease - and a good deal of power.

I was either far more rusty than I had realized, or Azriel was exceptionally pissed off for how his morning had gone. Judging by the cold, hard look he'd given me after I'd found him in the living room and intruded on his conversation with Mor, I would have guessed it was the latter.

They'd been sitting so close, on a friendly, plush cushioned seat of a velvet fabric. Her hand rested gently on his knee. His eyes had flashed when he met my gaze, frustration returning to the surface behind whatever calm Mor had managed to lull him into. I could only imagine how much worse it would have been had she not been there.

The visit to the mortal realms must not have gone well, I'd taken it.

"They've got some sort of barrier around the palace," Azriel had told me after I'd been invited to join them. Mor didn't leave. "I expected some kind of protection around their general quarters, but not magic and not nearly to this extent."

I nodded once as Azriel's lips drew tight. Mor's hand was still on his knee. "He's going to take some time to consider the best way of handling those protections so as not to sound the alarm that we're sniffing about."

A delicate way of saying Azriel was pissed as hell he hadn't been able to get in today. Not surprising, given his tendency towards efficiency and never failing - not ever. Azriel's methods were brutal and unrelenting at best, and most especially where his own capabilities were concerned.

"We'll figure it out," I said. "I'm glad you spotted the wards first. That means the queens are far more clever than we had dared hope and that we have more to consider than originally planned. Especially if they're already aware Hybern's strategizing moves and plotting against it." A small consolation for the day, but it signaled success to some degree.

Azriel finally looked up from where he'd been staring at the floor. "Like Feyre's sisters gleaned."

"Exactly."

He nodded, his gaze hitting the carpet again. Mor looked at me and bit her lip. I shrugged and offered, "Cass is training Feyre on the roof. Want to have a go?" He knew I meant with me.

Mor fixed him with a soft, encouraging smile and Azriel sighed, a wisp of smoke flexing over his hands. "Let's go." The shadows might have spoken for him.

Not even two seconds inside the ring and that sword had flown out of its sheath at Azriel's back. We peeled halfway out of our leathers not even ten minutes later when the sun had started to bake into our skin. And then it all came right back - anger and aggression pouring

down on me like a violent rainstorm as we danced, softening into a more steady rhythm when those damned shadows curled up into Az's ears and warned him of how much fatigue I was feeling. I only half wished they wouldn't.

Today was a first day of sorts for Feyre and I both, it seemed. I briefly noticed her watching Az and I move as she sipped from a cup of water, and was near enough to hear Cassian explain the markings along our skin - over our arms, chests, and down a narrow column along our spines nestled between the roots of our wings.

"We get the tattoos when we're initiated as Illyrian warriors," Cassian said, "for luck and glory on the battlefield." There was a prolonged silence interrupted only by the clashing of our swords before Cassian said with no attempt whatsoever to keep out of earshot, "Rhys is out of shape and won't admit it." A near snarl rose in my throat. "But Azriel is too polite to beat him into the dirt."

*Not when he's doing such a damned good job of trying to kill me*, I thought.

Az shot me an immodest grin and brought his sword down hard.

Cassian was right - on both accounts. I was out of shape and my pride dictated that I never confess it out loud. I held back a panting breath every time our blades met in the air and we stumbled back from one another.

Under the Mountain, I hadn't trained. It wasn't allowed and even if it had been or if I'd found a way around Amarantha's rules, it was too brutal, too Illyrian, too *other* for me to be seen with a sword in hand. My weapons had been sourced in other areas better suited to my mask of whore and politician.

But fuck if it hadn't taken its toll on me.

I couldn't bring myself to spar for weeks when I first came back. Azriel had offered, in his own understanding way, and Cassian knew straight away that I'd likely be off-kilter, but every time I thought about throwing a punch, knowing it would take me down hard and fast when it should have been uncomplicated, I died a little inside.

Mor was the one who took me out and made me practice after I'd 'sulked', as she had informed me, about it for too long. We went at it into the hours of the night until I was back on my feet enough to stand.

But my muscles had screamed at me the entire time. And my footwork was horribly sloppy. I barely felt like I remembered how to grip the hilt of a sword from how foreign fifty years without one had made it feel in my hands now stripped clean of all their callouses.

Just one more way Amarantha had violated me. Even a part of me that I had never shown her, she'd managed to find somehow.

Azriel caught the lapse in my attention and struck, nearly catching my arm if I hadn't blocked at the last second. This time, he didn't bother indulging me with a grin.

“So,” I heard Cassian say, right as I went on the offensive and struck at Az. “When are you going to talk about how you wrote a letter to Tamlin, telling him you’ve left for good?”

I took my eyes off Az and his sword, hunting for Feyre not far away, and missed landing the blow on him. But Azriel brought his sword around more slowly, driving it underneath me as I hurtled forward and catching my blade to stop me falling. The force of it as he pushed drove me back up.

“How about when you talk about how you tease and taunt Mor to hide whatever it is you feel for her?” Feyre’s voice was a venomous sting. And from what little shots of her I could catch, she looked as pissed as Azriel had been feeling all afternoon.

Azriel - whose sword slipped through the air. This time, I caught him. Neither of us looked anywhere but our blades - when I wasn’t watching Feyre, at least.

Cassian, bless the filthy prick, was laughing it off easily. “Old news,” he said. But he promptly fumbled with his own parry of words when Feyre shot back, “I have a feeling that’s what she probably says about you.” Cassian’s reply wasn’t the only thing with a little added heat to it as Azriel gained the upper hand on me for the umpteenth time.

It was a good thing Mor had stayed inside for this.

“Get back in the ring,” Cassian barked. “No core exercises. Just fists. You want to mouth off, then back it up.”

Azriel calmed down from his rage, sensing the turn the conversation was about to take, and held me on my toes just enough to keep me moving, but back enough that we could listen.

“Rhys told you?” Feyre asked.

“He informed Azriel, who is... monitoring things and needs to know. Az told me.”

Azriel, for his part, did not balk.

“I assume it was while you were out drinking and dancing.”

I looked with just enough time to see the frustration pulling on Feyre as she tried to side-step Cassian and was caught by his arm. “Hey,” he said, stripped of the rigid commander who had been instructing Feyre moments ago. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit a nerve. Az only told me because I told him *I* needed to know for my own forces; to know what to expect. None of us... we don’t think it’s a joke. What you did was a hard call. A really damn hard call. It was just my shitty way of trying to see if you needed to talk about it. I’m sorry.”

I saw him let go of Feyre’s arm, but only heard rather than saw Feyre say, “All right,” the heat and tension gone. My chest uncoiled with relief.

Thank the Mother above for the day she’d instructed the Cauldron to form Cassian and planted the wild idea into my head to go pull him from that flimsy makeshift tent in the camps.

“Thirty one-two punches,” he told her. He must have had pads up on his hands for her to hit. “Then forty; then fifty. You didn’t answer my question.”

Silence as Feyre positioned herself and made the first hit. “I’m fine.” The strikes formed a dull thudding sound.

“One.” Feyre struck again. “Two. And fine is good - fine is great.”

The same thing he’d told me. Had he not been working with Feyre, I would have bet my status as High Lord he’d be telling me to eat shit with those great big fists of his, the same way Azriel smiled at me every time someone said the word ‘fine’ out on that rooftop.

But Feyre was not fine - far from it. We had that lie in common.

I quickly lost count of her punches, the dull thuds increasing in pace. I think Cassian stopped counting too as her fists turned to smoke and ash and fire, burning through the pads as great, heaving sobs burst out of her.

The bond was closed. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but it was obvious without her having to say it. We all saw it written all over her face, as Azriel and I ceased sparring: grief. A grief so far-reaching and gut-wrenching it made it easy to understand why Feyre hadn’t found a moment in time to wish herself into non-existence, however much she hadn’t really wanted it.

I found myself walking toward her, leaving Azriel behind. The bond pulling me onward to go to my mate - to help her see the light she needed. But I was also just pleased that some of the emotion had finally broken free.

Freedom.

That was the other end of this if Feyre could say it out loud, could admit it to herself. It wouldn’t matter if we were there to bear witness to it or not, so long as she herself could say the words that would allow her to start really healing.

She gave Cassian one final punch, realizing she’d burned the pads on his hands to dust. Her face was so red, her many freckles seemed to vanish. “I’m all right,” Cassian told her, his hands giving a short gesture upwards to encourage her should she need to go again. My brother would have let her knock the world out of him if he thought it was what she needed to break free from her prison.

I took a steadying breath.

*Cassian.*

My brother. In truth, the heart of this court and all it stood for.

Through the many tears now flowing freely down Feyre’s heartbreaking face, she choked out, “I killed them,” barely even forming the words before the sobs shuddered over her body anew.



I remembered what she'd told the Bone Carver. How those deaths had haunted her. How she'd wanted to end herself afterwards. I hated that. Hated that Amarantha had wrecked her so thoroughly.

"I know," Cassian said, lowering his hands to give her space.

"It should have been me," Feyre cried.

My powers flew out of me without command. I think... I think the mate bond felt the struggle and reacted on instinct just then. Because looking at Feyre and feeling that immeasurable grief she experienced wash over me in waves, it was all I could do to find a way to soothe the act and let her know she wasn't alone.

Cassian didn't even look at me as he passed. He simply went straight to Azriel and began trading blows while I looked into Feyre's tear-stained face, her eyes red and burning. Calm, reassuring darkness flooded between us, both real and imagined. Gently, I cupped her face and brought it up to read mine, my wings wrapping out around us, again without any instruction to do so. Everything at this point was just pure instinct showing me the way to Feyre - to keeping my mate from going it alone.

That had been her one wish in death: to never feel alone. I'd felt it, right before her neck had snapped.

"You will feel that way every day for the rest of your life," I told her. Feyre's eyes were blue - so, so blue as she watched me, and tried to push herself out of my hold so she could run, but I held her firm. "And I know this because I have felt that way every day since my mother and sister were slaughtered and I had to bury them myself, and even retribution didn't fix it. You can either let it wreck you, let it get you killed like it nearly did with the Weaver, or you can learn to live with it."

I wiped the tears away gently with each word, my thumbs pausing here and there to pay homage to her skin and the quiet pains that hid behind it. The last time I'd cleaned her face of tears, it had been with cruel, taunting licks meant to distract her from Amarantha's torture. Too similar to the exchange we shared now even if the manner about it was entirely opposing.

Feyre stared at me for a long time searching my face and finding whatever truths she saw there and needed to keep her going. The tears finally slowed to a stop. "I'm sorry - about your family." Her throat was raw. That hadn't quite been the answer I'd expected. It sort of... broke my heart anew.

"I'm sorry I didn't find a way to spare you from what happened Under the Mountain," I countered, "From dying. From *wanting* to die." I found myself still stroking her cheek as I held this most precious treasure the Cauldron had ever seen fit to merge with my life. Feyre shook her head, about to protest, but she no longer tried to pull away. "I have two kinds of nightmares," I said, and she stopped moving. "The ones where I'm again Amarantha's whore or my friends are... And the ones where I hear your neck snap and see the light leave your eyes."

Silence. But her body relaxed as I continued to hold on to her, savoring the calm that slowly ached into her skin beneath that touch, and unwittingly across the bond tying us to one another.

My mate.

My resilient, wonderful mate.

Who was now looking me over as though inspecting me for faults and cracks of my own before finding her hands, wrapped in pitiful scraps of charred fabric, all that was left of her handiwork with Cassian. "Ah," I said, taking her hand and feeling my wings release smoothly behind me. "That."

Cassian and Azriel were having a true fight beside us, one I still couldn't match even if I'd given it my all on a good day.

Feyre looked up, her face squinting as the piercing light of the sun resumed its place between us. The coloring on her face was not quite so crimson anymore. "Autumn Court, right?"

"Right." I ran my hand over her palm, her fingers. Her skin was perfectly in tact, unharmed from whatever fires she'd sent forth.

Interesting.

"A gift from its High Lord, Beron."

Though he'd certainly never see it that way. Feyre took a deep breath. "I'm not well versed in the complexities of the other High Lords' elemental gifts, but we can figure it out - day by day, if need be."

"If you're the most powerful High Lord in history..." Feyre mused, "does that mean the drop I got from you holds more sway over the others?"

Some deep feral instinct, rooted within the male that the mate bond held prisoner, purred that I damn well hoped my drop held more sway.

"Give it a try," I suggested. "See if you can summon darkness. I won't ask you to try to winnow." I grinned, and Feyre's face tugged as though trying to remember what this play between us was like after the episode we were coming out of.

"I don't know how I did it to begin with."

"Will it into being." Her face fell, exasperated. So I gave her a hint of how to come back to me - to us and what we were. "Try thinking of me - how good-looking I am. How talented."

"How arrogant."

"That, too," I admitted, just pleased she'd bitten at all. I crossed my arms and waited, Feyre's gaze falling down. And further down, down... over my arms and, and - she was looking, I realized.

“Put a shirt on while you’re at it,” she said, far too quickly.

Ooh, she was definitely looking. The feral beast inside me purred again, yanking on his leash. “Does it make you uncomfortable?” I asked, leaning forward with a smile to match the wicked beast pounding away at my chest. I liked my mate watching me.

I liked it *very much* .

“I’m surprised there aren’t more mirrors in this house,” Feyre said, quickly recovering, “since you seem to love looking at yourself so much.”

She stood back and leveled her own feral gaze at me - one of attack and daring while Azriel and Cassian tried not to be too loud with their sudden fit of coughing that had apparently interrupted their sword play... pricks.

“There’s the Feyre I adore,” I said, almost smiling. And though Feyre scowled as she closed her eyes to look for my Night, the gentle peace had resumed its rightful place between us once more.

Her face strained, her body reaching for something it alone could not find. I stepped closer once more and sang her the story that might lead her nearer to it. “There are different kinds of darkness,” I murmured, fashioning each one at my fingertips. “There is the darkness that frightens, the darkness that soothes, the darkness that is restful. There is the darkness of lovers, and the darkness of assassins. It becomes what the bearer wishes it to be, needs it to be. It is not wholly bad or good.”

With each new form, darkness welled out of me looking for Feyre, filling the rooftop with infinite black and adding unique layers. Some were filled with starlight. Others with dust and shadow. Some still with pain. But all of them powerful and connected in never ending Night.

“Open your eyes,” I whispered and enjoy the glow in Feyre’s gaze as she took in the darkness shrouding us like a veil to plummet into deepest sleep with.

It wrapped us up thickly, enjoying the way Feyre felt against it. There was darkness inside her somewhere - and not the kind that ate away at her soul and forced her worst memories retching out of her throat night after night. It was a part of her and she of it. One day, I hoped, we’d find it together.

Feyre played with a piece of starlight that bloomed iridescent on the inky black waves caressing her skin and hair. And then, in a quiet wink, it was all gone. Feyre looked at me with something like awe left behind in her expression.

“We can work on it later,” I said. “For now,” and I sniffed the air with exaggerated disgust, “go take a bath.”

Feyre didn’t look back as she flipped me off, strode right in the middle of my brother’s match play, now free and wild once more without the darkness, and informed my general that he was flying her home.

“She’ll be fine,” Az said, clapping me once on the back as we watched them fly off.

And for once, I knew she would be.

## Chapters 31-32: It's A Promise

### Chapter Summary

Rhys receives a formal invitation to visit Tarquin in the Summer Court. Along with Feyre and Amren, the three visit and Rhys is instantly hit with a mix of emotions he isn't sure he can handle while gone.

The letter appeared some four days later addressed in scrolling script that had a bit of a flourish to it: *To the High Lord of the Night Court* .

I read the letter straight away. Tarquin kept his correspondence brief and to the point, but it was friendly. Welcoming.

Tarquin.

Winnowing, I found Amren in her study bent over some papers. I tossed Tarquin's letter on top of the stack, disturbing her work. She tensed, and then spotted the signature. "We leave tomorrow." She arched a brow at me. "Yes, we. I need you to come to Adriata with Feyre and I."

Amren leaned back in her chair, not bothering with the letter. The Summer Court wasn't really her aesthetic, but Amren scared the shit out of everyone in that court several times over and her powers would be invaluable keeping Feyre and I safe while we stayed.

Not to mention what getting the book into Amren's hands would mean if the rumors I'd heard circulating were true.

But that part could wait until we had the book and could know for certain.

"And I suppose I don't have a choice in the matter, Rhysand?" She studied me carefully. I must have sounded more hard set than I felt. I nodded. "Very well. I will go with you to visit Tarquin - on one request."

"Name it."

She fingered the thin metal chain dangling around her neck. "I want a ruby before we leave. A large fat one." The chain curled around her pinkie finger and could have broken for how it twisted when she curled that small digit inward. Only Amren could make delicate jewelry look like a weapon.

I snickered. "Whatever you want, Amren." Her eyes glowed with a not so subtle greed right before I left.

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I sent Amren ahead of me to round up the rest of the inner circle so I could fill them in on the plans for our time in Adriata. In the meantime, I wrote Tarquin a swift reply informing him our party would arrive the following afternoon. And then I sat in my own study and tried not to brood too long over the last time I'd seen Tarquin Under the Mountain, when I'd held his blood's heart in my hands and crushed the life force from it to keep his secrets from an evil queen's hands.

His mind had been scared. I'd had to calm and distract it like I had Claire, and coordinate the words and shudders coming from his body - a puppet on the strings. All so Amarantha wouldn't suspect the truth. Killing him had been a mercy. Tarquin knew it and undoubtedly remembered, but...

It had still taken a good long while for his invitation to arrive.

Whatever Tarquin sought to get out of our meeting, there was still a good degree of distrust to be handled.

Smart High Lord.

Despite his youth, Tarquin's mind was sharp, even with the million different hands Azriel informed me that were seeking to mold it to their will each day. Tarquin wanted to free lesser faeries, make them equals with the rest of us. The Illyrian in me heard and responded to that call. I'd fought for that change my entire life to little success because of the mask I had to wear to keep my court safe.

But Tarquin was making it work. Somehow. I sincerely hoped Feyre got that half of the Book without fuss. Tarquin was maybe one of the few allies I actually stood a chance of making in this damned world, and I... did not want to lose that chance with him.

I ran a hand through my hair and tore myself out of my study.

No matter what, my court came first, and I had to remain vigilant.

Walking out into the sunlight above the House, everyone but Azriel was present. Feyre had a pair of fighting knives dropped at her feet where she stood in front of Cassian, Mor chiding from the sidelines. Amren looked ready to doze off in her chair and I wondered if she'd told them anything at all.

"Sorry to interrupt while things were getting interesting," I said by way of greeting.

"Fortunately for Cassian's balls, you arrived at the right time." Amren resettled herself in her seat. Cassian gave a vague snarl that had me chuckling and no one else.

I was curious what they'd been chatting about before I'd arrived - or quarreling over.

"Ready to go on a summer holiday?" I asked. Mor's head perked up.

"The Summer Court invited you?"

“Of course they did. Feyre, Amren, and I are going tomorrow.” Now it was Feyre’s turn to look at me. But it was Cassian who loomed forward waiting for me to amend my statement.

“The Summer Court is full of hotheaded fools and arrogant pricks,” he told me pointedly, a general on duty. “I should join you.”

“You’d fit right in,” Amren said with far too much delight. Picking Cassian apart was her favorite pastime. “Too bad you still aren’t going.”

“Watch it, Amren,” Cassian said and there was a strange fire in his eyes, a fire to attack and defend, that wasn’t usually there among just us. Only the smile on Amren’s face that remained no more than a taunt kept me from wondering just what sort of conversation I’d interrupted.

“Believe me,” my Second said, “I’d prefer not to go either.”

“Cassian,” I said, increasingly frustrated with whatever bizarre tension was floating around, “considering the fact that the last time you visited, it didn’t end well-”

“I wrecked *one* building-”

“*And*, considering the fact that they are utterly terrified of sweet Amren, *she* is the wiser choice.”

Cassian took another step forward against me. I half expected him to invite me to spar for a place in our party. “It could easily be a trap. Who’s to say the delay in replying wasn’t because they’re contacting our enemies to ambush you?”

“That is *also* why Amren is coming.” I shifted away from Cassian, annoyed with the aggression in his tone. I would undoubtedly hear about it later. “There is also a great deal of treasure to be found in the Summer Court. If the Book is hidden, Amren, you might find other objects to your liking.”

Amren looked up at me in surprise. I shrugged : *You said you wanted a ruby.*

“Shit,” Cassian cursed. “Really, Rhys?” Yes, I was definitely going to hear about this later. “It’s bad enough we’re stealing from them, but robbing them blind-”

“Rhysand *does* have a point,” Amren said wickedly. “Their High Lord is young and untested. I doubt he’s had much time to catalog his inherited hoard since he was appointed Under the Mountain. I doubt he’ll know anything is missing. Very well, Rhysand - I’m in.”

Cassian took another step forward, his mouth opening. I gave him a sharp look, fed up with whatever this bullshit tension he was coming off was. I was already in a piss-poor mood contemplating how I was going to blindside Tarquin and stay in his good graces without him adding his personal grievances to the pile. “I will need you - not Amren - in the human realm. The Summer Court has banned you for eternity, and though your presence would be a good distraction while Feyre does what she has to, it could lead to more trouble than its worth.”

“Just cool your heels, Cassian,” Amren said when Cassian didn’t pull back. “We’ll be fine without your swaggering and growling at everyone. Their High Lord owes Rhys a favor for saving his life Under the Mountain - and keeping his secrets.”

“And the High Lord also probably wants to figure out where we stand in regard to any upcoming conflict,” Mor added. Feyre was watching the back and forth with deep seated interest.

Seeming to realize he wasn’t going to get anywhere with all of us, Cassian lowered his wings and evened out his voice, though there was still a good degree of bite beneath it. I scanned the group and realized Azriel wasn’t here, but Amren *and* Mor were.

That explained enough for me to imagine... certain dynamics muddling about the air.

“Feyre, though,” Cassian said, staring daggers at me. “It’s one thing to have her here - even when everyone knows it. It’s another to bring her to a different court, and introduce her as a member of our own.”

Yet another little problem I’d be discussing with Azriel later and further reasoning for Cassian to stay behind in Velaris. Cassian’s eyes were fire. One more word against him and he’d launch himself at me, ready to go to blows. It wouldn’t even have been personal. Whatever was brewing in his bones, it was something wholly unrelated to the direct conversation making him itch to get away for a week.

So I dropped it. Nodded at Amren, and made for the door, and heard Mor tell Cass to just back off and leave it. If my suspicions were correct, that reproach coming from her probably didn’t help much. I half expected him to push past her and follow me.

It was Feyre’s voice, however, that eventually caught up to me. She was hounded in dirt and sweat from training. For the past four days straight, she’d spent her mornings with Cassian - and Azriel when he was free to join - and her afternoons with me. Her fire magic was yielding more and more each day.

“Any more traps I should know about before we go tomorrow?” she asked. There was a taunt hidden somewhere in that remark.

I looked over my shoulder, barely hiding my smirk. “Here I was, thinking your notes the other night indicated you’d forgiven me.”

She stopped walking rather abruptly. “One would think a High Lord would have more important things to do than pass notes back and forth at night.”

More important things, *indeed* .

My mind had rather run away that night, if I were honest. Probably not the best idea before taking Feyre out where she’d be throwing herself in the paths of friends and enemies alike.

“I do have more important things to do,” I said, gentle as the night. “But I find myself unable to resist the temptation. The same way you can’t resist watching me whenever we’re out. So



territorial.” I waited for her to throw the words back at me, to scoff and call me a prick. But it never came.

Instead, Feyre breezed right up to me with all of my own usual grace and nonchalance, nearly brushing me as she went. A chill ran down my spine. “ *You* haven’t been able to keep away from me since Calanmai, it seems.”

Oh, she was a gem, Feyre. And not only was she sharp as diamonds, she was more right than she knew. I flicked her nose playfully, wishing the gesture could be more than it was as my eyes drew downward and fell on the smooth skin of her lips, still flushed a faint pink from training.

“I can’t wait to see what that sharp tongue of yours can do at the Summer Court,” I said, and enjoyed how her grey eyes flashed before I winnowed into the mist.

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Cassian, as I should have seen coming, ambushed me and held me up all night. And this time, he brought proper reinforcements. Azriel was naturally on Cass’ side about the entire affair, and for once, pushed just as hard on me to relent. Without Amren there to poke and prod, and with Mor gone... I wondered what itch exactly had come across my brother’s skin.

In the morning, I felt like we’d been out drinking all night even though I hadn’t touched a single drop. Slipping into some of my finest black clothing befitting of the cruel High Lord from Under the Mountain, I was already stewing and not pleased about it. Going into Adriata with a temper wasn’t what I wanted, even if it would support my proclivity for dramatics.

Feyre came down the stairs as Amren and I waited for her in the townhouse. Her hair was done up in soft curls and she wore a pastel purple dress that moved and flowed as she walked. Flowers from my court were pressed carefully into her hair.

When she landed on the bottom step, she seemed almost... normal. Almost herself again. There was color in her face and she was - she was beautiful. I half expected her to smile softly at me, but it never came.

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. Throwing her into real work with such high stakes warred against the idea of soon having to share her with another High Lord.

Either way, I felt tension slicing through me.

“Good,” I said in Feyre’s direction. “Let’s go.”

“He’s pissy this morning,” Amren said as though I were not present when Feyre eyed me curiously.

Something told me Amren could feel my gut rolling about in anticipation.

“Why?” Feyre asked carefully. I grabbed Amren’s hand and extended my free one to Feyre who didn’t take it right away. Shit, I was already so on edge. This wasn’t how I wanted this to start.

“Because I stayed out late with Cassian and Azriel,” I said, “and they took me for all I was worth in cards.”

The cards had lasted only a half hour in reality. But the discussion that broke off our revelry and kept us up late into the night over plans for the oncoming trip had been the real debate. Cassian had hounded me about taking him with us to Adriata. When Azriel wasn't busy supporting our brother against me, I'd informed him to give it two days to see if Tamlin moved before going back to the mortal lands to spy on the queens.

Then I'd left them be for the evening.

Two days was ample time for Tamlin to figure out Feyre was gone and do something about it if he pleased.

I was betting on Tamlin's preference toward inaction to keep him from doing anything.

Feyre eyed me squarely, half amusement, half curiosity. “Sore loser?” she asked, finally taking my hand. I felt better just holding on to her.

“I am when my brothers tag-team me.”

The wind swept us away, drowning out whatever reply or retort Amren and Feyre might have made. And we landed on smooth, polished stone set out over the bustling, glistening sea of the Summer Court's most luminous city.

Adriata.

The sea was the city itself the way the Sidra was Velaris. It was unnerving in the way that only a High Lord could ever feel in another court. Tarquin was simply everywhere, his power thrumming about in currents of the sea that thrashed in and out along the shore, and in the bright sun shining brilliantly overhead. Even the loud turquoises of several hundred different shades seem to ring with the power of the man standing before us and his small party out to greet their guests. A stone castle sat imperiously behind the Lord of Summer, made of sand and sun and light.

Amren looked at the scene rather dully, as though she'd seen better. And even though Feyre kept her face perfectly plain, her eyes wouldn't - couldn't - stop roaming over the new landscape.

“Welcome to Adriata,” Tarquin said, eyeing me keenly. He was not unwelcome in his greeting, which was more than I could say for the crowd behind him. Cresseida hadn't taken her eyes off me once yet in the several seconds since we'd appeared.

I slid one hand into my pocket, keeping the other free to gesture idly about - the bored High Lord looking for an activity worthy of distracting him. “Good to see you again, Tarquin,” I said.

He nodded. And it struck me how refreshed he looked. Something that mirrored a piece of my own recovery. His eyes were bright with many shades of blue. His dark brown skin had

evened out in complexion, and his hair, while still short, had grown back in fuller and well cut.

Yes, Tarquin looked well.

At least one of us was here to have a good day.

“Amren, I think you know,” I said gesturing to my Second and enjoying the reprieve Cresseida’s gaze offered me finally as she took in my Second with clear disapproval. “Though you haven’t met her since your... promotion.” Cresseida’s glare returned to me in full force.

I bit back a taunting smirk. She’d be the one to play with while Feyre was distracting Tarquin.

My stomach cursed the reminder, a shot of adrenaline rolling through me as I considered the lengths to which Amren and I were handing Feyre over to Tarquin to play. My skin started to crawl - to itch.

Tarquin didn’t notice as he eyed Amren thoughtfully. “Welcome back to the city, lady,” he offered. Amren looked him over, her eyes the only piece of her *bothering* with him.

“At least you are far more handsome than your cousin. He was an eyesore,” she said. Tarquin, to his credit, didn’t flinch. “Condolences, of course.”

Cruel. Such a cruel, cruel game we were setting ourselves about.

I stifled a sigh as I turned to Feyre and set my mask firmly in place. “I don’t believe you two were ever formally introduced Under the Mountain. Tarquin, Feyre. Feyre, Tarquin.”

Tarquin seemed momentarily speechless. He stared transfixed at Feyre, his gaze sliding down from her face to her chest. I leashed a growl that had loosened in my chest.

I didn’t like that look. Didn’t like him looking at her - like *that* . It was too close. This close to Feyre, I could smell her. Her face was a mask of stone, but her scent was near enough to call my blood to it. Not Tarquin’s. He probably didn’t even care one way or the other, was likely thinking some other thought I couldn’t have guessed, maybe even wondering if it was his powers he was picking up on that drew him straight to her, but all the same... I hadn’t seen another male look at Feyre like that since Tamlin.

“Her breasts *are* rather spectacular, aren’t they? Delicious as ripe apples.” I stood perfectly still, the picture of poise, but there was enough implied in the words that Tarquin could understand: *You aren’t the only one to look at her* .

I felt Feyre’s head turn to me and readied myself for a *prick* or a *go to hell* commentary, but instead, a feline expression curled quietly onto her face. “Here I was, thinking you had a fascination with my mouth,” she said, leaving her lips slightly parted.

Oh, she could play. And play *well* .

“You have a tale to tell, it seems,” Tarquin said, pulling our attention back to him.

“We have many tales to tell,” I said. “So why not get comfortable?”

Beneath Cresseida’s dark skin, the faintest red flush was discernible. Interesting. She stepped up to meet Tarquin and only just stopped short of getting on equal footing of him. “We have refreshments prepared,” she said.

Tarquin’s eyes briefly flashed as he turned to his cousin and glossed right over his misstep. “Cresseida - Princess of Adriata.”

I could have snorted when Cresseida blew me off and took to Feyre first. Azriel was right - she’d be the one to watch out for. “A pleasure,” she told Feyre, neither friend nor foe. “And an honor.”

Feyre shrugged, keeping it casual and decidedly off-hand like we’d discussed. “The honor’s mine, princess.”

Another well played move as Cresseida held her tongue. Tarquin rushed through the final acquaintances, which included Varian, the other royal of Adriata high up on Azriel’s priority list to keep watch for, and then Tarquin motioned for us to follow him inside.

The palace really was crafted from the sand and sea. Shells flecked the walls and floors in beautiful arrangements that created nautical designs repeating across the tiles and stone. And the passageways were open and airy. The construction of the palace was similar enough to my residence in the Night Court that the open breezes and sun felt familiar. But the colors, the textures... they were all wrong. And with Tarquin standing so near, my own powers dim to make him feel less wary, it was like a sickness that comes with the changing of the seasons.

And he kept looking back to Feyre as we walked. Every few steps, his head would glance over his shoulder and fixate on her for a few seconds before turning back. The hand in my pocket kept a tight fist, my lone release of tension.

“You’ve yet to decorate for Nynsar,” I said, noting the lack of ornamentation about the palace.

“No,” Tarquin said. He sounded rather glum about it for a High Lord giving back a fae holiday to its people. “Flowers and frivolity have held little consequence for me in light of more serious projects going on.”

I gave no indication if I agreed or not. “You have a good deal of work to be done without one night interrupting you.” His head drifted away, glancing back over his shoulder again. My fist began to ache at my side.

Cauldron, how was I going to get through a week or more of them spending time together? And why did I even care this much? The agitation was strong enough that when Tarquin looked back to Feyre *yet again*, I wondered how my own father had felt when he’d seen my

mother in the camps kicking and thrashing about, and cursed the Mother silently that I'd never get to ask him.

"We have four main cities in my territory," Tarquin explained, his body half turning to face Feyre as we walked. "We spend the last month of winter and first spring months in Adriata - it's finest at this time of year."

There was a brief pause before Feyre replied. "It's very beautiful."

Tarquin looked delighted, though he was smart enough not to give too much away. But he kept staring at her. And staring some more. I reminded myself it could likely just be his power thrumming in Feyre's blood that called out to him and bid his head turn round to inspect, but... he looked at her the way he'd stared at her chest on the reception platform, with a trace of desire.

*Mine .*

A vicious word. A filthy word. A word that made me want to peel myself out of my skin and hide if I wasn't going to indulge my primal instincts to grab Feyre and prove just how much she *was* mine. Though she wasn't mine at all, really. And I had no right until she said otherwise.

That didn't stop the voice from appearing all the same, though.

"The repairs have been going well, I take it." Tarquin looked at me as though I'd plucked him from a daydream. And for once, acting mildly irritated and bored with him felt natural.

"Mostly," he said, turning back around properly. My chest eased with the movement - *slightly* . "There remains much to be done. The back half of the castle is a wreck. But, as you can see, we've finished most of the inside. We focused on the city first - and those repairs are ongoing." An admirable decision, and the right one.

"I hope no valuables were lost during its occupation."

It wasn't a question, but Tarquin answered it for me anyway. "Not the most important things, thank the Mother."

Interesting.

White oak columns surrounded by a collage of stained glass ushered us into a magnificent dining area. I felt as though a thread was carefully unraveling, traveling farther and farther out to be lost at sea as I took my seat at the table and watched Feyre drift almost unconsciously to the huge, clear glass window. The bay, teeming with life and purpose, no doubt bustling below it.

I took a deep breathe, and savored the notes of sea and salt billowing in the air from that ocean outside. Maybe I was not to be totally out of my element here.

Varian and Cresseida accompanied me while keeping careful watch over Amren as we all took our seats. Tarquin, however, went to Feyre and explained his fixation with the view. I

was pleased to note others at the table who seemed uncomfortable with where their High Lord had wandered off to.

“My cousin puts it modestly,” Cresseida said beside me. I removed my eyes, but not my mind from Feyre as she complimented Tarquin’s court. “Reconstruction is moving forward splendidly.”

“Oh?” I drawled, making it plain I cared little one way or the other. Her face tightened.

“Yes,” she said, a bit of heat flaring behind the lone word. “Nearly all the debris has been cleared of the city center and every single business has re-opened its doors even if only with limited hours. Our fish markets-”

“Are thriving as ever,” Varian said coolly. Cresseida cut him a glare I was glad not to be on the receiving end of. “And how fare your own markets, High Lord? What damage did *they* see during your recent imprisonment.”

I didn’t honor him with so much as a stare. Given the choice, I’d have taken Cresseida. Amren could have this one.

Amren made a rather sharp note that the Night Court wasn’t one for *fish* markets, but that she could tell Varian about all variety of trade and purchase if he believed himself capable of handling it. She swirled her glass of wine viciously.

A mention of Amarantha caught my ear as Tarquin looked at Feyre with a smile in his turquoise eyes. “You are a pearl,” he told her. “Though I knew that the day you threw that bone at Amarantha and splattered mud on her favorite dress.”

If I’d hoped Feyre would stand back, I was horribly disappointed to see her step closer to the High Lord of Summer, looking him over. It was precisely the right move, but I hated it.

Hated it, hated it, hated it.

Hated it even more when she looked up into those inviting eyes and purred, “I do not remember you being quite so handsome Under the Mountain. The sunlight and sea suit you.”

My blood boiled. She’d *never* looked at me like that and meant it. Not once. And her voice - it was like liquid silk. The voice she’d use when the flirtation was real for her.

“How exactly do you fit within Rhysand’s court?” he asked, no discernible reaction.

“Feyre is a member of my Inner Circle,” I said, unable to stand it any longer that they weren’t at our table, even if I hid the frustration behind the mask and dull conversation about *fish* .

“And is my Emissary to the Mortal Lands.”

Feyre sat down in front of me eyeing me carefully. “Do you have much contact with the mortal realm?” Cresseida asked coyly. Tarquin sat regarding his cousin, but his attention was still very much concerned with Feyre - and now myself.

Good.

I picked up my wine glass and swished the liquid about, prolonging the silence before I answered. The last time I'd drank wine in a foreign court without taking the necessary precautions, my powers had drained and I'd wound up under a rock for fifty years. Tarquin didn't appreciate the motion, but looked as though he too might sniff his own glass.

"I prefer to be prepared for every potential situation," I said, still refraining from a single sip. I could feel hot irritation rolling off of Cresseida next to me and wanted to chuckle darkly at her. At least *someone* was going to be fun here. "And, given that Hybern seems set on making themselves a nuisance, striking up a conversation with the humans might be in our best interest."

Varian leaned forward. Now we were getting somewhere. "So it's been confirmed, then? Hybern is readying for war."

My fingers curled on the stem of the wine glass. I knew it would taste magnificent, the ocean striped of salt and brine and left to only pure, undiluted air flirting about the fruity undertones. But otherwise, the scent was empty. Finally, I deigned a sip.

"They're done readying. War is imminent."

"Yes, you mentioned that in your letter," Tarquin said. I'd been rather blunt with him in that regard, which made his delayed reply all the more infuriating - Cresseida be damned. "And you know that against Hybern, we will fight. We lost enough good people Under the Mountain. I have no interest in being slaves again." In that, we were of one mind. I was halfway to another sip when he added, "But if you are here to ask me to fight in another war, Rhysand--"

My teeth ground together on the way he said my full name so sharply. "That is not a possibility," I said, no room for argument, "and had not even entered my mind."

Carefully, I kept my eyes trained from Feyre. But Cresseida gave it away anyway. "High Lords have gone to war for less, you know. Doing it over such an *unusual* female would be nothing unexpected."

Unusual - a compliment and a marking, as if Feyre were Other or unwelcome. Oh yes, Cresseida was going to be *very* fun to crack. She at least had the spice Tarquin lacked as High Lord. And the way her cousin seemed to brush her off so easily, well - I'd know where to hit. And feel guilty for doing so after.

All eyes somehow turned to Feyre, giving me free reign to watch Cresseida and gage her reaction as Feyre leaned forward and uttered, without missing a beat, "Try not to look too excited, princess. The High Lord of Spring has no plans to go to war with the Night Court." Cresseida leaned forward herself, her tongue leaping from her lips with a trap at every syllable.

This was almost better than Cassian and Nesta, Mother above.

"And are you in contact with Tamlin, then?"

Again, Feyre didn't balk. My mate was her own weapon, free to blow holes and sink ships wherever she pleased. "There are things that are public knowledge, and things that are not. My relationship with him is well known. Its current standing, however, is none of your concern. Or anyone else's. But I do know Tamlin, and I know that there will be no internal war between courts - at least not over me, or *my* decisions."

A little thrill went through me then, even as Cresseida prepared another barbed insult to throw at Feyre. Finally - *this* felt familiar. This felt almost... normal, in a sick and twisted kind of way. I'd played these games all my life and had perfected my match play for the past fifty years.

Cassian and Nesta were all heat and emotion flooding between them. Instinct. But this was sword play - one move countered carefully by another. A game I had mastered, and Feyre too, now, it seemed.

How *good* it felt. Like a welcome home.

To a home I had sorely missed.

"What a relief, then," Cresseida said. The crab on her plate cracked like a broken bone beneath her touch, the snaps sounding in time with her words. She drank greedily from her glass and I could sense both Tarquin and Varian tensing, and yet neither of them bothered to cut Cresseida off as they waited for her to finish her sip. "To know we are not harboring a stolen bride - and that we need not bother returning her to her master, as the law demands. And as any wise person might do, to keep trouble from their doorstep."

Amren was as angry as I should have, perhaps, felt. But the lady of Adriata was nothing compared to Amarantha. I found myself truly disinterested in her idle threat.

Let Tamlin come. He would not like what he would find waiting for him, a greeting far unfriendlier than the one Tarquin had bestowed upon me thus far.

Feyre seemed to agree. "I left of my own free will," she said. "And no one is my master."

"Think that all you want, lady," the title sounding dismissive, "but the law is the law. You are - were his bride. Swearing fealty to another High Lord does not change that." A half truth. Feyre had sworn no such fealty - nor would I ever ask her to - and we'd done everything 'by the book' as Mor had said. She was free, tradition and laws be damned. At this point, Cresseida was just playing with what she thought was food. "So it is a very good thing that he respects your decisions. Otherwise, all it would take would be one letter from him to Tarquin, requesting your return, and we would have to obey. Or risk war ourselves."

Part of me hoped Cresseida was there the day we did meet Tamlin again, for almost inevitably we would, and I would relish the look on her face when Feyre shredded him to pieces - claws or no.

"You are always a joy, Cresseida," I said blandly, eyeing my wine.



“Careful, High Lord.” Varian’s voice, so rare and collected, bid me look up. “My sister speaks the truth.” Cresseida sat tall and proud in the wake of her brother’s defense.

But it was Tarquin, her High Lord, who drowned her out. Both of them.

“Rhysand is our guest - his courtiers are our guests. And we will treat them as such. We will treat them, Cresseida, as we treat people who saved our necks when all it would have taken was one word from them for us to be very, very dead.” He turned back to me - and Feyre. I remained carefully unfeeling, but inside, his words rang a truth that captured me.

This was the High Lord who saw the broken and insisted on justice. The High Lord of Summer who saw more in the lesser. He didn’t need centuries of experience to earn my respect for that. He was already more than ahead on that count.

It would be a miserable dishonor to betray him, I realized - any of my personal sentiments over Feyre aside.

“We have more to discuss later, you and I,” he said directly to me. And the way he spoke - so sincerely and regally - for a moment, none other was present save two recovering High Lords trying to save their kingdoms the best way they knew how. Perhaps the only ones in all of Prythian. “Tonight, I’m throwing a party for you all on my pleasure barge in the bay. After that, you’re free to roam in this city wherever you wish. You will forgive its princess if she is protective of her people. Rebuilding these months has been long and hard. We do not wish to do it again any time soon.”

And what was interesting was the hurt that flashed in Cresseida’s eyes as her cousin spoke. Not from the losses her court had suffered, but the dismissal of her own opinion and authority sentenced by her cousin.

Such a different dynamic between them when sat next to myself and my own cousin - Mor, who I might bicker and battle with behind closed doors, but never would I dismiss so clearly in front of another court. Cresseida, for all her strengths and powers that filled in Tarquin’s gaps, was still a princess in this land.

At home, Morrigan was a Queen.

I simmered into my wine glass. I knew exactly how I’d get under Cresseida’s skin tonight. She would be angry afterward, and I didn’t like it one bit. But... so be it.

I felt suddenly less poorly about the idea when Tarquin offered a personal coo to Feyre. “Cresseida made many sacrifices on behalf of her people,” he said, and Cresseida might as well have not even been at the table. “Do not take her caution personally.”

No - it was as though *I* may as well have been absent from the table.

“We all made sacrifices,” I said, letting a little bit of the sting pierce through. She was not his mate to defend. She was -

*Mine* .

“And you now sit at this table with your family because of the ones Feyre made. So you will forgive *me* , Tarquin, if I tell your princess that if she sends word to Tamlin, or if any of your people try to bring her to him, their lives will be forfeit.”

Tarquin himself must have cut the air from the room. But the ocean was still distinguishable - salt and sea and citrus, second nature to me. I felt the starlight flicker through my eyes as the Lord of Summer leveled a stare containing the heat of the sun at the Lord of Night.

“Do not threaten me in my own home, Rhysand,” Tarquin said. “My gratitude goes only so far.”

*Good* , I thought. *You can play games too* .

“It’s not a threat,” I said, enjoying Cresseida’s *near* jump when the crab claws on my plate cracked seemingly of their own will, my hands no where near the plate. “It’s a promise.”

As though he needed some kind of permission not to fight, Tarquin turned to Feyre after we held each other’s gaze for only so long. Feyre caught my eye, and whether she did it intentionally or not, I felt the bond dance between us.

“No wonder immortality never gets dull,” Feyre said.

Our game. We were playing this game together, my mate and I.

And she was *magnificent* at it.

## Chapters 33-34: To the Stars Who Listen

### Chapter Summary

Rhys's jealousy over seeing Feyre with Tarquin gets the better of him. After a night of flirting with Cresseida for information and being ignored by Feyre at breakfast, Rhys finds himself breaking down some of the emotional barriers in Feyre's room.

I went to Feyre's room looking for a friend, someone to talk to.

Or at least, that's what I told myself as I opened the door to the sunlit room that interconnected with mine. Bright seafoam green dripped from the walls and ceiling, a soft compliment to the dress Feyre had chosen for the day.

She looked up at me from the dresser she was about to go through or maybe just had. I shut the door in a bit of a frenzy. "The problem, I've realized, will be that I like Tarquin," I said. "I even like Cresseida. Varian, I could live without," he wasn't nearly as lively as sister and she wasn't nearly as clever as him, "but I bet a few weeks with Cassian and Azriel, and he'd be thick as thieves with them and I'd have to learn to like him. Or he'd be wrapped around Amren's finger, and I'd have to leave him alone entirely or risk her wrath."

I felt like I'd been talking way too quickly. I hadn't bothered with my room while I gave Feyre time to sort herself out in hers. Pacing had been all I could abate myself with after Tarquin had seen himself off to prepare for this evening on his barge. I'd wanted to rip my shirt in two as if I could shed the very skin beneath it.

Tarquin was decent. He was kind. And he was just. Lunch had shown me that enough. He was a good High Lord, who cared about his people. And Cassian was right - we risked a lot against him coming here.

"And?" Feyre said, leaning against the dresser. Her expression was bland - too much like the mask she'd had at lunch. The one she'd been so generous with where Tarquin was concerned.

"And," I said, looking for my friend in that pretty freckled face, "I want you to find a way to do what you have to do without making enemies of them."

"So you're telling me don't get caught."

I nodded, and realized I was staring at her exactly the way Tarquin had all through the afternoon. Now that I was alone with her again, the mate bond inside me plucked carefully along the strings tuning my blood. "Do you like that Tarquin can't stop looking at you?" I said, unable to help myself. Feyre's head turned sharply, her eyes steady on mine. "I can't tell

if it's because he wants you, or because he knows you have his power and wants to see how much."

"Can't it be both?"

"Of course. But having a High Lord lusting after you is a dangerous game."

Feyre's facade finally caved in a little, her tone dropping a bit tired. "First you taunt me with Cassian, now Tarquin? Can't you find other ways to annoy me?"

*I don't want to annoy you, Feyre. I want to -*

I took an automatic step to cut the thought off in my head. On edge - I was so completely on edge here. Having Feyre around my brothers, males I trusted heart and soul, was one thing. But around Tarquin - would she actually be interested?

Would *he* ?

I braced a hand over either side of Feyre's head against the dresser. And was pleased when she didn't lean into the drawers away from me as I held her gaze fast and sure.

I knew exactly what I wanted. And what did Feyre want? My court was on the line for this, depended on what she did.

Maybe it wasn't the mate bond driving me half as insane as I'd imagined. Maybe it was the feeling that for once, I wasn't the one determining the future of my lands. Feyre was.

"You have one task here, Feyre," I said. "One task that no one can know about. So do anything you have to in order to accomplish it. But get that book. And do not get caught."

Feyre's chin dipped lower towards her chest, the grey of her eyes twinkling. "*Anything?*" she asked me, causing my brow to lift at the suggestion. Her voice became breathy - sensual. As she thought of *him* . "If I fucked him for it, what would you do?"

When Feyre finished the question, it wasn't the High Lord of the Night Court, nor even her friend who reacted. It was that same primal beast who prowled beneath my skin, the one I'd felt walking the breezeways as another male looked at my mate.

A rush of blood moved through me, making my muscles tense. Indeed the wood on the dresser groaned beneath my hands as I fought off the urge to let predatory instinct take over and unleash my talons so I could protect what *felt* like mine, even if it really wasn't.

And that mouth of hers - the things it said, the things it might *do* .

And I knew right then looking at it *exactly* what I would do if Tarquin fucked her. And I wasn't proud of it.

"You say such atrocious things," I said, the closest I could manage to confronting the issue that burned up the mere inches separating us without seizing her lips then and there. I held off

a moment longer to finish swallowing my pride. “You are always free to do what you want, with whomever you want. So if you want to ride him, go ahead.”

Somehow, the words costed me a great deal more than they had when I’d teased Feyre with Cassian outside the Weaver’s cottage.

And Feyre knew it. “Maybe I will,” she said, keeping hold of my gaze.

Our lips were close, her forehead nearly touching mine. She was smaller and larger than me at the same time with all that power rolling about under her skin, drifting off of her in waves. It drove me mad.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine.” She didn’t move at all.

Neither of us did. “Do not jeopardize this mission.”

And I swore I could see the sea itself rise up in a wave within those eyes of hers, washing the grey away into that bright crystalline blue that appeared when she felt too much. This was the first time ‘too much’ had felt *good* rather than worrisome.

There was a candle sitting on her dresser. I motioned toward it, but didn’t take my eyes off her. “Light it,” I challenged.

Feyre lingered on me for an added second, and then looked at the candle. Her body hummed with the power, so strong I felt as though I could reach out and taste it straight off her tongue. She looked at the candle, her mind reaching for that glowing power of the Autumn Court, but a tidal wave rose, crested, and fell with a mighty crash instead.

The dresser was soaked, never mind the candle.

Feyre finally didn’t look quite so incensed at me as she took in the mess. I laughed. “Can’t you ever follow orders?”

A million beads of water rose gracefully into the air around us sparkling like diamonds. I almost stepped back as I took the sight of them in. They were gentle. Peaceful. And looked of everything I felt when the Darkness was all around me.

A gift to Feyre from another High Lord - one Feyre found herself inclined toward.

She had never summoned darkness so easily, nor even at all, after days in the Night Court. Yet here she was not even two hours in the Summer Court with a different sea and salt scent drifting out of her.

“I suggest you not show Tarquin that little trick in the bedroom,” I said, and felt all of those glimmering beadlets pummel me before I could so much as blink.

Playful. But also irritated. And somewhat dismissive.

But it was still Feyre and her radiant energy, as ever, as I stared open mouthed at her and willed a smile.

Perhaps I had been wrong to come here thinking I would not look for more than my friend - my ally from Under the Mountain - to share the weight pressing in on me from every turn, without feeling consumed by the heat and the lust and the bond threading up and down my soul.

“Good work,” I said. “Keep practicing.” I pushed off roughly from the dresser, needing and hating the distance from her all at the same time. Cauldron, there still wasn’t much separating us.

“Will he go to war? Over me?”

Water slid softly down my skin, caressing my cheeks, sticking to my skin underneath my tunic as I stalled.

A lifetime of High Lords chasing her. That was the fate that awaited Feyre however long she stayed with me in the Night Court. Or even here if she were ever to find a home with Summer. Tamlin might one day fade away entirely from her vision, but who would rise up to grapple for her then?

And would I be able to help? Would she even factor me into her equation?

Was it right that I even wanted her to when I knew the risks.

Azriel would send word if Tamlin grew too restless so long as we visited Tarquin. Though the borders of the Spring Court remained sealed, my brother would find a way to know if danger became imminent. The question now was - would Tamlin dare?

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

The heated temper that had been blooming in Feyre simmered down as she understood my answer. “I - I would go back,” she said. “If it came to that, Rhysand. I’d go back, rather than make you fight.”

My lungs tightened. At the certainty in her words despite the way they trembled at first. She meant it and would not retreat, whatever it may cost her.

I knew. I would do the same thing when it came down to it for my crown.

My pocket made a faint squishing sound as I slid a hand inside to steady myself. “Would you *want* to go back?” I asked. I needed to know, just as much for myself as for her. If it came to this one day - I couldn’t let the beast inside me win out over Feyre’s decision. “Would going to war on your behalf make you love him again? Would that be a grand gesture to win you?”

The sound of Feyre’s breathing grew unsteady in my ears. “I’m tired of death. I wouldn’t want to see anyone else die - least of all for me.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

A brief pause.

“No. I wouldn’t want to go back. But I would. Pain and killing wouldn’t win me.”

She wasn’t scared anymore. She was past that now. Tamlin couldn’t contain what Feyre had already become during her brief departure. And she wasn’t even quite tired the way she had once been. Feyre could do and burn and build now without falling down even if she felt like she couldn’t.

But what Feyre had become was cognizant enough to see the corruption around her and admit it was neither what she wanted nor what she deserved. And that she wouldn’t stand for it just because her heart beckoned her to.

That was why Tamlin had balked at letting her too far in. In a way, he had never lied to her. Losing Feyre to the outside world was a loss he truly wasn’t willing to suffer, even if it killed her in the end anyway.

A part of me wondered what would have happened if Amarantha had met this Feyre Under the Mountain - the one who walked in not in the name of love, but simply in the name of truth. This girl who was bright and full of pleasure and cunning, and so many hidden lights that it made Prythian too awful to deserve hosting Feyre’s human heart.

That world included me.

I walked away from Feyre, both wanting and denying. Pieces of myself littered the floor in the wake of my steps.

“He locked you up because he knew - the bastard knew what a treasure you are,” I said, pausing at the door. Feyre’s brow furrowed. “That you are worth more than land or gold or jewels. He knew, and wanted to keep you all to himself.”

Feyre spoke at once, but her posture slumped against the dresser as though even she didn’t quite believe what she was saying. “He did - does love me, Rhysand.”

*Rhysand .*

She said my full name in ways that were not intimate, were not familiar. Ways that put an ocean between us inside a single room.

“The issue isn’t whether he loved you, it’s how much. Too much. Love can be a poison.”

I couldn’t bother with door. Instead I winnowed, before that very same poison Tamlin and I both suffered the effects of could sink its fangs into my bones too deeply for me to come crawling back again.

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I’d told Feyre love could be a poison, for feeling it too much.

*Too much.*

That's what I felt in the Summer Court as Tarquin sidled up to Feyre almost as soon as we met on the barge upon that calm, luminous sea of his after sundown. Feyre accepted his hand to the dinner table, looking radiant in golds and pinks that made her skin appear sun-kissed, fresh from a day spent under open skies.

So when I followed their path, and intentionally took a seat next to Cresseida preparing for the evening to come, I cut off whatever I could feel of the bond. Didn't listen as Feyre engaged Tarquin in conversation I couldn't stomach. Didn't watch them once so long as she sat there and Feyre let Tarquin undoubtedly stare at her.

Easy. It was so easy for him. To earn her trust, her respect.

No one would ever think ill of the High Lord of Summer as they would the Demon of the Night.

Cresseida did enough staring for the both of us to be miserable the entire night anyway. I waited a few minutes to see what she might do with me sitting next to her, sipping wine as though it tasted dull and flat. If she initiated any interest in me at all, I wouldn't be able to go through with it. I didn't need Amarantha's voice cackling in my ear to know so.

But she didn't. She just stared at her cousin, and occasionally looked up to scan the room for Varian or some such acquaintance I couldn't fathom.

Maybe it was wrong to take advantage of her loneliness. Especially when I felt it so keenly myself. And maybe it was worse to *know* that I was taking advantage, letting the idea of Feyre spending the night tucked against the body of the male sitting down the table from me spurring me further in to it.

Either way, there were things I needed to know. So I took a sip of wine and settled my tongue.

"No young paramour to accompany you tonight, Princess?" I kept my voice a low easy tease. Cresseida didn't take her eyes off of Feyre.

"Don't flatter me when your pet is sitting across the table, Rhysand." I supposed that's what I got for calling her nicknames.

"Feyre is law unto herself, as I think you discovered at our lovely little lunch this morning."

"Is that why you looked so decidedly bored at lunch? Not yet won her heart? And here I was thinking you found us all as dull as you do anyone not of your own court." She drowned herself in a deep sip of her wine, colored a dark red stain.

"And where might you have heard that little untruth, hmm?"

Cresseida snorted, a scowl written across her face. "Please. Your reputation precedes you."

She probably expected me to dismiss her then, the same way her own flesh and blood continued to do. To say that she had her own reputation and it was equally disenchanting. Which was precisely why that tactic wouldn't get me anywhere past the frigid exterior.



I shifted in my seat, leaning gracefully over so that my lips were a breath away from her ear, and purred, "That's not the only reputation I'm known for, *Princess* ." I pulled back. Only enough to keep our chairs distinctly separate.

Cresseida arched one single, solitary brow against her dark skin, her eyes - vibrant even in the dim lighting - sliding to find me smirking at her. Her long silver hair fell evenly down to her breasts. "Is that so?" I picked casually at the cuffs of my tunic, toying with a stray thread or some such thing. Cresseida sunk back into her own chair. "I don't believe I'm well versed in that reputation. You'll have to fill me in, *High Lord* ."

A feline smirk. "You may call me Rhys."

"Charmed, I'm sure."

"Most women are. You being the exception, I think."

"You have to ask?"

"I'd like to find out."

Her eyes flashed, and she quickly reached for her wine glass and took another long sip. "You're horribly obnoxious, but I trust you know that already."

Tarquin chuckled across the table. I decided then was an excellent opportunity to run a finger along Cresseida's hand that rested on the table, tracing the delicate bones beneath with my fingertips. Cresseida stilled.

"Another reputation I'm well known for, I'm afraid. But can you blame me? Especially when I was privileged to hear so little from that delightful mind of yours at lunch."

Cresseida stared for one very long moment at her cousin before deciding. And for the first time all evening, I followed that gaze down the table to where Feyre was looking at the High Lord of Summer with something like admiration.

"Tell me what that look means," Tarquin asked her.

"I'm thinking it would be very easy to love you. And easier to call you my friend," Feyre replied, her eyes swimming like moonlight on a lake.

Easy. For Tarquin alone, Feyre would easily give her heart away. Which meant I would have to crawl through blood and tears and sweat to have a chance at it, as I did through all of history for anything I wanted.

I should never have listened, even for those few brief moments. The damage done was enough.

*Too much* .

Cresseida's fingers lifted gently, giving a little thrum along the table, her mind made up. I continued my tracing along her skin.

“There aren’t many men who care to hear what my mind has to say these days,” she said, finally dragging her eyes away from Tarquin and Feyre, whom I sensed were amusing themselves well in a less deceptive, ridiculous way.

“Many men are past idiocy. Women, too, I’d imagine, to dare handle someone with such candor.”

“So it’s true then?” she asked, the purr in her voice beginning to match my own as her fingers danced beneath mine. “You are not afraid of the Lion of Spring set forth to retrieve his bride from the Lord of Night?”

“I’m far more concerned with the Siren of Summer, if you must know, Cresseida.” My fingers gave a little squeeze.

She smiled then - not nearly so feline as my own smirking had been. But soft and pleased. Enjoying the attention she never received elsewhere, even if she still suspected its sincerity. Her fingers curled into mine. I gave her a cocky smile in return, the one only Illyrians used when they caught the scent of something they liked.

Nevermind that the something I liked was sitting across the table dressed in shades of the sunset, while Cresseida made for a dashing distraction in wit and temper.

She would hate me for deceiving her like this, if she ever found out. Tarquin and Varian’s own wrath wouldn’t even compare to what Cresseida would harbor in her heart for betraying her trust, the one thing I think she valued more than all else. Someone to believe in her.

Her feet curled up under her as she leaned in, her fingers toying with me just as much as mine did her. When she returned the favor of speaking so seductively in my ear, I could feel her lips just brush my skin. “What worries you so, Lord of Night, that you would run from a siren in the sea?”

Sadness - looming and great opened up in front of me as Feyre jumped from her seat, disturbing the table. I moved only enough to look at her, register that she had suddenly moved, and felt one last flicker of unhappiness before she was on her feet again leaving the room, the bond going still again.

I wasn’t sure what it meant. And I wasn’t going to care. I was too exhausted to care. Too isolated, too lonely to let that ache inside my chest plague me more than necessary whilst we stayed here, subjected to feeling the mate bond slap me in the face repeatedly.

If Feyre could have a fuck with Tarquin, she could handle a night of dealing with the repercussions of that relationship without it breaking me too.

I had work to attend to for my crown anyway.

“What do I have to fear from a siren of the sea?” I said with a chuckle as Feyre walked away, leaving my heart behind but far from peace. “Oh a great many things I’m sure. Perhaps... you could enlighten me.”

Cresseida watched me ravenously. She'd ask me to bed by the end of the night, I was sure. I tried to focus on the fact that I wasn't obliged to go through with it to stem the sick feeling twisting in my gut from rising.

"What did you have in mind precisely?"

My lips curled sweetly into a smile as I let starlight dust my eyes and damn my nerve. "Care for a drink, princess?"

---

She wasn't at breakfast.

I took my time working through the various jams and breads that had been set out, listening to Cresseida continue the stories she had left off on last night. I liked Cresseida well enough, but I was too bored with her voice to care and too distracted by Feyre's absence to really deign a reply.

She'd taken me out into the city, to one of her favorite drinking spots - a restaurant she'd taken a particular interest in renovating when the city resumed its agency after Amarantha's fall. It overlooked the bay. We could see Tarquin's ship docking from the open terrace of the bar that had something like coral climbing over the columns of the open facade.

While Cresseida looked more than disappointed when I politely refused her invitation to bed later that evening, it seemed my willingness to give her a listening ear for an evening would keep me in her good graces - for now.

So I let her prattle on while I waited for Feyre, wondering if Tarquin had stayed with her after the ship had turned in for the night. The Lord of Summer himself looked bright-eyed and full of sunshine when I met him with Amren and Varian for our morning meeting.

But Feyre never appeared all morning even after I'd stayed late to enjoy a long breakfast. Nor did she come at lunch.

So I was forced to wait for her until her scheduled appointment with Tarquin finally arrived.

I didn't like that he was there - or anyone else for that matter. Cresseida was a little sharper again when we sat down to meet with her cousin and brother, and have our first formal discussion of court politics and the war to come. It was uncomfortable sitting next to them, a sorrowful affair keeping the mask up and knowing where Feyre would take it next when Tarquin took her on her tour.

The discussion was smooth, though not without the same snap and petty commentary we endured at meals with one another. And there was a willingness from Tarquin to cooperate that I found myself returning, and cursing myself for it if everything went horribly wrong.

We met Feyre in the main hall after our little chat. She was already there waiting. Styled in an endearing shade of seafoam green in a dress that twirled around her, Feyre looked bright. Too bright, I noted. As though something were changed inside her. Tarquin stepped before her in

a tunic of nearly identical styling and it was then I noticed - saw the sunlight bounce between them, tying them together.

A heavy weight fell into the pit of my stomach, a little lump of teeth and claws and a feeling much too sharp to be simple annoyance.

“You’re looking well today,” Tarquin said with a chipper voice.

*The voice Feyre said she could love - easily.*

*But also the one you could befriend yourself, jackass.*

Feyre finally made to turn her head, but her eyes found Amren. Not mine. “I hope I’m not interrupting,” she said.

“We were finishing up a rather lively debate about armadas and who might be in charge of a unified front,” Amren said with her usual cool. “Did you know that before they became so big and powerful, Tarquin and Varian led Nostrus’s fleet?”

Yes, Amren. Because Feyre needed yet another reason to be enamored of the High Lord. As if on queue, Feyre looked delighted with this new piece of information.

“You didn’t mention you were a sailor,” she said, her eyes lighting up. Tarquin had the decency to look embarrassed.

“I had planned to tell you during our tour. Shall we?” He offered his arm and my stomach flipped, turning the beast inside of it upside down with rage. I shouldn’t have felt so incensed. Mate or not, Feyre was free to do as she pleased, but she hadn’t even *looked* at me, and now she was taking his arm and leaving without sparing me a second thought.

Was this punishment for ignoring her at dinner? Was this what she thought I deserved for playing so many cruel and wicked games with a man she could come to call friend or lover?

I found myself leaning forward, willing her to stay. To at least say hello, that we were still okay. To not walk off so easily with this other male who didn’t have to ask for her hand to receive it.

But all Feyre did was call, “See you later,” throwing her words carelessly over her shoulder as if she knew it would wound me.

It worked.

The beast burst from my stomach and clawed viciously at Feyre’s mind, to beg her to at least be careful, but I was met with a wall of glistening adamant that locked me straight out.

And she knew it. I knew she could feel me at the edges of her mind trying to get in. Feyre turned her head like she might acknowledge me, make some comment -

*Calm down you stupid prick...*

But she stopped when her eyes reached Tarquin, and then she *smiled* . Smiled like the sun and it was all the things that had been missing from her life - the fun, the radiance, the simple joy in living with someone close to you.

Feyre smiled - for another male who was not her mate.

The beast inside me didn't back off so much as die completely as I watched her walk away into the day, and get swept up by the seaside and its hidden treasures.

---

The second I could free myself of our Summer Court hosts, I stalked inside Feyre's room to wait for her. Amren, with her careless daring, had sensed my discomfort and attempted to convince me I should tell Feyre about the bond then and there. "Get it over with," she'd said. "You'll feel better." As if revealing the deepest, most intimate parts of myself were something to throw about with Feyre, no harder than ripping off a bandage.

"You don't just get it over with with a mating bond, Amren," I'd snarled in her face, before marching into Feyre's room and snapping the door shut. She would probably have slashed my face in half if I hadn't gone inside.

I didn't care. I was going mad inside waiting for Feyre, the mate bond gnawing on me every single second she was gone - with *him* . Risking her heart and the future of my court with whatever charms she laid.

No wonder my father hadn't waited so much as a day to take my mother back to Velaris be his bride.

They took their time touring the treasures and each tick of the clock was another chance for me to guess at how Tarquin might enthrall Feyre and bring her under his spell. I didn't even remember the Book she was supposed to be tracking. All I could think about was the two of them finding themselves wrapped up together in the most intimate positions.

Just as I thought I might become sick with the thought of Tarquin's hands on Feyre's skin, I scented her approach. I threw myself on her bed, my arms propped casually behind my head as if I had belonged here all along. The devious creature inside me settled in atop the sheets and argued that indeed I did belong right here - in Feyre's bed.

I closed my eyes satisfied as Feyre walked in briskly. Let her see how she liked being toyed with.

"What do you want?" Feyre snapped, allowing the door to slam shut behind her. I smiled, selfishly glad of her immediate annoyance.

"Flirting with Tarquin did you no good, I take it?" I asked, voice smooth as honey.

A box landed roughly on the bed next to me. "You tell me."

"This isn't the Book," I said, looking at the necklace housed within its little velvet nest. It was, of course, stunning. And Tarquin had just *given* it to her?

“No, but it’s a beautiful gift.”

Her casual dismissal set me off. All at once, that primal, restless creature I had thought dead at Feyre’s smile roared to life within me once more, pushing and pulling on my tongue.

“You want me to buy you jewelry, Feyre, then say the word. Though given your wardrobe, I thought you were aware that it was all bought for you.” I didn’t even care that my anger was ripping through the edges of my voice. For her part, Feyre sounded tired through the veil of her annoyance with me.

“Tarquin is a good male - a good High Lord. You should just ask him for the damned Book.”

I snapped the box shut, nearly shattering it from the force of my hands in the process. I was surprised the darkness had not come for how upset I felt hearing her defend *him*. He’d done nothing. Tarquin had done *nothing*. “So he plies you with jewels and pours honey in your ear, and now you feel bad?”

“He wants your alliance - desperately. He wants to trust you, rely on you.”

“Well, Cresseida is under the impression that her cousin is rather ambitious, so I’d be careful to read between his words.”

A look flashed in Feyre’s eyes, so fast I almost missed it. But it spelled out her own sort of rage curled within in her chest. I felt a ripple of her power underneath her skin as she snapped, “Oh? Did she tell you that before, during, or after you took her to bed?”

I looked up sharply.

So that was it then? She didn’t like me playing with *Cresseida*? But surely she saw it for the act it was? Had our time Under the Mountain and in Velaris shown her nothing if not that much? What I wouldn’t do to protect my court?

Had I not flirted and pushed and poured enough heat between us that she’d know I couldn’t possibly want another woman but her?

Distantly, I was aware of the cackling reply Amren would have given me followed by a curt, “No, boy,” if she’d heard me ask the question. Mor would have backed her up on it.

I rose from the bed slowly, trying miserably to appear collected. “Is that why you wouldn’t look at me? Because you think I fucked her for information?”

“Information or your own pleasure, I don’t care.” There was enough bite to confirm that Feyre really *was* pissed about my evening. The beast inside me writhed with delight. The very idea that Feyre might be jealous to any extent was a thunderous sound in my ears.

Feyre hated me, or at least... she had before.

But I didn’t think - I never thought she could feel... not about me. Not when I was working so damned hard just for a *look* or a smile. Just one fucking smile.

The bond drove me to her, putting barely any space left between us. “Jealous, Feyre?” I purred, my eyes gleaming against her as she stared me down.

“If I’m jealous,” she said, “then you’re jealous about Tarquin and his honey pouring.”

I almost erupted on the spot with every ounce of night and darkness available to me.

“Do you think I particularly like having to flirt with a lonely female to get information about her court, her High Lord?” I demanded. “Do you think I feel good about myself, doing that? Do you think I enjoy doing it just so you have the space to ply Tarquin with your smiles and pretty eyes, so we can get the Book and go home?”

“You seemed to enjoy yourself plenty last night.”

“I didn’t take her to bed,” I snarled. I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation. Was this how Cassian had felt sparring with Nesta? “She wanted to, but I didn’t so much as kiss her. I took her out for a drink in the city, let her talk about her life, her pressures, and brought her back to her room, and went no farther than the door.”

The words spilled out my mouth, my breathing uneven as I became unhinged, Feyre watching me with widening eyes and dawning comprehension. “I waited for you at breakfast, but you slept in. Or avoided me, apparently. And I tried to catch your eye this afternoon, but you were so good at shutting me out completely.”

*I tried , I wanted to say. I tried so damned hard to make this easier for you even while it felt like it was killing me to have her wrapped up in my seat while you were so close by with him. I’m trying every day just to get a glimpse of what you’re giving so freely to everyone else but can’t find space in your heart to give to me because I’ve become that much of a mess.*

Feyre grew very still, surveying me, taking in the wildness she wasn’t used to seeing from me. I’d hardly been this unhinged in front of her - in front of anyone except Mor on select occasions. “Is that what got under your skin? That I shut you out, or that it was so easy for Tarquin to get in?” she asked, hesitant.

Yes.

No.

All of it.

Everything.

*Mine .*

“What got under my skin is that you smiled for him,” I said, choking on the words. The creature inside me went limp.

I wanted her. Cauldron, I wanted her so badly and I couldn’t have her. That was really all there was to it. I had fought tooth and nail for that smile for months and she had given it to Tarquin in less than two days.

“You are jealous,” she said with a small voice. Her lips seemed to quiver, her eyes sympathetic.

*Of course I am, Feyre. I’m your mate.*

*But it’s your choice - always your choice.*

I would not be Tamlin.

I slumped and made for the bar table in the corner of Feyre’s room, throwing back a drink as wings threatened to form at my back. My control over my body felt tenuous at best, a feeling that unsettled me, I was so depleted.

Maybe Mor and Amren were right. Cassian too. Maybe being more honest with Feyre to take care of myself wasn’t something to feel so guilty about. I threw back another sip of alcohol and let the burn out of my lungs.

“I heard what you told him,” I said. “That you thought it would be easy to fall in love with him. You meant it, too.”

“So?” Feyre asked and my mind was filled with nothing but that smile she had given the High Lord of the Summer Court. It could burn my mind to pieces for centuries to come as easily as the smile itself had been given.

“I was jealous - of that,” I explained. “That I’m not... that sort of person. For anyone. The Summer Court has always been neutral; they only showed backbone during those years Under the Mountain. I spared Tarquin’s life because I’d heard how he wanted to even out the playing field between High Fae and lesser faeries. I’ve been trying to do that for years. Unsuccessfully, but... I spared him for that alone. And Tarquin, with his neutral court... he will never have to worry about someone walking away because the threat against their life, their children’s lives, will always be there. So, yes, I was jealous of him - because it will always be easy for him. And he will never know what it is to look up at the night sky and wish.”

I didn’t think Feyre had been expecting that.

There was a silence that filled that bright, tranquil room and when Feyre came to stand next to me, my heart in her hands, I could see a redness gathering on the rims of her eyes.

Broken. We were both so broken in so many ways fighting for the only truths we had left to protect. But she understood me - or part of me. And knew that I had let her see something profoundly vulnerable that few others ever bore witness to.

I watched as Feyre simply poured herself a drink and then refilled my own before she met my eyes. Compassion burned into that gaze, deep and permanent, reassuring me I was not the only lonely dreamer there.

“To the people who look at the stars and wish, Rhys,” she toasted.



It was hard not to feel so much of that solemn gloom still, but I clinked my glass with Feyre's in spite of it anyhow and toasted back, "To the stars who listen - and the dreams that are answered."

For once, it felt like someone was out there listening to every word we said.

## Chapters 35-37: Not A Game

### Chapter Summary

Rhys helps Amren and Feyre not get caught while stealing the book from Tarquin.

Feyre wore quite the number to dinner two days after our little heart-to-heart. And I wasn't sorry she did.

I only saw her in the evenings. When I'd come visit her room with Amren to debrief the day's meetings and check-in on where we stood with the Book of Breathings. Feyre had found nothing thus far and Varian's commentary on armada fleets was still dry as toast.

But the meetings kept Feyre free of Tarquin - and Cresseida, who watched her like a hawk. We seemed to have come to some sort of mutual understanding since I'd snapped in her bedroom and Feyre didn't seem to mind so much how much time I kept with Cresseida just as I didn't mind so much when Tarquin's gaze consumed her over dinner.

It was simply work now. Even the delicate, smokey grey dress hugging Feyre tightly as the gift from Tarquin she'd shown me wrapped a pretty little bow around her neck on full display. All of it work.

I'd been taking meetings with Tarquin and his family when a soft knock tapped on my shields, a knock that carried the pine and sunshine of Feyre with it. I offered her a sliver to curl her fingers into and received a brief vision of an old, tired building out on a tiny island of sand half buried by the tide. That was all she handed over before she slipped outside again and I knew.

She'd found where the Book of Breathings was hidden - or at least, where she thought it was.

And Nuala had certainly done her job well helping Feyre to confirm it. Tarquin had looked smug every time he admired the jewels glittering around her throat over cocktails and appetizers infused by the sea.

But I had a feeling Feyre wouldn't have needed the necklace, nor the dress. She was a marvel all through dinner on her own, dancing past Cresseida's frosty exterior until it had melted into a cool regard, as well as Varian's feeble attempts at biting back commentary in all the wrong places. And the stories she wove about her day in the city were smooth and well inflected enough that Tarquin was charmed before he'd finished his first glass of wine.

*I* was charmed just watching her orchestrate it all. She was so focused now that she'd scented blood in the water.

“You ate it right there,” Tarquin said, complete surprise when Feyre revealed she’d eaten fish straight from the docks that day. Her face was all aglow. Tarquin may have wanted to marry her right then.

I suppressed a sigh.

Soon we’d get the book. Soon we’d betray these kind, welcoming people and repay their hospitality with lies and grievances. I hoped very much - for their sake - that Feyre didn’t fail getting in and out of that house out to sea undetected.

I leaned forward instead, chin on my fist as I rejected dinner altogether to listen. Feyre was much more delicious anyway. “They fried it with the other fishermen’s lunches,” Feyre said proudly. “Didn’t charge me extra for it.” Tarquin roared with laughter.

“I can’t say I’ve ever done that - sailor or no.”

“You should. It was delicious.”

“Well, maybe I’ll go tomorrow. If you’ll join me.”

This time, I didn’t mind so much when Feyre smiled at him, her grin stretching ear to ear. She’d told me this was difficult on her. It was difficult for me too. And the smiles... maybe I had been too caught up in them to realize she felt the weights of this mission as keenly as I did.

And even if it was for another male or for work or just for the hell of it, what did it matter? Feyre was radiant. And I hadn’t given her enough credit in this. That should have been enough.

Feyre was also acutely nervous. I returned to my plate, eyeing a particularly fat prawn with more interest than was strictly necessary.

“I’d like that,” Feyre told Tarquin. She meant the words a great deal. And yet - “Perhaps we could go for a walk in the morning down the causeway when the tide is out. There’s that little building along the way - it looks fascinating.”

My eyes reached up only long enough to note the immediate exchange Tarquin held with Cresseida, who almost forgot to finish bringing her fork all the way to her mouth.

Feyre had found the first half of the Book indeed, it seemed.

“It’s a temple ruin,” Tarquin said - bored. “Just mud and seaweed at this point. We’ve been meaning to repair it for years.” I cut into my prawns carefully.

Set Nuala and Cerridwen within the castle to check rotations and layout. Amren and Feyre could monitor the perimeter. I’d circle above to check the turrets and towers.

My mind was already ablaze on instinct with strategy, years of finishing one war only to prepare for the next.

“Maybe we’ll take the bridge then,” Feyre offered. I’ve had enough of mud for a while.”

Tarquin’s eyes narrowed. And so too, did Varian’s.

I slid my claws along the interior of Varian’s and Cresseida’s minds and was startled to feel Feyre do the same to Tarquin, her mental shields breaking as she fixed her concentration solely on the Lord of Summer.

Varian and Cresseida’s barriers were like sand - densely packed, but easy to mold and sculpt with a little moisture misting over it. Their dinner plates and recollections of today’s meetings suddenly became *fascinating* as I gave a gentle, suggestive squeeze inside their minds - one I could regret later.

It was a good thing taking care of the siblings was so easy. Feyre was *quite* the distraction herself. She slipped inside of Tarquin’s mind like a glove, her fingers flexing and pulling inside the sleeves as she impressed him with his own aura of sea and sun. Until Feyre nearly *was* Tarquin - even felt like him across our bond. Her scents born of spring and earth were suddenly gone, replaced by Tarquin’s distinctive notes.

Years.

Centuries.

It should have taken *centuries* to whizz about inside his mind and reorder the thoughts and sentences to her liking before she slipped out unnoticed as she did tonight. Tarquin gave her a lazy, reverent smile. “We’ll meet after breakfast,” he said. “Unless Rhysand wants me for more meetings.”

Cauldron, he really had no idea what Feyre had just done.

She was - I didn’t know what Feyre was anymore. Any number of adjectives didn’t seem capable of describing her in person or in powers.

I waved a hand, ignoring that Cresseida and Varian still hadn’t stirred from their meals. “By all means, Tarquin, spend the day with my lady.”

I didn’t need to be jealous anymore. Feyre was on the hunt and she’d scented blood. She ignored my little remark and looked to Tarquin coolly, batting her eyes and purring like a queen.

“Tell me what there is to see on the mainland.”

Tarquin forgot all about the little shack on the causeway.

I almost did too.

---

“What a fast learner you are,” I crooned in Feyre’s doorway, after the servants and members of the palace had all retired for the evening. “It takes most daemati years to master that sort of infiltration.”

Feyre's face pinched from where she lay back on the bed, torn between pride and guilt. "You knew - that I did it?" she asked.

I affirmed that I did. "And what expert work you did, using the essence of *him* to trick his shields, to get past them... Clever lady." I wondered what essence of myself she could use to fool me. What Feyre might do if she sent a dream mighty enough to the stars for reply.

"He'll never forgive me." Her voice was barely audible. She was watching me squarely, waiting for a reprieve or a damnation.

"He'll never know. You get used to it. The sense that you're crossing a boundary, that you're violating them. For what it's worth, I didn't particularly enjoy convincing Varian and Cresseida to find other matters more interesting." Her head lolled to the side and I sagged slightly against the threshold. She should be proud of what she'd done - despite the repercussions. "If you hadn't taken care of Tarquin, the odds are we'd be knee-deep in shit right now."

"It was my fault, anyway - I was the one who asked about the temple. I was only cleaning up my own mess." Her face again pinched as she swiveled her head from side to side.

Was that what this was about? Residual guilt over whose fault it was? My stomach clenched, tingling with worry. Keeping Tarquin from the truth that could damn or save both our courts was a far cry from slaughtering innocent fae for the sake of an evil bitch's evening entertainment.

"It never does," I admitted. "Or it shouldn't. Far too many daemati lose that sense. But here - tonight... the benefits outweighed the costs."

"Is that also what you told yourself when you went into my mind? What was the benefit then?"

She sat up and waited for me to reply. Concerned, but... not quite so much for where we stood so much as where her own moral compass drew its lines.

Honesty. A little at a time. That was all Amren and Mor had asked of me, and it had worked for Feyre and I on this trip so far - to an extent.

I could offer a little more.

Pushing off the door, I held Feyre's gaze as I walked softly to the bed and sat next to her. It was the most comfortable things had felt between us since we'd arrived. That made the discourse easier. "There are parts of your mind I left undisturbed, things that belong solely to you, and always will. And as for the rest..." Her chest rose, waiting.

*Just a little more...*

My mind went rigid at those memories, those empty days and lonely nights she'd spent in the manor of Tamlin's court. But I could do it. I could tell her how I felt. "You scared the shit out of me for a long while, Feyre. Checking in that way... I couldn't very well stroll into the

Spring Court and ask how you were doing, could I?" She held absolutely immovable, and then heard Amren's approach at the same time I did. It wasn't long enough to gauge what she thought, but I wouldn't let her go all the same. "I'll explain the rest some other time."

My Second pushed through the door nonchalantly and owned Feyre's bed as she climbed atop. "It seems like a stupid place to hide a book," she said, no preamble. We might have been chatting about needlework or some such sport for all she cared.

"And the last place one would look," I said. I stood, letting Amren take my spot while I sat by the window. The sea sparkled behind me in greeting amid the waiting moonlight. Perhaps this would be the last I'd see of Adriata for a long while. I silently asked the stars that gleamed above that sea for the opposite. "They could spell it easily enough against wet and decay. A place only visible for brief moments throughout the day - when the land around it is exposed for all to see? You could not ask for a better place. We have the eyes of thousands watching us."

"So how do we get in?" Feyre asked.

"It's likely warded against winnowing. I won't risk tripping any alarms by trying. So we go in at night, the old-fashioned way. I can carry you both, then keep watch."

"Such gallantry," Amren said, "to do the easy part, then leave us helpless females to dig through the mud and seaweed."

"Someone needs to be circling high enough to see anyone approaching - or sound the alarm. And masking you from sight."

Much as I worried for alerting Tarquin, that I might never make it back to this city on friendly turns, Amren's quick wit had me missing home - missing my friends. It would be equal parts burden and freedom to remove ourselves from Tarquin's shining seaside palace.

Feyre too seemed to share that worry. She looked the most tense I'd seen her all week during our stay. "The locks respond to his touch; let's hope they respond to mine."

*They will*, I thought, thinking of how easily Tarquin himself had bent to a single caress from Feyre over dinner. I wasn't worried about Feyre anymore. It was the rest of the court who worried me.

Suddenly, I longed for the freedom of the skies.

"When do we move?" Amren asked.

I was about to jest that we should do it now, just so I could get out of this palace for a few hours to clear my head. But Feyre seemed to know just what I had in mind, answering first, "Tomorrow night. We note the guard's rotation tonight at low tide - figure out where the watchers are. Who we might need to take out before we make our move."

"You think like an Illyrian," I said, gaping a bit.

“I believe that’s supposed to be a compliment,” Amren added. I snorted. Yes, I was very much looking forward to returning home to our family, where Amren’s sharp tongue was hissing at Cassian and Azriel instead of me (most of the time).

I stood, and enjoyed the cool release of Night air under my skin as I anticipated the next several hours of work under the thought of *home*. “Nuala and Cerridwen are already on the move inside the castle. I’ll take to the skies. The two of you should go for a midnight walk - considering how hot it is.” Feyre gave me a sharp, battle ready look. Dangerously anxious - but excited.

It was the last thing I saw as I slipped outside into the seaside darkness and took to the skies.

---

I was selfishly fortunate that I did not have to endure Tarquin’s charms for the majority of the day. And that Cresseida and Varian were easier to trade jabs with and ignore.

Feyre came back when the sun was highest, looking haunted, but managed to keep up her spirits reasonably well through dinner, even as Tarquin continued to wish her well and express his sorrow we were departing on the morrow. Sorrow that was real and genuine, my gut realized, twisting in horror.

He pulled me aside in the middle of drinks afterward, and I felt like I could have been sick listening to him look out at his city the way I sometimes stared at Velaris from the House of Wind or my townhouse roof. He wanted an alliance. And freedom for not only his people, but all of Prythian.

My blood raced and I had to settle my heartbeat, lest he hear it quickening in my chest. I could have asked him then... Asked for the Book, and kept Feyre and Amren from such enormous risk the following day, but...

Tarquin’s focus was his court in front of him, those shops and towns and boats surrounding the sea. He was the same High Lord that I was - nothing if not dedicated. Which meant there was no guarantee he wouldn’t sell us out or accidentally let slip the information I’d be forced to give up in order to freely acquire his half of the book, and that was decidedly the one thing I could *not* do. It risked far, far too much.

So I focused on Feyre, keeping her upright when Tarquin kissed her cheek before bed. His eyes were so light, merry. Like he trusted us.

Feyre and Amren met in my room, dressed in fighting leathers and adorned with knives the way High Fae wore their jewels. We barely spoke. Nuala and Cerridwen had already departed. Azriel likely knew by now to expect us.

Casting my glamor over the three of us, we left the palace of Adriata in the still of night one final time, knowing we would not be back. Only the sound of the restless waves below and my wings tormenting the air behind us broke that icy silence we flew through.

Gently, I let Amren and Feyre down at the little temple out to sea, squeezing Feyre’s hand before letting go: *Don’t get caught, but please be safe.*

I didn't have to tell Amren to do the same for Feyre in return.

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I waited several long minutes in the sky, circling overhead. The guards stationed about the palace didn't so much as look in my direction as I kept watch.

Below, Feyre and Amren were quiet.

But the bond was alive with restless energy - one I didn't recognize or understand. It drove me insane waiting.

Feyre.

Amren.

The Book.

My court.

*Prythian* .

The names of places and players traded stations of importance like a shuffling dance the longer the temple door remained shut. My insides tensed, but the guards never moved. Not once.

The Book. We had to get the Book. It contained everything. It was worth Tarquin's wrath if we had to betray him. To save Prythian with it, to keep Velaris safe...

Anything. I'd do *anything* to make sure Amren got Feyre out with that book alive. Anything to -

The sea shifted - all at once in a great sweeping wave that seemed to move backwards from its natural tide. And promptly collapsed in a great heap upon the little temple that sent a wave of pure, carnal power radiating outward toward the city, searching...

I felt it hit me, the weight of it dragging me down out of the air, alerting me to the threat swimming about within the four stone walls below.

*Danger* , it said. *Thieves* .

I moved just as the first guard called out on the topmost palace tower. Another scurried down the bridge way, heading for a door. My wings tucked in and I shot down, an arrow piercing through the air, before landing and connecting with the side of the guard's head against my bare knuckles.

Two more guards flanked me on either side as the first sentinel went down. One seemed to take a step back as he spotted the wings looming behind me, eyes blown wide. The other drew his sword and lunged, begging his brother to join him in the fray. Knife in hand, I slashed back and disarmed them both without much thought, my senses suddenly on overdrive, hands and muscles moving of their own accord.



And it felt *good* , the power in those fists. One I hadn't truly touched in a very long while.

Why had I delayed getting back in the ring with Cassian? With Azriel? This was *easy* . The only thing in life that was. This - I was born for this.

Another wave of power crested against the palace, this time angrier than the last and just as urgent.

I flew from station to station casting swords aside and bringing guard upon guard down, savoring the feel of their blood curdling at the sight of me if it kept the guilt from Tarquin discovering my work from coming.

But where was Feyre and Amren? Where was the *Book* ?

That little door in the sea remained shut. But the sea thrashed about more and more intensely with each body that fell to my command.

A third wave of warning hit as motion to my right caught my attention. A guard lunging for the doorway inside. I landed, the ground cracking like veined marble beneath my feet, and twisted the man's arm back so painfully he cried out and lost his concentration. He fell to the floor unharmed, but unconscious.

My heart was pounding in my chest. Bodies. Too many bodies and not enough *Feyre, Amren* .

Horror struck me down where I stood, rooted to the spot. Though there was no blood, I'd made a mistake. Tarquin would need only see the fallen to know what had transpired against him. My stomach knotted. We wouldn't even be able to leave a word of goodbye like this.

Why hadn't I just broken into their minds? Held the palace in ignorance rather than fight them all off?

*Because you're a fool, that's why. A fool who has forgotten how to trade one weapon for another.*

A flash of metal through the air caught my sight, and I was on the verge of attacking once more when - there. I felt it. Relief and freedom. Fresh air pouring into Feyre's lungs as she hit the surface and swam for her life.

I followed the bond through the air until I found her and Amren pulling themselves on the shore. Behind me, the guard I left behind shouted and disappeared inside.

Too late now.

My leathers groaned tightly all around me as I landed on the sand in front of Feyre and Amren, who were drenched head to toe and looked like they'd just emerged from hell itself. "What are you two doing?" I asked, unable to make sense of what had happened in the absence of that bond.

The Book was nowhere in sight.

Amren sat up and almost spat at my feet in the sand. “Where the *hell* were you?”

I gaped at her. “You two set off every damned trigger in the place. I was hunting down each guard who went to sound the alarm. I thought you had it covered.”

Her eyes turned to slits. “That *place*,” she hissed at me, “or that damned book, nearly nullified my powers. We almost drowned.”

Drowned. They’d come *this close* to death and I... I hadn’t even known. I looked sharply to Feyre, feeling like I could fall over. “I didn’t feel it through the bond-”

“It probably nullified that, too, you stupid bastard,” Amren said, venom dripping off her tongue.

Shit.

Cassian was right. I was rusty. *Very* rusty.

“Did you get it?” I asked, my question directed specifically to Feyre. I’d deal with my own ineptitude later. She merely tapped her chest where a small, indiscernible lump lay hidden. Shouting taunted me from the palace. “Good,” I said, reaching out and grabbing the pair of them off the floor. Feyre still hadn’t said anything, but she looked alarmed at how quickly I moved, taking in the activity at the palace. “I missed some guards,” I mumbled tightly and winnowed.

Winnowed far, far away where the truth would catch up with me soon enough.

The townhouse was a welcome sight. Even Cassian’s cursing as Feyre and Amren toppled together onto the carpet, a mess of sand and sea and storm.

“What the hell?” My general shot up out of his chair at the dining table, Mor and Az right behind him looking stunned. This wasn’t the welcome home they had planned, surely.

“I’m waiting for an explanation too,” I said, feeling hot, and coming around to survey Amren and Feyre properly now that there was decent light.

Amren looked less than pleased as she ignored me, and gaped at Feyre. “How?”

Feyre blew out a stream of air. “During the Tithe, the water-wraith emissary said they had no gold, no food to pay. They were starving. So I gave her some of my jewelry to pay her dues. She swore that she and her sisters would never forget the kindness.”

It made no sense. Absolutely no sense, even as I sniffed and could just pickup the lightest notes of the wraiths on Feyre’s skin where they must have pulled her to freedom in the sea.

Feyre, for her part, looked like she might be slightly sick just thinking on it.

“Can someone explain, please?” Mor said. Amren chuckled, wholly at Feyre.

“What?” Feyre was squinting at her.

“Only an immortal with a mortal heart would have given one of those horrible beasts the money. It’s so...” *Human* . She laughed - hoarsely, but a laugh all the same. Amren rarely bothered. “Whatever luck you live by, girl... thank the Cauldron.”

Feyre considered what Amren had said for a moment before her lips twitched, and a chuckle was birthed between them. A chuckle that quickly grew into a full, rich, exasperated laugh shared only between the two of them. They fell back onto the carpet.

Mor, for once, did not look inclined to join in on the private joke. Azriel’s shadows were flying in and out of him, bees relaying honey - or death? - to their master. I looked at Cassian, and he shrugged.

*It is what it is, Rhys* .

I sighed and suddenly realized how exhausted I was. And if I knew Tarquin as the High Lord I suspected he was, further unpleasanties were on the horizon. “Ladies,” I said. Feyre and Amren ceased their cackling at once. They found themselves cleaned via Amren’s magic by the time we joined our party at the table.

Feyre stood upright as she reached inside her chest pocket and pulled out a small, metal box that clattered in ancient warning against the table. Everyone stared.

“One last task, Feyre.” Only her eyes moved to spot me motioning. “Unlock it, please.”

She sank into a chair, her hands shaking a little as she placed them on the table. I could have sworn the box almost jumped at the sudden nearness of her power, it was so alive. So *aware* .

Feyre’s lips pursed, a sly brow going steadily up after a heartbeat had passed, and she said to no one in particular, “Hello.” No one - except the box. “No,” came her next reply - curling and curious and distinctly *other* .

The power thrumming through the room was obvious, but it fell upon my ears as though muffled, Feyre the only channel to understanding it. Her hand laid flat on the lid. “Please,” she said. Nothing happened. Feyre’s fingers pressed tightly. “Open.”

I would have drawn a deep breath if I’d thought it wouldn’t disturb her process. Whatever was going on inside that Book’s mind, I didn’t like what it foretold.

As quickly as the box had appeared from Feyre’s pockets, it opened with a sudden *click* . Feyre sat back at once. “I never want to hear that voice again,” Cassian said darkly.

“Well, you will,” I replied, the only one willing to reach out and remove the lid. “Because you’re coming with us to see those mortal queens as soon as they deign to visit.”

Feyre sagged further in her chair. But her gaze remained sharp, as did we all when the lid was gone and the stone tablets within that dingy little box were revealed. Amren sat bolt upright, her face made of stone.

The plates were carved in an ancient language. None of us touched them. Even just looking at the lines of script none could read felt like a violation. Heat raced through me from a mere

glance at the first word - a silent warning of intrusion.

Was this what it had felt like when Feyre had to trick Tarquin's mind? The wards around the temple? The Book itself? Dark and foreign and unwelcome?

"What language is that?" Mor dared to ask. I didn't have to answer for Amren who rattled like a snake staring dumbfounded - and maybe even a bit *afraid* .

"It is no language of this world," she said, her voice quiet.

Azriel matched her pace. "What is it, then?"

"It is the Leshon Kaodesh. The Holy Tongue." Her eyes were shining. It seemed I'd chosen well to keep this secret from her. Had the Book been a failure in this regard, the devastation for Amren would have likely destroyed her.

Gently, bracing her for the full realization that her freedom was at her fingertips, I spoke, "I heard a legend that it was written in a tongue of mighty beings who feared the Cauldron's power and made the Book to combat it. Mighty beings who were here... and then vanished. You are the only one who can decode it."

"Don't play those sort of games, Rhysand." Mor's warning was not a joke. I shook her off.

"Not a game. It was a gamble that Amren would be able to read it - and a lucky one." Amren's eyes sharpened, finding me with nostrils flaring, braced to attack. I wondered that smoke didn't pour forth from them. So much emotion boiling inside the one who pretended to feel so little. I smiled. "I thought, too," I carefully explained as Amren studied me and debated whether or not she'd enjoy slashing my throat or ripping out my heart more, "that the Book might also contain the spell to free you - and send you home. If they were the ones who wrote it in the first place."

Amren didn't move. Not one single inch.

"Shit," Cassian swore.

"I did not tell you my suspicions, because I did not want to get your hopes up. But if the legends about the language were indeed right... Perhaps you might find what you've been looking for, Amren."

Finally, she spoke, but her voice was chained to death. "I need the other piece before I can begin decoding it."

I nodded. Anything she needed. "Hopefully our request to the mortal queens will be answered soon." My eyes fell on the carpet - stained with sand and salt and water. Another dark blot to fall on the pages of history from my court. "And hopefully the next encounter will go better than this one."

That lit the fire back inside Amren. "Thank you," she said. I wouldn't be surprised if she did not speak again for some time - to anyone.

Mor gave a dramatic sigh and the tension in the room cracked. “So what the hell happened exactly? I’m not exactly sure how water wraiths resulted in all this mess.” Her chuckle was half-hearted, broken off by Azriel’s musing interruption.

“Even if the book can nullify the Cauldron... there’s Jurian to contend with.” Mor again looked as uneasy as the rest of us. “That’s the piece that doesn’t fit. Why resurrect him in the first place? And how does the king keep him bound? What does the king have over Jurian to keep him loyal?”

A sly shadow snaked along Azriel’s arm, disappearing at the fingertip he tapped along the wood grain of the dining table. I wondered if it didn’t disappear inside that metal box still sitting untouched.

Finally, I sat. “I’d considered that,” I admitted. “Jurian was... obsessive in his pursuits of things.” Selfish. “He died with many of those goals left unfinished.”

Mor leveled a flat stare at me. “If he suspects Miryam is alive-”

“Odds are, Jurian believes Miryam is gone. And who better to raise his former lover than a king with a Cauldron able to resurrect the dead?” Mor looked away, blinking back a near groan.

Cassian braced himself against the table, his hands landing well away from the Book. “Would Jurian ally with Hybern just because he thinks Miryam is dead and wants her back?”

I looked at Feyre, who sat quietly by taking every word in. I doubted she knew any of the story, but she was already familiar enough with it. Azriel hadn’t needed to send word of Tamlin after two days in the Summer Court, but I wouldn’t doubt he’d do anything to get back the woman he loved if he thought it within the realm of possibility. Especially when it was with *me* Feyre now resided.

Jurian would be no different.

“He’d do it to get revenge on Drakon for winning her heart,” I said. At least Tamlin wouldn’t have that *exact* problem. I gritted my teeth. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Feyre found me watching her from across the table. She looked as tired as I felt, but there was something there considering me in that gaze. Something quiet and steadfast.

Her chin dipped almost imperceptible, and I felt a smooth, soothing stroke along my adamant walls requesting access: *To the dreams that are answered*, she told me, and was gone.

I followed her across the bridge, melting into the touch I applied wishing it were her skin. I was so tired. But she’d made all of this worth it.

*To the huntresses who remember to reach back for those less fortunate* I breathed to her, *and water wraiths who swim very, very fast.*

## Chapter 38: Rhys

### Chapter Summary

Rhys receives the blood rubies from Tarquin and goes into quite a brooding mood that only Feyre can pull him out of. But later that night, he suffers a terrible nightmare. Once again, Feyre helps him process his thoughts and feelings.

### Chapter Notes

Sexual Abuse/Rape TW for this chapter!!!!!!!!!!

After breakfast and shooing everyone out of the townhouse for some peace and quiet, Feyre retreated to her room, nearly falling asleep on the stairs. I had half a mind to join her if it hadn't been for the pleasant weather and the little knot of anticipation riding my stomach.

Sure enough, it was mid-afternoon when Azriel landed at the open balcony to my study, the box I'd been waiting for held between his hands. It was carved finely of wood, and as I bid Azriel enter and watched him set it on my desk, I could see the mother of pearl inlaid at the center to form an impressive, imperial dagger.

"Any word?" I asked.

Az shook his head, his wings flexing taut behind him. "It arrived at the Court of Nightmares twenty minutes ago with no other detail."

My lips pursed together as I ran a hand over the lid. I could practically feel Tarquin's wrath, his disapproval as though he were right before me when my fingers brushed the pearl. A sick feeling swept over me.

"Go check on him," I told Azriel. "See how serious he is about," I waved my hand dismissively over the box and all the hopes I'd born that its arrival shattered, "...about this."

"It's done." Azriel was out the window and gone before I could blink.

I snatched the box and went outside where the sun was still shining over the townhouse rooftop. I set it on the ledge and stared at it, summoning the first liquor I could find and pouring myself more than a healthy portion. The liquid burned my throat raw and I welcomed all of it, that searing heat.

Finally, I lifted the lid - and there they were.

Three luminous red rubies, glimmering in the setting sun. Each the size of a large egg and full of blood and vengeance and promise.

I didn't know how long I stared at the gems, only that the sun had sunk considerably lower by the time I closed the lid and that my disappointment was sinking with it.

*You fool. You great, ignorant fool.*

I took another sip from my glass letting it sting me down.

*To have dared think for one moment you might have found an ally in another man's court, another dreamer - a friend.*

Velaris began to glow with a steady rhythm before me, my view of the city winking into existence with lights here and there that would soon take over after darkness fell. For this, I had to remind myself, for this I could lose everything. Even... even a partner like Tarquin, and his dreams for a greater free world.

My chest heaved as my wings fell to the floor while I stared at Velaris and tried - *tried* to remember what had brought me here.

The pine hit me first, always the strongest and clearest of her scents. Followed swiftly by the grass and sun carried by the wind. Feyre cleared her throat. "I know you're there," I said. For once, I was not comforted by those scents enveloping me.

"If you want to be alone, I can go." Her voice carried quietly on the air, willing to go or stay - whatever I wanted. She was being... easy for me, reasonable. Narrowly, I shirked at the chair next to me and Feyre shuffled forward to take it after a pause. She went straight to Tarquin's gift on the table next to where my decanter sat.

Feyre's eyes widened, as if she could feel Tarquin beneath the lid too. "What is that?" she asked.

*My damnation*, I thought, snatching the decanter to refill my glass and drown in another gulp of it.

In the distance, the Sidra shimmered in hues of red and gold as the sun touched down upon the horizon.

"I debated it for a good while, you know," I said, clenching the glass in my fist. "Whether I should just ask Tarquin for the Book. But I thought that he might very well say no, then sell the information to the highest bidder. I thought he might say yes, and it'd still wind up with too many people knowing our plans and the potential for that information to get out. And at the end of the day, I needed the *why* of our mission to remain secret for as long as possible."

*But you could have tried. Tarquin might never had betrayed you. He trusted you. He welcomed you. You could have had a friend in this war, but you cursed his name and spat in his face instead...*

My fingers tightened, daring to shatter the glass as I brought it to my lips and fought off the desire to rip my hair out.

“I didn’t like stealing from him. I didn’t like hurting his guards. I didn’t like vanishing without a word, when, ambition or no, he did truly want an alliance. Maybe even friendship. No other High Lords have ever bothered - or dared. But I think Tarquin wanted to be my friend.”

Feyre kept strictly serious at my side, either willfully ignoring what I’d said or too unsure what to even say as she went back to the box. “What is that?”

“Open it.” The lid gave a faint moan on its hinges beneath Feyre’s touch. She didn’t say anything as she saw the stones inside. “Blood rubies,” I told her silence. “In the Summer Court, when a grave insult has been committed, they send a blood ruby to the offender. An official declaration that there is a price on their head - that they are now hunted, and will soon be dead. The box arrived at the Court of Nightmares an hour ago.”

I felt more than saw Feyre draw a deep, slow breath. “I take it one of these has my name on it. And yours. And Amren’s.”

My eyes fell on the rubies and my power crackled out of me until the box had snapped shut. I didn’t want to look at them anymore. I wanted to hurl them into the Sidra a considerable distance away and never tell Amren, never see Tarquin again, or know that I had wronged him.

“I made a mistake,” I said as Feyre jumped back from the box. “I should have wiped the minds of the guards and let them continue on. Instead, I knocked them out. It’s been a while since I had to do any sort of physical...” my muscles still ached with the feeling of fist meeting flesh at the palace, “defending like that, and I was so focused on my Illyrian training that I forgot the other arsenal at my disposal. They probably awoke and went right to him.”

“He would have noticed the Book was missing soon enough.” Feyre sounded sharper. Clearer. It made me angry.

“We could have denied that we stole it and chalked it up to coincidence.” Could have saved... whatever trust had grown between us. I drained my glass, but managed not to throw it against the table. I would not be... violent. “I made a mistake.”

“It’s not the end of the world if you do that every now and then,” she said, understanding dripping from her lips so casually.

I scowled. “You’ve been told you are now public enemy number one of the Summer Court and you’re fine with it?”

“No. But I don’t blame you.” It was hard not to look at her then, but my eyes wouldn’t move. Wouldn’t budge as the sun dipped finally over the edge and the city refused to meet night, sparkling instead like a sheet of diamonds in the sky. Little lights twinkled everywhere, a friendly reminder of why I’d lost everything again.



My breath came out unevenly.

*I blame me . That's the problem . If we lose this because of what I did to him, it's all my fault.*

Feyre scooted a little closer to me. I almost wondered that she might reach out and touch me somehow, but she didn't. I wasn't sure if that emptiness made me relieved or all the more lonelier. "Perhaps you could return the Book once we've neutralized the Cauldron," she suggested, "apologize."

I snorted. "No. Amren will get that book for as long as she needs it."

"Then make it up to him in some way." She fidgeted, a trace of irritation behind the words. "Clearly, *you* wanted to be his friend as much as he wanted to be yours. You wouldn't be so upset otherwise."

"I'm not upset. I'm pissed off."

"Semantics," she scoffed, and finally I turned to look at her and found a scowl waiting for me.

She was still so unaware. So endearingly determined to see past it all.

"Feuds like the one we just started can last centuries - millennia. If that's the cost of stopping this war, helping Amren... I'll pay it."

Over and over again. I'd be the villain to make history forget its saviors and the good they protected.

"Do the others know - about the blood rubies?"

"Azriel was the one who brought them to me. I'm debating how I'll tell Amren."

"Why?"

The rubble and destruction we had seen on our visit would become a mere fraction of the fires she would start, the dead a small pebble among a sea of graves. Only ash would remain of that seaside palace. I repressed a shudder.

"Because her answer would be to go to Adriata and wipe the city off the map." Feyre shuddered for me and I felt the power go straight through my bones. "Exactly."

We both stared back out at Velaris. What was the death of one city to me at the gain of saving another? My mind felt warped. Too many questions, too many what ifs. I was the High Lord of the *Night* Court, not Summer.

But the courts shared a duty to all of Prythian. That included myself.

My gaze swept over the long length of the Sidra, how it carried the city lights sweetly along the water, drifting from shop to shop, person to person. Anything to save this city, even at the

cost of myself. There was so much life out there, but part of me would never be entitled to any of it for what I had to do for my crown.

Still, somehow, looking at the treasure laid before me, part of it did not feel worth it. Not today.

Feyre's breath was visible on the air when she spoke, the chill night having taken over. "I understand," she started softly, "why you did what you had to in order to protect this city. And I understand why you will do anything to keep it safe during the times ahead."

My stomach tightened. A reminder that I would pay further prices in the war to come for what I loved. "And your point is?" I said, the words sounding unpleasant, even to me.

But Feyre didn't flinch. If anything, she shifted even further toward me and there was a kindness blinking back at me when I looked in her eyes. "Get through this war, Rhysand, and then worry about Tarquin and the blood rubies. Nullify the Cauldron, stop the king from shattering the wall and enslaving the human realm again, and then we'll figure out the rest after."

*After .*

"You sound as if you plan to stay here for a while."

She straightened sharply. "I can find my own lodging, if that's what you're referring to." Her eyes narrowed in that playful feline look I sometimes gave *her* . "Maybe I'll use that generous paycheck to get myself something lavish."

Lavish. Like that necklace Tarquin had given her, before she'd scoffed shortly after at my own offer to buy her jewels and finery.

"Spare your paycheck," I bit out. "Your name has already been added to the list of those approved to use my household credit. Buy whatever you wish. Buy yourself a whole damn house if you want."

Her voice was a song calling out to me as she nestled in at my side, softly, sweetly... "I saw a pretty shop across the Sidra the other day. It sold what looked to be lots of lacy little things. Am I allowed to buy that on your credit, too, or does that come out of my personal funds?"

When my eyes slowly slid over and caught her gaze, Feyre was blinking up at me, holding my gaze with a knowing, piercing look. She cared. It hit me so hard then, a stone across my chest or an arrow through my wings. This wasn't just a game to her. Her face was bright and teasing, but her eyes held steady - held *me* steady through my worst.

And just when the Cauldron had seen fit to give me some small piece of my mate to care for me, all I could feel was that empty sinking feeling that I had just damned myself and my entire world for what I'd done to Tarquin, to get that book.

"I'm not in the mood," I mumbled, and readied for the solitude that would follow. But Feyre's head dipped forward, keeping my gaze from turning.

“I never knew Illyrians were such morose drunks.”

“I’m not drunk - I’m drinking,” I ground out, anger flashing through me.

Feyre waved a dismissive hand. “Again, semantics.” She removed herself from my side, settling back in her seat and staring up at the stars. Her body sprawled about casually, openly. And I noticed how it no longer looked so starved. Every day there was one less bone visible to count through her clothes. “Maybe you should have slept with Cresseida after all,” Feyre offered. “So you could both be sad and lonely together.”

“So you’re entitled to have as many bad days as you want, but I can’t get a few hours?”

“Oh, take however long you want to mope. I was going to invite you to come shopping with me for said lacy little unmentionables, but...” She kept her gaze trained on the heavens, but I could have sworn a faint smile almost ghosted her lips, “sit up here forever, if you have to.”

A wave of anger rolled over in my blood, melting into interest. The emptiness I’d felt earlier, not emptiness at all perhaps.

“Maybe I’ll send a few to Tarquin,” Feyre mused, as if she could see the outfits she’d already picked out in her mind before her now, “with an offer to wear them for him if he forgives us. Maybe he’ll take those blood rubies right back.”

*Blue. She’d wear blue for Tarquin or maybe that seafoam green he was fond of. But for me, I’d have her in -*

“He’d see that as a taunt,” I said and found Feyre’s eyes shining at me, the vixen.

“I gave him a few smiles and he handed over a family heirloom. I bet he’d give me the keys to his territory if I showed up wearing those undergarments.”

“Someone thinks mighty highly of herself.” I drew the sentence out, swirling the dark liquor around my glass. Feyre shrugged, carefree and indifferent.

“Why shouldn’t I? You seem to have difficulty *not* staring at me day and night.”

*Red. Red lace and barely there, hugging every single one of those delicious curves of her skin that were coming back to her the more time she spent away from the Spring Court, safe and taken care of. It would make her body look like it’d been set alive with life and fire, and I would lick at every flame she offered.*

Fine, Feyre. You win.

“Am I supposed to deny,” and I set my glass down to stare at her properly, “that I find you attractive?”

“You’ve never said it.”

“I’ve told you many times, and quite frequently, how attractive I find you.”

Her shoulders shrugged again, and her head lolled against the back of her chair. “Well, maybe you should do a better job of it.”

My hands tightened on the table, bracing to keep myself from pressing my body over hers. It would be too easy - she was sprawled out so deliciously on the seat. I decided then and there that that would be how I would have her, one day if she ever let me, spread out beneath me where I could touch her as I pleased until my mate was limp with indulgent pleasure against me.

My voice came out a rich purr, all anxiety forgotten as I looked at Feyre and saw excitement spark in her eyes at how close we’d gotten. “Is that a challenge, Feyre?”

The corners of her lips tugged. I begged them to go up more. “*Is it?*” she asked, her own voice grown thick.

A jolt went racing through my core. She was practically inviting me to touch her. Her mouth was full and parted just enough that if I kissed her, I could slid my tongue inside and taste the sensations of her mouth. Would she moan? Would she grip me back as my hands and lips searched her chin, her neck? As my teeth grazed down the column of her throat...

“Why don’t we go down to that store right now, Feyre, so you can try on those lacy little things - so I can help you pick which one to send to Tarquin.”

Feyre’s chin dipped, her lips parting further. And for a heartbeat, I thought she might actually say yes, if the arousal that just hit me before I spotted the blur of darkness whirring about the sky was any indication.

Azriel came to land on the rooftop several feet away in two great strokes of his wings. Feyre was out of her chair and making for the stairwell before he’d even touched down, the scent of her arousal lingering near her seat and -

And down the bond, which stood open and bare to me with every step Feyre took. Wicked delight lit my soul.

“Tarquin’s-”

I cut Azriel off with an abrupt shushing noise, my hand help up as I rested back in my seat and closed my eyes. “Just... give me a sec.”

In my mind - I pictured the scene. And made sure Feyre did too:

*Feyre’s steps slow to a creeping pace as she spots the shop beside the Sidra, feels the heat creep up her neck as I enter with her and politely nod at the shop ladies while she enters a dressing room stall. She snags the lace set off the table as she passes, eyeing me viciously over her shoulder.*

*It’s red. Good.*

*Her nerves go through the roof while we wait for her to dress, dancing along the bond between us so strongly that even she could feel the tension through the curtain separating us.*

*A curtain that she sweeps back... and then reveals herself to me.*

*She wouldn't know how much my breath would catch or my blood would boil, or how hard it would be not to spring out of my seat and grab her, push her back, back, back into the stall and against the wall to take her lips with mine at the very sight of her in that poor excuse for lingerie. I can see her nipples peaked through the fabric, and the way her skin glows against the red straps... Cauldron boil me.*

*Feyre bites her lip as I look her over twice and then dismiss the shop ladies. They lock up and leave us be. And suddenly, we're alone. With nothing but desire and intensity in the space between us. Too much space, I decide.*

*I crook a finger at her, a finger I'd like to tease and stroke her with, and murmur across the room, "Come here."*

*She lifts her head high and prowls to me, not a cat but a lioness, stalking toward her mate in heat across the savanna. My legs part so she can stand between them, her hands bracing on my shoulders as my own search her thighs, the sweet seductive curve of her hips. The lace feels incredible beneath my fingertips, but nothing compared to her skin.*

*Feyre....*

*The word is moaned across the bond to her or maybe it's just in my mind, but I taste it on my tongue as my lips meet her stomach and suck, my cock straining in my pants and begging me to stand so I can remove every last article of clothing that stands between me and my mate. My tongue flicks out between my teeth and Feyre's back arches slightly as her grip tightens on my shoulders.*

*She cries out in pain .*

My eyes fluttered open as Feyre rubbed the spot on her head where she slammed into a beam or some such absurdity in stairwell, and cursed me down the bond - *Prick* - before throwing her shields back in place.

But I swore I could still feel the heat. I swore the care in the way she'd looked at me was still there. And I swore Feyre felt *something* now even if I wasn't sure how far that something goes.

Azriel smirked at me where I sat grinning like an adolescent Illyrian fool, looking oddly smug. I knew he could scent me. He could probably still scent Feyre too. His eyes flitted briefly to the stairwell where she left and I suddenly couldn't help but feel a little laid bare watching those shadows of his consider.

*Mate...*

A tense silence.

"I was going to offer taking you out with Cassian," he said, "But it looks like I don't need to."

“Just, tell me what happened with Tarquin,” I replied, getting out of my seat and deciding another glass of liquor isn’t quite what I needed anymore.

Azriel shrugged. “Nothing. He’s fuming from what I can tell, but there’s no word anywhere within Adriata or elsewhere in the court of readying for attack or sending anyone after you. I think...” Azriel considers a moment, and it makes my face tense waiting. Finally, he shook his head. “I think he’s pissed as hell, Rhys, but he doesn’t mean it.”

My face must have fallen. I threw my hands in my pockets and faced the city. “Oh he means it. He didn’t just lose a secret precious to his court today. He lost a secret precious to all of Prythian, to the dawn of creation itself. If being High Lord means half as much as the title means to me, he’ll make sure to find a way to make me pay for it even if it isn’t with my life.”

“You don’t-”

“Yes, I do.”

A chill gust of wind rose up then, biting at my skin and forcing my head up to the sky. It would be nice to fly. When I looked over, Azriel was watching me thoughtfully, his gaze dancing between me and the stars. “Do you want to...”

The flick of his brows upward is the only end to the sentence I receive before I gave him a small smile - a thank you. And together, we took off into the night.

---

*“Rhys.” Her silky voice coos in my ear, low and sweet, her hair falling to form a curtain around me that blanks out her face. My fingers find their way into the strands, curling around them in a fistful and gripping it tightly. Straddled above me, her hips move over me in an aggressive rhythm I hadn’t expected, but that I thrust into all the same until she’s moaning for me. “Rhysand.”*

*My eyes snap to her at that and I see the vicious glow increase in her gaze as her hips move more harshly, grating a rough course on my cock. It feels horrible. It feels wrong.*

*Amarantha runs her long fingers over one side of her hair so that her face catches the dull light of the room and I can see the red sheen of the strands, like freshly slain blood. It’s no wonder Feyre couldn’t look at the color for so long.*

*Feyre -*

*“Yes,” Amarantha croons, her hands flattening my shoulders into the mattress. “You thought it was her, didn’t you?” Her smile is torture. “But can your Feyre do this, Rhysand, hmm?” Her hips give a rough motion over my cock while she leans down to lick my face, her tongue trailing across my cheek until it ends in a low cackle at my ear.*

*I’m going to be sick. I’m going to throw her off of me if I can just get my shoulders out from under her hands, but the second I shirk, a terrible pain flares and I realize she’s somehow gotten me to spread my wings. They’re pinned to the bed with stakes.*

*A long, sharp fingernail rakes over my lip.*

*I'd thought it was Feyre...*

*A sob racks out of me. "Ooh," Amarantha says, her voice full of mock sympathy. "If you insist then."*

*Suddenly her body is different - is Feyre's. Dark blond hair drips down from her shoulders and Feyre's blue eyes stare wildly at me, but they aren't her own. I can still hear my name ringing horribly in my ears: "Rhysand.... Rhysand... Rhysand..."*

*"Is this what you want?" Feyre says. She has stopped working me, but her words are just as awful. "You'd rather this human whore than a faerie queen?" Feyre gives me a horrible smile when the tears sting my eyes. "Touch me, Rhysand. Go on. You want to, don't you?" Her hands grab mine and lead them up her body. It's just as starved and scrawny as it was the first day I brought her to the Night Court. I shudder and try to pull away as they reach her breasts, but Feyre - Amarantha - makes me keep going until I'm at her neck, my fingers curled around the delicate skin.*

*My eyes widen, shocked and terrified because I know what she means to do now. And there is no darkness to guide me. No night. No stars. Only her and her venom.*

*"Go on Rhysand," Feyre purrs.*

*Rhysand. Rhysand. Rhysand. Only my enemies call me Rhysand.*

*This is not my Feyre. My chest heaves to no avail.*

*"Touch me."*

*Feyre's hands yank for me and underneath my own touch, I feel her bones snap - and I've killed her. Her body falls against my chest, but somewhere in the room, I still hear a wild cackle of triumph. Salt stings my lips as I scream, a searing pain slamming into my face.*

*I pull on the bond - pull on it so hard to save her because it's all I know, and mercifully, someone pulls back.*

*Rhys!*

*The sound drowns out the cackle for just a moment. It's all I can feel or see, so I latch on to it, letting it guide me out of the nightmare.*

*When my eyes finally open and I'm no longer dreaming, Feyre is below me, our bodies somehow flipped though I don't remember doing it, and she's staring at me wide-eyed and heartbroken.*

*At her neck, my taloned hands curl.*

---

“It was a dream,” Feyre said when I woke up. “It was a dream.” Her breath sounded just as ragged as my own. Here, the darkness is everywhere. But it still feels constricting. That is, until Feyre runs her hand along my arm and sends her own darkness calling out to me, flecked with night and care.

“Feyre,” she said, as she stroked me with the night. “I’m Feyre. You were dreaming.”

It took everything left in me to focus on the sound of her voice, to see through the haze and find those eyes. Grey. Her eyes were grey tonight, not blue like the dream when Amarantha had made me... made me...

I felt the darkness swell inside me, Feyre pressing it into my soul and shuddered in relief. She was real and whole and alive. I hadn’t killed her. But -

*Touch me, Rhysand. Go on...*

“Feyre,” I said, my voice barely even audible. She blinked back nodding encouragingly.

“Yes.” Her face was sharp, so razor sharp and completely dedicated. I could see her ambition, her resilience, her worth. All those things I loved about her, she somehow found and poured back into me until I was grounded into the earth.

This was *my* Feyre. I was sure of it.

And that was *my* taloned hand at her throat. I pulled it away at once, my body sinking backward to kneel on the sheets whilst trying violently not to shake. My entire body felt like a prison. My wings were blown wide across the bed behind me, and my hands and feet had become unrecognizable as the beast within me fought its fae shackles, yearning to break free.

I stared at my pillow and was vaguely aware as Feyre vacated the spot and sat beside me. Just a moment ago, it had been her head lying there - dead.

“You were having a nightmare,” she said quietly.

She’d saved me. I’d killed her, but - no. She’d saved me. She’d seen this - this mess. I looked around at how much darkness the room had enveloped. I didn’t have to leave the bed to feel it creeping through every pore in the house. It was the dead of night, I must have woken her. I must have - oh, Feyre...

My body heaved.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and willed my hands return to normal, to deny the evidence of what had happened.

“That’s why you’re staying here, not at the House. You don’t want the others seeing this.”

“I normally keep it contained to my room. I’m sorry it woke you.”

Feyre’s hands fisted. In anger? Or something else? “How often does it happen?” she asked.



I turned to look at her, suddenly realizing how much I hated this, hated her seeing me like this. Naked and afraid and the least of all fae. The least of all those strengths and powers I'd willed to her when she had woken up terrified and suffered her worst.

"As often as you."

Feyre swallowed hard, her eyes searching mine with kindness, with that compassion only she ever showed me. "What did you dream of tonight?" I wanted to weep at the answer.

So I avoided her gaze, blinking back the tears, and stared at Velaris through the windows - my city and my life. "There are memories from Under the Mountain, Feyre, that are best left unshared. Even with you."

I'd told her once that I dreamt of only two things: Amarantha fucking me and my brothers against our will, and watching the light leave Feyre's eyes as she died. Technically, Feyre already knew what I'd seen tonight, but damn me to hell if I was going to say it out loud. I wouldn't - couldn't do it. It would be as torturous as reliving it all over again.

Tentatively, Feyre touched my arm, pulling me back, not caring if I was ready to show her the truth or not. It was just a simple touch. A friendly touch. So much softer and kinder than Amarantha's had been. "When you want to talk," she whispered, "let me know. I won't tell the others."

I found warmth in the spot her fingers held.

She moved, toward the edge of the bed, but I found my hand holding on to that touch, keeping her against me. Just a moment longer. Just one more moment...

"Thank you," I said, squeezing her hand and letting it fall away so she could escape.

But Feyre... Feyre paused, and then she leaned up on the bed so that she was kneeling next to me, searching my face before her lips reached out and pressed gently to my cheek. And it didn't feel dominating or controlling or rough or - or any of the things that Amarantha made me feel when she touched me.

No, Feyre's kiss was *loving*. Caring. For me, not for her.

I couldn't look at my mate as she climbed from the bed. Nor as she paused in the door one last time before she left. I didn't move for a long while even after that. My body was loose and taut all at once thinking about that kiss and my mate and how she'd - she'd seen me at my worst and not looked away or flinched like everyone else did. Only Mor had ever come close, but even she hadn't seen me like this.

The sheets were stark cold as I fell against them, letting my wings hang over the bed behind me whichever way they pleased. A star fell through the darkness in the air landing on my pillow. I twirled it around my finger until it danced away again falling somewhere else.

She had kissed me.

And somewhere in the darkness, my soul thought that maybe that was a little more than okay.



## Chapters 39-40: I Hope They All Burn in Hell

### Chapter Summary

Rhys starts to recover with Feyre's help as they wait for the queens to reply. When word finally reaches them, they visit Feyre's sisters once more only to learn that the queens aren't as sympathetic to their cause as hoped.

The coming weeks that passed were easier. I realized it more day by day as Feyre made me slowly learn to dwell less and less on Tarquin, on what had transpired between our courts. What I might have lost.

Now there was only what I stood to lose still as we waited for the queens to reply from the mortal realms, several letters now having been sent that remained unanswered. I had Cassian send one from me personally, without the others knowing specifically what it contained. Not even Mor. I had a feeling that if it too failed to call the queens to our attention, then no letter would, but it was all I had.

I poured everything into that letter. And watched it go wondering if it would matter.

Amren took the news of the blood rubies well. I brought Mor with me, the least antagonizing of the circle and the most likely one Amren wouldn't throttle if her temper flared. But when I opened the lid on the box and she spotted the rubies, there was only a brief flash of venom in those silver eyes before she laughed her head off. She picked up a ruby and barely gave it any examination before it fell with a heavy *clunk* on a stack of paper, and that was that.

"Males are fickle beasts," was all Amren said before dismissing us. Mor shook her head at me for being so dramatic about the affair, but she still insisted on taking me out for lunch *before* she kicked my ass in the sparring ring that afternoon.

I was getting along better with the sparring itself, the training. Now that I wasn't quite so inclined to shy away from it, I found my body craving it again, having gotten a taste of it in Adriata the night we stole the book and now I wanted more.

Cassian had Feyre out for practice most mornings and Azriel was gone every other day trying to infiltrate the palace of the mortal queens. So I waited until night fell, and I was exhausted from training with Feyre all afternoon, to go back up to that rooftop and trade blows with Cassian. He looked exhausted himself sometimes, but no matter how many times I told him beating me up for sport wasn't necessary, he never turned me down.

"You're easy game anyway, brother," he told me once, chucking an Illyrian sword at me that was sharper than the sun and watching closely to see how well I'd catch it. "Besides - you could use the workout. Feyre's gonna find a new High Lord to cross paths with if you don't

beef up a bit. You're looking a little," he stood back, one arm crossed and the other ending at his chin considering, "scrawny."

He grinned like a hellion when I flashed my teeth at that. "Just fight me, you bastard."

And he did. With earnest.

It felt... good again.

My muscles ached in all the right places, growing thicker again a little more each day. My agility came back and my foot work wasn't such a mess anymore, and the few times I had to spar with Azriel when he wasn't out, I didn't have to worry about whether or not I could best him. Eventually, I'd get back on pace with Cassian as well, I knew.

Cass knew it too. He told me so everyday in the way he'd clasp my back with a twinkle in his eye after going at it all night, sometimes so long that the sun was coming up over the city by the time we retreated to our respective homes.

Occasionally, we'd find Mor dozing on the couch inside the House, an open doorway letting in a draft from the balcony while she waited for Azriel to get back. Cass would take one long stare at her before shrugging his shoulders at me and dismissing himself to go get cleaned up. I never woke her once.

But it was Feyre who made my blood race, who made me feel alive again. I wondered every time we met to train with our minds and our powers if she and I hadn't been suffering a bit from the same depressions, the same insecurities. That day I'd gotten the rubies... she hadn't given up on me. Maybe the teasing and fantasies had all been an illusion to keep me fighting, the same way I'd done to her initially, but as the days passed, it came to us naturally and I didn't feel that same facade between us anymore.

No, what Feyre and I had was real. Something I could count on and trust as we trained together, learned from each other.

Her mind was razor sharp, and absorbed everything, her natural curiosity and disposition to learn spurring her own. I filled her head with every ounce of information I could about her powers, where they came from, the courts and males they belonged to originally. And in exchange, she concentrated on using that knowledge to hone the skills at her disposal into deadly weapons, until she could crackle like fire, send out waves of water and wind, and summon darkness all with ease. And look damned good too while doing it.

And all the while, she never stopped talking to me. Never stopped listening and asking and watching. The sound of her voice filled me for days on end. I didn't have any more nightmares knowing she was close by keeping watch, at least none so out of control that I did little more than twitch in my sleep once or twice. But I hadn't forgotten that kiss she'd pressed upon my cheek, and the promise that seemed to stand because of it: if I needed her, she would come.

We weren't alone anymore, it seemed. I had a partner - a real genuine partner who... who cared.

Which made the mate bond tick like clockwork inside my skull.

Mor and Amren poked and prodded at me more and more every day to tell her the truth; Mor especially was insistent. But every time I went to tell her, it seemed, Azriel would come back with poor news about the mortal realms or quiet disturbances coming out of the Spring Court that he nearly missed, and I would see Feyre dancing in her flames and ice and think that she was happy. Happy without all those High Lords and enemies chasing after her. Happy... with just Rhys.

So I stayed silent, but never far. Only the days I had to be away to tame the Hewn City, when Mor complained it'd become too restless for even her to deal with, or off to neighboring cities to check in with my people, did I not see Feyre. And those days were by far the least pleasant while we waited for the queens to correspond with us.

But we remained close anyway, that little piece of paper and pen floating back and forth between us constantly.

*How's the temple?*

The paper came fluttering back to me midday, shortly after I'd sent her a teasing message about trying not to miss me too horribly while I was away. A letter had reached me the previous day, from one of the few surviving priestesses at the temple in Cesere, asking if I'd like to come speak with her now that things had settled and the temple had rebuilt somewhat.

*Not well, but coming along all the same. Priestesses are resilient, determined individuals in fae culture. The attacks and ensuing deaths would be considered devastating among their kind - to us all, really. But even if there were only one priestess left among them, it would be a higher shame to give up, to not right such an injustice.*

There was a pause before her answer returned, too long given how short her question was.  
*What kind of priestesses are they?*

*Nothing like Ianthe, I promise. Tell me something else. A thought for a thought?*

*Ladies first .*

I snorted at that and snatched the pen out of the air, licking the tip before writing out my reply.

*Such a gentleman, you are. I'm thinking that it's a shame I was so distracted after the Mountain, that I was so overcome with what Amarantha had done and trying, unsuccessfully, to process it all, that Hybern slipped in right under my nose and destroyed an innocent village. I hate that he stole something from me, even if it wasn't technically mine in the first place .*

Her reply came much more quickly this time.

*You're allowed to feel things, Rhys. You're allowed to process and not be perfect for once.*

I smiled and wrote back, *So you admit I'm perfect, hmm? I do believe it is your turn, Feyre darling.*

The letter winked into nonexistence and I swore I could feel Feyre's scowl down the bond as she wrote her reply.

*What do you want to know?*

I considered a moment, considered where I was and how important the specific culture was to the priestesses around me. They'd lost such a dear, precious gift. And suddenly, I knew what I wanted to ask Feyre. Now that I thought she might answer me on it.

*Tell me about the painting.*

*There's not much to say.*

*Tell me about it anyway.*

Feyre was quiet for a long while before that next leaf of paper tumbled out of the wind to greet me. And all it said in her soft script was simply, *There was a time when all I wanted was enough money to keep me and my family fed so that I could spend my days painting. That was all I wanted. Ever .*

Ever.

And now that desire was gone. I remembered that day by the Sidra, when I'd first shown her the artists' quarter and she'd balked, almost repulsed by the idea of being near something she so once loved, and how I couldn't understand it, couldn't fathom never wanting to fly again.

But that was a long while ago now, a few solid months of food and friendship and time in between. So I replied: *And now?*

*Now, I don't know what I want. I can't paint anymore.*

My shoulders slumped, even as Feyre couldn't see me. *Why?*

*Because that part of me is empty. Did you always want to be High Lord?*

That I did understand. That I could relate to... somewhat.

*Yes. And no. I saw how my father ruled and knew from a young age that I did not want to be like him. So I decided to be a different sort of High Lord; I wanted to protect my people, change the perceptions of the Illyrians, and eliminate the corruption that plagued the land.*

"High Lord?" I looked up as the letter disappeared and found one of the priestesses returned from the inner temple, which had received the worst destruction of all.

"Please, call me Rhys," I said. The priestess looked a bit uncomfortable at the idea, but nodded all the same.

“My sisters are ready to receive you now. We’ve ensured the pathway is safe.”

I gave her a polite smile and stepped forward, when Feyre’s reply caught in my hands. The priestess smiled blandly and averted her gaze, and I unfurled the paper now filled to the edges with our conversation and read, *At least you make up for your shameless flirting by being one hell of a High Lord.*

I snorted, and caught the priestess with a suspicious look upon her face, smirking into the sun.

The tour of the temple took the remainder of the day and was by all means well worth it, but Feyre’s words were what kept me upright through most of the proceedings, kept me from falling too far into despair with every new injury or ruin we met. Plans were made to aid reconstruction and see about adding new members to their number, even if only for a temporary time.

When I strolled into the townhouse after nightfall that evening, Feyre was lounging in the living room reading. She looked up at me bright eyed and alert. I smirked and leaned against the threshold, peering down at her. “One hell of a High Lord?” I said, skipping hellos.

Feyre’s scowl was hardly that as a torrent of water crashed over me, drenching me head to foot. I fell to the floor, feeling the rumble of laughter chasing up my chest and throat, and shook until all the water was spraying off of me and falling like rain upon Feyre next to me. Feyre - who yelped and scrambled off the couch, running for the stairs with a quiet laugh. I jumped up and chased after her, letting that roar of laughter out without question, and grinned as I saw her blue eyes dance out of sight at the top of the stairs.

She was never far, my mate.

---

It was one morning when I woke, and padded out onto my balcony to find the snow thawing under a considerably warmer sun that was ready for spring to bloom, that I heard a knock on my bedroom door.

“Rhys?”

I waved a hand and the door opened seemingly of its own accord, my cousin poking her head through until she found me on the balcony.

“You’re up early,” I said.

“That’s *your* fault, lest you forget where I work,” Mor said, joining me outside. She propped herself up on the stone top of the railing and held her face up to the sun, eyes closed so she could bask in its full glory. She wore a soft lavender outfit, cut off at her midriff today. “I don’t understand why anyone chooses to live inside that horrible rock when the sun is this lovely.”

I snorted. “I find one generally has to be lovely in order to appreciate similarly lovely things.”

Mor winked an eye open. “There’s a compliment in there somewhere.”

“Only for you.”

“Of course,” she smiled. And pulled a letter from inside one of her pockets. “You’re being nice today, so I’ll return the favor and give you your fan mail.”

The folded letter she handed me was richly decorated, the seal of the mortal lands stamped across the back. *To the High Lord of the Night Court* was elegantly stamped on its front, unlike the polite penmanship Tarquin had used to address his invitation.

I looked up at Mor.

“The queens wrote back?”

She sighed. “It would seem so.” I ran my thumb underneath the seal and broke it. “Azriel gave me the letter about an hour ago. I came straight here as soon as I could.”

An hour, yet she’d come straight here. That meant... I paused my perusal of the letter. “How is he?”

Mor’s mouth ran a tight line as she flinched and looked away. “I think he’s relieved, but at the same time frustrated he didn’t figure out their half of the book first. Like we might go tomorrow and find them handing over the book easily and he’ll have wasted all this time. I’m not sure. He’s been... difficult to get through to lately.” Her hands clenched on the stone where she sat and stared off into the distance behind her, where the Sidra waited. I rarely saw her so deflated, but for Azriel... I understood the hurt flashing in her eyes.

I laid a hand on hers and it surprised her enough that she looked at it, brows raised. I smiled softly, knowingly, when she looked up and her face sort of fell and returned the smile at the same time, her other hand patting my own as she nodded. We let the moment pass.

“So, tell me tell me,” she chirped, regaining some of that usual vigor. “What do our dear old friends have to say to us after all these years?”

I unfolded the letter and sat up on the railing with her to read it together. The queens would come tomorrow or not at all. Our choice to meet them or not.

“I guess we’re going to the mortal realms,” Mor said quietly when we’d finished. I arched a wry brow at her statement, a silent question. “Yes, yes,” she said, hopping off the rail and breezing back towards my room. “I’ll go this time, calm your tits. But what in Prythian am I going to wear...”

“Please. You already know exactly what you’re going to wear, Mor,” I called after her. “You’ve probably known for weeks since we sent off that first letter.”

She graced me with a vulgar gesture before winnowing to her rooms or maybe a shop in Velaris to search for that perfect dress. I summoned paper and pen and quickly left a note behind for Feyre to find when she finally stirred for the morning.



*No training with your second-favorite Illyrian this morning. The queens finally deigned to write back. They're coming to your family's estate tomorrow.*

We left that evening right after dinner.

---

Nesta and Elain were a bit unhinged as Azriel took them through drafting a reply to the queens - a guide, or sorts, that provided the exact layout of the manor and its furnishing, where we would receive the queens. The knowledge had been their lone demand beyond the time. I didn't think it did much to settle the two sisters for the coming day.

Feyre came out of her room that she shared this time with Mor wearing a flowing white dress that stood out starkly against my cousin's red one. The trimmings were in gold, befitting a queen.

When I held the gold feathered diadem up that mirrored my own of black, she inclined her head a little more easily than before, and watched me as my fingers carefully ran down her face when I was done. The bond felt stiff between us.

"We need to go," Mor said and strode off down the hall. The others were already waiting for us, my brothers clad in leathers and swords, Feyre's sisters in attire befitting a court of the highest order of fae and mortal alike.

The room was entirely silent, save the crippling crackle of the fireplace where Feyre and I took our places.

The clock on the mantle place chimed. Nesta and Elain visibly stiffened. And Mor's eyes went razor sharp as a soft glow appeared, followed by fifteen members standing before us who had not been in this household nor even this territory south of the wall a moment prior.

The mortal queens and their guards surveyed us cruelly - all save one.

They were of every shape and age and coloring as their narrow eyes passed over each of us in turn lingering here and there. One was old, two devastatingly young, and the others somewhere in between. But beyond their differing shades of skin and lines drawing their faces, or even the fact that they had *winnowed*, was one feature even more remarkable to me: one was missing.

Across the room near the windows, Cassian and Azriel had the guards well prepared for defeat with a single look, should they be foolish enough to attack.

"Well met," I said, addressing the queens at large. The youngest queen, with dark skin and golden hair, leveled a look at me and dismissed her guards, who scattered to take station around the room. It was almost difficult not to laugh at the effort.

I stepped forward, feeling Feyre's eyes trained to my back and keenly aware of that simple movement, and watched as the queen's sucked in a breath. "We are grateful you accepted our invitation." No reaction. "Where is the sixth?"

The eldest of the queens blandly admitted, "She is unwell, and could not make the journey." And then, with no further interest in me, her gaze fell just behind me - on *Feyre* . "You are the emissary."

"Yes. I am Feyre," she replied. But along the bond she was loose and nervous. Her mental shields were lowered - intentionally in case we needed each other.

The woman darted back to me with something like a judgment coming off her tongue. "And you are the High Lord who wrote us such an interesting letter after your first few were dispatched."

Feyre's thoughts drifted unaware across the bond wondering what was so special about one letter in a sea of many. Thinking of that letter now and what I'd sent...

*I write to you not as a High Lord, but as a male in love with a woman who was once human...*

I suppressed a fond smile, and teased her quietly back.

*You didn't ask what was inside them.*

"I am. And this is my cousin, Morrigan."

There was no greater pleasure to be wrought from this day, I felt, as there was watching my own flesh and blood take such bold steps - a *queen's* own steps - toward that fellow golden-haired woman and seeing her cower in reply.

The Queen of the Hewn City paused just beside Feyre. I was glad Mor had come. "It has been a long time since I met with a mortal queen," Mor said by way of greeting. One of the middle-aged mortals shuddered as Mor's voice carried through the room, leaning forward and clutching her breast.

"Morrigan - *the* Morrigan," she said almost gasping, "from the War." No one moved nor spoke.

Yes, I was very glad *indeed* Mor had come.

"Please," my cousin bid them all, "sit." And together, with a final look over us all, they did. Until every seat in the large sitting room was occupied by the five of them, their guards unmoving along the walls.

The young golden child again took up the mantle of address. It seemed she would be our main representative for the meeting, however long it might last. "I assume those are our hosts," she drawled, looking at Nesta and Elain. The sisters stood stiff backed and chins held high at the cutting look she gave them. Elain managed to curtsy a short way.

"My sisters," Feyre said. The queen pulled herself from Nesta and Elain, a perfectly groomed brow raising a mere hair as she turned to Feyre, and up, up, up toward the golden band of feathers reigning around my mate's head. The queen lingered there before her eyes turned sharply on me. Beside me, Feyre knew exactly where those eyes had traveled.

“An emissary wears a golden crown. Is that a tradition in Prythian?”

No teasing. No mockery. Just simple... amusement, perhaps, if not mostly genuine curiosity. But she'd read the letter, so this was just another part of the game to her.

“No,” I said, “but she certainly looks good enough in one that I can't resist.”

I received no friendly return. “A human turned into a High Fae... and who is now standing beside a High Lord at the place of honor. Interesting.”

Feyre's head rose, matching the queen's considerate regard, and again it was an effort not to smirk. I wondered what more Feyre might become in a few more weeks or months if given the opportunity. Where we might be together, even, if ever we met the queens again.

“You have an hour of our time,” the elder queen stated, already irritated at bothering with us. “Make it count.”

“How is it that you can winnow?” Mor asked straight away. Finally, the young queen revealed some trace of enjoyment as she taunted my cousin with a smile. “It is our secret, and our gift from your kind.”

Mor was not so kind as to give her a smile back.

As the silence of waiting filled the room, I took a steadying breath and turned to Feyre. She swallowed harshly and shuffled forward, but didn't go very far from me.

“War is coming,” she declared. “We called you here to warn you - and to beg a boon.”

I hadn't particularly expected a reaction of great surprise from them, but the dull, muted expressions that greeted Feyre's words were disheartening. There was no fear. No panic at the revelation. No, the queens were already aware and perhaps even... uncaring, as concerned the situation.

Silently, I cursed.

This needed to be easy. The only easy part of this entire ordeal. I supposed from their several weeks long silence at answering our letters, I should have known this would not be the case.

“We know war is coming,” the old queen said. “We have been preparing for it for many years.”

Feyre took a sharp breath and met her head on. “The humans in this territory seem unaware of the larger threat. We've seen no signs of preparation.”

“This territory is a slip of land compared to the vastness of the continent. It is not in our interests to defend it. It would be a waste of resources.” The golden queen did not so much as soften her regard as she spoke. There was little sympathy, if any at all.

Across the room, Cassian ran his palm flatly over the pommel of his sword. I could feel the heat simpering off of Mor as Azriel watched her intently.

“Surely,” I said, with equal boredom to that of the golden queen, “the loss of even one innocent life would be abhorrent.”

Back and forth she and the old woman went returning our volleys. “Yes. To lose one life is always a horror. But war is war. If we must sacrifice this tiny territory to save the majority, then we shall do it.”

Feyre’s lips parted, and her voice was hoarse. The bond between us quivering. “There are good people here,” she breathed.

“Then let the High Fae of Prythian defend them,” the golden one said. I wondered that she did not give my mate a taunting smile as she had my cousin. My blood began to boil, roaring in my ears of what I might do if this child swam too close to my court today.

Nesta’s voice cut across the queens, imperial and unabashed. “We have servants here. With families. There are *children* in these lands. And you mean to leave us all in the hands of the Fae?”

Finally, the old woman paled slightly. Perhaps hearing the affront in Nesta’s voice at listening to her own kind so willingly betray her. It surprised me, but I supposed given what Feyre had said of her sister who burned and raged, that it shouldn’t have. That she would consider the greater offense against her family not from the fae demons across the wall, but from her own race tearing itself apart from within.

“It is no easy choice, girl-”

“It is the choice of *cowards*,” Nesta said, biting across her. The queen glared.

“For all that your kind hate ours...” Feyre interrupted, staring willfully at her sister who ignored the stare, “You’d leave the Fae to defend our people?”

“Shouldn’t they?” The queen of gold quickly turned to brass or copper as she eyed my mate like a specimen to poke and prod at. “Shouldn’t they defend against a threat of their own making?” She snorted, an adult casting down a child. My blood simmered, darkness calling at my back. “Should Fae blood not be spilled for their crimes over the years?”

Briefly, I shared a look with Cassian, recalling how he’d so greatly taken offense to Nesta’s quick dismissal of all fae for the rumors surrounding our culture alone. Were we really so expendable to them? Were our histories really so bleak?

“Neither side is innocent,” I said smoothly, “but we might protect those who are. Together.”

“Oh?” The old crow cut in again. I was quickly growing tired of how they tag teamed us with such nonchalance. Her eyes were the devil himself as she stared at me, looking me up and down with heavy disdain. “The High Lord of the Night Court asks us to join with him, save lives with him. To fight for peace. And what of the lives you have taken during your long, hideous existence?” My stomach turned to stone, darkness and night cracking my veins beneath my muscles as she *laughed* at me. “What of the High Lord who walks with darkness in his wake, and shatters minds as he sees fit? We have heard of you, even on the continent,

Rhysand. We have heard what the Night Court does, what you do to your enemies. *Peace?*” Her eyes were incredulous. “For a male who melts minds and tortures for sport, I did not think you knew the word.”

I went absolutely silent. The queen seemed to feel it deep inside me. She knew she’d hit the mark.

It wasn’t that the mortal hags had a problem with all fae, after all. Far from it. Apparently, it was only me. Again, I was the scapegoat for my court, the villain for all mankind. The only shame, the only disappointment, the only outright *wrath* that matched the heat burning my lungs as that cold, nearly dead queen cast me aside was *Feyre’s* .

My mate stepped forward. I’d never seen her be so bold in my honor yet. A small sense of feeling crawled back into my skin. “If you will not send forces here to defend your people,” *your* , not *ours* , I noted, “then the artifact we requested-”

“Our half of the Book, child, does not leave our sacred place. It has not left those white walls since the day it was gifted as part of the Treaty. It will never leave those walls, not while we stand against the terrors in the North.”

Something inside Feyre... cracked then. Cracked the way her bones had when Amarantha slipped her fingers around her neck. I could feel it along the bond. And I felt here again now. But this time, it wasn’t her bones that broke. It was Feyre’s heart.

“Please,” she said, and then again when no one offered her anything. “Please. I was turned into *this* - into a faerie - because one of the commanders from Hybern *killed* me.”

The bond went taut for half a second as Feyre pressed on that word, pressed on her death as she had for the Bone Carver, and in the weeks since. As she did now, spilling the passion and kindness for her family and the life she’d once had before the queens.

“For fifty years, she terrorized Prythian, and when I defeated her, when I freed its people, she *killed* me. And before she did, I witnessed the horrors that she unleashed on human and faerie alike. One of them - just *one* of them was able to cause such destruction and suffering. Imagine what an army like her might do. And now their king plans to use a weapon to shatter the wall, to destroy *all* of you. The war will be swift, and brutal. And you will not win.” She gestured around the room - to us all. “ *We* will not win. Survivors will be slaves, and their children’s children will be slaves. Please...” She swallowed. Her hands were stiff and unyielding at her sides, but the bond between us shook with a fierce tremor. “Please, give us the other half of the Book.”

Feyre waited with bated breath as the two queens - the only ones bothering with us at all while the others sat idly by - exchanged glances, and the energy in the room shifted. Shifted toward Feyre and how they saw her.

“You are young, child,” the eldest queen said, like a mother to a newborn babe. *Child* . It was worse than seeing Nesta of all people called a *girl* . And it made my teeth wrench. “You have much to learn about the ways of the world-”

“Do not,” I said, reeling in a considerable amount of wrath from my tongue that yearned to defend my mate, “condescend to her.” The eldest queen’s brow flinched at me. There was... some satisfaction in it. “Do not insult Feyre for speaking with her heart, with compassion for those who cannot defend themselves, when you speak from only selfishness and cowardice.”

“For the greater good-”

“Many atrocities have been done in the name of the greater good.”

At the hands of *your* kind - your ancestors before you, I silently added. The queen held my gaze. I wanted to shout at her. To rage and roar until they saw Feyre for the woman she was. That my mate should fail to impress them because *my* stains upon history were... a disgrace.

But the old hag only grew wearier of this meeting. “The Book will remain with us. We will weather this storm-”

Morrigan shot to her feet. *The Morrigan*. “That’s enough.” The entire world beyond those queens and their crowns fell silent as the Queen of the Hewn City leveled them all, dripping in her dress of crimson that recalled battles and blood of ages past.

“I am the Morrigan. You know me. What I am. You know that my gift is truth. So you will hear my words now, and know them as truth - as your ancestors once did.” Mor pointed at Feyre, her own passion and heat blazing out of her as though born of divine inspiration. “Do you think it is any simple coincidence that a human has been made immortal again, at the very moment when our old enemy resurfaces? I fought side by side with Miryam in the War, fought beside her as Jurian’s ambition and blood lust drove him mad, and drove them apart. Drove him to torture Clythia to death, then battle Amarantha until his own.” Her words cut on the memory. I could have sworn Az almost stepped forward. Cassian checked a brief glance on him. We both did as my cousin continued, allowing nothing and no one to stop her from her truth. “I marched back into the Black Land with Miryam to free the slaves left in that burning sand, the slavery she had herself escaped. The slaves Miryam had promised to return to free. I marched with her - my friend. Along with Prince Drakon’s legion. Miryam was my *friend*, as Feyre is now. And your ancestors, those queens who signed that Treaty... They were my friends, too. And when I look at you...” Mor shook her head, her mouth flashing every one of her gleaming white teeth, “I see *nothing* of those women in you. When I look at you, I know that your ancestors would be *ashamed* .

Mor’s eyes were lined with red - anger, more than tears. Fools. Those queens would be such fools to dare refute her now.

“You laugh at the idea of peace? That we can have it between our peoples?” Mor asked them. They did not move. Did not dare remove their eyes from her for one single moment. “There is an island in a forgotten, stormy part of the sea.” My stomach tightened. Azriel and Cassian both leaned subtly forward. Feyre searched the bond curiously. “A vast, lush island, shielded from time and spying eyes. And on that island, Miryam and Drakon still live. With their children. With *both* of their peoples.” Mor’s eyes shone. “Fae and human and those in between. Side by side. For five hundred years, they have prospered on that island, letting the world believe them dead-”

“Mor,” I said gently. My cousin’s eyes glistened. She wanted this *so damned badly* . We all did. But any further and we might stray too far.

The queens knew it too, just looking at Mor and the somehow controlled mania that she’d taken on. At the end of the day, Amren would not be the only one with a new set of jewels to admire.

The queens considered silently. I wondered vaguely if they could communicate mentally somehow, given the winnowing. I wouldn’t have been surprised if they could.

“Give us proof,” the elder told me, dismissing Mor and all she’d said in a single pass. *Proof*... I knew what they would need before they even asked it of me. And my body cried out *no* . “If you are not the High Lord that rumor claims, give us one shred of proof that you are as you say - a male of peace.”

I stood, too disgusted and angry and tense to deal with them and their idiocy anymore. The inky black of my jacket swirled around my waist like a nighttime wind lingering about the stars as I moved, my mask guiding me upward. The queens rose with me.

“You desire proof?” I asked. Feyre stared at me wide-eyed. I didn’t want to know what Mor or the others were thinking. So I shrugged carelessly. “I shall get it for you. Await my word, and return when we summon you.”

“We are summoned by no one, human or faerie.” The young queen was a prison of ice as she readied to leave.

“Then come at your leisure,” I said, deigning to play her game at last, the damper on my powers threatening to rupture and let the demons loose. Cauldron, how I wanted to... “Perhaps then you’ll comprehend how vital the Book is to *both* our efforts.”

Again, the elder exchanged places with the younger. The back and forth - so constant and unending - made my skin itch.

*A game. It is a game . This is no more than Amarantha’s court and you are called to service in the name of your crown. A game. It is a game.*

“We will consider it once we have your *proof* ,” she said, cold and bitter to the last. “That book has been ours to protect for five hundred years. We will not hand it over without due consideration.”

I wondered, even with the proper motivation, if they would *ever* hand it over. The cruel, cunning smirk on the young queen’s wretched mouth told me that no - they would not.

“Good luck,” she said, more a taunt than encouragement. And together, the fifteen members who came vanished just as suddenly. Feyre’s chest sunk, enough that I shifted toward her and wondered at how heavy the crown on her head might have felt just then. If it was too much. If she should want to wear it again after that, or consider her life easier without it.

But her gaze found her sisters first, as Elain crossed her arms, her own eyes ringed with the same red of vengeance Mor had bled, for a people she had never even met, and said what we were all surely thinking, "I hope they all burn in hell."

xx



## End Notes

Thank you for reading! Feel free to leave any feedback and/or join me on Tumblr. :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!

### ACOMAF Part 2.3: The House of Wind Cont'd (Rhys POV)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10671303) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10671303>.

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# **ACOMAF Part 2.3: The House of Wind Cont'd (Rhys POV)**

by [illyriantremors](#)

## Summary

Chapters 41-51 of ACOMAF from Rhysand's POV.

Kicking off with Rhys's decision to steal the Veritas and subsequent hesitation over the role Feyre will play if she goes with him to the Court of Nightmares.

## Notes

This chapter references some dialogue between Rhys and Azriel at the time of the Incident. The dialogue is taken from a Moriel fic I wrote called Shadowsinger that chronicles that time. It's listed on my AO3 if you feel so inclined. :)

## Chapter 41: I Trust You

Our goodbyes with Feyre's sisters were short. Nesta seemed glad to be rid of us, queens and all. I didn't argue with her for once. Nor did Cassian.

No one spoke as we flew home. Not even Feyre, who I carried through the warm, dry skies filled with an angry sun that seemed to sense the anger rolling underneath my skin.

Those queens were damned fools and they were going to make us all pay for it. Make all of them pay for it - my friends, my family, Feyre. Watching them all fly home, it would be my fault if they never made it. My fault if the court fell into ruin because the queens didn't trust *me* enough to hand over the Book.

I thought about everything I'd done as we landed at the townhouse. Every single way I'd defiled myself to save this city for centuries. Letting people think me a whore, a murderer, and a tormentor who delighted in less savory carnal acts. I set Feyre down and walked past an awaiting Amren, needing to look out on the city and know it was worth it, but as I sat by the fountain in the courtyard, I couldn't face my people. My eyes found the ground instead.

A thick scratching noise scraped against the flagstone, as seats were pulled apart and my friends sat with me. "If you're out here to brood, Rhys," Amren said across from me, "then just say so and let me go back to my work."

I had no retort to give her as I met her gaze, so sharp and piercing as ever. "The humans wish for proof of our good intentions," I said. "That we can be trusted."

Amren shot to Feyre in a blaze. "Feyre was not enough?"

Feyre winced slightly, and I felt the bond wobble between us. "She is more than enough," I said, feeling rage snap through me again at the implications of what those queens had inferred of our meeting. "They're fools. Worse - frightened fools."

"We could... depose them," Cassian suggested. "Get newer, smarter queens on their thrones. Who might be willing to bargain." There was no trace of humor. It was, on the whole, a serious suggestion and one that we might have taken up in the past.

Because this was what my court did. This was what *I* did, to maintain peace for a single city in the cold mountains of Prythian. Murdered innocent people and it made me a monster even the humans knew and feared.

And still, I considered it before shaking my head no. My gut twisting that my reasons had more to do with logistics than the morality of it.

"One, it'd take too long. We don't have that time. Two, who knows if that would somehow impact the magic of their half of the Book. It must be given freely. It's possible the magic is strong enough to see our scheming." I pictured every one of those queens - even the sixth and missing one - and hissed. "We are stuck with them."

“We could try again,” Mor said. Finally, I looked up and found her warm eyes watching me, understanding me even possibly. “Let me speak to them, let me go to their palace-”

“No,” Azriel said, cutting across her. Mor perked up, undoubtedly unused to Az’s fixed opinion against her, but the shadowsinger was set - and I couldn’t blame him. The things he’d told me of the palace were more than simply dangerous.

That didn’t stop Mor from staring at him incredulously, her voice sharpening as she redirected her attention to him. “I fought in the War, you will do well to remember-”

“No,” Azriel said again, staring right back at her determined. Every muscle in his body seemed to flex. “They would string you up and make an example of you.”

“They’d have to catch me first.”

Azriel’s wings shifted. Cassian and I shared a look and both equally tensed. “That palace is a death trap for our kind,” Azriel said, halfway toward getting up out of his seat and sitting next to Mor if it would convince her - if it would keep her safe. “Built by Fae hands to protect the humans from us. You set foot inside it, Mor, and you won’t walk out again. Why do you think we’ve had such trouble getting a foothold in there?”

Mor opened her mouth to retort, but Feyre spoke first. “If going into their territory isn’t an option, and deceit or any mental manipulation might make the magic wreck the Book... What proof can be offered? Who is - who is this Miryam?” Mor’s mouth closed, the moment forgotten. History flooding back to all of us as we looked at Feyre. “Who was she to Jurian, and who was that prince you spoke of - Drakon? Perhaps we... perhaps they could be used as proof. If only to vouch for you.”

My heart slowed down, a weight pressing in. Whatever we did moving forward, it seemed all of our options would betray somebody.

“Five hundred years ago,” I said, “in the years leading up to the War, there was a Fae kingdom in the southern part of the continent. It was a realm of sand surrounding a lush river delta. The Black Land. There was no crueller place to be born a human - for no humans were born free. They were all of them slaves, forced to build great temples and palaces for the High Fae who ruled. There was no escape; no chance of having their freedom purchased. And the queen of the Black Land...”

I trailed off, Mor picking up the pieces my scars barred me from recalling. “She made Amarantha seem as sweet as Elain.”

“Miryam was a half-Fae female born of a human mother. And as her mother was a slave, as the conception was... against her mother’s will, so, too, was Miryam born in shackles, and deemed human - denied any rights to her Fae heritage.”

A cruel, dark blemish on the history of our kind was that era, no war needed.

“Tell the full story another time,” Amren said, clipped and irritated. “The gist of it, girl is that Miryam was given as a wedding gift by the queen to her betrothed, a foreign Fae prince

named Drakon. He was horrified, and let Miryam escape. Fearing the queen's wrath, she fled through the desert, across the sea, into more desert... and was found by Jurian. She fell in with his rebel armies, became his lover, and was a healer amongst the warriors. Until a devastating battle found her tending to Jurian's new Fae allies - including Prince Drakon. Turns out, Miryam had opened his eyes to the monster he planned to wed. He'd broken the engagement, allied his armies with the humans, and had been looking for the beautiful slave-girl for three years. Jurian had no idea that his new ally coveted his lover. He was too focused on winning the War, on destroying Amarantha in the North. As his obsession took over, he was blind to witnessing Miryam and Drakon falling in love behind his back."

I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard Amren say so much in one go.

"It wasn't behind his back," Mor said, a near snarl. "Miryam ended it with Jurian before she ever laid a finger on Drakon." She looked at Amren with a trace of that same regal warrior she'd stared the mortal queens down with. A queen in her own right, ready to defend her friends to the death - not against Amren, but in that war she'd lived through. I didn't want to think of her fighting in one again.

Amren brushed her off easily. "Long story short, girl, when Jurian was slaughtered by Amarantha, and during the long centuries after, she told him what had happened to his lover. That she'd betrayed him for a Fae male. Everyone believed Miryam and Drakon perished while liberating her people from the Black Land at the end of the War - even Amarantha."

Mor's eyes flashed. She'd been there, marching through the sand and hell fires to help Miryam free her people.

"And they didn't," Feyre said, putting the pieces of the story together. "It was all a way to escape, wasn't it? To start over somewhere else, with both their peoples?" Mor and I nodded simultaneously. "So why not show the queens that? You started to tell them-"

"Because," I said, the words sounding tired - exhausted - even to me, "in addition to it not proving a thing about *my* character, which seemed to be their biggest gripe, it would be a grave betrayal of our friends. Their only wish was to remain hidden - to live in peace with their peoples. They fought and bled and suffered enough for it. I will not bring them into this conflict."

"Drakon's aerial army was as good as ours," Cassian said softly, a thought more than a suggestion. "We might need to call upon him by the end."

I shook my head.

No, not Drakon. Not Miryam. Not their armies nor their families, nor mine. And not the queens' own lives forfeited for new ones. Each of those routes either ended with too much death or would not be enough to assure the queens of *my* own guilt.

If we were to get the book, *I* would have to take the risk again to right myself before them.

And I only knew one way to do that.

“So, what do we offer them instead?” Feyre asked. Everyone looked to me. “What do we show them?”

The queens wanted to know me - the real, true me. Then I would pay a steep price to give it to them if it would save us - save my city and my mate that I’d written so desperately about to those women.

I swallowed, my throat feeling raw. “We show them Velaris.”

“What?” Mor said. I couldn’t meet her eyes.

“You can’t mean to bring them here,” Feyre said hesitantly.

“Of course not,” I replied. “The risks are too great, entertaining them for even a night would likely result in bloodshed. So I plan to merely show them.”

“They’ll dismiss it as mind tricks,” Azriel said, no doubt thinking of those beautifully laid dangers he’d met in their court.

Finally, I stood. I was tired. I was hungry. And I felt empty. “No, I mean to *show* them - playing by their own rules.”

“What do you mean, High Lord?” Amren asked, her eyes narrowed. But I faced my cousin, and she saw me for what I meant. Her skin paled, another curse at my feet to carry forward in this fight.

“Send word to your father. We’re going to pay him and my other court a visit.”

To my side, Feyre’s head slowly lifted to meet mine. The bond pulled taut.

Just one more curse to carry.

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“What about-”

“No,” I said, stifling a sigh as I stared at the dark red liquid swirling inside my wine glass. All of us save Amren sat the dinner table. Mor’s face was heavy. “That city is too far north - too near Illyrian territory. If *my* reputation proceeds me to the mortal realms, the proximity to Illyrian territory may very well also. It doesn’t matter anyway. You’ve all suggested half a dozen cities already. None of them will hold as Velaris will.”

Mor looked away tersely, her lips tight. Cassian sat on one side staring hard at her, concern urging him to do something. He’d been restless since we’d sat down to dinner - almost as restless as Azriel’s shadows, who’d leave soon to contact his spies now that the plans were set for tomorrow’s visit to the Hewn City.

“I still don’t understand,” Feyre said on my right, “why any city will work, Velaris or no. What’s the Veritas? Why will the queens trust it?”

I parted my lips to answer, but Mor's voice rang clear across the table even if she wouldn't look at Feyre - or me. "The Veritas is my family's most ancient gift," she explained. "The wielded holds the ability to show truth - to show the world exactly as it is anywhere, at any given time, among other things. It was forged and given to my family that our bloodline might share that power and merge it with our natural magic. It is why the queens could hear my story and know that it was truth, even if..." Azriel leaned forward across from Mor as she ran her lips together, staring hard at her plate. "Even if it didn't matter in the end anyway."

"With the Veritas," Cassian cut across for her, "the queens will be able to see Velaris and know with absolute certainty that it is real, safe, and most importantly, that Rhys isn't the evil prick they think he is."

Cassian's eyes darted quickly to me, as if I might take offense, but I shook my head. He gave me a short nod.

"And you're positive," Feyre asked, hesitantly crossing her arms on the table as she looked at Mor, a line creasing her brow, "that there's *nothing* else we can show them? Nothing that would equally prove?"

"No," I said. Her eyes snapped to me, considering.

"Even..." She swallowed, allowing herself to remember even as the vision of us wailing and crying out across Amarantha's blood-strewn floor together flashed across the bond and caused us both to cringe.

"Definitely not," I said, breaking my gaze off. I took a sip of wine and sat the glass back on the table, my fingers picking at the stem. "Velaris is the only way. Tomorrow, we winnow in close to the base of the mountain and fly the rest of the way. You three," and I pointed to Mor, Cassian, and Feyre - wishing it wasn't Feyre, "will help me distract Keir while Azriel slips out to get the Orb. We stay no longer than necessary to avoid suspicion."

Mor stood up abruptly from the table. "If we're done here, I need to start preparing."

"Mor-" Cassian said, jerking at her motion, and standing quickly to follow her.

But my cousin only made it a few steps, muttered, "I need to write my father to let him know we're coming," and winnowed. Her skin was ghost white.

Cassian ran a hand through his hair, his temper perhaps the only sentiment stronger in the room than my guilt. Azriel stood and walked over to his brother, placing a shadow-encrusted hand on his shoulder. "I'll find her after I sort my spies out," he said quietly.

"She's not going to-"

"I know where she'll be. And yes, she will." They shared a hard look, one so private and intimate even to me, that Feyre and I both looked away.

A pause. And then, "Okay."



Azriel left, Cassian not far behind with barely even a goodbye. A lengthy silence ensued before Feyre announced she was going for a walk. I didn't object.

I had the table cleared with a snap of my fingers the second she left the door, my wine glass replaced with something much deeper and of a more amber coloring.

The house was too still and quiet as I poured a fresh glass. I thought of Mor and hated - *hated* - the way she refused to look at me before she left. It felt exactly the way losing Feyre's first smile to Tarquin that morning she wouldn't meet my gaze in Adriata had felt: broken and isolating.

I took a long sip of that drink, feeling it burn in my throat, just as it had when I'd received the blood rubies.

Tarquin.

Feyre.

Mor.

*Mor* .

She had told me many times over the years that she was not bothered to be a queen in a city that once made her a slave of its own liking. There were days she returned from the Hewn City looking empowered for having held court over the family she despised for what they'd done to her.

And then there were days like today, where I asked too much of her - to steal from her own family, to get perhaps *too* close to history. And it was only that sheer determination and duty to the crown Mor and I shared that kept her from breaking in two.

That, and Azriel. I hoped for both our sakes that he resolved his discussions with his spies and found my cousin quickly. Hurting her... was not something I wanted. Not *ever* . She deserved better than that for all she'd given our family since the day I'd met her. All of this city and more.

And yet... tomorrow she would wear the mask. We all would. Cassian the alpha male, dominating with his siphons and that aura that crackled like fire to fill a mountain top. Azriel, the phantom that would haunt and vanish like smoke, injecting fear into every heart he touched. And Feyre.

I did not want to think of what Feyre would have to become if she came tomorrow.

Feyre - who was out now looking at my city and possibly wondering if what she'd said about it when she escaped the Attor was no longer true. Feyre, who was now my friend. Would I sacrifice that friendship, that hope for more, to keep my crown - *our crown* , the bond begged me to think - safe? Could I?

I'd already forced the scene from filling out in my mind half a dozen times at dinner, knowing how she would hate me for the mask that *I* would wear tomorrow if she came. The

one that had forced her to return to a place of pain and torture where I'd painted her body, drugged her, and splintered her bones. It wouldn't matter why I'd done those things. Only that I'd done them at all.

Maybe Mor and Amren were right. Maybe I should... tell her.

I waited for her in the foyer near the stairs and wasn't left waiting long. Feyre returned within close to an hour of her initial departure, her cheeks flushed from the walk and crisp air.

She took one look at me and halted, brows knitting together. "What's wrong?" My heart sank.

Concern. My friend was concerned - for me.

"I'm debating asking you to stay tomorrow," I said. Her chin jerked to one side brusquely, her arms crossing.

"I thought I was going." Her eyes pleaded silently with me behind those few words. Behind that mind that thought I would lock her up like *him*. I could neither take her, nor leave her. Either way, I was damned.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to stay upright. The stairs looked inviting. "What I have to be tomorrow, who I have to become, is not..." Feyre's chin dipped waiting, "it's not something I want you to see. How I will treat you, treat others..."

"The mask of the High Lord," she finished when I could not.

*'Whore...'*

Both of us. We'd both be whores if Feyre went.

"Yes," I said, and sat down, unable to stand any longer. The angle of the stairs felt sharp against my back, like the throne I would sit on in a matter of hours.

Feyre watched me from where she still stood, that momentary doubt and fire gone. "Why don't you want me to see that?"

*Tell her, Rhys. Tell her the truth .*

*Mor-*

*Tell her, damn it, or I'm not going tomorrow .*

I sighed.

*Alright, Mor - for you.*

"Because," I said slowly, "you've only started to look at me like I'm not a monster, and I can't stomach the idea of anything you see tomorrow, being beneath that mountain, putting you back into that place where I found you."

Feyre held my gaze, and... after a moment, I watched that crease in her brow release, felt the bond go soft and pliant. But her eyes - they were not afraid as they stared into the darkness.

“Let me help,” she said, resolute. “In whatever way I can.”

What would happen to that resolution if I brought her, dressed her up and objectified her before my entire court? “The role you will have to play is not a pleasant one.”

Feyre was walking purposefully toward me instantly, taking the small spot next to me on the stairs. She sat so close, our arms and knees brushed. That one simple touch meaning almost as much to me as the way she stared straight into my eyes past the stars and the bleakness and whispered, “I trust you.”

*My friend - my mate.*

*My trust.*

“Why did Mor look so disturbed when she left?” Feyre asked.

I swallowed roughly. By now, Azriel would be with Mor. And she’d be... better. I hoped.

“I was there, in the Hewn City, the day her father declared she was to be sold in marriage to Eris, eldest son of the High Lord of the Autumn Court.” Feyre’s eyes went wide - and rightfully so. “Eris had a reputation for cruelty, and Mor... begged me not to let it happen. For all her power, all her wildness, she had no voice, no rights with those people. And my father didn’t particularly care if his cousins used their offspring as breeding stock.”

That day had been... horrifying. And Mor had not begged me to save her so much as wept and mourned and all but thrown herself off the edges of the world if it would save her somehow.

“What happened?” Feyre’s voice came out particularly tiny. I missed the amber decanter I’d left sitting on the dining table.

“I brought Mor to the Illyrian camp for a few days. And she saw Cassian, and decided she’d do the one thing that would ruin her value to these people. I didn’t know until after, and... it was a mess. With Cassian, with her, with out families. And it’s another long story, but the short of it is that Eris refused to marry her. Said she’d been sullied by a bastard-born lesser faerie, and he’d now sooner fuck a sow. Her family... they...” A sharpness stung behind my eyes. I’d never forget the way she’d... how her stomach had... and Cassian, Azriel. *My cousin - my Morrigan.*

I scraped the pain off my throat enough to admit to Feyre, who sat dutifully at my side through every word, “When they were done, they dumped her on the Autumn Court border, with a note nailed to her body that said she was Eris’s problem.” Feyre sucked in a breath. I’d never felt the bond so quiet since those weeks of silence in between visits from the Spring Court. “Eris left her for dead in the middle of their woods. Azriel found her a day later. It was all I could do to keep him from going to either court and slaughtering them all.”

*Mor-*

*She'll be okay.*

Still, I'd had to restrain my brother with magic to keep him from leaving her bedside and flying back to those woods of fall.

*Thank you for finding her.*

*I would have gone to the ends of the world and back to find her.*

Eyes like stone, he'd had that day.

*I know you would have.*

That was the day we'd become family - all four of us. I would not let it break. Not then. Not now. Not *ever* .

*Too* much. It was always too, too much, it seemed.

Whether she felt the tension in my veins or simply needed to relieve her own, Feyre's gently took my hand and allowed me the privilege of keeping it. Her skin was soft as I brushed idle strokes back and forth over her palm.

And then she told me in that same resolute voice that would not, could not be broken anymore, "Tell me what I need to do tomorrow."

I sighed, but squeezed her hand and told my friend the role she would play in my Court of Nightmares.

## Chapter 42: This Mask Does Not Scare Me

### Chapter Summary

Rhysand takes Feyre to the Court of Nightmares as a distraction while Azriel steals the Veritas. Quite a show ensues on the throne in front of the entire court.

I felt sick. For the first time in centuries, power was not my friend accompanying me to the Hewn City - the Court of Nightmares. Though it would have to be my ally if we were going to accomplish this mission.

It wouldn't be like last time, with Tarquin. I wouldn't let it. We would enter, Azriel would swoop in to snatch the Veritas, and we would leave.

But Feyre would see every moment.

I'd once pledged to her that she would not become a weapon nor a pawn so long as she worked with me. Holding her tightly against my chest as we flew through the cold mountain air towards the gates, Cassian and Azriel flying nearby, the memory tasted of a lie on my tongue. I couldn't look at her knowing how Mor would transform her when she received us. So I only held on more tightly instead.

Feyre had sat with me for a long while after I'd explained her role in today's proceedings. When we'd finished and I was certain she understood, would decide it was too vile and demoralizing to go through with and walk out, she squeezed my hand tighter.

And now we flew, all I could think of as I stared at the slowly melting snow and surrounding forests was whether she would forgive me today's grievances only to enter that mountain and see Amarantha anew - and panic.

Panic the way my heart did now, beating away a wild tension rapidly in my chest.

It was an odd contrast to the trees that sat so silently near us as we flew by. Not even the brief stirrings of the wind seemed to ruffle their branches. The birds hiding among their number remained utterly silent.

So cold, my court. So unyielding and stern, and -

"Amren and Mor told me that the span of an Illyrian male's wings says a lot about the size of... other parts," Feyre said in the middle of that great silence. It was an effort not to jerk in surprise through the air currents. Of all the -

Briefly, I glanced at her, and saw a shy, coy face watching me. "Did they now," I said offhandedly. Feyre shrugged as though we were merely discussing the ease into spring the

weather had taken.

“They also said Azriel’s wings are the biggest.”

*Of course they did.*

I was going to murder my cousin after this trip. Feyre bit her lip in a *near* smirk and slid her gaze carefully to my brother, flying slightly ahead of us now. My heart sped up for entirely new reasons.

“When we get home, let’s get out the measuring stick, shall we?”

Feyre’s fingers danced across my forearm and pinched. The grin I flashed her just before tucking my wings in tight was undeniable. Her arms went wild scrambling for purchase around my chest - my neck - as we fell, dropping several feet. But the scream the fall elicited out of her as Feyre buried her face in at the side of my neck was sensational.

My wings fanned out at my back, sending us into a smooth even glide with a few measured pumps. Ahead, Azriel barrel rolled over, his expression questioning at Feyre’s cry.

*Biggest span, my ass* , I thought, as my subsequent grin and laughter sent him back off.

Tilting my chin down, my lips found the little pathway between Feyre’s ear and neck.

“You’re willing to brave my brand of darkness and put up one of your own, willing to go to watery grave and take on the Weaver, but a little free fall makes you scream?”

She didn’t even move so I could better hear her reply through the wind whipping about us. Her arms were locked firmly around my neck, fingers gripping at my leathers. I quite liked her clutching at me like this, holding me tight, making her scream -

“I’ll leave you to rot the next time you have a nightmare,” she said, poison behind those words. More and more these days, I seemed to come up with the proper antidote.

“No, you won’t,” I teased. “You liked seeing me naked too much.”

“Prick.”

But her fingers tightened on me. And it loosed a deep laugh rumbling out of my chest. The gates to the Hewn City loomed not terribly far off in the distance, but for just a moment, they were a little further away in my mind.

I shifted my arms around Feyre as she adjusted against me, her head still buried at my neck. Something brushed along the underside of my wing, too quick to register, until -

A tremor ran down the column of my spine as Feyre softly ran one delicate finger over my wings, forcing a low groan to hiss out between my lips. A groan that was guttural and primal and enough that Feyre snatched that mischievous, unsuspecting little finger right back.

“That,” I said a bit breathlessly, trying not to register what my cock was or wasn’t doing in response, “is very sensitive.”

My eyes met Feyre's as she quickly tilted her face up against my chest to consider me. "Does it tickle?"

Cauldron no - not if the good degree of heat that had already pooled below my waist was any indication.

I thought a moment, excusing myself to the trees and mountaintops to shove certain inclinations aside, and whispered, "It feels like this," before blowing softly into Feyre's ear. She rewarded me with a shudder in her back and better access to that beautiful damned neck of hers. The skin was hot and just a hair's breath beneath where my lips rested.

"Oh," was all she said, a small gasp. I smiled and removed myself from that delicate skin of hers.

"If you want an Illyrian male's attention, you'd be better off grabbing him by the balls. We're trained to protect our wings at all costs. Some males attack first, ask questions later, if their wings are touched without invitation."

I should have known Feyre wouldn't simply leave it there, though I didn't quite expect, "And during sex?" to come flying so readily out of that mouth. A flicker of pleasure swam through that delicious pool of heat in my crotch.

"During sex, an Illyrian male can find completion just by having someone touch his wings in the right spot."

"Have *you* found that to be true?"

Now I couldn't look away. Feyre's eyes were dancing on my chest and slowly rising higher to meet me - *toy* with me even. Cauldron - what would she do once we were *inside* the mountain?

"I've never allowed anyone to see or touch my wings during sex," I admitted. "It makes you vulnerable in a way that I'm not... comfortable with."

Feyre peered off into the mountains - bored, apparently, and drawled, "Too bad."

"Why?"

She shrugged, her face appearing rather taut. And damn me to my grave, I hated that even in ways she might never find herself concerned with, I might have disappointed her somehow.

And yet - "Because I bet you could get into some interesting positions with those wings."

A roar of laughter stumbled blindly out of my chest, and before I knew what I was doing, my head was nuzzling into Feyre's side, inhaling the fresh scent of her hair that sped my blood along at a tumultuous pace, grazing the cool skin of her scalp beneath with my nose. My lips met her ear, readily parting to apply a reckless kiss of appreciation.

That's when the first arrow flew by.

*Fuck!*

An army of deadly darts followed. I snatched one clean out of the air and took one look at the ash makings before my hands had snapped it into mere fragments.

Feyre's body went rigid against me as we hurtled down to the ground in immediate descent. I wouldn't winnow lest we lose whoever assaulted us. Magic tore from me to form a shield against the arrows trailing us - trailing me and *my mate* , seeking to wound or kill, I didn't want to know. My arms engulfed Feyre in response, every instinct in my body telling me what protecting my mate's life truly meant.

Cassian and Azriel were at our side in seconds, blue and red orbs blazing around them to form their own shields. Shields I had seen many, many times over the centuries in battles and in wars.

Blood pounded in my ears vying for dominance over the brittle wind.

This was *my* court. And someone had infiltrated. The Attor hadn't been lying that day Azriel carved him up and feasted on his dirty little secrets.

The moment we slammed into the ground, I handed Feyre to Cassian - barely registering she was unharmed - ready to demand payment from whatever bastards were roaming my mountains.

"Take her to the palace," I told Cassian, who's eyes were made of fire and sun, "and stay there until I'm back. Az, you're with me."

Cassian didn't so much as blink. But Feyre stepped away from him, retreating back towards the embrace I'd made her quit. "No," she said.

I whirled around back around from where I'd turned to face her and was not proud of the snarl that ripped from my mouth. "What?"

*My mate.*

*My - my mate .*

But Feyre was strong. And she did not budge.

"Take me with you," she said, neither a request nor a demand. I steadied a breath. My wings, my arms, my everything - collapsing inward. Feyre's gaze glossed over me noticing it all, a huntress marking every detail. "I've seen ash arrows," she said, her words no more than a breath of air. "I might recognize where they were made. And if they came from the hand of another High Lord... I can detect that, too. And I can track just as well on the ground as any of you. So you and Cassian take the skies. And I'll hunt on the ground with Azriel."

*You think like an Illyrian .*

And it was still true.



Not only true, but just.

Hybern. Tamlin. Some other beast I knew not about. My own people... Even Tarquin now. I did not know what sought after us. But Feyre could. And I trusted her to do it. Trusted my - my friend.

My friend through danger and doubt, who had not left me to myself these many weeks. And who now stood straighter, no longer starved, but confident and assured of who she was becoming.

I turned to Cassian, my mind searching rapidly to see the details. "Cassian - I want aerial patrols on the sea borders, stationed in two-mile rings, all the way out toward Hybern. I want foot soldiers in the mountain passes along the southern border; make sure those warning fires are ready on every peak. We're not going to rely on magic." Cassian nodded, just as my other brother sent shadows spilling out of him in a frenzied rhythm. "When you're done," I told Az, "warn your spies that they might be compromised, and prepare to get them out. And put fresh ones in. We keep this contained. We don't tell anyone inside that court what happened. If anyone mentions it, say it was a training exercise."

The shadows cleared, sent off somewhere I knew naught. Both their siphons continued to glow with a steady, near violent energy, as though they might burst at any moment.

And when I looked at Feyre, she held her head high, her eyes clear and sharp. The huntress called from hiding in the dark caves of the mountainside, ready to fight once more.

"We've got one hour until we're expected at court." Feyre held my gaze. "Make it count."

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We didn't find anyone. Not so much as a single fallen arrow. Cassian and I flew until we'd carved the earth up from above with our eyes, but there was nothing in those trees.

Nothing we could discern, at least. It set my teeth on edge. Not a good start to our visit.

"When we get-

"I know," Cassian cut me off. Mor had taken Feyre away already to change and go inside. I stood with my brothers away from the gates where the sentries might overhear. "Set the new rotations as soon as we're back. It's as good as done already." Azriel affirmed his own intent with a nod. My chest still felt tight. "Who do you think was behind it?"

There was a pause before I answered during which Azriel's shadows stilled, listening - preparing. "Hybern more than likely. That's twice now they've found us. Found Feyre."

Cassian's voice was sharp as an Illyrian blade. "The Attor." I nodded. Even after the affairs in Adriata, I doubted the two incidents of attack on Feyre were unaffiliated. Cassian turned on Az and groaned, "Why couldn't you have just killed that sick fuck and saved us all this trouble."

“Believe me, it would have been a pleasure.” Az’s face paled slightly as a flicker of black kissed the shadowsinger’s ear. “It’s time.”

I sighed, avoiding their gazes and finding that cold, calculating mask I wore all too well. It felt oddly comforting to slip behind it, where Feyre might not see too much of me. Where she and I might both be safe from whatever ash would chase us next.

And there would be a next, and a time after that.

An eternity of war and high lords chasing after her.

An eternity of death.

A warmth pressed upon my shoulder. I looked up to find Cassian’s hazel eyes, equally soft and warm as that touch, boring in to me. “One hour,” he said. “It’s just one hour. That’s all she’ll see.”

“But it’s enough,” I replied. He shook his head.

“Nah. It’s not.” He brought his free hand round to my other shoulder and squared me up. “She’s fine. And you know she is. So will you stop worrying so much and let us deal with keeping both your asses safe today?” He smirked. “You know I get cranky when you try to do it yourself.”

I put my hands in my pockets, eyes scoffing away to land on Azriel who merely shrugged. “You do kind of suck at it,” he said.

Cassian shirked his head as if to say, *See?*

“Fine,” I relented and stepped out of Cassian’s hold. “Let’s go.”

Azriel tipped me a small, easy smile before his wings beat into the air. My own stretched wide behind me, but I stayed a moment to look at Cassian - bastard, commander, brother. “Cass-”

“I know,” he said. “I always know.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Just promise me one thing?”

“Name it.”

“Kick Kier’s ass in there today.”

Our twin smiles were greedy as we flew to the mountain.

---

For the first time in 500 years, I was nervous stepping through those gates. The Court of Nightmares had never been my home, nor even a place within in my own court that I took

interest in ruling. The beasts it housed were cretins, the lot of them, easy to rule and I had enough power several times over to drown them all if I wanted. Wearing the cruel mask of the High Lord they cowered before was easy.

But today was not that day. Today, someone important would be watching. Someone I still couldn't quite fully understand how she felt towards me, much less how she would feel after I'd exposed her to the monster that would be pawing at her in front of the court I despised.

Cassian and Azriel stood before me at the handles of the doorway that would lead me to my throne. Beyond, Feyre readied herself beside my cousin. I could hear the cutting voice of Kier, Mor's father, as they met, my gut twisting in revulsion.

Memories of that night centuries ago, when she'd only been seventeen and untested, curled through me as I remembered how I'd barely been able to tell it to Feyre the night previously. I didn't allow myself to slip into Keir's mind now and witness how he was experiencing Feyre, lest I slip and splinter him to ash.

Azriel budged almost unnoticeable, hearing the exchange of words too. "Ready?" Cassian asked, brows raised at me.

Easy as flicking a button open on a shirt, I lifted the damper on my power. Darkness flowed off my body in rippling waves, so thick with fog that you couldn't tell where the black of my clean, crisp tunic ended and the smoke began. The stars that swirled atop my head shimmered with uncompromising light weaving a thick crown even those sheathed in the darkest reaches of the mountain could have felt.

I took comfort in the feel of it all, of releasing my true self that I so seldom was able to become. My oldest friend, the darkness that soothes. Only here did that darkness appear so abhorrent.

I nodded at Cassian and together, he and Azriel pulled back the doors. I allowed them to enter first into the now deadly quiet hall where dozens had gathered. The palace the mountain cradled within was a mammoth compared to the pitiful imitation Amarantha had fashioned Under the Mountain for us. With every step, the ground quaked beneath my feet as I followed my brothers, instantly spotting Feyre where she stood with her face lowered the way I had instructed her to do.

All at once, the room knelt.

"Well, well," I said, soaking in the power I had over my despised court. "Looks like you're all on time for once." Boredom drawled from my voice, from the disinterested sway of my surveying eyes as bodies cowered away from my passing approach.

The eyes were what beckoned, leaned forward as chests tightened and breaths held still. Power. So much power before them and they wanted it even when their foolish minds instructed them differently. It was hard not to wonder at how many of them had longed to lick at Amarantha's feet for fifty years while I was away. Mor had already sent me so many to... attend to.

But there would always be more.

It was Feyre who stopped my blood in its tracks. I nearly whistled at the sight. Mor had done a number on her.

She knelt in a thin sheet of black fabric, fabric rippling with sparkles and grace, that threatened to expose her most intimate parts. And for a brief second, we were back Under the Mountain and I was readying to ply her with booze to make her forget my wicked schemes. Even if here, she looked... a cheek more refined, more sleek and powerful than when I had dressed her. Guilt nipped at my heels as I stopped in front of her and gripped her chin with hard intention.

“Welcome to my home, Feyre Cursebreaker,” I bit, turning her face to me with predatory command. Her gaze was focused, cunning as she did not flinch from the cruel touch. “Come with me.”

Feyre stood, the fabric around her swaying to allow subtle peeks at little hidden expanses of her skin, and Cauldron damn me, my guilt shifted from revulsion at what I was doing to one of pure, animal instinct. This was my mate, I realized. Not just my friend, but my *mate* parading before me. I tightened the leash on my mask watching Feyre prowl toward me on the throne, as the fabric exposed her hips, now so much more rounded and soft than when she had first left the Spring Court. Her breasts were high and supple, threatening to burst from behind the thin slips covering them and her lips - damn Morrigan for her cunning skill - her lips were full and red and pulsing at me to bite them.

She wasn't starved anymore. There were no longer any bones to count. Feyre was simply herself - stunning, seductive, and powerful.

A small, inviting smile, not entirely meant for my court, rose on my face as I sat on my throne and practically pulled Feyre atop me. My hands found her exposed rib cage, her inner thigh and began to run teasing circles over her skin with my thumb. Other than a small twist of discomfort at finding my fingers cold, which I immediately rectified, Feyre seemed... okay.

So I let the act begin, well aware my court was still kneeling and watching. I brought my lips in close on Feyre's ear and half whispered, “Try not to let it go to your head.”

“What?” Feyre asked, the innocent plaything of the High Lord.

“That every male in here is contemplating what they'd be willing to give up in order to get that pretty, red mouth of yours on them.”

I tensed inside my head, waiting to see how Feyre would handle her first test, if she could stomach the ruse that so mimicked some of what I imagined were her worst nightmares from Amarantha's vile prison sentence.

But then Feyre looked out at my court as if they were her court too. No fear. No revulsion. Just pure, cold command as she offered up a smile as slippery as the serpents crawling along the engravings of the throne where we sat.

My blood hummed. How much had I feared this day would ruin her? Maybe even bring her back to square one with all the memories it was sure to stir in her. We still had a ways to go, but my confidence grew at seeing the deadly smile Feyre aimed at the kneeling fae, all of them High born and rotten. A smile I hoped I would one day soon earn for myself.

My thumb ventured maybe half a centimeter higher on Feyre's thigh and she leaned quite noticeably into it, and here we were, already slammed so close together.

"Rise," I said at last, power tempering my voice, and the court obeyed. I dismissed them to their pointless charades with obvious boredom before calling Keir to the dais. Morrigan's father looked pained as he approached. Off to the sides, my inner circle watched the man with narrowed eyes, Azriel worst of all as Keir spotted him and took in Truth-Teller at his hip, the small Illyrian dagger promising a lifetime of pain as soon as the golden woman beside him gave the command.

The day Azriel sliced the blade into that man was a day that couldn't come fast enough. But for Mor, we would wait. Mor, who tensed to be here but now stood staring at me with her own pride and power drumming in her veins. A queen come to hold court.

"Report," I spat, nodding my head imperceptibly to my friends who immediately dispersed. Within seconds, Azriel was nowhere to be seen and I could feel more than see Mor and Cassian within the throngs of people.

"Greetings, milord," Keir said with an even voice I didn't think him capable of mustering anymore, least not to me. "And greetings to your... guest."

I looked at Feyre, momentarily pausing my lazy sweeps of her thigh. "She is lovely, isn't she?"

"Indeed... There is little to report, milord. All has been quiet since your last visit."

"No one for me to punish?"

"Unless you'd like for me to select someone here, no, milord."

"Pity," I said, never removing my gaze from Feyre. Nervousness entwined itself through my bones as tightly as the stars stitched atop my head as I considered her. My friend would likely think me vile, irredeemable for using her body like this the way Amarantha had used me, but I had to do it to make Keir, and what would end up reaching the farthest corners of Prythian, believe our act. They already believed her my whore, so what else would she appear visiting if not that?

And Feyre knew. I'd told her all of it and she had agreed without hesitancy, knowing it would cost us both. I'd apologized for it more times than I could count before she'd squeezed my hand and told me to stop, that it was okay.

I had to trust that as I moved in on her then, a fear I hated so intensely flickering in my mind teasing me with images of rejection and loathing to come. But I reached for Feyre with my lips anyway, lightly tugging at her earlobe with my teeth. Shivers broke out all over her body.

Her stomach tightened, back arching slightly and I thought she was going to pull away, and I'd be forced to feel the bond between us pull taut with disgust.

And then her limbs went limp, her legs widening a margin around my own, and she fell back against me - no, *into* me. The bond seemed to loosen, a sigh of relief between us.

Licking the inside of my mouth, I dared to begin the enticing circles of my thumb over her thigh and heard her breath hitch, felt her core pool with heat across the bond. My thumb immediately stopped.

Cauldron - was she actually *enjoying* this? It felt like someone had unzipped my body and shaken my bones, laid them stark along the ground for everyone to see, I was too startled.

Feyre sighed in an almost inaudible way, urging my stroking to resume. It was an effort to remind myself to nod at Keir as he prattled on and I lost track of his one-sided conversation with me.

Feyre didn't flinch at my touch once. Her body melded into mine as the room became glued to us despite the music and the food. My index finger joined my thumb, sliding higher with each pass along her thigh even as my other hand grazed the underside of her breasts and I realized how hard I was falling into the mixed haze of deceit and longing.

Would she hate me for this? Would she curse me? It felt like a violation what I was doing to her, the guilt gnawing more vicious than a sea beneath a wild storm when I took in the fact that she had no obligation to be here. Forcibly, I clamped the lid on my mind shut while widening the damper on my powers, begging for *some* kind of release, forcing myself to run as far away from the doors of her mind lest I be tempted to enter and see the ugly truth of who I was staring back at me from her thoughts.

Because no - she wouldn't enjoy this. These touches. These hasty, heat filled strokes.

Yet... I couldn't stop touching. Couldn't make my fingers find another restless land to explore to beg forgiveness. She felt simply exquisite wherever my fingertips roamed. It was both a mercy and a grievance when Keir interrupted my thumb only inches away from slipping under the fabric at Feyre's crotch.

"I had heard the rumors, and I didn't quite believe them," he said. "But it seems true: Tamlin's pet is now owned by another master."

*Wrong.*

*Pet. Master.*

*So very, very wrong.*

How far from the truth those words were. Feyre had no master even as I sat there luxuriously stroking her and she didn't back down. But I forced Keir's impression onto myself as I replied.

“You should see how I make her beg,” I said, running my nose along her neck, a momentary reprieve to my fingers.

“I assume you brought her to make a statement.”

“You know everything I do is a statement.”

“Of course. This one, it seems, you enjoy putting in cobwebs and crowns.”

Disgust laced his voice. Feyre and I both halted, our gazes snapping to Keir. I could have throttled him dead for that one remark alone, but Feyre was faster than I and far more cunning as she stared Keir down with wicked disapproval on her lips.

“Perhaps I’ll put a leash on *you*,” she said.

The demon working inside my mind flew back to the doors of Feyre’s mental shield as fast as he had fled only moments prior, knocking at her mind’s door with approval.

“She does enjoy playing,” I said. “Get her some wine.” Keir left and sitting alone with Feyre a mountain full of eyes staring at her in her near-nakedness pulled me back into my guilt. I pressed a light kiss below her ear hoping she would understand how irrevocably sorry I was for making her play the harlot. It was the last thing I wanted her to ever be.

And that’s when it hit me.

Sorrow filled me to the brim. I shouldn’t have let her come. I couldn’t rob her of her freedom to choose, especially not after how cruelly Tamlin had treated her in that regard, but I could have tried harder to convince her to stay. Surely there could have been *something* I could have offered her, another task seemingly as important to beg her to stay behind in Velaris while still feeling useful. Anything to spare her this role.

I should have found a way to protect her just as much as free her. Sitting there with Feyre half-naked on my lap, I was no better than Amarantha. Still her lover. Still her wretched whore. I told myself I did this for the good of my court, and in part I did, but my court included the beasts now watching us. The ones I had never found a way to tame.

I didn’t deserve Feyre. I didn’t deserve Cassian, nor Azriel, nor my cousin who my eyes went out pleading for and couldn’t find in the sea.

The sea of eyes and disapproval.

That was my fate. That was what I deserved for stripping the huntress with the human heart down like this to make a mortal court owe us their allegiance.

As if sensing my change in mood, Feyre turned to look at me, her eyes searching. My grip on her thigh tightened marginally, and her lips turned down softening. Her mental shields lowered a fraction, inviting me in.

*What?* I dared asked into the folds of her mind, but she wouldn’t answer. Not there. Her internal touch caressed my mental shields instead. It felt soothing, light. And I couldn’t help

but to lean into her. So I opened my mind to Feyre as much as my fear would allow and her voice filled me up like the melody of the music I'd once sent her, speaking a salvation I had craved for centuries.

*You are good, Rhys, Feyre said. You are kind. This mask does not scare me. I see you beneath it.*

The care in her words, the absence of all the fear and disgust I was sure she would hurtle at me from now on, shocked me so thoroughly that my grip on her tightened and I instantly found her cheek where I pressed a kiss of gratitude and adoration against her skin.

It was so soft. And it smelt of jasmine.

Feyre pressed in to me. Her legs widened again. And her next words undid me as she silently begged, low and sultry, *Why'd you stop?*

A low, feral growl almost escaped from me in an eruption that would have been loud enough to shake the snow from the mountains outside. Feyre felt the pulse of music around us and started to writhe in my lap, allowing my hands to roam and touch at my leisure, her own hands exploring my thighs. My inhibitions escaped right at that touch alongside her own as I went hard beneath her, consumed with want. She'd taken all of those doubts and crumpled them up like paper. I took deep reverent breathes at her neck, inhaling the perfume of her skin, imagining what it would be like to taste it all, to consume her with the full force of my body and mind. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life.

*My mate.*

*My mate. My mate.*

Heat radiated from Feyre's fingertips sending warmth over my thighs as she gripped me. Her thoughts swam across the bond, barriers down and unguarded for me alone, with visions of the burning she felt in her core made manifest. I had to choke back a pleased laugh at how intensely she was reaching for me. How much I felt that fire burning me up myself.

*Easy*, I said to her down the bond. *If you become a living candle, poor Keir will throw a hissy fit. And then you'd ruin the party for everyone.*

Feyre's hands cooled, but to my utter delight, she flung her head back and pressed herself into the crook of my neck as I shifted below her. The sensation of that pressure on my skin was ravenous, the feeling that she wanted this just as badly as I - a divine glory to my soul.

My hand slid high enough on her thigh to finally hook underneath the fabric, dangerous territory, while my other hand cast a knuckle firmly along the underside of her breast, her nipples now very peaked. She might never love me, might never accept or forgive me, but maybe if she gave me this, and her friendship.... maybe I could settle for these scraps. If they kept her from the lifetime of running instead, if they kept me near enough my mate to see and feel, but never have...



Feyre's mind opened to me and I read nothing but the desire for *more, more, more* before Keir made a startled movement.

We turned to see the stupid prick standing there, mouth wide open, a forgotten glass of wine in his hand. Feyre quickly lost interest and I wanted to laugh at him for how foolish he was. I settled for licking my way up Feyre's neck instead watching him gape at us. Feyre's back arched.

I stifled a chuckle. This was somehow... oddly fun. In ways I had never anticipated.

*I think he's so disgusted that he might have given me the orb just to get out of here*, I said to her.

*You and I put on a good show*, Feyre replied in a voice I never imagined she would bestow *me* with. It was heavy. Sultry. I could feel it grasping for me through the bond. My fingers curled along her thigh, tightening in approval, starving for that attention from her. Her body twisted in my lap fighting to get impossibly closer when she stilled entirely feeling how hard I'd become for her every movement.

My breathe caught. I waited for her to pull away, but suddenly she was even closer, grinding on me and returning my earlier licking with one of her own up my throat.

My head swam. Her scent was intoxicating, a rich, sweet liquor I could drown myself in drunkenness on night after night in never ending ecstasy. I wanted this. I wanted all of her. Right there on the floor in front of everyone until she would scream from the pleasure of how I felt inside her and we were mated, never mind the consequences. It was like standing on that balcony and realizing she was my mate, and all the little impulses that went along with it, yet magnified tenfold.

A laugh of feline amusement that was nearly a growl flicked out of me. I trailed kisses across her shoulder, her neck, and dug my fingers in at her thigh, dragging them up, up, up until they met with a thick, sticky slickness.

Feyre froze the second my fingers touched the wetness dripping from between her thighs. I was so blind with the desire to dip my fingers in and taste her - fuck, what did she *taste* like - that I almost forgot what was even happening.

*It's fine*, I said in an attempt to calm Feyre's unease. *It means nothing. It's just your body reacting*. But my words sounded ragged in her mind, even to me. Her body was reacting the same as mine had and still was. We both wanted this. At least, I thought we had. But the contact between us just then had brought a very harsh reality to Feyre's mind that she perhaps wasn't ready to confront just yet.

*Because you're so irresistible?* Feyre sounded out of breathe herself. Mercifully, Azriel returned at this precise moment, sparing us the discomfort of pressing the growing tension between us further.

Keir offered me the wine and I grabbed it with the hand that had rested between Feyre's legs. It was a pain and a relief to remove myself from the spot on her thighs. My fingers ached at

losing the new home they so enjoyed, but as I grabbed the wine goblet and caught the scent of Feyre lingering on my fingertips where I could see some of her slickness shining, my blood boiled with desire all over again and I knew one very certain thing: Not my anything, something, friend, mate - I was so fucked. And maybe not in a good way.

“Should I test it for poison?” I said to Keir at the same moment I told Feyre, *Cassian’s waiting. Go*. Our act was finished and I desperately needed the reprieve. Another moment on my lap with that scent catching me and I would have flipped her over and closed the gap between us entirely all the while wondering how much of the monster she saw in my eyes while I fucked her.

Feyre pranced away, the perfect image of the High Lord’s plaything. Was this how Amarantha had felt watching me leave her room in the morning? What the fuck was wrong with me that I’d done this to Feyre now too and *enjoyed* a great part of it, immensely so.

Even if she had seemed to... even if Feyre had also...

The room followed her as she made her way to Cassian, including Keir. He stared at her with rank distaste as she passed at the foot of the dais, his mouth parting in a foul line as he whispered words he thought only she could hear.

“You’ll get what’s coming to you, whore,” he spat.

Darkness split the room, consuming and hungering.

For several seconds, no one could see an inch in front of their noses as my body directed the madness. The inky darkness whipped and cracked until I could feel it drag Keir to his knees.

It was fear. It was confusion. The darkness that punishes.

And punish me just as much as Keir, it did.

*Whore*.

I’d made Feyre my whore. All of Prythian would soon know it no matter what I did to Keir to refute it. I wasn’t just Amarantha’s whore anymore. In a way, I *was* Amarantha in all her despicable manipulative ways for how I’d betrayed Feyre. It cut me to my core, replacing all that unbearable heat we’d shared together with shame.

So I did the one thing left for me to do. I saw the mask of the cruel, *villainous* High Lord of the Night Court everyone wanted to see, twirling in front of me and yanked it harder to my being.

When the smoke cleared, I appeared on the throne as the perfect image of casual terror ready to reign down on Keir and break him for every bone he was worth.

“Apologize,” I said with lethal intent lacing my voice and yet, the bastard had the nerve to stay quiet. “I said, apologize.” Still he was silent, so I started at his shoulder and forced the bone to splinter four times down to the elbow. I didn’t even move a muscle to do it. My cousin stood in the far corner, my eyes having finally spotted her, looking rather pale. But her

eyes sparked with a hint of venomous pleasure. Azriel stood just behind her, close enough to touch. I imagined, they were.

Still Keir said nothing except to choke on his sobs. Anger flashed through my veins, and power crashed out of me. His elbow disintegrated and only then when half of his arm was shattered did he barely manage to mouth the words *I'm sorry* to Feyre between his screams. I broke the bones of his other arm for his lack of effort with a dangerous smile on my face.

This was the monster I hadn't want Feyre to see, but Feyre looked almost as pleased as Morrigan to see Keir fall beside her.

"Should I kill him for it?" I asked to the room at large, feeling as though I'd somehow fallen with him. No one spoke. "When you wake up, you're not to see a healer. If I hear that you do..." his pinky - gone, "If I hear that you do, I'll carve you into pieces and bury them where no one can stand a chance of putting you together again." Keir collapsed and I ordered him away to his rooms, hauled off by some guard or other. I relaxed in my seat, feeling pleased that however I had betrayed Feyre, I'd at least been able to provide her with some small form of amends.

Slowly, other courtiers dared themselves forward on pained feet to fill in for Keir. I sat on my throne listening for well on an hour, feeling my ears grate on the idle chatter.

*One hour.*

I allowed myself to take in Feyre at the back of the room only periodically.

*It's just one hour. That's all she'll see.*

Now and then, she would stare back at me. No fear. No revulsion. But her face was as pale as my cousin's. And her gaze drifted in and out over the crowds. Too like Amarantha's crowds? Too much like the murderous whore looking back at her from my seat?

Just one hour. But Cassian had been wrong when he'd refuted that sixty minutes were enough. Every time I lost Feyre's gaze, I knew it had been plenty.

For the remainder of that hour, only the darkness dancing and delighting at my fingertips kept me company.

## Chapter 43: What Is It That You Want?

### Chapter Summary

Feeling guilty after the way he used Feyre in the Hewn City, Rhys pulls Feyre aside and proceeds to have a fight that leaves him wounded. Mor pushes him to be honest with Feyre about the bond and fix things in time for Starfall.

Leaving the Court of Nightmares felt like a curse.

Feyre had left me breathless on my throne, her touch and scent lingering all over me as I listened to the endless prattle of the courtiers. But when the moment came to actually leave, I choked.

One look at Feyre as we were within arm's length of each other again and any happy illusion of her and I dreamt up on that throne was shattered, replaced by one solitary word: *Whore*.

"See you back-" Mor started to say, but I pushed her aside, grabbed Feyre, and winnowed without a word.

*Whore*.

It rang and rang and rang with a bleeding in my ears. Kier's mouth the cave through which it echoed.

The word corrupted me. I practically tossed Feyre aside as I released her arm and marched several feet away from her in the mountain clearing we'd reached, running a hand through my hair. I had thought... we were... she looked... Fuck, I didn't know what she looked like anymore, how she felt about me. One minute her body was pressed up against mine tighter than a violin string and she's looking at me like she wanted it too, and the next...

*Whore* .

I felt sick.

"I'm sorry," I rasped suddenly. I didn't know what else to say. How she could ever forgive me, was still standing here even -

"What do you possibly have to be sorry for?" Feyre asked.

Her question was so innocent, as if she didn't know, and I wondered. She had seemed... accepting as she watched me that last hour, but a selfish, savage beast inside of me denied the possibility as Keir filled my mind to the tipping point with truth.

Truth. That bastard's family gift, right? He couldn't lie. No one who'd seen us could have. Mor would have pummeled me into the dirt if she could have heard my thoughts right now. I was glad I'd taken Feyre away alone first before facing them all.

Fuck, what would my friends say, I hadn't even thought...

"I shouldn't have let you go. Let you see that part of us. Of me."

My hands shook. I wanted to fall over, to collapse as the full weight of the day struck me, my perfect facade was so eroded.

But still Feyre said, "I'm fine," a little insistence behind her words that I wanted to believe. But then, "We knew what tonight would require of us. Please - please don't start... protecting me. Not like that."

I could hear the fear in her voice. See it play out in her head as we recalled the same memory. The reality of how she felt smacked me in the head. It was all an act. An outright lie. I was no better to her than Tamlin, a monster dressed up in beautiful clothes with a will to control her. The idea cracked my skull in half, and a river of sin came tumbling out.

Unhinged. Unglued. Just like in Adriata when I'd seen that necklace thrown at my feet on Feyre's bed.

"I will never - *never* lock you up, force you to stay behind. But when he threatened you tonight, when he called you..." I tightened my fists to release the pressure. Mercy, she didn't even feel free around me yet. "It's hard to shut down my instincts."

The heat on Feyre's body jumped about a million degrees. Her stance shifted, barring herself against me. "Then you should have prepared yourself better," she seethed. "You seemed to be going along *just fine* with it, until Keir said-"

"I will *kill* anyone who harms you!" I shot back, cutting her off. "I will *kill* them, and take a damn long time doing it. Go ahead. Hate me - despise me for it."

"You're my *friend!*" she said, her voice cracking on a sob.

*Friend. My friend.*

"You're my friend - and I understand that you're High Lord. I understand that you will defend your true court, and punish threats against it. But I can't... I don't want you to stop telling me things, inviting me to do things, because of the threats against me."

Tears spilled down her face without hesitation. It was the most honest she had ever been with me directly. But all I could think and feel and see inside my own stupid, selfish brain was Tamlin. And I lost it. The darkness exploded - the one that brings pain and sacrifice, my wings flying right along with it on that wicked wind.

"I am not him," I said in a cold, low voice. "I will *never* be him, act like him. He locked you up and let you wither, die."

“He tried-”

“Stop comparing. *Stop* comparing me to him! You think I don’t know how stories get written - how *this* story will be written?” My hands flew to my body. I could already feel the guilt racking up its debt inside of me, but I shoved it aside for the rage I harbored instead - had harbored for *months* . “I am the dark lord,” I explained and Feyre shuddered. “Who stole away the bride of spring. I am a demon, and a nightmare, and I will meet a bad end. He is the golden prince - the hero who will get to keep you as his reward for not dying of stupidity and arrogance.”

“And what about my story? What about *my* reward? What about what *I* want?”

Feyre challenged me with a cold, unfeeling look not unlike the mask I wore most frequently, trying to prove a point, but did she even know what she was asking?

“What is it that you want, Feyre?” Her face flickered in briefest doubt as silence fell. So I asked her again, “What is it that you *want* , Feyre?” Again, nothing. My fears about everything confirmed in her silence over nothing. She didn’t want me. She didn’t want any of this. I was convinced of it beyond a shadow of a doubt. She was my mate and I had known it instantly, knew I would love her until the sun bled and the clouds cried on the final days of Prythian and even then for a millennia after, and I would have told her in a heartbeat had she asked me. But to ask the same of her?

Nothing.

“Perhaps you should take some time to figure that out one of these days,” I said, my anger in complete control. Bitter until the very end. But it was Feyre’s next words that marked my death.

“Perhaps I don’t know what I want,” she said, venom hissing from her red-lipped mouth. “But at least I don’t hide what I am behind a mask. At least I let them see who I am, broken bits and all. Yes - it’s to save your people. But what about the other masks, Rhys? What about letting your friends see your real face? But maybe it’s easier not to. Because what if you did let someone in? And what if they saw *everything* , and still walked away? Who could blame them - who would want to bother with that sort of mess?”

My entire body jerked. Several feet separated us. It felt like a chasm. And then... I was empty. Her words stripped me so bare, I wasn’t sure even *I* had ever seen such a raw version of myself.

*Mess* . Suddenly infinitely worse than *whore* .

At once, Feyre shifted. Her face shattered. “Rhys.” That’s all she said. Just my name. Just one little word. Barely even a syllable long. But the chasm it opened was too wide to cross.

“Let’s go home,” I said, my voice as hollow and red-rimmed as Feyre’s tear-stained eyes. When had she started crying?

I grabbed her hand before she could even try to sway me and winnowed home. All except Amren waited for us at the town house. “What the fuck did Kier say that-” Feyre’s fingers were out of my grasp the moment we touched down, cutting Cassian off abruptly. I heard her mumble some vague excuse under her breath before she tore down the hall and disappeared, leaving everyone gaping at the aftermath of our fight written all over Feyre’s face.

As if they’d needed to see it. My own face was - a mess. The mask didn’t exist anymore. I barely even recalled what it had felt like watching Feyre disappear.

No one spoke. It felt like a thousand lifetimes spent Under the Mountain passed before I could even look up from the floor, and when I did, I found my Inner Circle gaping at me with a range of expressions. Azriel’s polite face was concerned, swimming in shadows to the point that he would drown. Cassian’s arms were crossed, his brows raised in the question his voice would dare not ask. And Mor... She was the worst.

My cousin stood with a passion in her eyes, hands braced on her hips as she pinned me down with such a piercing stare, not even Amren could have competed with it. Azriel watched her sharply, but didn’t so much as flinch to question her.

“Everyone. Get. Out.” she said, each word a solitary sculpture carved from a prison of ice.

“Mor,” Cassian said. “We need to talk about this together.”

“Get out,” Mor repeated.

“Come on, Mor-”

“I am not in the mood for your games, Cassian!” Mor’s voice rang through the apartment with finality. “You heard me.” And then her head turned to Azriel who had the decency not to look hurt as she silently dismissed him. My brothers reluctantly exited leaving me alone with my cousin’s wrath.

“What the hell is your problem, Rhysand?” Mor spat at me the second they were gone, each word clear and overly enunciated. The muscles of my back constricted against my spine with shivers.

“You don’t even know what happened.”

Mor tisked horribly. “I know *exactly* what happened. Don’t insult my intelligence. You don’t think we haven’t seen you the past however many months since you came back? Watched you try to pretend you haven’t been falling apart as badly as Feyre was until you saved her? You don’t think I don’t remember how you looked at me the first day you brought to the palace?” Her eyes stung with redness. “Rhysand...” Mor rushed at me suddenly, grabbing me by the shoulders with a heartbreaking stillness. A softness overtook some of the fury and I realized she wasn’t angry at me. Not at all. She was terrified for me.

“You’ve been a shadow,” she said, her voice unhinged. “And you’re pushing the one good thing that’s been saving you away. You need to tell her.”

All at once, my doubts came rushing back. I brushed my cousin's touch away and side stepped her until we were separated by several feet, and still it wasn't enough. An entire ocean could have stood between us and I could never have felt capable of breathing after what Feyre had told me.

"It's not that simple, Mor," I said. "I can't tell her. I can never tell her. You don't realize what she thinks of me."

"I know *exactly* what she thinks of you and believe me when I say it's not what *you* think she thinks of you." I scoffed, but Mor pushed on, her arms flailing a bit. "She's so stupid in love with you, Rhysand, the entire world knows except you. She might not have admitted it to herself yet, but it's as plain as the tattoos you share with her on your skin."

My stomach turned, refusing to accept it. My hands shook and I couldn't steady them, but my pockets seemed miles away. A mess. A mess not worth loving, she had called me. "It doesn't look that way anymore." Mor's tone snapped back to pure venom.

"It certainly looked that way up on that frigid throne of yours today. Cauldron's sake, Rhysand, I didn't know who was going to fuck the other one first, you or her."

"Don't talk about her that way," I barked, whirring on Mor, but she jumped right back, flying into my face, her sharp perfectly manicured hands threatening to twist up my throat. It had been an age since I'd seen her this enraged - most especially with me.

"Why not!" she demanded. "Why should it be such a bad thing that she wants you? And she does. You could have taken her then and there on that throne and she would have let you, but *not* because it was part of the game." She looked me over, her face so scrunched together, the moment became personal for her. "You don't touch someone, feel someone, *live* in someone like that unless you love them, I don't care what's at stake otherwise."

Mor was close to crying. If I were capable of being more honest with myself, I would have been too. My throat swelled nearly shut at the same time my chest tightened inwards and I felt all of the words die in my throat. The conversation with Feyre at the lake replayed in my head and all that guilt I'd ignored that told me I was making a mistake, choosing to be miserable, came roaring back to life to enact its revenge.

I didn't say anything for the longest time. Simply stared at my cousin until she finally wiped her eyes. *Mor...* Now I'd hurt her too, the one person who knew... everything.

"Starfall is almost here," she said shakily. "You should tell her soon or at least make up. It'd be a pity to waste the evening."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to Starfall."

"Like hell you're not," Mor rasped, her voice run dry. "Rhysand," and she grabbed my face firmly, but not without care. "I wasn't under that mountain with you for fifty years, so I won't pretend to understand what you went through there. Only Feyre has any idea what that was like. But I'll be damned - *damned* - if you think for one moment that I am going to spend another Starfall without my cousin - without, without..."



Her words broke off in a sob and I pulled her against me instantly as the tears broke against my chest. I hadn't realized just how much I had missed my fearsome, beautiful Morrigan until precisely that moment. I thought I'd known all this time, what she'd meant to me, all these years, but... I'd been blind.

"I can't," I whispered next to the ear pressed against my shoulder. "I can't tell her. It's too late. She hates me. She thinks I'm just like Tamlin."

"What?" Mor pushed back enough to look at me, a confused expression on her face. "Rhys, if you really think that, then you haven't been paying attention at all. And we're done here. You fix this with Feyre and you go to Starfall." She stabbed a finger into my chest with each declaration of instruction.

"Morrigan--"

"Ah-ah! You're going and that's final."

She stepped away and made for the door, stopping when she reached the handle. "You fix this with her, okay? Or I'm going to have Azriel kick your ass back to Hybern while Cassian eats popcorn on the sidelines." A vague flicker of a smile graced her face, but I couldn't return it. "See you at Starfall," she said, leaving no room for argument. And then she was gone.

The next few days were a blur. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. I did solely what my court demanded I do and only that - speaking with Amren to get a letter to the queen dispatched, ensuring Cassian and Azriel had made the necessary adjustments I'd requested, and hunting down the cretins who'd attacked us to no end. And I avoided Feyre like a plague. The further the guilt seeped into me, the less courage I had to make amends. It didn't matter what Morrigan thought or wanted. I'd seen Feyre's face. I had heard the conviction in her voice when she told me I was worthless to love. She'd throw me out if I pushed again.

But every time the conversation replayed in my mind, it ended on that single word: *Rhys*. There had been the tiniest glimmer of *something* behind the way she'd said it that my heart dared to hope even while my mind was burnt out on the effort. How many times had I hoped and lost? I couldn't go through that again.

Feyre and I had been going back and forth, circling each other so constantly. She had admitted it herself, she didn't know what she wanted, so why waste my time trying to convince her?

The day of Starfall arrived and I still had no intention of going, my mind focused instead on the trip I'd decided we'd make to the Illyrian Steppes the following day to wait out the queens in better safety now that magic was tracked.

I awoke to find my suit hanging on the door for me, no doubt Morrigan's way to taunt me into going. I vaguely wondered if she'd stayed overnight rather than at the House with the boys. But Feyre had made no move to see me since last we'd argued, all but confirming my decision to stay behind. So when a faint tug of magic flickered by me once in the morning and once at mid-day, I ignored them both. But the third time it happened, I felt an awful

anxiety cross the bond and my masochistic curiosity got the better of me. I released the magic. A paper appeared beside me with Feyre's neatly printed script.

*Is this punishment? Or do people in your Inner Circle not get second chances if they piss you off? You're a hateful coward.*

Coward. Hateful. Pissed off. Whore.

But not *mess* .

I ignored all of it and honed in on one word: punishment. Feyre felt my silence was a punishment, and if she thought it was a punishment to be withheld from me...

Three times. She'd tried to contact me three times and I'd ignored her. I'd ignored her waiting for me in the garden after the Court of Nightmares too.

*You don't touch someone, feel someone, live in someone like that unless you love them, I don't care what's at stake otherwise.*

All those times Mor had waited for Azriel. Had watched him over the dinner table when the conversation turned sour. Had her hand on his knee when I'd interrupted her receiving him at the House. Had stayed with him and waited for him and danced and delighted in him when he couldn't for himself.

All those years. I'd barely given it *one* with Feyre.

Before the sun could finish setting, I jumped up and ran for the door, snatching the suit from the hanger, and threw all my hope into it as I prepared for Starfall.

## Chapter 44: Smile Again

### Chapter Summary

Starfall :)

It took me precisely half an hour to stop actively trying to convince myself she hated me and open the door. As I stepped out onto the terrace and took in Velaris from the upper balconies of the House, I knew I'd made the right call by coming.

The city glowed under the soft lanterns that had been dimmed to accommodate the coming attractions. Music hummed celestial in every corner and smiles met me at every turn. My chest expanded inhaling it all in.

Home. This was home.

It was every bit as spectacular as I'd remembered, and every bit as painful as I'd expected it would be while I waited Under the Mountain. But it was worth it. Fifty years of hiding came flooding back into my mind and it was an effort not to buckle as the realization of what I'd survived - what I'd *earned* - fell upon my shoulders watching citizens move out clinking glasses, sharing stories, laughter. There wasn't a cloud in sight.

This was Starfall and it would be magnificent.

The city that housed every single one of my dreams gleamed at me with life and love and hope as I walked into the throngs of people, things I had almost lost. We all had. But looking around, I could feel the pieces of myself that I'd lost dancing around me, begging me to reach out and grab them. I just couldn't quite... reach yet. Something was missing. Too much pain blocked the way, told me it was all a lie and that I wouldn't be allowed any of it.

If Morrigan had heard my thoughts, she would have said I was sabotaging myself again and made good on her word to have Azriel kick my ass back to Hybern. I spotted the Shadowsinger in question across the way, along with Cassian sharing a laugh with a mutual friend, and simply stared, unable to move forward and accept that any of it was real. It was so normal. My friends...

I swallowed. And then I saw *her* .

A narrow lane parted in the sea of people around me, leading only to Feyre. Her hair, pulled back by two crystal pins, dripped down behind her in a golden caress of her back that moved softly on the breeze. Diamonds and tiny crystalline jewels of faintest blue, a softer shade of my mother's sapphire ring, adorned the dress that clung to her every curve.

*Curves* .

She had them now and in abundance. This wasn't the full bodied seductress I'd taken to court. Feyre looked happy and healthy, and when she turned her head enough for me to see her profile, my stomach dropped out completely at the sight of her, a fallen star ready and waiting for someone to catch her and break her fall. That now familiar rhythm of my soul conducted a melody in time to my heartbeat, one word for each beat that I never wanted to stop hearing.

Feyre wasn't my friend. Could never be my friend no matter what little pieces of her heart she was willing to let me protect. I might be nothing more than a ghost or a friend in her life, but I knew looking at her there was only one option my heart could make room for if Feyre was to stay, only one way I could picture her.

*My-Mate.*

*My-Mate.*

*My-Mate.*

My heart sped up at each beat of the words.

"If you don't shut your mouth, you'll get drool all over the ground and while I know you've been gone a long while, we don't allow behavior like that at Starfall anymore," Cassian hissed in my ear.

Startled though I was at the sound of his voice pulling me from what had apparently become an outright stare at Feyre, I managed to contain myself to a mere twitch of my head. Cassian barked out an amused laugh knowing exactly where my weaknesses were.

"Go already, you stupid prick," Cassian said. His hands found my back and shoved until I stumbled forward. I couldn't even manage a retort, my eyes had not moved off of Feyre.

Each step was a well of anxiety around my feet, but when I reached the threshold where Feyre and Mor stood chatting, every ounce of hesitation slipped away as I was momentarily trapped by the sight of her. From far away, Feyre was a fallen star glimmering on the edge of a cliff. But close up, she was as all consuming as the wildest galaxy.

"I've had lovers," Mor was saying, "but... I get bored. And Cassian has had them, too, so don't get that unrequited-love, moony-woo-woo look. He just wants what he can't have, and it's irritated him for centuries that I walked away and never looked back."

I stepped forward, a tad surprised at the topic of conversation, and spoke before I had too much time to lose my nerve and turn around. "Oh, it drives him insane," I said. Feyre jumped about a mile high out of her skin. I caught a wicked knowing grin from Mor before I moved, circling Feyre and drinking in the sight of her openly. I couldn't help myself when my eyes had finished the length of her and I smirked. "You look like a woman again."

"You really know how to compliment females, cousin," Mor said. And just like that, she left, but not before resting her hand on my shoulder with a firmness in her touch that told me she was glad I'd changed my mind about coming.

And then, just like that, I was alone with her. With Feyre. My Feyre. And all I could do was stare.

But... she was staring too - a good thing, I wondered. Or at least, she tried not to, but I could see her eyes trailing all over me, taking me in from the loose black jacket around my shoulders to the exposed skin at my neck where my tattoos swirled. Already I'd become a mess inside, unglued at the mere sight of her.

It was Feyre who finally pulled us out of the silence.

"Do you plan to ignore me some more?" Her voice was silk - cool, and on guard.

"I'm here now, aren't I?" I said. "I wouldn't want you to call me a hateful coward again." Even with her shields up, I could feel her slip away the instant the words left me. Heat ravaged her skin and as I watched her head turn in search of some other comfort, I slipped back into my old fearful self, desperate not to lose her again. "I wasn't punishing you," I said in a rush. "I just... I needed time."

Feyre tensed, her body taking a deep inhale as she shifted away from me, but at least she didn't leave.

"Will you please tell me what this... gathering is about?"

The wind danced over her hair, her skin sparkling. Mother above, she was so beautiful. And she had no idea. About herself. About Starfall. Me or them or us or any of it. And I loved her for it, that gorgeous curiosity about the world she knew so little of that made her mind so sharp and inviting. The first thing she'd brought with her and offered me in that palace of the north.

I stepped up behind her, daring myself closer and murmured in her ear with an amused snort, "Look up."

"No speech for your guests?" she asked, turning her attention to the skies at the same moment the entire city stilled.

"Tonight's not about me, though my presence is appreciated and noted." I paused, pointing high above us to the Heavens just as the first star fell. "Tonight's about that."

Feyre followed my gesture, and gasped as souls began weaving across the star-strewn sky, thin at first and then more steadily thick, like heavy streaks of paint blurred together beneath a brush. Lights collided in heavy drops of color so rare and unseen in any other part of the world. Blues, and impossibly stark whites took over until the sky was a canvas of sparkling divinity.

I felt Feyre lean against me and quickly pull herself back forward. That momentary lapse between us was enough to set off my craving for her all over again, a reminder that I had missed this very moment, not just with her but the entire city, for the last fifty years.

So I stepped away to give her space to take it all in, but the view that met me only twisted the knife in my gut further: Morrigan. Azriel. Cassian. All of them dancing, twisting around and into one another like the souls above us with vibrant smiles plastered across their faces. They were a wild and living thing, my trio of closest friends and allies, just happy to be alive and in each other's company.

I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be just so. The idea that I could have all of that spirit and will again tasted so foreign on my mind's tongue. And tomorrow it could all be gone again, just like that. The possibility weighed me down considerably.

Feyre noticed. She came to stand next to me with a heavy gaze in her eyes. I swallowed and offered her my hand, needing to be away from here where it was just her, the only one who'd understand the twisting of my thoughts. Who I hoped would still listen.

"Come," I said, glad when Feyre took my hand. "There's a better view. Quieter."

I led her to a balcony high up on the House of Wind where the entire city was laid out before us in a sweeping view and the sky shone at its brightest to see. Feyre seated herself on the balcony, but one look over the edge sent her reeling back off of it by several feet, her face drawn pale.

"If you fell, you know I'd bother to save you before you hit the ground," I said with a quiet laugh.

"But not until I was close to death?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"As punishment for what I said to you?"

She said it so quietly. My throat went instantly dry. "I said some horrible things, too," I admitted. The absolute truth. But Feyre sputtered out a hasty rebuttal that surprised me.

"I didn't mean it. I meant it more about myself than you. And I'm sorry."

"You were right, though. I stayed away because you were right," and indeed, I had. "Though I'm glad to hear my absence felt like a punishment."

Feyre snorted, my heart melting at that tiny insignificant sound, and a manageable calm settled between us that felt almost normal again.

"Any news with the orb or the queens?"

"Nothing yet. We're waiting for them to deign to reply."

We stilled then simply taking it all in and it dawned at me that the door was open. I could tell her tonight. Mor twirled stories below us, but her words from two days previous rang through my ears loud and clear: *You need to tell her. Fix this...*

Be honest.

“They’re not - they’re not stars at all,” Feyre said, cutting my dangerous thoughts off. I came to meet her at the railing of the balcony where she studied her heavens, but I couldn’t be bothered to join her. My first Starfall in fifty years and all I wanted to watch was her.

“No. Our ancestors thought they were, but... they’re just spirits, on a yearly migration to somewhere. Why they pick this day to appear here, no one knows.”

Feyre passed a quick glance over me that made my heart shudder. Her every look was fatal tonight, like my life depended upon them. “There must be hundreds of them,” she said softly, a kind of sadness creeping over her.

“Thousands,” I corrected. “They’ll keep coming until dawn. Or, I hope they will. There were less and less of them the last time I witnessed Starfall.”

A weight snapped back in place over my soul. So... back and forth tonight. So inconsistent, my heart felt.

But fifty years. *Fifty years*. It was a mere blip in the context of my entire life, but it was enough to let me know I’d missed out on something important, something essential to the fiber of my being. This was my court, my home, and the fact that I didn’t recognize even a small, infinitesimal piece of it like the number of souls traversing the skies at Starfall, made me feel as though my own soul were dying.

Like I had failed as their High Lord.

“What’s happening to them?” Feyre asked. I felt her look at me, searching for something more than the explanation of Starfall, but I suddenly couldn’t bear to return her gaze anymore as I folded beneath the force of what I’d done. So I just shrugged.

“I wish I knew. But they keep coming back despite it.”

“Why?”

Such a simple question with such a complicated answer, but I gave her the only one I had. The one that had come to define me since the moment I drank the wine and felt my powers fade away in that wretched throne room.

“Why does anything cling to something?” I asked. “Maybe they love wherever they’re going so much that it’s worth it. Maybe they’ll keep coming back, until there’s only one star left. Maybe that one star will make the trip forever, out of the hope that someday - if it keeps coming back often enough - another star will find it again.”

And I would. I would go back a thousand times over to save this city even if I were the only one left to inhabit its gentle streets. If time froze and my powers were stripped away and my wings were torn, I would have fought Amarantha over and over again just for a chance at returning here and finding Feyre, my radiant, hopeful star.

“That’s... a very sad thought,” Feyre said quietly.

“Indeed,” I said, collapsing inwardly on myself. I rested my forearms against the railing of the balcony as she studied me, trying not to let my grief show through, but I couldn’t do it anymore. I was tired of being miserable and alone, hiding myself from anyone and everyone.

This was Starfall. It should be special even if it was painful and honest. And if anyone deserved to know the truth, it was Feyre.

“Every year that I was Under the Mountain,” I began, trying not to let my voice waver even as I needed desperately to get the words out so someone could understand, “and Starfall came around, Amarantha made sure that I... serviced her. The entire night.” Feyre went very still beside me. “Starfall is no secret, even to outsiders - even the Court of Nightmares crawls out of the Hewn City to look up at the sky. So she knew... She knew what it meant to me.”

Music disappeared. The sky went dark. The earth fell away at my feet and all Feyre said was a simple, “I’m sorry.” But it wasn’t full of pity. No, it was full of understanding. A promise that what I was telling her was okay. It gave me the courage to press on.

“I got through it by reminding myself that my friends were safe; that Velaris was safe” I explained further, feeling little bits of the night come back to me as the weights of revealing the truth were lifted. “Nothing else mattered, so long as I had that. She could use my body however she wanted. I didn’t care.”

“So why aren’t you down there with them?” Feyre’s head motioned out of the corner of my eye to below - to where my family was *living*.

I shook my head at the reminder of those temptations of what tonight could be for me if I was only brave enough to reach out and snatch it. Brave like Feyre.

“They don’t know - what she did to me on Starfall. I don’t want it to ruin their night.”

“I don’t think it would,” Feyre said and I could tell she believed it. Wanted me to as well. “They’d be happy if you let them shoulder the burden.”

“The same way you rely on others to help with your own troubles?”

I looked at her to find her staring right back at me. I hadn’t realized how close our faces were. A light prickle graced my fingers and I was surprised into utter delight to find her hands reaching for me, carving out a home for themselves in my palm. My hands stilled as she drew a finger over them, a caress that said, *It’s alright. I’m here and I know you*, just as she’d told me in the Court of Nightmares.

*We can rely on each other.*

And I realized then how empty I had been. How starved I was for that touch. Not just during these past weeks and months or even years with Amarantha. Centuries had gone by spent wonderfully with my friends, I didn’t discount those years with them for even a second.

But even as we had grown up together, fought together, danced and laughed and lived together, there had always been something missing. My family was taken from me, my



cousin treated worse than cattle, and my friends counted as mere swords on the battlefield and nothing more. We were all broken and abused and healing, and then Amarantha came and stole what little faith had been left in my heart away.

And now here was Feyre giving it all back to me and more, promising me the world in that touch on my hand. It stole the breath right out of me to feel her reach for me, like my lungs might collapse or my knees might give out.

I wanted to kiss her. To tell her everything and anything she wanted to hear, whatever she would let me say. I was hers. She could have all of me if she would take me on, let me reach back.

A burst of light and Feyre cried out in shock, staggering back from me with a look of pure horror coming over her. A falling star-soul had collided with her face, the freckles of her nose and cheeks illuminated in a beautiful cascade of color. Feyre stood stunned and looking at me as if the universe had cursed her.

So unaware. So taken aback. So *free* .

I laughed. I laughed so hard, my soul might have burst. My body unraveled at the seams even as it was simultaneously filled to the brim with a joy I had not felt in years, maybe ever. If I had, it could never have compared to the way that joy felt now in precisely this moment watching the sky paint my mate with the purest form of life my court could offer.

“I could have been blinded!” Feyre shouted, charging at me and shoving me roughly. I laughed again without restraint at her outrage and Feyre’s features softened, betraying her angry bluff. It only made my heart sing more wildly for her. She tried to wipe the dust away, but I grabbed her hands in a frenzy with a bright smile on my face.

“Don’t,” I said staring down at her beautiful, star-strewn face. “It looks like your freckles are glowing.” Even amidst the smear of color, I could still see the red glowing beneath it on her cheeks. Such a brilliant star you are, I thought.

She made another swipe at me, but not without a wicked mischievous look in her eyes. She was - she was *playing* with me. And it felt *fun* . I jumped out of the way right as my own sky-bound traveler smacked into my face, like the stars above were trying to drive us together, to match.

“Shit!” I spat, gaping at my hands as I clawed away at the dust from my face. Feyre’s laugh burst out of her with rapture. She strode immediately for me, as though she didn’t realize what she was doing, and took my hand. I froze, my breathe hinging on her touch while her fingers traced the pattern of a star on my palm.

A smile overtook my face, my grip tightening around her hand as she finished painting me. *Painting* . Feyre was painting again for the first time. And it meant... it meant that I wasn’t Tamlin. I wasn’t the monster in the shadows. Not to her, at least. Not to my mate. I was simply Rhys, stripped of everything except the simple fact that my entire heart sat there between us in the palm of my hand as she molded and gave it life with the brushes of her fingertips.

And when she looked up at me not even aware of what she'd done, she took one look at my dust covered face, her fingers still laced tightly with mine, and *smiled* .

My soul sighed.

Feyre was smiling. I'd never seen anything more - never dreamed she'd look so -

All at once, the music that had disappeared, the lights that had dimmed from the sky in the darkness of my thoughts - all of it came rushing back. Noise and lights and music and laughter surrounded me, creating a joyous symphony all because of that smile. I had waited what felt like an eternity for this moment. Every single second under that mountain had been worth it... just to see Feyre smile.

Feyre's lips twitched, returning to her normal composure as her eyes asked me what was going on inside my head.

"Smile again," I requested humbly, hardly able to get the words out. Feyre looked down at our entwined hands taking in the magic her fingers had drawn out on my palm. She seemed to realize what had passed between us just then, but she didn't shy away from it. Quite the opposite, actually. And when she looked back up at me, her smile was so bright and beaming - for me, *all of it for me, it was mine* - I could have cried. "You're exquisite," I breathed.

"You owe me two thoughts," she said through that radiance. "Back from when I first came here. Tell me what you're thinking."

I huffed out a laugh, my breath tickling her cheeks, and rubbed my neck with my remaining free hand. "You want to know why I didn't speak or see you?" I asked, the words springing immediately to my lips. Somehow the truth didn't feel so awkward anymore. "Because I was so convinced you'd throw me out on my ass. I just.... I figured hiding was a better alternative."

"Who would have thought the High Lord of the Night Court could be afraid of an illiterate human?" Her voice purred at me, begging me to come play. Another of the night's many temptations. "That's one. Tell me another thought."

I gave her the only other thing on my mind as my eyes danced wickedly to her lips. "I'm wishing I could take back that kiss Under the Mountain."

Feyre's brow furrowed in surprise. "Why?"

"Because I didn't make it pleasant for you, and I was jealous and pissed off, and I knew you hated me."

*And because I wish I could relive that kiss properly, right here, right now in the way that you deserve.*

An intense electricity buzzed between us. Our eyes flitted from our still grasped hands to our shared gaze and back, never sparing a thought for the non-existent space between us. We had one solitary touch connecting us at our fingertips and somehow it felt miles deeper and more

intimate than what had passed at the Court of Nightmares, than anything I'd felt down the bond itself from her.

When I looked up at Feyre for the final time, I let the desire for her - mind, body, and soul - flow freely across my face. The finger that ran along my wrist in response sent adrenaline through my system, rooting me to the spot.

"Do you," she started say, nearly tripping over the words. "Do you want to dance with me?" Her voice was so soft, barely a whisper. It wasn't until she looked back up at me that I realized I'd forgotten to answer.

"You want to dance?" I asked in a rasping voice; she'd taken even that away from me.

Her smile brightened, teasing - knowing. "Down there - with them," Feyre replied, pointing to where Mor and my brothers were gathered. All of the many temptations the night had to offer coalesced in front of me and with my hand curling ever more tightly around Feyre's, I was finally ready to chase at them. If Feyre could heal, enough to want to paint again and smile for me, then I could do it too.

"Of course I'll dance with you," I said. "All night, if you wish."

"Even if I step on your toes?"

"Even then."

Feyre gave a little smile I couldn't resist. It was as though now that she had started, she could no longer stop, it felt too joyous to deny her lips the pleasure. Closing the small gap left between us, I leaned down and brushed my lips against her cheek. A small gift for the both of us. "I am... very glad I met you, Feyre," I said when I pulled back. Her eyes were rimmed with redness, but she did not look unhappy. Far from it, in fact.

"Come on," she said with a tug of my hands. "Let's go join the dance."

And dance we did. All of us together as a family, just the way it should have always been and should always be. Feyre freed me well and truly that night. My entire soul sang at her every touch, turned over on itself with every look. And despite how much I enjoyed spending the evening with all of my friends - sharing drinks and jabs with my brothers and jubilant dances so full of merriment with my infectious cousin - it was Feyre I kept coming back to indulge in, dance after dance after dance.

I let our movements do all the talking. Each sweep of her out of and into my arms begged her to wake up, told her how much I cherished her, how much I never thought I would look up out of that pit below where I'd found myself and see her staring back at me ready to pull me up. The power she held over my being threatened to burn right through me.

And when the music had swelled its finest and Feyre's smile glowed enough to encompass the city and make them forget the souls above, the darkness reached out of me and swept Feyre up into the air until we danced on clouds of smoke and our own inky pool of starlight.

The darkness of lovers. The darkness that binds.

She laughed at the rush, smoke curling around the folds of her dress where it swayed around her ankles and floated us off the ground in time to the music. I pulled her wrist until she swam back into me, her own darkness leaking out to mate with mine.

My world felt complete.

Feyre watched the shadows glow and the darkness surround her as she twirled in the starlight. A laugh - the first of many that evening - burst across her face. My own would soon follow.

## Chapter 45: I Want to Paint You

### Chapter Summary

After Starfall, Rhys takes off for the Illyrian Steppes with Feyre, Cassian, and Mor. While out training, Feyre learns the truth about Rhys and Tamlin's fraught friendship.

No longer if, but when.

When I would tell Feyre, I decided. It's what had kept me up long after I'd flown Feyre back to our townhouse, kissed her brow at her door, and bid her goodnight. Sleep-addled, star flecked expressions had flanked both our faces until finally I had torn myself from her side, and spent the next hour wondering if I dared go back to discover what peeling her out of that gown would feel like or sleeping skin to skin.

We had danced all evening, until the streets were empty and the sun was cresting over the horizon, playing along the gentle ripples of the Sidra. Feyre barely moved to the last beats of music as we slowed in our dance. I scooped her up in my arms, enjoying her warmth as she cradled into me, her head resting in that open collar of my shirt against my skin, and shot into the sky. Below us, Azriel peeled a sleeping Mor from the settee off the dining room to tuck her away inside for the morning. Cassian had already disappeared.

And now we were airborne once more, shooting through the brightest day of spring I'd seen yet in Velaris, toward the House of Wind for a quick lunch before making for the Illyrian camps. Azriel and Amren would stay behind, while Mor went with the rest of us before taking off for the Hewn City herself to check on Keir. I had tried to convince her, in those days she chided me for pushing off Feyre, that he wasn't worth her notice, but she'd nagged back that I was being a tart for ignoring Feyre, so she'd ignore me too until I'd wizened up.

But Mor wasn't at the lunch table for me to attempt to persuade anew when Feyre and I breezed inside. Amren too was missing, though I could see the dark red stains in a tea glass at the end of the table that told me she was hissing about somewhere.

"Where's Mor?" Feyre yawned, stretching out of my arms like a cat. She wore her flying leathers, which made her appear much more awake than any of us currently felt.

Cassian opened his mouth to answer, but it was Azriel, his eyes softly closed over the tea perched at his lips, who said dreamily, "She's still asleep." Cassian's head twitch, a movement he would never have made had his brother been awake to bear it witness despite the shadows - shadows that seemed nonexistent this morning.

I wondered just how long my brother had stayed with Mor after carrying her from that settee only a few hours ago.

Feyre's eyes slid to mine, the first real look she'd given me since we'd awkwardly stumbled into each other to fly here. It seemed neither of us were going to address the evening, that air of *what if*, quite just yet. She lifted a single brow and I scowled. It only made her chuckle silently.

"I'll go get her," she said.

Cassian snorted, but sitting there in his worn out leathers, it sounded flat - even for him. "Good luck," he said and Feyre traipsed toward the hall. "If you want deal with the princess on less than appropriate sleep, be my guest."

Feyre came to a grinding halt at the hallway threshold and wagged a finger at the commander of the Illyrian armies. "Ah-ah, Mor is not a princess." Cassian lifted a single brow. "She is a *queen*," Feyre finished and disappeared, though not before returning Cassian's scowl with a gesture that would have made the queen herself proud.

"Cauldron," Cassian groaned, his head lolling back on the chair and turning toward me. "Now there's *two* of them. This is all *your* fault." Azriel bit back a smile as he finally opened his eyes to peer at the pair of us, and cut it short when he saw Cassian wasn't quite laughing.

I sat down next, Azriel across from me and Cass at my side, and focused on buttering my toast with honeyed jams and berries rather than contemplate the leathers we all wore, the places we were all about to go - separately.

Last night we had all been inseparable. Now, we might never be whole again. The Illyrians... The Queens... Keir. The magic of Starfall was already a distant memory with the promise of brutality in differing forms lingering closeby.

My eyes kept darting back faithfully to that threshold where Feyre had been. Waiting. Watching. Wanting. Wondering when she'd be back. How long we'd keep dancing. It felt like we had never stopped dancing.

Amren walked in with a fresh cup, filled to the brim, and inspected us sharply, though I was the only one who bothered to acknowledge she'd come back. She didn't say anything until Mor came back with Feyre and saw what had been a hesitant smile drop on her face now that she was faced with a last meal. Only Amren and Azriel spoke for the remainder of lunch.

One day... or fifty. This was not going to be a pleasant trip.

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Mor made quick work of her food, meager for what she normally consumed with such fervor, and her goodbyes. She winnowed all four of us into the north and suddenly, my lungs were filled with a cold numbness, full from scents of pine and blood and sweat.

Feyre's gaze swept out in a hard line from left to right, reading the mud, the shanties, the cliffs atop which shirtless Illyrian novices trained to a bone breaking degree. It had only been recently that arriving in these camps did not issue a shudder down my spine. I used to live and breathe (and sometimes not breathe) in those hell pits, fighting for scraps of respect and dominance. Cass and Azriel too.

Within seconds of landing, Lord Devlon spotted us and his back straightened impossibly higher, a sneer already landed on his face. "I hate this place," Mor said at the sight of him stepping forward, the blood caked about his clothes as if it could hide the veneer of arrogance. "It should be burned to the ground."

A fair conclusion, even on a good day.

Neither Cassian nor I moved. I made Devlon come to me - him and the *five* other brutes attending him. A thrumming twitched at my fingertips - power asking me to do something. He hadn't even spoken.

Devlon paused and eyed me up and down. "Another camp inspection?" Now he gave Cass a go. "Your dog was here just the other week. The girls are training."

"I don't see them in the ring," Cassian said, folding his arms over his chest. His siphons caught the light, a subtle reminder that the High Lord's dog would always outrank him.

"They do chores first, then when they've finished, they get to train."

A morning's worth of tension snapped inside my cousin, a snarl ripping out of her mouth low and sweet. Devlon turned his head to her, not expecting her presence, and had the decency to go still. "Hello, Lord Devlon," Mor said, a lover and a sinner's prayer all at once. The smile she flashed him was beyond atonement.

And just as Nesta had once ignored Cassian upon dinner, Devlon barely acknowledged Morrigan's hello before fixing his waiting, agitated gaze on myself.

"Pleasant as it always is to see you, Devlon," I said, nothing pleasant at all about the way I let the power relieve itself in my tone, "there are two matters at hand." His mouth tightened. Sometimes I still thought about challenging *him* to a go in the ring. "First," I continued, "the girls, as you were clearly told by Cassian, are to train *before* chores, not after. Get them out on the pitch. Now. Second, we'll be staying here for the time being. Clear out my mother's old house. No need for a housekeeper. We'll look after ourselves."

"The house is occupied by my top warriors."

"Then un-occupy it. And have them clean it before they do."

I couldn't let my powers roll out of me. High Lord magic tricks would mean little here. Would probably do more damage than good, in fact. So it was all down to dead end stare I gave him, the promise of death and disease lingering about my voice, to get Devlon to do my bidding as he knew he'd eventually be forced to anyway.

And indeed, he released my stare.... only to land on Feyre. His nostrils flared, sniffing. Once. Twice. It was a beautiful thing to hear that foul blackened heart of his beat so rapidly away in its cage when he first stared at my mate.

"Another like that... creature you bring here?" He actually sounded tentative. "I thought she was the only one of her ilk."

“Amren,” I said coolly, “sends her regards.” And would have a field day when I told her how her favorite chew toy spoke of her.

I motioned to Feyre, who didn’t back away from Devlon’s critical eye. My mate and an Illyrian lord... A smile danced brutally inside my chest. “She’s *mine*,” I said, the words easing off my tongue as if I’d said them out loud a thousand times before, never only in my head. Said them the way I’d wanted to when Tarquin had stared at her over meals and plied her with honey in his treasure troves. “And if any of you lay a hand on her, you lose that hand. And then you lose your head. And once Feyre is done killing you, then I’ll grind your bones to dust.”

The smile in my chest pranced out in a vicious smirk that made Devlon and his lackeys assessed Feyre. Power hummed in my veins, the same power I’d let loose stealing the book from Tarquin, attacking and taking down his sentries one by one. A new kind of freedom, one I could only truly indulge here.

It felt *good*. With my mate by my side to see it.

I think all of us felt it. Mor was eying Devlon behind me as he stepped away and I was surprised not to see a tail wagging excitedly behind her. Cassian similarly could feel his powers running wild - the killing power, alive and well. It was one thing to come here alone, another to visit with friends - allies.

“We’re heading out,” I announced, stepping toward the tree line and cutting Mor a look. “We’ll be back at nightfall. Try to stay out of trouble, please. Devlon hates us the least of the war-lords and I don’t feel like finding another camp.”

“I’ll try,” she said with a wink, and even though I shook it off, I was pleased to see some fire back in her eyes. Perhaps the afternoon would provide enough distraction she would not dwell so much on Keir. Perhaps, she would even change her mind about going altogether and stay.

I turned to Cass. “Check on the forces, then make sure those girls are practicing like they should be. If Devlon or the others object, do what you have to.” His grin was all the compliance I needed.

“Let’s go,” I said to Feyre, stalking toward the trees and halting when she didn’t immediately follow, but swung around to face me instead.

“You hear from my sisters?”

“No. Azriel is checking today if they received a response. You and I...” I paused, and positively ate Feyre alive with the filthy smirk plastered on my face. “We’re going to train.”

*And see just how beautiful that killing power of yours Devlon fears truly is.*

Her face sparked with the promise of flame and ice and maybe something more. Excitement. “Where?”



I swept one arm out wide, the trees and greenery and mountains just beyond where my fingertips led, and offered my other arm to Feyre. I was quite pleased when she took it and crawled into my embrace. "Away from potential casualties," I said.

And then, we flew. And for a moment, it was just as nice as Starfall.

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That wonderful spike in confidence ebbed into a pensive, contented flight with Feyre tucked warm against my chest. She didn't seem to have a problem being nestled there. And she was also the braver of us to break the silence first. We were as close as we had been as the sun had crested over Starfall.

"You're training Illyrian warriors?" she asked. Even the wind didn't fight her words reaching me today.

"Trying to," I said. My wings beat us higher into the air, over the canopy of trees. I stared at the tops as though I might see the Illyrian women themselves fighting or hiding beneath. As though I could see my mother. "I banned wing clipping a long, long time ago, but... at the more zealous camps, deep within the mountains, they do it. And when Amarantha took over, even the milder camps started doing it again. To keep their women safe, they claimed. For the past hundred years, Cassian has been trying to build an aerial fighting unit amongst the females, trying to prove that they have a place on the battlefield. So far, he's managed to train a few dedicated warriors, but the males make life so miserable that many of them left. And for the girls in training..." I hissed, the memories of those initial trials crystal clear in my mind, the lengths to which Cassian and I - and those girls especially - had gone, through word and bone, to make it happen. "It's a long road. But Devlon is one of the few who even lets the girls train without a tantrum."

A slice of heat whipped down my neck from where Feyre's skin connected - angry. "I'd hardly call disobeying orders 'without a tantrum.'"

"Some camps issued decrees that if a female was caught training, she was to be deemed unmarriageable. I can't fight against things like that, not without slaughtering the leaders of each camp and personally raising each and every one of their offspring."

"And yet your mother loved them - and you three wear their tattoos." Not a judgment call, but close enough to it that I tensed.

"I got the tattoos in part for my mother, in part to honor my brothers, who fought every day of their lives for the right to wear them."

"Why do you let Devlon speak to Cassian like that?" Another kiss of angry heat. Another almost judgment. My eyes began searching for the nearest clearing to make a home in for the afternoon.

"Because I know when to pick my fights with Devlon, and I know Cassian would be pissed if I stepped in to crush Devlon's mind like a grape when he could handle it himself."

Feyre's hand turned from heat to ice for a brief space of time before her tongue set to work on my mind once more, this time more calculating and considering than the last. "Have you thought about doing it?"

"I did just now," I admitted, and could still feel the remnants of power that had twitched to break free at my fingertips when Devlon had approached us. "But most camp-lords never would have given the three of us a shot at the Blood Rite. Devlon let a half-breed and two bastards take it - and did not deny us our victory."

"What's the Blood Rite?"

Finally, I looked at her, and was amazed how little exasperation was on her face for the drill she put me through. That curiosity hard at work, as always. "So many questions today." Her hand gripping my neck slid down to my shoulder and pinched - hard. A new kind of fire. I chuckled even as it stung slightly. Feyre ghosted a pleased look in return, her head reclining back on my chest.

"You go unarmed into the mountains," I explained, "magic banned, no Siphons, wings bound, with no supplies or clothes beyond what you have on you. You, and every other Illyrian male who wants to move from novice to true warrior. A few hundred head into the mountains at the start of the week - not all come out at the end."

Slowly, that head on my chest tilted up - just slightly. "Do you - kill each other?"

"Most try to." Only the wind kept my voice from creeping down low. "For food and clothes, for vengeance, for glory between feuding clans. Devlon allowed us to take the Rite - but also made sure Cassian, Azriel, and I were dumped in different locations."

"What happened?"

"We found each other. Killed out way across the mountains to get to each other. Turns out, a good number of Illyrian males wanted to prove they were stronger, smarter than us." As though in phantom memory, a number of small scars on my body sliced with a flash of knowing - blood and pain and death. But also Cassian coming over that hilltop like a god cut from the skins of heaven enact justice. And Azriel too, shadows carrying him through the trees and wiping the blood that caked his scarred hands and mouth. But mostly, the the twinkle in each of our eyes as we recognized one another and continued the blood shed all the way back to camp and received our markings. Warmth replaced the slicing pain along those scars. "Turns out they were wrong," I finished.

Feyre looked up at me. But I shifted us downward into the clearing I'd spotted first. Snow crunched softly beneath our boots as we inhaled the fresh pine and sap of the trees. Winter would always be thick in the Steppes.

Feyre stepped out my arms, ruffling herself a bit as she went, and surveyed the clearing. "So, you're not using magic - but I am?"

"Our enemy is keyed in on my powers. You, however, remain invisible." She turned to look at me. And there was something stiff - something hesitating in those eyes of hers. Something

that didn't quite match the high of flying with her that I felt. "Let's see what all your practicing has amounted to."

I waved my hand that she should begin, but she stared at me flatly, and stumbled out, "When - when did you meet Tamlin?"

The hardest part was not flinching - not breaking eye contact with her. Tamlin... Tamlin? We were going to talk about - "Show me something impressive, and I'll tell you," I offered, because of course, I wouldn't keep it from her if she really wanted to know. "Magic - for answers."

And it worked. "I know what sort of game you're playing-" I smirked and Feyre broke off. "Very well."

Easy as breathing, Feyre held out her hand and willed water into her palm, bending and shaping it as merrily as she pleased - the artist at work in the huntress' mind. A butterfly emerged and I didn't realize until Feyre stared at me waiting, and I couldn't fully... approve, just how much I did not want to discuss Tamlin with her.

"Tamlin was younger than me - born when the War started," I said. Feyre watched me carefully, the butterfly flying and dancing on. "But after the War, when he'd matured, we got to know each other at various court functions. He..." I zoned in on that small butterfly, wishing I were it instead. My body stiffened, muscles contracting to keep a focus. "He seemed decent for a High Lord's son. Better than Beron's brood at the Autumn Court. Tamlin's brothers were equally as bad, though. Worse. And they knew Tamlin would take the title one day. And to a half-breed Illyrian who'd had to prove himself, defend his power, I saw what Tamlin went through... I befriended him. Sought him out whenever I was able to get away from the war camps or court. Maybe it was pity, but..." *but he had been my friend... once*, "I taught him some Illyrian techniques."

"Did anyone know?"

She didn't have to do party tricks. She didn't have to prove herself. But I motioned to that little creature flitting about her hand anyway, just to buy me time.

I did not like the part that came next, the part that arrived after Feyre had folded her butterfly into a multitude of birds that soared away on the wind and flew circles above us. A distant, less damaged part of my mind could have sworn it heard them singing.

"Cassian and Azriel knew," I said. "My family knew. And disapproved. But Tamlin's father was threatened by it. By me. And because he was weaker than both me and Tamlin, he wanted to prove to the world that he wasn't." Somewhere in the clearing, I lost track of those songbirds. Feyre's eyes were slowly dimming. "My mother and sister were to travel to the Illyrian war-camp to see me. I was supposed to meet them halfway, but I was busy training a new unit and decided to stay.

"Tamlin's father, brothers, and Tamlin himself set out into the Illyrian wilderness, having heard from Tamlin - *from me* - where my mother and sister would be, that I had plans to see

them. I was supposed to be there. I wasn't. And they slaughtered my mother and sister anyway."

I'd thought it'd been difficult not to break eye contact with her before, but... I'd been wrong. So devastatingly wrong.

Feyre had visibly paled, her skin grown whiter than the white-grey clouds above us that promised more rain and snow. Redness stung her eyes as she shook her head biting back - what, tears of denial? Sympathy? Grief? I decided I didn't want to know and didn't bother seeking out the bond for an indication.

"It should have been me," I said, wondering that my voice didn't waver. "They put their heads in boxes and sent them down the river - to the nearest camp. Tamlin's father kept their wings as trophies. I'm surprised you didn't see them pinned in the study."

It was said with enough bitterness that we both looked away, or... or maybe only I had. But I went looking for those songbirds again wishing I could forget. When the boxes had arrived, when the camp lords had seen what was inside and told me... it didn't matter that I was a half-breed or that my father was a High Lord they spat at every time he left the camps. Or that he'd mated an Illyrian woman they'd been inches from maiming for life. That day, even the fiercest Illyrian warriors were sick for me.

Feyre had turned the songbirds into animals of many shapes and varieties, painting them about the clearing. "What else?" I demanded.

The bond between us pulled taut, enough that I almost looked at her, if not for the animals that froze between leaps and scurries about the air, the water cracking into fragments of ice that mirrored the way I felt in my heart - the way we *both* felt. They clattered to the ground and shattered, the sound rattling in my ears. Broken.

And it should have been me. I should have been a piece of ice on the floor or a head in a box or a wing on a wall, and my mother and sister well with my father in Velaris just now.

But Feyre had offered me another tribute of herself, so I forged ahead, bringing her story and mine full circle.

"When I heard, when my father heard... I wasn't wholly truthful to you when I told you Under the Mountain that my father killed Tamlin's father and brothers. I went with him. Helped him." Feyre waited for me to go on, giving away nothing but that awful pressure testing the bond. "We winnowed to the edge of the Spring Court that night, then went the rest of the way on foot - to the manner. I slew Tamlin's brothers on sight. I held their minds, and rendered them helpless while I cut them into pieces, then melted their brains inside their skulls. And when I got to the High Lord's bedroom - he was dead. And my father... my father had killed Tamlin's mother as well."

Feyre's head motioned heavily from side to side, but I couldn't stop now I'd started. The ache was too heavy not to.

“My father had promised not to touch her. That we weren’t the kind of males who would do that. But he lied to me, and he did it, anyway. And then he went for Tamlin’s room.” The night swept by me. Suddenly, I didn’t see Feyre standing in front of me in the cold lonely snow. I saw my friend, who had murdered my family in exchange for me murdering his own. Part of me wished he was the one to hear this - to *know* . “I tried to stop him. He didn’t listen. He was going to kill him, too. And I couldn’t... After all the death, I was done. I didn’t care that Tamlin had been there, had allowed them to kill my mother and sister, that he’d come to kill me because he didn’t want to risk standing against them. I was done with death. So I stopped my father before the door. He tried to go through me.” Vengeance. For his mate. For his light. For his heir, even. “Tamlin opened the door, saw us - smelled the blood already leaking into the hallway. And I didn’t even get to say a word before Tamlin killed my father in one blow.

“I felt the power shift to me, even as I saw it shift to him. And we just looked at each other, as we were both suddenly crowned High Lord - and then I ran.”

Like a coward. Like a strategist. Either way, I ran. I didn’t need the bond, or to be within Feyre’s mind, to know Tamlin had never been forthcoming with her concerning our personal history. The horror streaked in tears and outrage across her face, hiding those lovely freckles, said it all for me.

“He didn’t tell you any of that.” Not a question.

“I - I’m sorry,” she said, barely able to put sound to the words, her mouth hanging open slightly. I realized we were both unhinged.

“What do you possibly have to be sorry for?”

“I didn’t know.” Suddenly, she surged forward a step, fevered. “I didn’t know that he’d done that-”

And maybe it was again for the distraction. Maybe because I hoped she would ask me something else. Maybe it was for some other reason altogether that I had no clue about, but I motioned to her beautifully broken ice shards and shrugged, “Why did you stop?”

The bond held true for the span of a few seconds - and then fell. Into smoke. Into fire. Into a roaring of flames that seared the entirety of the clearing, wiping those ice shards into nonexistence.

For a heartbeat in time, my body did not recognize those flames as my mate’s own creation, her wrath twisting around us like snakes to strike back at what Tamlin had done. And I knew - finally, I knew. She wasn’t angry at me for my retaliation. She found it *justified* .

My wings shot out behind me on either side, stretching past the fires as they rolled down to a low simmer, my body leaning instinctively towards Feyre before remembering she was their master, not their victim. It was consuming to watch and to feel, as her heart bled for me - for *them* . I wasn’t sure how I was still standing upright when the fire cleared, if not for that brief instinct to keep her safe. The flames left nothing untouched.

“Feyre,” I said, no longer able to look anywhere but my mate. The sound of her name seemed to call something to attention just then. Her eyes pinned me down with so much pain and promise, that the darkness was her friend too. My darkness.

*Her darkness.*

Easing out in soothing strokes that kissed both our cheeks, until our flesh was filled with color again and our lungs felt relaxed enough to expand comfortably. Until there was nothing and no one but us and the night. The fire - the smoke. It was gone.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked, face drawn up, eyes still rimmed red. But they were searching me, body and soul. I think something in both of us healed a little more right in that moment.

“I didn’t want you to think I was trying to turn you against him,” I replied.

Feyre softened and came right up into my arms, cutting the distance between us down to less than those dissipated flames, letting me wrap myself around her. Hold her. “I want to paint you,” she breathed, and a rush of wind swept right through me as I picked her up and pressed my lips to her ear.

“Nude would be best.”

## Chapters 46-47: The Darkness Begins to Stare Back

### Chapter Summary

Rhys and Feyre are out training in the Illyrian Mountains when they run in to Lucien and Rhys finally learns the full truth of where Feyre stands on going back to Tamlin.

We sat painfully close at dinner, to the point that no more than a needle would have separated our legs. After the afternoon in the forest, physical separation felt almost unbearable. Even walking back to the house after we'd landed out in the mud, we'd stayed close wondering if one of us might have the nerve to take the other's hand.

But Cassian cut through me with a glance when we walked through the front door, motioning to Mor from across the kitchen. She sat the table picking at some knot in the wood grain. Wordlessly, I nodded at Cass.

Feyre was covered in a good bit of mud and snow, but she sank down across from Mor rather than the fire while I helped Cass finish up the stew he'd been working on. She shivered at the first sip.

"This soup is piping hot and the fire is delicious, but I think every bone in my body might shatter from how freezing this place is," Feyre said, lapping up another bite.

Cassian nodded and poked around his own dish, but his eyes were quietly trained on Mor. "They pick these locations just to ensure the strongest among us survive."

"Horrible people," Mor said. She'd barely eaten anything. "I don't blame Az for never wanting to come here."

Cassian and I exchanged another look. "I take it training the girls went well." Cassian's answering drink of ale was answer enough.

"I got one of them to confess they hadn't received a lesson in ten days. They'd all been too busy with 'chores,' apparently." He shook his head, a scowl plastered all over him.

"No born fighters in this lot?"

"Three, actually," and Mor looked a little brighter. "Three out of ten isn't bad at all. The others, I'd be happy if they just learned to defend themselves. But those three... They've got the instinct - the claws. It's their stupid families that want them clipped and breeding."

Like Mor. Like her own family had wanted her. The family she'd visit tomorrow.

She stared for far too long at the bowl in front of her, pushing the spoon around and forcing down bites, that Feyre stood suddenly and took her dish to the sink. Cassian set his own spoon down and turned in his chair, clear that no one else but Mor sat in the room.

I stood, right as Cassian asked quietly, “When do you head for the Hewn City tomorrow?” Mor’s nose pinched.

“After breakfast. Before.” Her head shook softly. “I don’t know. Maybe in the afternoon, when they’re all waking up.”

Cassian moved under the table, likely taking her hand, and when Mor looked up, understanding passed between them. And I wondered if it was Cassian - Cassian who had been the one to really break her free from her shackles - that remained the only reason she had stomached coming here with us. The only reason she felt safe and loved enough to do it.

Feyre and I shuffled for the stairs, not bothering with ‘goodnights’ so as not to risk interrupting. I couldn’t bear to when Mor finally had something other than dread on her face.

For her own part, Feyre was distraction enough. From the table to the sink to the stairs, our bodies stayed close circling one another and daring to touch, but not quite closing the gap. There was fire there as my eyes trailed over her back climbing those stairs.

Fire. Today this woman had lit the world on fire for me. I wanted to light it back.

By the time we’d made it to the upstairs landing, and only two doors remained, a warmth from Feyre’s fire had made it to my core and settled nicely. Feyre stared between the two doors looking like she’d rather not choose. I pointed at the second nearest her.

“You and Mor can share tonight - just tell her to shut up if she babbles too much.”

She didn’t laugh. Just stared hard at the door. And I thought maybe she wasn’t the only one preoccupied with my cousin and what was twitching inside that beautiful head of hers downstairs. So I grabbed the knob to my own door, ready to leave her be and ignore the fire for the night, when... nothing. Absolutely nothing except Feyre standing still and quiet, and the bond... pulling taut again. Taut with - with *heat* .

My hand stilled on the knob. And slowly I turned. And found Feyre’s eyes trailing up my body one piece at a time, lingering here and there, her lips slightly parted.

And her eyes. They filled with that heat, curled and smoked and... considered me. It was one thing, perhaps, not to touch all through dinner. It was now entirely another to allow rooms and walls to separate us.

And we’d flown so close, her skin so comfortably against my neck and hands as my wings had beaten away an ancient storm behind us, that I wondered...

I drew breath to ask her - to ask if my mate would like to join me for the evening. To talk. To sleep. To love. Whatever she wanted - whatever scraps she’d give a despised half-breed of the north.



But as soon as my lips split, Feyre whirled around and disappeared inside her room. The fire inside me dulled into a depressing, needing ache to touch her all the more. Something I was sure some part of her wanted, but with a private room all her own, the option to keep pretending remained too easy to take.

So maybe tomorrow, I wouldn't give her one. And let come what may.

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The scent of rain was refreshing, the cold shower I had needed all night as I tried in vain to sleep. My mind had been too preoccupied with Feyre to bother risking the nightmares and the dreams for another night. She was simply... everywhere now.

Cassian had risen first and opened his door at about the same moment Feyre had opened hers. She must have shaken her head because Cassian's had shoulders slumped. "When?" he had asked.

"About an hour ago," Feyre had replied. "She told me not to bother waking you."

Cassian had politely nodded and closed the door. From where I still laid on my bed, I could see the heaviness weighing him down even as he stared at the door. I wished Az had come. At least Mor would be back by nightfall.

I waited until breakfast was over to tell him Feyre and I wouldn't be back until the following day. He seemed more concerned with getting out into the rings to push some of the novices around than dealing with our extended absence anyway.

And now, trailing Feyre by several feet through the forests where we'd flown miles from camp and lugging all of our equipment while she teased me with the sway of her hips, I half wished we'd stayed. She was going to drive me up the wall, that fire from the hallway wholly unabated by the rain.

Every step I took, she took another and it felt like my future was in front of me and moving further away at the same time. She kept her mental shields well up, but I could sense her overall mood was pensive, even a tad brooding.

It was only when I'd caught up to her that I realized she had stopped her hike. Her shields were beginning to crack ever so slightly as her thoughts struggled, just enough to let me feel a little more - unusual, given how superb she typically was now at maintaining them. I half wondered if it was intentional, but...

Feyre turned to look at me and I could feel the tension rolling around in her head as she took me in, her eyes trailing over my wings the same way she had last night - with questions - until she met my gaze.

Silently, I lifted an eyebrow. If she had questions, I would answer. I would answer anything for her. I could practically see the words forming in her mind and I pressed against the bond without breaking her down, revealing how desperate I was to know every inch of her. Let her see some of *my* fire, what she kindled in me every day now.

What I didn't expect was the hand she held up instead and the small flicker of a smile. I caught a flash of fire in her heart - real, tangible fire from the days of Autumn - and concern for my safety. It was hard not to laugh, so I instead bowed low for her to go on and play, wondering if she realized the double meaning in my gesture as there was only one person on this earth I would ever bow for beyond my crown.

And for her, I was ready to do it.

Feyre turned her back on me, rolling her eyes at my bravado as she went and I felt my insides turn into a blaze. Sometimes... she could be so wicked, so playful. And I *liked* when she was playful. It was us seated that throne in the Court of Nightmares all over again, my fingertips brushing the inside of her thigh as she ground against me and I felt how moist she was.

I still wanted to feel that. Fuck, I wanted to taste that. I wanted to take her further into the woods and fuck her where no one else would hear the sound except the mountains and the trees.

Feyre blushed even from so many feet away as I licked along the bond between us, filing that bridge between our minds with a lazy lust. I sent the caress intently, amusement flowing with it as she tried not to let it show how much she was beginning to squirm inside. My crotch went full with heat.

She had just paused in a clearing and turned to face me, either to begin her magic or to tell me off - I hoped for the later - when it happened.

A bolt of dread went through me as I watched a group of four men dressed in colors of a court I had come to loathe surround my mate. And with them at the center standing before Feyre was Lucien.

A million decisions ran through my mind on the spot, each overriding the last and vying for position. My instinct was to winnow us away immediately, all risk of my magic being tracked be damned. But one look at Feyre and I knew I couldn't do it. She could be my mate if she wanted to, but she hadn't decided that yet. This decision right here, right now was hers alone and until I knew what she wanted, I would let her handle Lucien.

I would not make the same mistake I had with Tarquin. *I wouldn't.*

"We've been hunting for you for over two months," Lucien said. He sounded so relieved, like he thought this was going to be easy. I prayed he was wrong, tried not to... not to panic. If as much for Feyre's sake as mine. I had no idea how open she was to the bond just then.

"How did you find me?" Feyre asked. It was too short for me to gauge how she felt and with Lucien suddenly present, her mental shields had snapped firmly back in place.

"Someone tipped us off you'd been out here, but it was luck that we caught your scent on the wind, and-" Lucien paused as Feyre retreated from his approach and even at this distance, I could tell he was confused. I made a mental note to check in with Azriel later about who Lucien's mystery *tip* had been. Suddenly, his voice was tight. "We need to get out of here. Tamlin's been - he hasn't been himself. I'll take you right to-"

“No,” Feyre said.

My heart skipped a beat. Though she whispered the word, it was firm and binding. A declaration. A choice.

And Lucien didn’t want to believe it.

“Feyre,” he said carefully, his hands tensing at his side. Weapons were very much within reach, though nothing like the display Feyre herself wore. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

I wracked my brain as quickly as I could, but... Feyre had never called the Night Court her home. And much as I despised Tamlin, he had made a home for Feyre once, a home I suddenly realized she might remember with Lucien standing there and... miss. A home she never felt she had with me.

There was heat, I thought. And Starfall had been a dream. But both times we’d chosen to go our ways separately, to retreat to different spaces. And all this time I still hadn’t told her the truth.

And now here we were, surrounded by soldiers. This was the life she would have staying with me. Maybe... I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. Maybe she wouldn’t want this life after all.

Sorrow began to overtake my heart as I saw what might happen. It would break me to see her return to the Spring Court with Lucien and even now standing there just thinking about the possibility, I felt like I would die if she chose it. But if she did, if she... left me, whatever this bond between us had become, I would find a way to be okay with it. I had to for her.

Feyre squared Lucien up and my breath hung on every word. “That stopped being my home the day you let him lock me up inside of it,” Feyre said.

And Cauldron - it was all I could do to focus as the relief flooded me. I knew in that moment, perhaps more clearly than ever before now that I could look in on her from the outside, that Feyre felt something for me, enough to choose me in some capacity. And that I wasn’t going to go back on my promise to tell her everything - and soon.

My desire to find out exactly how she would choose me weighed my feet down as I dug into the ground and prepared for Lucien’s move that would prompt me to take off.

“It was a mistake,” Lucien retorted. The poor fox looked aghast. He hadn’t come prepared for a fight. “We all made mistakes. He’s sorry - more sorry than you realize. So am I.”

Lucien tried to near Feyre once more, but again she edged away, only she was running out of room. I could sense the tension in her rising as she turned the arrow pulled in her hands directly on Lucien. His eyes widened.

“Put the arrow down,” Lucien said and the way he said it, so condescending, as if he could control her just like Tamlin did with some simple twist of words. But Feyre - my Feyre - held

her ground. The bond started to hum.

“Don’t. Touch. Me.”

“You don’t understand the mess we’re in, Feyre. We - *I* need you home. Now.”

The next few seconds were a blur as Feyre moved, and Lucien after her. I winnowed into the air towards the spot where Feyre had been to find she was already gone on her own cloud of smoke. Lucien stumbled back and I rode around on Feyre’s trail until I found her safely out of the reach of Lucien and his sentinels.

And it was intoxicating.

Feyre’s magic hung electric in the air between us. It didn’t matter if I had been there or not to save her, she’d saved herself and she knew it. She stood proud, a fierce glare in her eyes aimed straight at Lucien as he righted himself to search for Feyre, only to find me standing by her side with power dripping off of me - off of *us* . I would make her my queen, this warrior at my side, if she would let me.

The mask appeared easily. Lucien had clearly not been prepared for such a sight. His entire body seized as he took me in, myself now dressed formally in sleekest black, without my wings or the fighting armor. Dressed to kill. Not even the rain pelting my face and soaking my clothes felt cold.

“Little Lucien,” I said with wicked amusement. “Didn’t the Lady of the Autumn Court ever tell you that when a woman says no, she means it?”

“Prick,” Lucien spat and I was almost happy until he added on, “You filthy, whoring prick.” The word unleashed a snarl from deep within my chest. “What have you done, Feyre?” Lucien asked her, horrified at what he was seeing.

“Don’t come looking for me again,” Feyre breathed.

“He’ll never stop looking for you; never stop waiting for you to come home.”

Home.

There was that word again. I admitted a small trace of fear to myself as Feyre paused. Lucien snatched at his chance.

*He’ll never stop looking... waiting... A lifetime of high lords and assassins chasing you...*

“What did he do to you? Did he take your mind and-”

“Enough,” I said with more grace than I felt. But I had to be convincing. “Feyre and I are busy. Go back to your lands before I send your heads as a reminder to my old friend about what happens when Spring Court flunkies set foot in my territory.”

But Lucien didn’t budge.

“You made your point, Feyre - now come home.”

“I’m not a child playing games,” Feyre replied and I knew he’d finally overstepped with her. Feyre didn’t need to be locked up. It was why she left the Spring Court in the first place. Out here in the wild, she was her own person and Lucien had no idea how dangerous that could be for him if he forced her back towards her former self.

“Careful, Lucien,” I said with delight. “Or Feyre darling will send you back in pieces, too.”

He looked ready to tear himself in two, to fall on bended knee and unravel all those thick red braids until she gave in. “We are not your enemies, Feyre. Things got bad, Ianthe got out of hand, but it doesn’t mean you give up-”

“You gave up,” Feyre whispered. Time seemed to stop on those three little words, quiet but full of endless pain... and remembrance. In a way, it broke my heart all over again. But the strength that followed ensured both our hearts stayed in tact. “*You* gave up on me,” she continued. “You were my friend. And you picked *him* - picked obeying him, even when you saw what his orders and his rules did to me. Even when you saw me wasting away *day by day*.”

“You have *no idea* how volatile those first few months were,” Lucien snapped. He was angry, probably from shock, at how difficult Feyre was being. He had thought this would be easy. “We *needed* to present a unified, obedient front, and I was supposed to be the example to which all others in our court were held.”

“You *saw* what was happening to me. But you were too afraid of him to truly do anything about it. I begged you. I begged you so many times to help me, to get me out of the house, even for an hour. And you left me alone, or shoved me into a room with Ianthe, or told me to stick it out.”

With a steely edge to his low voice cut sharp like the finest sword, Lucien dared his final resort. “And I suppose the Night Court is so much better?” he asked, setting my soul ablaze with rage. Always the whore. Always the villain. No chance for truth to see the light of day. If Lucien did not quit after this, I was going to tear him limb from limb, past histories be damned, and let Tamlin see how that stood for a response. We’d go to war shortly anyway.

But I didn’t have to tear him apart. All of my doubts about the Night Court not being Feyre’s home started dissipating in my mind like tiny bubbles floating away on the wind as I felt Feyre shift beside me. The entire clearing seemed to kneel in the presence of her unfolding power. Her anger matched mine. Her desire to protect was my own and cauldron damn us, it raged so strong. I dared to slide my eyes away from their careful watch over Lucien to look at her and beamed with joy as she even physically mirrored me, talons appearing at her hands and wings - *Illyrian wings!* - slipping out from between her shoulder blades on her exposed back.

And when Feyre spoke, it was thickest, blackest Night made manifest.

“When you spend so long trapped in the darkness, Lucien, you find that the darkness begins to stare back,” she spat. I could feel Amren next to me, nodding her approval. She was

playing a part just as I had always done, keeping everyone safe - my friends, Velaris, even me - when she didn't have to and I adored her for it.

Oh no, there was no doubt now where Feyre's home was if ever there was any before.

I sent rapturous, wicked joy down the bond, praising her, delighting in this beautiful, bold woman before me with these wings so fierce and perfect at her back, a symbol that she would fight. The rain slid down the membranes smoothly and I wondered that they didn't quite shiver. I hoped she knew in that moment not just how much I approved of her actions then and there, but also just how much I *admired* her too.

Lucien's mouth hung open agape. "What did you do to yourself?" he breathed - horrified for her - for his one time friend. Finally, he sounded defeated. The razor thin smile Feyre gave in reply, so feral and animalistic, was a final knife to the heart.

"The human you knew died Under the Mountain. I have no interest in spending immortality as a High Lord's pet."

"Feyre-"

"Tell Tamlin," Feyre pressed on, "if he sends anyone else into these lands, I will hunt each and every one of you down. And I will demonstrate exactly what the darkness taught me."

For what it was worth, Lucien did look momentarily broken. He snapped back into his cold and calculating persona immediately, but for half a second, I saw the grief written in his eyes and was struck by the sudden thought that this was costing him personally to leave here without her. That maybe just as Tamlin and I had once been friends destroyed by war and feuding, so too had Lucien and Feyre.

And then his eyes crawled over to me through the wings and knives banded at her waist and mud caking her boots, disgust filling up the features on his face. My sympathy died. "You're dead," he said venomously. "You, and your entire cursed court." For once, I didn't even care.

Before I could retaliate, he had winnowed, the sentries with him. And Feyre was left staring miles into the distance, a hard threatening look burned into her face determined not to believe he was really gone. Her wings and talons still hung around her, tensing in the air not knowing the threat was gone. I dared run a finger along the veining in her wings and she shuddered, the spell broken. Relief ran through me at the same time I was so overwhelmed just to touch her again.

Out of sight, I shook my head to the side once incredulous. *Wings. My mate had made herself wings.* I had never seen anything more attractive or beautiful in all my life than my mate with Illyrian wings.

"How?" I gasped, stepping in front of her. We were inches apart.

"Shape-shifting," she said, still a little rigid. But then her eyes found mine and in the next few precious moments that passed between us, she softened. It was as if she was seeing something in me as I stared at her, trying to send all the love I felt for her through our bond,

and it melted her. The wings, the talons, the tension - it all disappeared, no trace of it left in sight where my beautiful Feyre stood so close to me. I needed to touch her again. Her scent, her magic - it was everywhere.

I recalled my own wings, my leathers, casting aside the High Lord for the Illyrian.

“That was a very convincing performance,” I said, melting a little bit myself.

“I gave him what he wanted to see. We should find another spot.”

It was as if she had read my mind. Gladly, I picked her up, ready to fly her away anywhere she wanted. But even as I held her, I could feel the thoughts swarming around inside her head. It wasn't Lucien anymore, but...

“Are you all right?” I finally asked, fear lacing my question before it was met with the soothing feeling of Feyre pressing herself firmly into my chest, cradled as close as she could nest herself.

*Home .*

“The fact that it was so easy, that I felt so little, upsets me more than the encounter itself,” she explained.

And all at once, we were flying and I was angry again. Angry at Lucien and Tamlin and that entire damned court for betraying Feyre so cruelly, Feyre who I now stared at as we flew further into the skies.

“I knew things were bad,” I said over the wind and rain. “But I thought Lucien, at least, would have stepped in.”

“I thought so, too,” Feyre said. She sounded so tiny and disappointed, as if realizing just how far she had come from her first days in Prythian where Tamlin was concerned. I gave her a gentle squeeze and she looked up at me back into my eyes and I couldn't stop myself. I sincerely hoped that maybe one day her and Lucien could reconcile - somehow.

“You look good with wings,” I said, kissing her brow. I was tired of fearing open affection for her that wasn't a joke or a tool to pull her out of something.

And it seemed to work. Feyre's chest warmed as she nuzzled ever closer against me and together, we flew and flew and flew.

## Chapter 48: When I Lick You

### Chapter Summary

Feyre and Rhys stop in at a remote inn for the night while out training. Intense fingerbanging ensues. ;)

To say the inn where we were staying was cramped would have been an understatement, but there it was. The attic room given us was tiny, Feyre was grumpy as hell from training, and I was horny as fuck from flying her here against my chest through the wind and rain.

The encounter with Lucien seemed to have triggered something in us both that even the Court of Nightmares and Starfall had not managed. I thought about how Feyre had looked with those powerful wings gliding out of her back the entire flight to the inn, trying not to drop her in my anxiety as we flew.

But we both felt it. The *shift*. A primal sensation building between us, the final missing piece that would undo the tension we shared. I was done pretending with her that it didn't exist anymore. The lone bed boldly staring at us from within four tightly packed walls of the inn, too narrow and dingy to house what I felt for Feyre, seemed to throw that realization back in our faces.

"I asked for two," I said automatically, my hands thrown up in surrender over the threshold to the room.

Feyre seemed to be thinking along the same lines as she didn't dare move within the room. "If you can't risk using magic, then we'll have to warm each other," she said, a blush immediately overtaking her frozen cheeks. "Body heat," she spat out, but not before a smug look had crept onto my face. "My sisters and I had to share a bed - I'm used to it."

"I'll try to keep my hands to myself."

"I'm hungry."

*So am I*, I thought, but not for that kind of nourishment.

"I'll go down and get us food while you change." Her brows rose in genuine curiosity. The danger of where this night might lead had us both thrown off our game. "Remarkable as my own abilities are to blend in," I explained, "my face is recognizable. I'd rather not be down there long enough to be noticed."

My fingers were agitated as they worked on pulling the cloak over my wings. I wasn't even inside the room yet and already it felt suffocating. There was no way I could let myself lose control with Feyre here in this miserable den, far from what I'd hoped it would be. Muscles



screamed at me as I stretched for the fastening to cloak myself, the result of a long day exposed to the rough elements raging outside. It made all the things my body needed feel so out of reach.

I caught Feyre staring, a glazed look in her eyes studying me intently. Darkness brooded over my body while my fingers worked, a darkness that was annoyed and angry at my limitations, but Feyre was drinking it in like fine wine.

“I love it when you look at me like that,” I said, my voice low and aching.

“Like what?” she asked.

“Like my power isn’t something to run from. Like you see me.” Her words at the Court of Nightmares came back to me, warming my skin against the chill in the room.

*You are good, Rhys. I see you.*

And she’d meant it too.

“I was afraid of you at first,” Feyre said and I smiled because I knew it wasn’t true.

*This mask does not scare me.*

“No, you weren’t,” I countered, finishing up the hood of my cloak. “Nervous, maybe, but never afraid. I’ve felt the genuine terror of enough people to know the difference. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t keep away.”

The intimacy of this fact threatened to tip me over and I darted away from her and our cramped quarters before she could say anything. As I waited for our food to be drawn up, I tried not to think about the layers of damp clothing she would be removing floors above me, sticking to her skin and hair, her nakedness against the sheets as she sat on the bed and removed her moistened undergarments to change. I shuddered the thought away before it could get the better of me by adding her newly fashioned wings to the equation.

When the inn keep handed me the trays of food, I demanded a bottle of wine instead of the water. Hopefully it would loosen up my body enough to cooperate with my mind from touching her all night. He handed me the bottle and two glasses with a grunt, glad to be rid of me.

The stairs groaned beneath my feet as I climbed mocking the release I was unable to unleash and I came to stand outside our door. Feyre opened it before I could knock and stood there, her hair dripping water down her neck from the rain. But it was the sweater that did me in - *my* sweater that she was wearing. I could smell myself on it - on her, like a feral dog marking its territory.

*Mine, mine, mine .*

My groin gave an adrenaline inducing twitch. Fuck the small room. I was touching her by the end of the night - somehow.

“Tell me that’s stew I smell,” she asked, her eyes closing as she took a wonderful inhale. I tried not stare at her lips as I brushed past her and set the tray on the bed, glad of her question to free me from my masochistic thoughts.

“Rabbit stew,” I said. “If the cook’s to be believed.”

“I could have lived without hearing that.” I grinned at her and thought I saw some of that mischief dancing from her as well, but she quickly turned her back on me. “What’s the other one beneath?”

I moved around the bed, tucking my wings to my back as tightly as I could to avoid knocking into the wall. “Meat pie. I didn’t dare ask what kind of meat. Go ahead and eat. I’m changing first.”

“You should have changed before going downstairs.” A casual comment, but there was a stiffness to it that suggested she was avoiding me. I shirked off my cloak and started in on my tunic trying very hard to ignore the fact that I was going to be naked in front of her in a matter of seconds.

“You were the one training all day,” I said, hoping to fill the air with something other than the fact that there was a bed between us and my half-hard cock was close to being out as I swapped my pants for a clean pair. I could hardly think of anything else. “Getting you a hot meal was the least I could do.”

Silence reigned supreme. I listened to Feyre sip her stew, her lips making slurping noises as she sucked that sounded of -

I worked faster and finished dressing myself, the last of the cotton shirt taking some extra attention to fit my wings. I sat on the bed and grabbed my plate when I was done.

“How do you get it over the wings?” Feyre asked, conversation at last.

“The back is made of slats that close with hidden buttons... But in normal circumstances, I just use magic to seal it shut.”

“It seems like you have a great deal of magic constantly in use at once.”

“It helps me work off the strain of my power,” I said between bites with a careless shrug.

“The magic needs release - draining - or else it’ll build up and drive me insane. That’s why we call the Illyrian stones Siphons - they help them channel the power, empty it when necessary.”

Feyre paused and set her bowl aside looking wide-eyed and surprised. “Actually insane?” she asked. There was her innate curiosity again about the world she still knew so little of that I adored so much.

“Actually insane,” I confirmed. “Or so I was warned.” As if in reflex to my words, my back tightened and something deep inside of myself written into the fabric of my soul twitched,

like an itch I couldn't scratch so long as my powers were traceable. "I can feel it, though - the pull of it, if I go too long without releasing it."

"That's horrible," Feyre said, looking at me from across the bed with concern. And for once, I didn't doubt that it was real.

"Everything has its cost, Feyre. If the price of being strong enough to shield my people is that I have to struggle with that same power, then I don't mind. Amren taught me enough about controlling it. Enough that I owe a great deal to her. Including the current shield around my city while we're here."

I raised another spoonful of stew to my lips and stopped when Feyre's grip on her mental shields went out from under her and a horrid thought, one I despised, that told her unfairly of how useless and freakish she was fell out. It couldn't have been further from the truth. Even sitting there with her hair a mess and not a single weapon on her, Feyre was powerful - a perfectly crafted arrow flying through the night only the dark huntress herself was capable of seeing.

"You're not," I said with no room for argument as to the question of if she were worthless.

"Don't read my thoughts," she grumbled.

I set my emptied bowl of stew down a tad too hard, some of my tension releasing in that snap. "I can't help what you sometimes shout down the bond. And besides, everything is usually written on your face, if you know where to look," as I always did. "Which made your performance today so much more impressive."

Feyre gave me careful consideration before leaning back against the pillows of the bed clutching her wine glass close to her. Something glared behind those eyes as she sipped her wine. I continued eating, thinking her frustrated at my reproachful tone, when she surprised me mid-bite.

"Did you think I would go with him?"

My eyes darted to hers across the fork at my lips. An awful truth twisted in my gut cutting at the desire I'd built up for her. "I heard every word between you. I knew you could take care of yourself, and yet..." I had to take a bite to buy myself time, scared to admit what I had prayed in that forest she wouldn't do. "And yet I found myself deciding that if you took his hand, I would find a way to live with it. It would be your choice."

And I meant it despite how vulnerable it left me.

Feyre casually stole a sip of her wine, letting it mask the need behind her next question. "And if he had grabbed me?"

At this, my hesitations were non-existent. "Then I would have torn apart the world to get you back." Feyre's eyes beamed, refusing to look away from mine as if to say, *Good*.

"I would have fired at him," she said in a breathy voice, "if he had tried to hurt you."

“I know.” That ache from earlier that I’d *almost* forgotten about snaked its way back into the tightness at my groin as we watched each other knowing. That she would protect me, care for me - love me even, made me mad for her that much more. It was the closest she’d yet come to admitting it.

And even though it was soft and loving, there was heat behind it, fire in those bright blue-grey eyes that had stared me down at Starfall and sought to defend me and know my soul. Feyre was passion divine. I started to harden again from across the bed in my desire to worship at that altar of hers housed underneath my sweater.

“One thought for another,” she said suddenly. “No training involved, please.” Irony sprung out like an Illyrian blade ready to cut me to the quick. I chuckled before downing the remainder of my wine and gave her the honest truth. No more hiding. I was done cowering from how I felt.

“I’m thinking,” I said as she licked her tongue over that rich, full bottom lip of hers I wanted to sink my teeth into, “that I look at you and feel like I’m dying. Like I can’t breathe. I’m thinking that I want you so badly I can’t concentrate half the time I’m around you, and this room is too small for me to properly bed you. Especially with the wings.”

The most beautiful blush worthy of making an Illyrian sunset jealous blossomed over her cheeks. I meant every word. And even if my wings were forced out in this inn with my magic barred from retracting them, it didn’t matter. If I had her - no, *when* I had her - she would have all of me as my mate properly deserved.

Feyre took a long sip of her wine polishing off the glass and setting it aside. I realized I wasn’t even nervous for what she might say. Part of me already knew what it was.

“I’m thinking that I can’t stop thinking about you. And that it’s been that way for a long while.” My heart leapt in my chest. *More, more, more - give me more. Please.* “Even before I left the Spring Court. And maybe that makes me a traitorous, lying piece of trash, but-”

“It doesn’t,” I cut her off, again with no room for argument. She seemed stunned into acceptance of what I’d said.

We sat there, staring each other down, the bond thick between us. Her blood called to me from across that bond to take her, flip her over, shred the sweater filled with my scent and ravish that beautiful, strong body where she dwelt.

Feyre swallowed, as though she herself felt the same - wanted it just as badly. “We should go to sleep.”

It was a long pause as I worked the fire within me down enough to acquiesce. “All right,” I agreed, wanting to do anything but. I should have just taken her in the direction of one of my many hideaways in these mountains so I could bed her properly.

Feyre undid the covers nearest the slanting of the wall and tucked herself in whilst I crawled underneath after her. I blew the candles out at the bedside and listened to the silence fill the room save for the pitter-patter of the rain outside. I laid there watching her, her back turned to

me, imagining all the things I could do to that back alone. What would it take to get those wings out again? Where would I have to kiss, to touch? We were only inches apart, the bed was so small, and I could both see and feel her body trembling.

“You’re shivering so hard the bed is shaking,” I said.

“My hair is wet,” she said casually and I smirked to myself. I was willing to bet it wasn’t the only wet thing in the room.

Pushing myself across the bed, I slid hungrily around her. “No expectations,” I said coolly just behind her ear and enjoying the shiver over her skin. My hands wrapped over and under either side of her pulling her tight against my chest while my legs tangled themselves between her own, settling in. “Just body heat.”

Her body was supple and warm against me, feeling like a perfect match against where we made contact. I cursed the fabric of my shirt and her sweater between us wishing some of Beron’s fire would come bursting out of her body to burn it away and leave us a mess of skin and sweat in its wake. My wings folded over Feyre, cocooning us in place.

I closed my eyes, contentedly reserved to fall asleep as we were for the night thinking this was as close as she’d let me get, when a cold, gentle touch met a tender trail along my right wing. And despite how much I had tried all evening not to, I hardened immediately at the unexpected touch.

“Your finger... is very cold,” I said against the skin of her neck, barely able to maintain composure. Her neck shifted more openly at my mouth as she stroked my wing again allowing her nail to drag against the membrane. She might as well have been stroking the length at my crotch aching for her for all it did to me.

My body clenched in response, my hand gripping her stomach. “You cruel, wicked thing,” I purred in her ear, my nose moving to graze along her neck. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you manners?”

“I never knew Illyrians were such sensitive babies,” Feyre replied before running another finger along the membrane. My hips bucked forward into her and I knew she felt how hard I was. Heat rippled across her skin at the touch, but Feyre soaked it right up, dragging two of her fingers wickedly yet again over my wings. Her stroke sent my hips in motion against her in time to her caresses longing to be released.

And I decided that if she was finally willing to play, so was I.

My hand at her stomach commenced a slow, lazy tour of the area around her navel, taunting Feyre with possibilities. She pushed back against me, her neck arching enough so that her chest lifted, clearing a path for my other hand towards her breast.

“Greedy,” I said full of lusty headiness. I wouldn’t let her come quite so easily. No, if I had to wait to bed her, I would make her beg for this, prove to me she wanted it just as badly as I did. “First you terrorize me with your cold hands, now you want... what is it you want, Feyre?”

It was the same question I'd asked her outside the Court of Nightmares. But this time, I was going to get an answer out of her. I skimmed along the outside of her sweater, my hand stroking against her breasts. My other hand dipped lower on her stomach close to the lining of her pants. I didn't want to wait. She was wet and I didn't need to touch her to know. I could *smell* it on her thick as smoke after a fire.

"What is it you want, Feyre?" I repeated, my teeth scraping her neck as my own body's responses amplified. She arched when I nipped at her earlobe demanding an answer, a low whimper hissing out of her.

"I want a distraction," she breathed. "I want - fun."

My whole body stilled, temporarily lost in the haze that this might still only be a game for her, that she might not mean it. But then my hands remembered the heat pooling between her legs and mine and I threw explanations of the mate bond out the window, my body begging to touch her. *Anything* if I could just touch her.

"Then allow me the pleasure of distracting you," I growled, my hand plunging beneath the sweater and colliding skin on skin with her breasts. Feyre groaned as my mind exploded at the sensation of feeling her up. How long had I wanted just to *feel her*. "I love these," I said, wildness taking over my voice as I started to lose control of myself. "You have no idea how much I love these."

I tormented her chest in every way that I knew, loving how her nipples peaked for me and made her grind harder against my hips, against my cock throbbing behind her. "Stop that," I said roughly in her ear to make her shudder. "You'll ruin *my* fun."

And indeed, it was more fun than I had ever imagined. My hands weren't even lower than her waist and I was in hell, rotting from the pleasure of her skin, still smelling of the pine-soaked rain outside. She twisted, all sorts of breathy little pants running out of her, ignoring my pleas, and trying to reach around for me. But I held her firm, blocking her access to my groin.

"I want to touch you first," I said utterly unhinged, my voice becoming someone else's, someone I'd never heard before. I had never wanted someone so badly, never imagined I could need Feyre this much, mate and all. "Just - let me touch you."

I squeezed her breast hard and Feyre calmed caving in to me, too tormented for words. My hands trailed her skin like a moth drawn in to the flame, too stupid to stay away. And when my fingers finally threatened to dip below the hemline at her pants, I was at last greeted with her voice that had turned equally as primal and needing as my own.

"Please," she begged, barely able to get the lone syllable out. It satisfied me to no end.

"There are those missing manners," I grinned into her neck. My hand sank below the fabric at her waist and *stroked*.

Feyre groaned at the same moment I snarled in wicked approval of the wetness between her thighs. She was so thoroughly soaked, I needn't even have pushed myself towards her before my fingers went sliding down, down, down. My thumb circled her clit in teasing sweeps until

finally, neither of us could take it anymore and I pushed down, my entire body clenching around her.

Feyre's own body cried out, her hips buckling against mine as rapid pants poured out of her. I laughed insufferably, wanting to pull *more, more, more* out of her. "Like that?" I asked intoxicated by her reaction to my touch, that I could elicit such a response from my mate. A frenzy - the frenzy of our magic - sprang to life inside me.

She groaned, begging my fingers lowered and I obliged... to a point. I savored the feeling of her slickness on my fingers inviting me in, hardening beyond what I thought possible as I relished the promise of how she would taste on my tongue when I was finished. "Please," Feyre gasped, again only managing a single syllable. Her ass ground against my hips and I sent a finger diving into her.

"Fuck!" I swore at her ear. "Feyre... Oh, fuck." Her insides tightened around me, groping for more, begging not to lose contact. I kissed desperately at her neck, her ears, whatever my lips could get a hold of before slipping a second finger inside her as she writhed against me. The bond blossomed open between us, and Feyre sent a torrent of heat and *need* across it that trembled and shook.

The sensation that had been pooling at her core began to grow, building towards that all consuming swell that controlled us both. "That's it," I murmured, my tongue licking her ear. *Come for me*, I begged inside my head. *Come for your mate*.

And then, before I knew what she was doing, Feyre sprung free of my grasp just enough to pivot herself around and catch my stare, a blue wildness pouring out of her eyes as she leaned up and captured my mouth with hers and I was lost. She bit my bottom lip exactly as I'd wanted to bite hers and I groaned, my fingers thrusting into her harder automatically.

Her lips parted. My tongue surged inside. I stroked against her, mimicking the movement of my fingers at her core until the sensations were in sync. I could taste her all day. An eternity wouldn't have been long enough. I might have come just fucking her with my hands. And when I couldn't stand it any longer, I pulled back just enough to watch her finish for me.

"You have no idea how much I - *Feyre*," I groaned and she shattered. Pressure squeezed tight around my fingers soaked in her wetness as she came. I swallowed her cry with my lips before it could drown out the sound of the rain beyond the inn. Her body shook and trembled a second time and I swore, guiding her through the end of it until she was left in utter ruins within my arms, the sweat between our skin gluing us together.

Her head turned leaning against my arm to look at me as I removed myself from inside her, ready to offer her more honesty. "I wanted to do that when I felt how drenched you were at the Court of Nightmares. I wanted to have you right there in the middle of everyone. But mostly I just wanted to do this."

Without breaking eye contact, I brought those two cum-stained fingers to my lips and sucked. The taste that met my tongue was better than the finest wine or the sweetest honey.

Feyre moved instantly, pupils blown wide ready to overtake me, but I grabbed her hand. My cock ached horribly for reprieve, but I would be damned if I didn't hold true to my promise not to bed her in this wretched room that was far too small to contain what I would do to her when we mated.

"When you lick me," I said, my voice rough as I took hold of her hand with a hard grip, "I want to be alone - far away from everyone. Because when you lick me, Feyre," and I leaned in to give a few last teasing kisses along her neck that sent her shivering all over again, "I'm going to let myself roar loud enough to bring down a mountain."

I shifted her body so that she was forced to return to her original position against my chest, my arms back around her in a close, unyielding embrace. I laughed as her body protested, screaming at me with desire for more.

"And when I lick *you*," I pressed on, "I want you splayed out on a table like my own personal feast." The whimper Feyre choked on was the final nail in my coffin. "I've had a long time to think about how and where I want you. I have no intention of doing it all in one night. Or in a room where I can't even fuck you against the wall."

Her body gave out. My fingers at her stomach reached the waistband of her pants once more and stopped, my other hand commencing a soft sweep of the skin at her stomach and sides, far more loving than tantalizing as before.

"Sleep," I whispered into her ear, smug and satisfied at the scene I'd brought forth. I watched Feyre unwillingly fight against my touch before giving in and falling fast asleep. When at last her breathing evened, I stopped my stroking, pressed a gentle kiss against her brow, and closed my own eyes.

For the first time in many years, the darkness of my nightmares did not find me once.



## Chapters 49-51: I Deserved to Know

### Chapter Summary

On their way back to camp, Rhys is about to tell Feyre about the mate bond when Hybern's men shoot them out of the sky. Taken away, Feyre saves him and finds out from the Suriel the truth about her and Rhys before Rhys can tell her himself.

I woke up in precisely the same position I'd fallen asleep with my arms wrapped firmly around her. We hadn't moved once the entire night, two puzzle pieces that once snapped together were locked in place. And Feyre - Feyre was everything. I could still taste her on my lips, feel her in my skin. I could even still smell the scent of her in the remaining moisture lingering between her thighs where her muscles had come over me.

And deep peace abided within me because of it.

*Mate...*

*Mate...*

*Mate...*

The word pulsed a subtle rhythm in time with my breaths as I enjoyed the simple pleasure of holding her. She kept me safe the entire way through the night. The darkness never visited once. Feyre held eternal.

Where once I might have quivered at the thought, the idea of being so wholly connected to her lest I lose it, now it calmed me more than ever. It was finally time that I would have to tell her. I'd kept the secret for too long and I loved her too much to keep it again.

A quiet rustling alerted me to her waking. I opened my eyes right as Feyre shuffled around to face me and was filled so completely with the sense of her and - *oh Feyre - darling, I love you.*

I could have rested in that quiet pocket between heaven and hell content never to see the light of day again if the Cauldron would have let me. Tell her. I had to tell her.

We watched each other for a long while beneath the shelter of my wing before Feyre finally dared to break our perfect peace first. "Why did you make that bargain with me? Why demand a week from me every month?"

The reminder of the betrayal between us laid into me heavily and my eyes shuttered. The bargain. Still she thought it was *the bargain* and I began to wonder if I bedded her then and

there if she would still fail to recognize the bond on her own. I said an awful half truth before I could rethink it.

“Because I wanted to make a statement to Amarantha; because I wanted to piss off Tamlin, and I needed to keep you alive in a way that wouldn’t be seen as merciful.”

“Oh.”

The truth - the mate bond - hung on my lips unsung at Feyre’s disappointed answer and I wondered if vaguely some part of her knew why.

“You know - you know there is nothing I wouldn’t do for my people, for my family,” I said. *Nothing I wouldn’t do for you .*

She didn’t say anything.

*A distraction - fun.* That was what last night had meant to her.

I unfurled my wings from around us beginning the debate of how I would tell her we were mates or if I would let our bodies continue to speak for me in my cowardice. Before I could let the guilt take hold and ruin our morning, I asked, “Bath or no bath?”

Feyre squinted in disdain. “I’d rather bathe in a stream.” I felt the discomfort of the downstairs bathroom wash over her and chuckled. Feyre bathing in a river bed was a sight I would not deny either of us the pleasure of enjoying.

“Then let’s get out of here.”

Feyre didn’t mention what had transpired between us as we flew the majority of the day over the forests of the steppes leading up to the majesty of the Illyrian Mountains, and I didn’t press her on it. I was too nervous.

There were moments throughout the day I felt the words rise to my lips and promptly die to plummet back down my throat at one look from her as she paused her magic while we practiced. She showed me everything - fire, water, wings, wind, and ice. Magic flowed from her in droves to match my own. It was an effort just to stand and not collapse from how utterly stunning she was unleashing all of her capabilities for the earth around her to see.

I knew it was the bond pressing in on me to spill ourselves to each other. I’d ignored it for too long and now it was too strong - we were too connected to keep on with this game.

But the words, the words, the damn blasted fucking words wouldn’t come out. Watching her train was a horrifying reminder of why we were here in the first place, of what she would become if she was with me. They would never stop hunting her. But I didn’t know if I could live with scraps anymore. She was becoming too tantamount to my existence to leave us unfinished like unraveled fabric.

The day grew colder and darker and I nearly let the sun set entirely before I finally took Feyre into the skies between my arms.

It wasn't long before the curious glances she had given me while I watched her *watch me* in training turned into the question that would undo us both. "What is it?" she asked.

Vision focused on the trees ahead and below us, I strained to tell her, "There is one more story I need to tell you."

The story of us. And immediately as the depth of Amarantha and the seeds of our narrative filled my mind, it felt like too much. Too heavy to get out.

Feyre's fingers brushed my cheek dragging my eyes to her like a magnet. She was so hard to resist and that touch - it was everything to me now. Tender and merciful as the night in my heart.

"I don't walk away," she said, sensing my fear. She knew me better than she realized. And it was murdering me slowly that the bond was right there hiding in plain sight for her and she still didn't see it, but - "...not from you."

My being melted. If anything could issue the story from me, of course it would be that, those words. Be her, be - "Feyre-"

Pain overwhelmed me as I felt shots flare through me, little needles of pain that pricked the membranes of my wings in a dozen places before expanding into an all consuming burden over me. And all I could think of, the only vision in my head as that pain took over was Feyre.

Her screams rang in my ear as we fell, a shrill cry coursing down the bond for the mate she didn't know she had. I clutched her fiercely to me as I felt my power fade out. I cast about for it anyway to winnow back to camp, but nothing happened. No magic. No darkness. No night. Nothing came to my aid except my mate's hands holding on to me to keep us both steady.

A fresh wave of arrows hit. I could feel my wings beginning to shred along the bones and muscles where the venom sank its fangs in and disabled me, everything that I was. My body took hits too and we fell ever lower. My essence cried out for any of my magic - something to get us through safely, but even Feyre, who's mental shield broke for me, knew that nothing was there.

*Feyre .*

The mate bond thrummed to life with the urgency to protect her. I hadn't felt it this strongly since I watched Amarantha stride towards my mate, her arms outstretched and I had known what she was going to do to her. Those hands had wrapped around her neck and I...

I broke, the last of my magic reaching out into the void and surrounding Feyre. The wind that ripped her from my arms tore my heart in two and I roared for the whole of my court to hear at losing her. But if she was safe... if separating us kept them from her even while I died, then...

*Feyre. Feyre. My mate. Find me...*

They were my last thoughts as I hit the earth and the shackles that would permanently bind my magic away from me so long as I wore them were thrust upon my hands, and I lost all consciousness, lost my mate all over again.

I was vaguely aware of being dragged into the cave, of the men who held me with anger they relished and made sure I was awake enough to see the torturous gleam in their eyes while they strung me up along the wall.

My arms were lofted high from my sides and my wings - *fuck*, my wings. I'd forgotten what this kind of pain could feel like, it had been so long since I'd been taken captive like this.

They'd left the arrows in them and already I could feel myself losing my hold on reality, on the will to live at the thought that my wings might shred.

And then the whip cracked.

A horrible *snap* against the air that dealt a blow of blood across my back, shattering the skin and eventually the muscle beneath. It was unbearable. Excruciating at the best, murderous at the worst.

I couldn't command enough strength to watch my blood drop to the floor around me as one by one, the hits fell in an endless torrent. The whip struck my wings and not even my voice cried out as I emptied of everything.

Everything except her.

*Feyre*, I wept. *My Feyre. My mate. Please...*

The whip snapped and I distantly heard one of my captors scream. The whip sent fresh waves of pain rippling down my spine and again, a male fae burst. And then the whips stopped all at once, but the shouts - they continued until I was left with nothing but silence and the scent of her filling me, pulling me back to a dull aching consciousness.

I felt a rush of wind flow across my skin as she appeared in front of me out of the air. She grabbed my face and forced me to look at her. I barely got my eyes open before I groaned, but she was there and she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. My salvation come to rescue me.

Her hands worked deftly even as they shook to undo me and my knees cracked as they hit the ground with a hard grind.

"Rhys," Feyre said breathless. I felt her then at the call of my name - finally. Felt all of the pain and fear she felt and the love too. I felt it roar from her veins trying to reach me.

Quietly, with the only senses I had left, I stirred behind our bond. Feyre nearly fell alongside me at the flicker of my consciousness.

"Rhys," and again the sound of my name coming from her voice rattled through me. "We need to winnow home."

“Can’t,” I gasped. Never had it been so hard to say a single damn word.

But Feyre - I felt her magic answer her instantaneously. It simmered into a hot boil of anger and passion that ruptured and took control of her, pulling me into her body as she turned and *winnowed* us out of the cave.

*To safety.*

*To her.*

*Home.*

I had no idea where she’d taken us. Only that she was carrying me against her with whatever new strength had gripped her. When we landed in a new cave, the stale scent of rock and dirt that was entirely void of any other life told me it was over for the night. I collapsed with her on the ground with a groan as pain racked my body from the impact. I was cold. So cold.

“Rhys,” Feyre said, her voice wavering in the darkness. I just wanted to see her again. Just one look to save me. “I have to get these arrows out.”

*Fuck.*

I gripped the ground, whatever I could take hold of without completely wasting myself, and prepared. I felt Feyre’s disappointment wash over the bond at how weak I was. That she had to see me like this, that she was capable of taking care of me so fiercely and wonderfully - it was a curse and a blessing in equal measure.

“This is going to hurt,” she said as her fingers traced the area around where the first arrow had slaughtered my wings. But Feyre paused and the arrow didn’t come out.

“Do it,” I said in a quick pant, my adrenaline crashing within me. I was terrified. Terrified of the pain. All those years spent Under the Mountain and never had I been tortured like this. *I* was always the one who did the torturing. I didn’t know which end of it was worse to be on anymore.

The slight pull on the arrow shot a hiss out of me and again, Feyre paused. Through the ash arrow, I could feel her knife poised around the wood ready to slice.

“Do it,” I said one more time.

The pain returned in full measure as Feyre sawed. It was slow. So. Fucking. Slow.

I read her thoughts. She didn’t bother shielding them from me and I understood that going faster might kill me anyway. But it *burned*.

*My wings, my wings, my wings.*

*My mate, my mate, my mate.*

My mate was there. And tenderly, she was holding me in her voice while she worked, carrying me away and as far from the pain of my body as she could.

“Did you know,” Feyre said, “that one summer, when I was seventeen, Elain bought me some paint? We’d had just enough to spend on extra things, and she bought me and Nesta presents. She didn’t have enough for a full set, but bought me red and blue and yellow. I used them to the last drop, stretching them as much as I could, and painted little decorations in our cottage.”

I let out a sigh of relief because I *did* know. I’d seen her painting. Little bits of anything here and there. The first image I’d seen of her painter’s hands that had come to me in a dream floated to the surface of my mind right as Feyre yanked on the arrow, pulling it swiftly out of me with no warning.

“FUCK,” I roared into the echoing recesses of the cave. My body locked up, but the pain in the hole of my wing was already subsiding, dulling to an ache I could manage.

And then Feyre found the second arrow and the process started again.

So did her stories.

“I painted the table, the cabinets, the doorway... And we had this old, black dresser in our room - one drawer for each of us. We didn’t have much clothing to put in there, anyway.” She paused and waited for me to brace myself before pulling the second arrow out and starting on a third. “I painted flowers for Elain on her drawer. Little roses and begonias and irises. And for Nesta...”

She stopped her speech as the third arrow came loose and one wing was free. The tremendous burden of the pain lifting, my wing fell in sweet relief, but my chest shook uncontrollably regardless. It was involuntary at this point. Feyre moved to the other wing.

“Nesta. I painted flames for her. She was always angry, always burning. I think she and Amren would be fast friends. I think she would like Velaris, despite herself.”

All the better for Cassian, I thought to myself.

“And I think Elain - Elain would like it, too. Though she’d probably cling to Azriel, just to have some peace and quiet.”

I saw the image of her sister with my brother form in her mind, but quickly Feyre had replaced Elain with Morrigan as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. She was right.

Another arrow had fallen and if my count was correct, I could feel only three more left. The rest of my body felt clean as I started taking inventory of my muscles. The guards for whatever reason must have seen fit to remove the arrows directly on my person while I was briefly out - the fucking idiots.

Raw from the pain and lack of use, I moaned to Feyre, desperate for further distractions about her life as I'd first known her, before she'd ever come to Prythian.

"What did you paint for yourself?"

"I painted the night sky."

Everything - all the pain, all the agony, the shaking, the fractures, all of it stilled at those five little words. Feyre removed the sixth arrow.

"I painted stars and the moon and clouds and just endless, dark sky."

*Me. She painted me. I saw her and she saw me. My mate. My mate. My mate.* I wanted to cry.

"I never knew why. I rarely went outside at night - usually, I was so tired from hunting that I just wanted to sleep. But I wonder..."

The final arrow came undone and both my wings fell equally to the ground. Feyre's voice was thick as she gathered herself together and explained the mate bond to me that I had been trying so ardently to show her all these weeks and months.

"I wonder if some part of me knew what was waiting for me. That I would never be a gentle grower of things, or someone who burned like fire - but that I would be quiet and enduring and as faceted as the night. That I would have beauty, for those who knew where to look, and if people didn't bother to look, but to only fear it... Then I didn't particularly care for them, anyway. I wonder if, even in my despair and hopelessness, I was never truly alone. I wonder if I was looking for this place - looking for you all."

The cave went silent and the world stilled as it narrowed in on Feyre coming to kneel before me.

My mate. Night everlasting. Life supernal.

"You saved me," I said, voice rasping in an entirely new kind of pain I had only felt once before - the night she died.

"You can explain who they were later," she said, thinking I meant the sentries.

"Ambush," and finally I felt enough strength to piece more than a few words together.

"Hybern soldiers with ancient chains from the king himself, to nullify my power. They must have traced the magic I used yesterday..." And the horrible realization of what I'd done to her - to my mate - hit me in full force. The price of our great secret if ever Feyre knew and decided to claim me. I did this to her.

"I'm sorry."

And it would never be enough.

"Rest," she said simply. No anger. No resentment. Just care - love.

Feyre moved towards her pack and I didn't care what she wanted from it. I grabbed her wrist and told her the closest kernel of our truth that I could muster before I collapsed.

"I was looking for you too."

And then I was gone.

---

When I woke, I was met with a thick heat wrapping around me. Feyre - Feyre was gone and it was hard not to panic that something had happened to her, but if she was hurt or worse, I would have been too.

The bond was cool between us. Quiet. She was alive and she was fine.

I scattered the blankets she had nestled me in and enjoyed some of the cool breeze flowing into the cave from outside - from where she was.

My body was still on fire. Waking was an effort. But sleeping without her was worse.

But eventually she came and my body was suddenly not the only fire in the cave as she threw a handful of something coarse onto my chest.

"Chew on that," Feyre said and there was bite behind her words.

I picked up the pink weed of a plant she'd thrown at me and blinked wearily at her while she stared me down. Confused, I took a few bites of the plant as she had asked - no, *ordered*. It tasted bitter.

And then in the blink of an eye, Feyre was in front of me with a knife to her arm. She sliced and the blood ran free and every nerve inside me wanted to fight against the harm to her body excepting for the fact that Feyre herself had done it.

And I had no idea why.

"Drink this. *Now*."

She gripped me and forced me to drink. But I'd barely managed two, maybe three mouthfuls before she'd decided it was enough and had pulled away from me angrily leaving the tangy taste of her blood on my lips. Even that much separation, just the few inches she had recoiled, was unbearable.

"You don't get to ask questions," she said, a dangerous storm brewing. I could feel it down the bond. "You only get to answer them. And nothing more."

My mind lagged as I caught up with her words and registered the pain leaving my body as holes closed and wounds healed. Her blood working the healing magic of the Dawn Court inside me to save me again.

Caught between the dull throb of my blood and the desire to chase Feyre down the rabbit hole of her newfound anger, I chewed slowly on a fresh piece of the weed and nodded my



consent to submit to whatever interrogation was waiting for me.

Feyre stared at me hard and then, she skinned me alive with her question and it was worse than a thousand ash arrows in my wings.

“How long have you known that I’m your mate?” she asked. I watched her watch me, watch the fear course through my eyes. Watched her as I acknowledged that I would never have the privilege of telling her myself now - and she knew it.

“Feyre,” I said, that very fear freezing my bones.

“How long have you known that I’m your mate?” she said again.

My mind jumped in a quick blaze of thoughts from the lingering scent on her to the knowledge of her time in the Spring Court to the bitter weed I swallowed in my mouth.

“You... You ensnared the Suriel?” I asked.

“I said you don’t get to ask questions.” Her voice was a dangerous arrow in the night ready to take me at the smallest miscalculation. I took one more bite of the weed to prepare myself and gave her what she’d been waiting so long for. My heart broke on every word. My heart that had mended all this time with her.

“I suspected for a while. I knew for certain when Amarantha was killing you. And when we stood on the balcony Under the Mountain - right after we were freed, I *felt* it snap into place between us. I think when you were Made, it... it heightened the smell of the bond. I looked at you and then the strength of it hit me like a blow.”

Slowly, I studied Feyre as the memory of that day slid into place and she watched me stumble back on that balcony while I felt the bond click between us, leaving me forever linked to her. And she was scared. Terrified.

Worse - *betrayed* .

“When were you going to tell me?” she asked, the full weight of that deceit lacing her words. I felt the ash arrow go through me again - this time through my heart.

“Feyre.”

*“When were you going to tell me?”*

“I don’t know,” I admitted, just wanting this to be over with. I wanted her. Wanted to mate with her and find our eternal connection together, but I’d ruined it. I’d ruined everything as usual and it felt like too much this time. “I wanted to yesterday. Or whenever you’d noticed that it wasn’t just a bargain between us. I hoped you might realize when I took you to bed, and-”

“Do the others know?”

“Amren and Mor do. Azriel and Cassian suspect.”

Heat flooded Feyre. Embarrassment. Rage. I couldn't tell. Maybe it was both. "Why didn't you tell me?"

And *there* was the hurt. The wounds that opened just as sore and raw as my own as I watched us break apart in front of each other.

"You were in love with him," I said, the unimaginable horror that was my mate belonging to another forever spilling out of me. "You were going to marry him. And then you... you were enduring everything and it didn't feel right to tell you."

*Lies. Such horrible wicked excuses.*

"I deserved to know."

"The other night you told me you wanted a distraction, you wanted *fun*. Not a mating bond. And not to someone like me - a mess."

It was still a horrible excuse for lying to her, using the Court of Nightmares that we had supposedly healed at Starfall together. But I was desperate at this point. I could see the fire growing in her eyes and I wanted to cling to any blind hope I might find that could keep the possibility of us knit together before she turned her back on me for good.

But she had promised me - she wouldn't walk out. *She wouldn't walk out.* Not on me.

*Please don't. Fuck, don't leave me in the dark.*

"You promised-" and I felt her crack inside. "You promised no secrets, no games. You *promised.*"

"I know I did," I said, fighting so hard for her despite how miserably my body and mind were failing me just then. "You think I didn't want to tell you? You think I liked hearing you wanted me only for amusement and release? You think it didn't drive me out of my mind so completely that those bastards shot me out of the sky because I was too busy wondering if I should just tell you, or wait - or maybe take whatever pieces that you offered me and be happy with it? Or that maybe I should let you go so you don't have a lifetime of assassins and High Lords hunting you down for being with me?"

"I don't want to hear this. I don't want to hear you explain how you assumed that you knew best, that I couldn't handle it-"

"I didn't do that-"

"I don't want to hear you tell me that you decided I was to be kept in the dark while your friends knew, while *you all* decided what was right for me-"

"Feyre-"

"Take me back to the Illyrian camp. Now."

I don't know at which point my lungs started gasping - choking for air, but they were. *Stay. Stay stay stay - please. "Please."*

In a flash of furry, Feyre flew at me and grabbed my hand with a force that could have leveled the mountains within which we stayed. *"Take me back now."*

There weren't any words for the emptiness that hollowed me out, for the unbearable grief that consumed me in its place as I looked at Feyre and felt myself lose her one more time.

I squeezed her hand and with no strength whatsoever - only by the desire to please her, do whatever my mate wanted, did I manage to winnow us back to camp.

Mud flew into my face as we landed. Too far from the house like I'd hoped. Now every fucking Illyrian in these damned mountains would see. See their High Lord bruised and bloodied and rejected by the woman who could have destroyed them all if she wanted - an Illyrian in her own right.

I pushed off the ground to scramble for her. All I wanted was her. Just Feyre. Just my mate. *My mate. My mate. My fucking mate - Cauldron just give me my mate.*

I collapsed as my arms gave out. Collapsed from that utter exhaustion of just wanting her all the time.

"Feyre," I groaned, but she was moving towards the house where Cass and Mor were running from towards us. Cassian got to me first while Mor stopped short and I barely heard Feyre over the chaos asking Mor to be taken away - away from *me*.

Mor looked pitifully at me and back to Feyre before she took her hand. "Feyre," I pleaded one last time and then - and then.

She winnowed. Walked away exactly as she had promised she wouldn't. Into the wind and day, my mate left me.

And I didn't blame her one bit.

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### ACOMAF Part 3.1: The House of Mist (Rhys POV)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10671366) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10671366>.

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# **ACOMAF Part 3.1: The House of Mist (Rhys POV)**

by [illyriantremors](#)

## Summary

Chapters 52-56 of ACOMAF from Rhys's POV.

Starting with his recovery after being shot down by Hybern while Feyre takes time away.

## Notes

From the bottom of my heart, thank you everyone who has been reading and commenting. This is the last batch until after ACOWAR. I hope you all enjoy!

## Chapters 52-53: Then Go Get Her

Cassian was the only Illyrian in the entire camp who dragged my sorry ass inside, my muscles having given out in their feeble attempt to push out of the mud as soon as Feyre disappeared. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror as Cassian somehow got me inside and dumped me on the floor. The brief vision that met me wasn't pretty.

He closed the door and looked at me as I shuffled to adjust. My bones and muscles felt like they were breaking one by one, screaming with so much residual pain.

Cassian bent over, and hissed. "What the fuck happened out there?" I barked out a cry when he bent up one side of my wings, inspecting the wounds that had looked grey-green in the mirror beneath the dried blood. "Rhys-

"Don't make me say it."

He let go and squared me up. "What the fuck happened?"

"If you need me to say 'please,' I will."

"Rhysand," and it was my brother holding my shoulders tight, concern lacing his eyes. My wing was sore where he'd held it, but... I was glad someone had.

"The fucking Suriel told her we were mates - that's what happened, Cassian," I spat out. "Right after a band of Hybern's swine shot me out of the sky because I was too preoccupied with the idea of fucking Feyre in the middle of the forest to notice they were there."

"Shit."

"Yes shit," I shouted - practically screamed. An endless torrent of pent up male aggression pounding out of me. Cassian did not back so much as an inch away, almost expecting it.

"Fucking shit, shit, and more shit - all of it and-"

Movement shifted behind us, the door opening. Morrigan appeared and ran right to me, not expecting the rough fistful of her blouse that I snatched. Blood roared in my ears.

"*You*."

"Rhys," she said and took a steadying breath.

"You know where she is." I tugged on the fabric, holding back enough not to hurt. I wouldn't be that male. Not to her. "*Where did you take her?*"

"I can't tell you that."

My fingers tightened. My soul tightened. "Yes you-"

Cassian's hand shot out to my wrist - just in case. With mate bonds, all bets were off. But Mor's soft fingers brushed him away and he relented. "She is safe, cousin," she said, just... holding my hand. "She is fine. A little shook up and confused, but she is fine and before you can ever so much as think it," she added, when my lips snapped opened again, "your mate does not hate you."

My chest rose and fell in huge waves. It was like being shot out of the sky all over again. "She... she doesn't?"

"No." Mor shook her head. "I think, quite the contrary in fact." And then, she gave me that smile - small and sweet and reassuring. My hand slackened, releasing her blouse. She didn't seem to care save for the wrinkles left behind.

"I'm not telling you where she is. Even Cassian will admit you're smart enough to figure it out for yourself." My brother snorted. "She just needs some time. And you..." Mor ran her fingers over my brow, pushing back the hair and biting her lip. Her face was a hard line taking in the rest of me. "You need a bath. And a healer."

"Don't bother - with the healer." They both looked ready to protest. "Feyre's blood already healed me. It seems the High Lord of Dawn gifted her more than just the sun. All that's left to do is wait it out." And pray it stopped hurting like hell for more than a few seconds.

Mor sat back shaking her head. "You've got a lot of talking to do."

"Well let's do it in the bath, shall we," Cassian said, hauling himself under my shoulders once more. Mor took the other side. "You smell like *shit* and I don't care what Mor says. Feyre's never gonna fuck you like this - mate or not."

I didn't have time to retort before Mor had winnowed us into the upstairs bathroom, cackling in my ear as we landed.

---

Cassian and Mor weren't wrong. I looked miserable.

After they'd cleaned me up and made sure I had enough strength to withstand a few minutes alone, they exited to my shared room with Cassian so I could relieve myself and just take a moment. The image reflected back at me in the mirror was me, but it wasn't at the same time.

With the mud and blood vanished, I could see the damage that had been hiding underneath, and it was enough that I stopped thinking about Feyre for more than a few minutes at last. Her blood had done a lot in that short space of time to clean me up, but my skin was peppered with bruises and fresh new scars littered my wings in horrible sea-sick green and yellow blotches that disrupted the patchwork of red and gold in the veining. And my skin was sallow looking, the bags atop my cheeks full and puffy. Inside, my body screamed.

I bent over and rolled the cuffs of my pants up to my knees. The slits where the ash arrows had struck my calves were sealed now, but four new scars throbbing crimson marked the occasion. I hadn't wanted to look when Cass had poured over them helping me clean up in the tub, Mor applying a salve carefully to my wings.



First Lucien, which was really Tamlin. And then Hybern. The Attor had informed us of Hybern's movements in Illyrian territory from months ago. Was it coincidence they'd found us and sought to take advantage? Or was it planned? Where Tamlin had failed, had Hybern somehow... stepped in? I buried the thought.

A light knock sounded on the bathroom door. "Rhys?" Cassian pushed the door open just as I stood up, and the motion of standing upright again must have changed the pressure in my head because suddenly, the room started spinning and I wasn't sure if I was seeing one version of Cassian or three.

I just heard my brother curse and the sound of Mor's feet running behind him before he caught me and I blacked out.

---

Five days. That's how long it took before I was fit again. Before any residual swelling had disappeared, I could think coherently, and the bruises existed only in memory.

The downside, of course, being that as my body's pain went down, my heart's increased exponentially.

Mor wouldn't leave my room for practically anything. It took Azriel's visit the day after I'd winnowed into camp to get her back downstairs, and even then she came back with Az in tow. Cassian explained it all to me in detail one afternoon after she'd stepped out for the toilet. Apparently, I'd been asleep for all of it.

Azriel only stayed long enough to check in before the shadows sent him chasing back to the mortal lands. Whether it was an excuse to ditch out of a miserable home he hated or because Nesta and Elain had gained word from the queens, I didn't care.

The only thing I did seem to care about besides hunting Hybern down like a pig and slaughtering him from one end to the next, was Feyre. Finding her, holding her, making sure she was okay. I'd been so addled in our escape, I hadn't even been able to see if any of those arrows had hurt her, and it didn't matter how many times Mor assured me they hadn't; I wanted to see it for myself.

But Mor was silent as the grave about where she'd taken Feyre when she wasn't otherwise chewing my ear off with admonitions or making me drink this or that. Cassian laughed from the other side of the room the entire way through it, only leaving to check in with the Illyrian females and make sure Devlon was letting them train.

Mate.

My mate.

I had a mate. And she was... out there. Somewhere. Waiting for me or hoping I never came.

Mor disappeared on the third night and didn't come back until the following morning around lunch. She pushed Cass aside and plopped on the bed next to me where I lay on my stomach, Cassian checking my wings and muscle strength, and threw her head back on her hands. I tried to push up. "Don't even, she's fine," Mor said. My head hit the pillow with a groan. But I still caught the twinkling in her eyes.

"What?"

"You'll see," and that was all she said before falling into a little cat nap. Cassian shrugged.

And part of me, however spitefully resentful for my own self, was glad that Mor was there, was the one helping Feyre. That Feyre had a friend in her life to count on to keep her secrets and tell her when I was being a stupid ass that wasn't worth my mate's time. Not that she had told Feyre those things... but I enjoyed thinking that the relationship was pleasant enough between them now for Mor to feel inclined to stay a night with her. That Feyre might invite her to.

Mate.

My mate. And my cousin.

*Family .*

All of us. I closed my eyes at night and went to bed thinking about it. Only the pain kept me from thinking too long as it descended into a dull ache and then almost nothing, my body healing itself with Feyre's help. When my parents and sister had died, all within the span of two days, I had felt empty and proceeded to spend more time alive without them than with. I was hollow.

On the fourth night when I could feel myself just about fully healed, I turned my head over on the pillow and looked at my cousin sleeping soundly next to me, the left side of my wing stretched out over her. Healing.

And there was Cassian across the room on his own bed snoring lightly. And Azriel, even if the pain of his personal history had been too much to keep him here for long, had still come and seen me, made sure I was okay. The Illyrians I'd slaughtered for. The woman I'd helped save to fashion into a queen.

And now Feyre.

This was my family, I thought. The Court of Dreams. Where blood had failed, they had held true. All of them for centuries and episodes of my life that had felt hopeless. My eyes grew heavy again as moonlight streamed over us through the open window. A light breeze carried in and kissed my wings, and finally, they didn't resist the call. The muscles tightened, pain not even a question, back arching slightly at the will to fly again.

Forcing myself to back down, I relaxed into the sheets. Mor shuddered and her hand twitched. I took it savoring the knowledge that we shared blood together beneath our connected palms. Blood that had saved us.

*Family .*

Had saved Feyre.

*Mate.*

I went back to sleep with my body healed and my mind made up.

It was time.

---

Mor found me the following morning in a fit of distress as I ransacked my drawers for the right tunic. She carried a breakfast tray loaded with what smelled like something delicious. Cassian was undoubtedly behind downstairs, Morrigan herself unable to cook so much as an onion.

She stopped on the threshold, took in my disheveled state and frowned. "You can't leave yet," she whined.

"I'm not in the mood, Morrigan," I replied, going back and forth between a black tunic and a brown one. I heard the clinking of metal as Mor set the tray down behind me on a stand.

"But you haven't said it yet." I kept silence and picked a piece of lint off the cuff of the black set. Mor's voice deepened in a false imitation of me. "*You're right, Mor. I can't leave yet! Not when I haven't told you how right you were about everything.*" I turned around and saw her tick off a list on her fingers. "*Feyre not hating me. Keeping secrets from her. I should have listened to you and Amren all along.*"

"Okay - shit," I cut her off and she leaned back on the wall, pursing her lips to keep from laughing. I couldn't help the twitch of my own lips. "You've made your point." She held a hand to her ear and tapped her foot. I sighed. "Fine. You were right."

"About what, cousin dearest?"

"About everything." I turned back around to my dresser. "I should have just told her." Maybe then I could have spent an entire week mating with her instead of a handful of hours. After the incident with Hybern's men, I didn't care if Devlon's camp was safer. We were going back to Velaris as soon as Feyre and I sorted ourselves out, in whatever way that might be.

Mor appeared at my side peering down at the tunics and leaned her chin on what she could reach of my arm. "Don't tell me you're fretting about what to *wear*."

I cleared my throat. "Don't start."

"Rhys," and she gave me an incredulous look, thrusting a folded paper against my chest and stepping off. "I'm pretty sure clothes are going to be the *least* of your worries shortly."

"Why do I feel like I should be having this conversation with Cassian instead, hmm?" She snorted.

The paper she'd given me was crinkled, clearly having been opened and read already. But I recognized the cut seal on it immediately and promptly forgot about my tunics.

"They wrote back?"

"Az sent it this morning." Her face was grim. "They expect us in four days."

"Four days." Cauldron. That wasn't much time. And Feyre was still - "Feyre."

"I know," Mor said, coming over to me and unfurling her arms. "Rhys, I know."

"But I have to - I have to..." The words came out breathless, my body feeling unhinged now that the truth had been so laid bare. "Mor, I have to find her."

I took a seat on the bed, suddenly feeling the need to sit, and Mor plopped down next to me, taking my hand with a sympathetic little smile on her face. "No," she said. "That's not what you mean." She inclined her head, eyes searching me to spit the truth out. My throat went raw, but still - I said it.

"I have to mate her." Mor nodded and the truth was so startling clear. I would do... whatever Feyre wanted. But it would break me if I found her out there, in a cabin I'd been wondering at the last five days as I healed, and she sent me off. "I can't - I can't do this without her." Mor's grip on my hands tightened, encouraging, as my voice cracked. Right there with me every step of the way. Tears threatened to spill down my face. Somehow, just saying the word out loud made everything much more intense, overwhelming. "She's my mate, Mor. She's my mate, my mate." I said it over and over again until she shushed me, the same thing I'd repeated when she caught me my first night back.

And then, my cousin smiled. It was not the petrified, stunned silence that gaped at me in reception when I'd flown from Under the Mountain and spotted her waiting for the first time in fifty years. It wasn't the tears or the comforting embrace that brought me inside for jasmine tea until I'd told her almost everything crippling me inside.

This Mor was happy. This Mor was bright and beautiful and proud. No more anguish, only... a new family waiting for her. And me.

"Then go get her, you stupid prick," she whispered, eyes sparkling like the sun. I wished I could have told her the same, knowing what other persons lingered about next door to her room at the House in the night, separated from her by mere walls and shadows.

But quietly, my lips twitched, turning upward, and I knew she was right. Mor had been right about everything.

I wolfed down breakfast and left at once.

## Chapters 54-55: You're Mine

### Chapter Summary

Rhys finds Feyre in the cabin where Mor left her and tells her everything at long last. They proceed to mate. LOTS of smut. SUPER NSFW.

There was really only one place she could be. My instincts hurtled me toward that spot with alarming speed, but it still took me the greater part of a day to get there.

The wind was absolutely brutal at my back. The first few hours were nothing more than an effort in keeping concentration on the repeated boom of my wings to stay airborne. The muscles trembled and struggled through the initial currents, but then I was up, up in the sky, a light rain cooling my brow and guiding me north.

To Feyre.

And even as I landed in the lakeside clearing and saw the smoke billowing out of the chimney from the little cabin where candles twinkled inside the windows, I felt nervous, undeserving of the woman inside who I'd lied to for so long.

But I was done hiding. I was done with the lying. So long as she let me stay, I would give her everything.

I walked through the snow, still so pure and fresh this far north in the mountains, and paused on the doorway. It was quiet inside, but I could *smell* her. My fist instantly pummeled the door with a loud groaning that rattled throughout the house - begging her for an answer.

A light shuffle of footsteps, a pause, and then... there she was. Feyre.

Her scent hit me in full force as the door opened, the pine and grass, the warm sun and even some lingering hints of jasmine and sea from when we'd been together. When she'd saved me. It was potent enough to distract me from the appearance of paint that covered her hands and clothes. Inside, the scent lingered further.

It was a long, tense moment as we stared at each other. I had no idea how long it lasted, only that I was beside myself with relief when Feyre's eyes softened and she stood aside to let me pass. In her cream colored sweater, hair mussed up and paint staining her fingertips, Cauldron - she was a dream.

And so was the inside of the cabin.

My family had kept this property for centuries, our own private retreat. Morrigan and I had come here so many summers as kids, even if just for the week. And when we got older, I

brought my brothers to hunt in the fall. There wasn't a single square inch of it I didn't know, didn't have a memory of some sort connected to it. And now, Feyre had added several dozen more.

The walls were covered in paint. Fresh coats slathered here and there with drawings and sketches of... everything. Flowers on the tables, icicles and springtime blooming on the walls. The cold wood paneling was now suddenly full of color and warmth. I might have sworn or gasped surveying it all, until my gaze landed above the hallway threshold and saw what was perhaps the most interesting detail of all.

"You painted us," I said, my first words. And indeed, Feyre had. Four sets of eyes belonging to the four most important people in my life, save for her, sat above the threshold watching. Mor kept Azriel close, followed by Amren, and Cassian rounded out the right.

Feyre watched me carefully. "I hope you don't mind."

*Mind...* How could I possibly mind? What she'd done was... stunning.

"Azriel, Mor, Amren, and Cassian," I said, naming the eyes one by one. "You do know that one of them is going to paint a mustache under the eyes of whoever pisses them off that day."

I tore myself away to look at her, feeling my breath catch in my chest all over again. She was smiling, or at least, trying very hard not to. "Oh, Mor already promised to do that," she said.

Morrigan.

*What?*

*You'll see.*

She'd known. She'd known about all of this and had refused to tell me. I was glad she hadn't. The surprise was worth it. There was just one thing missing.

"And what about my eyes?" I asked.

Feyre took a step, and I could hear her heart racing. It sounded strong and wild and... ready. "I was afraid to paint them."

"Why?"

"At first, because I was so mad at you for not telling me. Then because I was worried I'd like them too much and find you... didn't feel the same." My stomach cursed violently at that. "Then because I was scared that if I painted them, I'd start wishing you were here so much that I'd just stare at them all day. And it seemed like a pathetic way to spend my time."

The shiver from the cold outside went out of me, enough to force one of Feyre's *almost* smiles on me. "Indeed."

She looked at the door. "You flew here."

“Mor wouldn’t tell me where you’d gone, and there are only so many places that are as secure as this one. Since I didn’t want our Hybern friends tracking me to you, I had to do it the old-fashioned way. It took... a while.”

She swallowed and looked at me suddenly so... starved. Like she couldn’t quite believe I was finally here and in one piece. The last time she’d seen me, I’d nearly died. “You’re - better?” she asked.

“Healed completely. Quickly, considering the bloodbane. Thanks to you.”

And there it was. The bond throbbed between us, and then reached for her as Feyre stepped into the kitchen not quite meeting my stare. Her heart continued to twitch away. I followed the beat closer.

“You must be hungry. I’ll heat something up.”

As fast as I had started, I stopped and Feyre noticed, spotting me over her shoulder as she looked through the kitchen cabinet and lit the burner. The bond urged me on, pressing, pressing, pressing.

“You’d - make me food?”

“Heat,” she said, mock offense at the suggestion. “I can’t cook.”

And suddenly... my mate was cooking - heating - for me. Was invoking her right as a woman and a mate and she didn’t even know it. She poured a can of soup into a pan and stirred it over the burner. It could have been water. It could have been mud. And I wanted every last drop of it, my stomach curling inward just for a taste.

“I don’t know the rules,” Feyre said. Her eyes chanced a glance at me from where she stood in the middle of the kitchen. I hadn’t moved from open center of the cabin. “So you need to explain them to me.”

Those fingers of hers turned the soup over carefully.

*Mine.*

*Mine - all mine.*

My very bones rattled the claim out inside me. How much did she feel? How much did she know now that she knew the truth?

I cleared my throat, but my voice still came out in a rasp. “It’s an... important moment when a female offers her mate food. It goes back to whatever beasts we were a long, long time ago. But it still matters. The first time matters. Some mated pairs will make an occasion of it - throwing a party just so the female can formally offer her mate food... That’s usually done amongst the wealthy. But it means that the female... accepts the bond.”

Feyre didn’t look up from the pot. Her stirring slowed. And then she whispered, “Tell me the story - tell me everything.”

Tell her and she would tell me - if I deserved her, if I was good enough, if she'd have me.

My mate.

And whether I felt worthy or not, I knew what I wanted. So I pulled out a chair from the dining table and told my mate everything.

---

The story of us was a long one, going all the way back to Amarantha - the *first* time she'd met me. During the War.

Feyre wouldn't look at me at first, but as the story dragged on and she heard... my history, her eyes slowly left the burner and the soup began to simmer like the bond between us.

I told her everything. Amarantha's capture of me during the war and how my father had rescued me. The fallout that ensued afterward followed by her return to Prythian, where it had left Tamlin and I amid the deaths of our families. Being taken by the red-headed bitch a second time, whored out to keep my family safe. And finally, when tears streaked both our faces and I could feel my eyes burning as red as Feyre's, I told my mate of how she'd first come to me. In visions and in dreams that had kept me up late at night, kept me sane. How I had found her on Calanmai, cowered when the Attor dragged her Under the Mountain to make her deal, and fought tooth and nail to see her survive the trials only to die anyway with the bond the only thing left to keep the light in her eyes.

Feyre had gone deathly still as I described what had transpired Under the Mountain, as the Cauldron shoved the bond in my face and not hers, and all of the events thereafter. Even with her tears, she looked beautiful.

"When you finally came here... I decided I wouldn't tell you. Any of it," I admitted, my mind feeling close to depletion. "I wouldn't let you out of the bargain, because your hatred was better than facing the two alternatives: that you felt nothing for me, or that you... you might feel something similar, and if I let myself love you, you would be taken from me. The way my family was - the way my friends were. So I didn't tell you. I watched as you faded away. Until that day... that day he locked you up.

"I would have killed him if he'd been there. But I broke some very, very fundamental rules in taking you away. Amren said if I got you to admit that we were mates, it would keep any trouble from our door, but... I couldn't force the bond on you. I couldn't try to seduce you into accepting the bond, either. Even if it gave Tamlin license to wage war on me. You had been through so much already. I didn't want you to think that everything I did was to win you, just to keep my lands safe. But I couldn't..." I shuddered, the words stumbling off my tongue at the emotion written across Feyre's face. "I couldn't stop being around you, and loving you, and wanting you. I still can't stay away."

I collapsed backwards in my chair, my muscles failing me even though it was my heart that felt drained. The cold from flying still hung in my wings, my hands, as a shaking breath rattled out of me and I waited. Waited for Feyre to make up her mind.



Eyes shining, she pivoted toward the burner where the soup was boiling. She flicked the burner off and where I had always denied the possibility of this moment before, I didn't doubt then. Not in the way her hands shook when she removed a bowl from the shelf, nor how she bit her lip ladling the soup into that very same dish. And when she carried it over to the table, and asked me so softly as though no one had ever dared tell her the words before, "You love me?" - I knew what my mate had decided.

I nodded and Feyre set the bowl in front of me along with a spoon. Her voice was raw when she spoke.

"Then eat."

And so I did.

---

I would never look at soup in the same boring, bland way again.

Feyre was accepting the bond. She was choosing me. My mate - *I had a mate* .

But she hadn't said anything and it took every ounce of power I possessed within my 500 year career to steady my hand as I lifted each spoonful to my mouth and watched her from across the table.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I asked when I was done eating.

"I was going to tell you what I'd decided the moment I saw you on the threshold," Feyre said. Our hearts seemed to beat rapidly together now.

"And now?" I said, starting to squirm.

Feyre came to me. I counted every step. I heard every breath, watched every soft movement of her long, slender arms as she found me and came to straddle me in my chair. I held on to her hips trying so desperately not to shake for fear she was going to reject me despite it all, that Tamlin was going to win in the end again and this was just one final way to dig at me.

But Feyre's eyes trapped mine with her own and gave me such a deep, knowing look I half hoped she wouldn't... she couldn't... not after everything I'd told her, everything I had fought through to keep her alive and happy. I would make her so happy if she'd only let me.

"And now I want you to know, Rhysand, that I love you," she said. And I broke. "I want you to know..." She paused to wipe away the tears that were falling down my face, tears that came harder and faster than previously. "I want you to know," she continued with a low, gentle voice to soothe my aches and pains, "that I am broken and healing, but every piece of my heart belongs to you. And I am honored - *honored* to be your mate."

I never knew my heart could break and that I'd actually be glad to feel it happen until it actually did in that moment.

She chose me. My mate chose me. I found her and fought for her and revealed my entire being to her and she didn't run away in fear like the rest of the world had at the merest

glimpse of me.

*My mate.*

My friend who hadn't let me cower, hadn't let me fall apart. Who had been there when the world was quiet and my hope had fallen.

*My mate.*

My protector who had saved me - body, mind, and soul. Who had welcomed death with open arms to keep me from facing it alone.

*My mate.*

*And she was all mine now. All mine.*

And now that it was real, I was unnervingly overwhelmed. It didn't matter that I'd known since Calanmai. Nothing could have prepared me for the weightless feeling that took over, knocking me down just so my mate could hold me up one more time. It was everything. I fell against her, my body completely falling to pieces as she held me, ran her delicate fingers through my hair like a promise to never let go again.

"I love you," Feyre repeated. "And I'd endure every second of it over again so I could find you. And if war comes, we'll face it. Together. I won't let them take me from you. And I won't let them take you from me, either."

I lifted my head from her shoulder. I had to see her beautiful face, to understand how absolutely and irrevocably she meant each word. But I had cried so hard, it was difficult to even concentrate on what I was holding before me.

Feyre leaned forward with such careful ease that my body stilled. She kissed away the tears one at a time, each one like a whispered promise calling to me. I'd kissed her tears away. Once.

*My mate. My mate. My mate.*

When she was through - when every last salt kissed drop was gone - she looked at me one final time and spoke with such certainty. "You're mine," she breathed - into me, through me - and my body responded with a great heaving shudder before I kissed her.

I poured my entire being into that kiss moving my lips with gentle clarity that explained to her how treasured she was, how grateful that she would accept me, that I could be so privileged to even have a chance with her, my equal in every way. It was the kiss we should have had, the one I'd stolen from us Under the Mountain. The one that said *good morning and I'll miss you* to my friend and *welcome back I'll have you* to my lover. The kiss to begin and end everything.

Feyre's arms slid around me securing me to her. Her mouth parted in reply to my own just enough for me to deepen the kiss. Our tongues met and the spark of heat that shot through me

shifted the moment. I went hard beneath her. *I went hard for my mate.* Feyre felt it too and groaned into my mouth and that did it.

I scooped her up and laid her against the table as she hooked both legs around my waist. I was vaguely aware of paints and brushes scattered about the table, but I didn't care enough to be bothered with moving them out of the way. No more waiting. I needed her to come for me now. The bond plucked away at the impulse every single second to claim, to take, to give - all of it. *Now* .

I moved my mouth aggressively down her neck while my hands made quick work of her shirt, tossing it over her head and away from the table. I took my time surveying the half-naked site of her while she stared at me, already covered in bits of paint, before my mouth came down on one of her breasts.

Her fingers plunging into my hair told me she liked it well enough, so I flicked my tongue violently against her peaking nipple right as my hand shot out onto the table... and straight into a glob of paint.

And I laughed. I couldn't help it. The sound rumbles out of me and it felt *good* . This was going to be messy and it felt so right that I dragged my fingers through the paint and drew a lazy circle around the breast I'd been enjoying myself on before drawing the line out down my Feyre's stomach where it ended in an arrow pointed towards the warm spot between her thighs. Feyre watched my fingers the entire way down with unabated hunger.

"Lest you forget where this is going to end," I said devilishly.

Feyre snarled and I barked out another laugh, some deep feral beast in me pleased at her reaction. This was already so much, so incredible. I was going to put her through the ringer, I decided, as I sucked her other breast and teased her with my hips. She squirmed against me, grabbing at me all the while. Months and months and what really felt like a lifetime of waiting for this exact moment, I wouldn't waste it. I'd prove to her exactly how much she meant to me.

We were a tangle of paint and limbs as I allowed Feyre up enough to help me get my leathers off until only my pants remained. And then we were skin to skin, heaving against one another as our lips sunk into each other once more. Her bare skin against my chest felt like heaven against my chest.

I couldn't wait any longer.

I tore at her pants until she was utterly naked before me and even though I could tell she wanted me to take her fully then and there, told me so right down the bond - something I had half a mind to do, I was throbbing beneath my clothes - I wasn't going to let her have it. Not yet.

I pulled my mate to the end of the table and heard the gasp of shock escape her mouth as she realized what I was doing. I threw her legs over my shoulders and knelt before her at the edge of the table, knelt on my stars and my throne for her alone and no other. Knelt for my Feyre.

The first lick of my feast was slow and agonizing and it tasted divine, made even better by the sound that came out of my mate's mouth as she felt me taste her. That was all the encouragement I needed. I gorged myself on her, licking between her folds and nipping in all the right places to make her body tremble and gasp to the point that I had to hold her hips in place. She tried to buck up into me as my teeth grazed circles around her clit, and I splayed out my hand flat on her stomach, now full and thick and curved from her time in my court - *our* court.

And just when I felt her start to near her climax, pulsing at me down the bond, I inched my mouth higher and slipped my fingers inside, rocking her harder and harder until she shattered with my name barely rasping off her lips.

"Rhys..." she moaned. It was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

The bond had me gripping her back harder, pumping her faster, until she came for me again. *More, more, more* it cried through my blood.

I had never felt so smug in my life as I did when I finished, looking her paint smeared body over that felt like jello in my arms, the result of my handiwork. A feral, instinctual smirk glossed over my face proud at what I could make her feel for me, *because* of me.

"*You're mine,*" I declared with my own snarl before taking her limp body into my arms and carrying her into the bedroom that would be our nest for the night. I laid her down on the bed and removed my pants so that I could join her fully. Feyre stared and I saw her pupils blow wide as I removed my cock from my pants where it was hard and waiting for her. My wings came free of themselves then. She had asked me about it once while we were flying and I'd told her never would I allow myself to be so vulnerable with a partner.

But Feyre was different. She was my mate and my equal and therefore, deserved every inch of me I had to give, including my wings.

They appeared on my back, tucked in tightly, as I lowered myself over her. I could read the delight in her eyes as she reached out one of her slender fingers and caressed the curve of one side. My body shuddered again, including my more *sensitive* areas.

"Play later," I said through gritted teeth as she smirked at me. I cut her off with a kiss and enjoyed the sensation of her legs locking around my waist as our kiss deepened into another frenzied passion. Cauldron, she was a perfect fit. And I wanted her so badly. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted a woman or quite possibly anything in my entire life. I was so close to taking her, but I couldn't resist one last tease as I pressed my cock near her entrance and stopped short.

The snarl that ripped from her mouth gave me the satisfaction I craved. There was a warrior and a lover and lioness crawling under her skin, soaking up the power of what we were and ripping at the bond with it until we were everything the universe had ever seen.

"*Play later,*" she said, throwing my own words back at me and causing me to laugh. But then I slid into her, watched her eyes close as I filled her up, deeper and... *Feyre, Feyre, Feyre - Fuck*, she felt good. Perfect. We were perfect.

Her eyes opened as she adjusted and I knew she felt as content as I did. But I needed to hear it from her. I wanted her to say the words over and over again before we moved.

“Say it again,” I breathed, desperate to hear her claim me again. And she did.

“You’re mine,” she sighed. I moved on her then. One slow, long thrust out and back in until she repeated herself. “You’re mine.” I quickened my pace inside her with every thrust. Her hands gripped me for purchase, face scrunching together as that feeling between our hips mounted.

And Mother above - the bond.

I could see it between us. I could feel it, smell it even. I scented Feyre becoming me and me becoming her and it plunged me further inside her, kissing her recklessly with every piece I could offer. She continued to claim me with her words even as her hands found other ways to take me, gliding over my chest, through my paint stained hair, and across my wings.

*Mercy, my wings.* The stories her fingers told on them - where once had been scars and death now stood legends and dreams and promise with the tremors my mate unleashed along the membranes.

“I love you,” I gasped and she came, breaking over me on the spot. I felt her tighten around my cock as pleasure overtook her and we fully became one, mated forever until the day the rest of the world died away and even then, we would not separate, I was sure of it. I had never felt anything so brilliant, nor understood anything so perfectly as I did my Feyre in that moment when I watched her come for me. A roar ripped out of me as I came inside her so deep and shattering around us, that I could feel the earth around the cabin quake.

We were still for a few moments panting in our love making until her hands found my face. And then, Feyre smiled at me. And my life was perfect.

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We were still together in the quiet of the cabin for a long time. My hands roamed her body freely now and then, my fingertips just happy to find reassurance of her skin underneath them. My mind wandered back over all the memories of how we’d reached this point and I found the words toppling out of me effortlessly as they never had before, as if I would never find enough ways to tell her how much I utterly adored her.

“I think I fell in love with you,” I said, “the moment I realized you were cleaving those bones to make a trap for the Middengard Wyrms. Or maybe the moment you flipped me off for mocking you. It reminded me so much of Cassian. For the first time in decades, I wanted to *laugh* .”

I wanted to laugh then remembering that rare moment of joy within the bowels of so much pain that entire ordeal had been. But Feyre didn’t take it that way.

“You fell in love with me,” she said, “because I reminded you of your friend?”

I flicked her nose, enjoy the way she squirmed underneath the touch. “I fell in love with you, smartass, because you were one of us - because you weren’t afraid of me, and you decided to end your spectacular victory by throwing that piece of bone at Amarantha like a javelin. I felt Cassian’s spirit beside me in that moment, and could have sworn I heard him say, ‘ *If you don’t marry her, you stupid prick, I will.* ’ ”

Her body quivered at that, a small chuckle coming out of her before she stilled again and I wondered if I’d still done something wrong. But I followed her eyes and found them roving over the paint that covered us. It was everywhere. My hair was caked with it, my tattoos covered, a distant thing of the past. And my wings - Cauldron, my wings were absolutely littered.

And I... kind of liked it, like she had marked her territory over me so intimately. In a way no one ever had before. And those stains were mirrored back at me over her breasts, her thighs, her stomach.

“How convenient that the bathtub is large enough for two,” I said, looking down at her with a wickedly satisfied grin. Feyre smirked, and then tried to make for the tub in a great leap all on her own, but I was having positively none of that as I grabbed her and carried her naked self against me into an already steaming bathtub. I grabbed the soap and rags from the basket that had appeared as Feyre momentarily submerged herself under the hissing water, and then handed them to her when she came back up. “Someone, it seems, got my wings dirty.”

Feyre delighted in ordering me to turn around and I eagerly obeyed, my body tensing as I splayed my wings fully for my mate and waited for her to begin her work. The heat of the water felt good against the veins, but nothing prepared me for Feyre’s touches. My hands shot out and gripped the sides of the tub as she began her careful, cleaning strokes over my wings. It felt luxurious and... undoing at the same time. My cock gave a few twitches and was hard before the first paint stains had cleared. Feyre seemed to notice and snickered at my ear.

“At least the rumors about wingspan correlating with the size of other parts were right,” she said. I snorted. But my relaxation was short lived when she spoke again. It was amazing how every word, every action from this beautiful creature that had blessed my life could control my emotions so fully. I existed on her every thought, the bond happy to pull me along as it saw fit.

“I think I was falling in love with you for a while,” Feyre said. Her voice was so quiet, it scared me to death. “But I knew on Starfall. Or came close to knowing and was so scared of it that I didn’t want to look closer. I was a coward.”

My heart sank a stab of guilt pained me.

“You had perfectly good reasons to avoid it,” I told her.

“No, I didn’t. Maybe - thanks to Tamlin, yes. But it had nothing to do with you, Rhys. *Nothing* to do with you. I was never afraid of the consequences of being with you. Even if every assassin in the world hunts us... It’s worth it. *You* are worth it.”

My head fell, burning itching at my eyes. I could barely talk, much less breathe, but I managed to choke out a strangled, "Thank you." Feyre kissed my neck, her fingers stopping from cleaning to indulge a stroke at my cheek so lovingly, I knew without a shadow of a doubt how deeply she loved me.

When she'd finished cleaning my wings, I took the soap and rag from her and turned her so that I could wash the paint from her back. "What now?" she asked. It felt wonderful to touch her again.

"It's up to you," I said, my mind running through all of the options. "We can go back to Velaris and have the bond verified by a priestess - no one like Ianthe, I promise - and be declared officially Mated. We could have a small party to celebrate - dinner with our... cohorts. Unless you'd rather have a large party, though I think you and I are in agreement about our aversion for them." Feyre groaned her assent. "We could also go before a priestess and be declared husband and wife as well as mates, if you want a more human thing to call me."

"What will you call me?"

"Mate," I said, never more confident of my answer than when I said the word to her in that tub, and then another tempting thought struck me as my hands massaged the length of her spine. "Though also calling you my wife sounds mighty appealing, too. Or if you want to wait, we can do none of those things. We're mated, whether it's shouted across the world or not. There's no rush to decide."

She turned around to face me. And was so striking, so self-assured, that I remembered that day I'd shown her the war room, shown her and puzzled over what she could be if and when *mate* or *wife* were not enough. No, there was one more title I would give to Feyre, just as soon as we could get back to Velaris.

"I was asking about Jurian, the king, the queens, and the Cauldron," Feyre said, "but I'm glad to know I have so many options where our relationship stands. And that you'll do whatever I want. I must have you wrapped completely around my finger."

Fuck, she was divine. I could feel the burning ache for her starting again, she had me ready fast. "Cruel, beautiful thing," I said. Feyre snorted and the thoughts she shouted down the bond at me - intentionally or not - had me reeling right away. Thoughts of doubt that I could find her so attractive, which I most certainly did. "You are," I said, affirming her beauty. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I thought that from the first moment I saw you on Calanmai." The tears threatened, tears that broke and built me at the same time, and I had to make it better.

"Which is good," I said, stroking at that beautiful, beautiful face I loved so much. "Because you thought I was the most beautiful male you'd ever seen. So it makes us even."

Feyre scowled through every one of her freckles and relief tore through me so much so that I laughed and grabbed her, pulling her to me until she was straddling me like she had when she first told me she would have me for her mate back in that chair, before all the paint and *ravishing* had occurred.

“Tomorrow,” I said and the mood in me shifted as we approached a subject I wanted nothing to do with even though I knew it would have to interrupt my heaven with Feyre at some point. “We’re leaving tomorrow for your family’s estate. The queens sent word. They return in three days.”

Feyre’s eyes widened. “You’re telling me this now?”

I couldn’t hide the joy from my voice as I marveled at the sight of her, all mine to behold and consume and love. My eyes fished low on her body and I felt heat crawl over her skin. “I got sidetracked.” Heat - and something else.

And then it happened. The heat on her skin became real, and it transformed the unimaginable peace on Feyre’s face into a sparkling radiance of brilliant white light. A glow emitting from every pore and bone and beat of her heart. My soul knelt before her, I’d never - never...

“Well, at least now I can gloat that I literally make my mate glow with happiness,” I purred.

When Feyre laughed, the glowing seemed to intensify and my body reacted on instinct, grabbing for her and kissing her until we were both breathless. I was hard against her hips and could feel her body readying for me to take her again on the spot as she nudged forward, but I wanted the bed. I lifted her and walked wet, dripping steps back to the freshly cleaned bed and laid her down where she was able to take herself in properly. She didn’t seem to know what to make of it, only that she was as taken by the light as I was.

“Day Court?” Feyre asked.

She was so heartbreakingly beautiful and she was all mine.

“I don’t care,” I said gruffly, and lost it. I let the damper on my powers come off, matching my mate power for power. Darkness flooded the room. The dreams. The nightmares. The stars. The moon. The chaos. All of it flooded around us merging with the light from Feyre’s body, the light that guided me home.

Feyre swam through it, marveling, and pulled herself up to kiss me when she found it worthy. Gently, she guided me down onto the bed where her mouth became a fire against my lips, her tongue roaming everywhere. She had me pinned on my back, my wings locked beneath me, and I felt a lapse of a panic hit me.

“Illyrian baby,” Feyre cooed, and I didn’t still until that hand of hers slid down my chest and kept right on going. Her eyes filled with wicked intent and I knew what was coming - revenge. Feyre suddenly had my cock in her hand. Her fingertips started a dangerous game along my head that broke goosebumps on my skin.

*My mate. My mate. My mate.*

That hand belonged on me, my cock inside her. But she stopped me with a deadly seductive, “My turn,” and a knowing look that I would let her do anything she wanted to me, have every power over me. I tried to play it cool, flashing that self-satisfied smirk at her that I knew



drove her wild, but the second her mouth went down on me, I lost all sense of the calm, collected High Lord.

“*Shit*,” I yelled, my hips bucking. Feyre’s only reply was to take me deeper and hold back a laugh around my cock as her teeth dragged lightly over the skin. My hands fisted the sheets as I groaned, pleasure pulsing out of my core with every drag. I wanted to let her finish me, but the second I dared open my eyes and spotted her dark golden head sucking between my legs, control escaped me.

In one fast motion too quick for Feyre to realize what had happened, I had her flipped. I laid her out on her stomach and brought her hips up, wasting no time to thrust inside her entrance. The feeling was every bit as good and overwhelming as the first time. She moaned instantly into the pillows at her face, the pressure filling her up as more and more light flooded the darkness.

That glow was enough to kill me. If it weren’t for the ache to make love, to fuck, and exist in her for as long as possible, I could have died just taking her all in. No one and nothing had ever existed like Feyre. Even the Cauldron had been wrong there, for in that sense, I could never match my mate. It made me kiss along her back, slowly working in and out of her. “Look at you...” I gasped.

Feyre turned just enough to see us joined, not just physically, but in equal parts light and darkness. We were two sides of the same coin, the same energy ticking in two separate bodies I was going to spend the rest of my life trying to stitch together. And just like that, with one look at us and our mating, she came for me.

But it wasn’t enough. Would it ever be enough? I wanted her over and over again. I hoisted her up, still inside of her with her back against my chest, and fondled every inch the apex between her thighs to the full breasts that moved slightly as I worked in her. I lost count of the number of times she shattered and had no idea how I kept myself from breaking.

But I knew as she came for me, my name on her lips, how exactly I wanted to come. I slid out of her and returned to my position on my back with her atop me. A flash of another time darted across my mind, one I wanted to never think of again after this night, one that I could replace with my mate and the bond growing between us.

Feyre saw it and stilled. Her eyes softened taking me in and I knew she knew. And she glowed for me. More and more. She was life. She was love. She was rebirth.

*My mate. My mate. My mate.*

It was all I could do to keep from losing it all over again and collapsing against her. With more tenderness than I’d ever been shown, Feyre leaned down to kiss me, sliding herself gently on to me in the same breathe. I was so deep inside her this way, filling her up, up, up.

“Feyre,” I moaned into her mouth, half a cry.

She took her time, making love to me passionately. The amount of care in her eyes and in her touch as she looked at me and willed herself to glow even brighter, devastated me. I was

yelling her name as I thrust in time with her body and she came. I felt myself spill inside her as release took me soon after and she worked the final throws against my hips.

Breathless, I clutched the damp hair around her neck and took her in. Nothing - *nothing* - compared to my mate making love to me like that.

“We’ll have to find a way to put a damper on that light,” I managed to say.

“I can keep the shadows hidden easily enough,” Feyre said in her defense.

“Ah, but you only lose control of those when you’re pissed. And since I have every intention of making you as happy as a person can be... I have a feeling we’ll need to learn to control that wondrous glow.”

“Always thinking; always calculating.” Feyre’s fingers trailed the tattoos of my chest, digging in here and there with the faintest of pressures. It sent shivers up my spine.

“You have no idea how many things I’ve thought up when it comes to you.”

The corners of her mouth twitched - *her mouth, fuck*. “I remember mention of a wall,” she said wickedly.

Already, barely removed from inside her, I was starting to feel the need for Feyre claw itself back through me. This was going to be a long night. I laughed as I promised my mate, “Next time, Feyre, I’ll fuck you against the wall.”

“Hard enough to make the pictures fall off.”

That sent me reeling. I stared at her lips and she licked them. My cock twitched. “Show me again what you can do with that wicked mouth,” I begged and felt myself go taut with pleasure as she showed me.

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I wasn’t sure how much sleep I got. A few minutes if that. Feyre found sleep against me for little less than an hour, we devoured each other for so long through the night, and as much as I relished the idea of sleeping along side my mate, I knew what waited for us in the morning and I didn’t want to waste a single second with her. So I watched her as she slept, savoring every little intake of breath, every twitch of her fingers resting against my chest, the relief an abundant consolation when she never once started from a nightmare. I had a feeling my own nightmares would be few and far between from now on.

When she did wake, I tried to convince her breakfast was the best course of action and she’d agreed, but not two seconds after I stood from the bed and ruffled my wings for a stretch, I felt her body smack into my back, tearing me down to the floor and flipping me over. Our laughter quickly turned to a symphony of moans and panted breaths as Feyre grabbed my cock and positioned herself. She rode me hard - greedily. Her body tearing into mine. I lost what little control I seemed to still possess and felt a sharpness at my hands as my talons slipped out.

The floor rug didn't live to see another day.

"It's normal," I said, when we finally made it to the kitchen. We had to eat if we were going to make it through all the traveling ahead of us.

"What's normal?" Feyre asked. She was avoiding my gaze. We both were. One look and I might turn the tables over, fuck her in the chair. Carefully, I chose my words.

"The... frenzy," I said. "When a couple accepts the mating bond, it's... overwhelming. Again, harkening back to the beasts we once were. Probably something about ensuring the female was impregnated. Some couples don't leave the house for a week. Males get so volatile that it can be dangerous for them to be in public, anyway. I've seen males of reason and education shatter a room because another male looked too long in their mate's direction, too soon after they'd been mated."

Feyre's body stilled, visions passing unwittingly along the bond and I saw that... that monster flash through her mind, along with a destroyed study.

"I'd like to believe I have more restraint than the average male," I said softly, trying to soothe her worries, but I also had to be honest. We were leaving soon and I was incredibly agitated about doing so, more than I wanted her to know. More than I wanted *Cassian* to know. "But... be patient with me, Feyre, if I'm a little on edge."

Feyre's eyes finally found mine and albeit a bit hesitantly, she nodded.

"You don't want to leave this house," she said quietly.

Without a second thought, I instantly snapped out, aggression and adrenaline controlling my voice, "I want to stay in that bedroom and fuck you until we're both hoarse." And it was so desperately true, I'd do anything to stay in this cabin with her all week to fuck her senseless if I could. Cassian was right - he was going to wipe the floor with my ass now that Feyre had bedded me.

And Feyre - Feyre felt the same. I could tell. Our gazes lingered on each other for a moment too long. Her brow creased, her lips parted, and I could hear her heart pounding away in her chest demanding my attention.

"About - pregnancy," she said and I froze, the mood entirely jilted. "We didn't - I'm not taking a tonic. I haven't been, I mean."

I considered what she said, read the anxiety so clearly implied by the way she stumbled - rather adorably - over her words. So I kept it simple.

"Do you want to start taking it again?"

"If I am a High Lord's mate, I'm expected to bear you offspring, aren't I? So perhaps I shouldn't."

Her response ripped anger through me, not because she would think something so horrible, but because the world had become so twisted to make her believe she had to.

“You are not expected to bear me *anything*,” I declared firmly. Feyre eased back into her chair almost at once. “Children are rare, yes. So rare, and so precious. But I don’t want you to have them unless you want to - unless we *both* want to. And right now, with this war coming, with Hybern...” I shuddered at the idea. “I’ll admit that I’m terrified at the thought of my mate being pregnant with so many enemies around us. I’m terrified of what *I* might do if you’re pregnant and threatened. Or harmed.”

Feyre’s shoulders sagged in what was clearly relief. Her voice sounded a million times more assured when she spoke. “Then I’ll start taking it today, once we get back.” She rose with a small smile and made for the bedroom. Despite everything I’d just told her - and I meant every word - I couldn’t help the sudden vision from swimming to the forefront of my mind, one I had dared so little to indulge over the centuries.

Children were never something I thought I would be blessed enough to receive and after... what had happened to my own family, I never deigned to hope I would have that family back one day lest I be disappointed all over again. But then, I never thought I’d be blessed enough to find Feyre, much less keep her, and yet here she was, my mate. Suddenly, I saw the potential, couldn’t keep my imagination at bay as I thought... I could have all of that with her. Could have a real life.

“I would be happy beyond reason, though,” I blurted and she stopped at the door, eyes bright, “if you one day did honor me with children. To share that with you.”

She turned back to look at me, the kindest loving smile overtaking her face. A smile just for me. “I want to live first,” Feyre said. “With you. I want to see things and have adventures. I want to learn what it is to be immortal, to be your mate, to be part of your family. I want to be... ready for them. And I selfishly want to have you all to myself for a while.”

“You take all the time you need,” I said, beaming at her. My heart was... very, very full just then. “And if I get you all to myself for the rest of eternity, then I won’t mind that at all.”

Feyre was pure radiance... before she tried to *slip* ever so shyly away to clean herself up. But I caught up to her at the mouth of the tub, pulling her down into the waters with me where I made love to her one last time, visions of the future that could be dancing between us.

# Chapter 56: We Will Serve and Protect

## Chapter Summary

Rhys and Feyre winnow back to camp and find an arrogant Cassian waiting. After spending an hour brawling, Rhys comes inside to have one more moment with Feyre before everyone winnows back to Velaris and pledges to keep Feyre safe for their High Lord.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The mud squished under our boots as I winnowed Feyre and I back to camp, just outside my mother's cabin where Cassian was already waiting for us.

"Well, it's about time," he said loudly, a shit-eating grin plastered all over his stupid face. Illyrian males in the vicinity tore off into the sky taking women and children with them. And my senses went *ballistic*.

Fuck.

Shit.

*Fuck.*

Feyre jolted, her arm reaching out to touch me, when I whirled around and a snarl louder and bolder than the roar I'd unleashed finishing inside my mate ripped past my lips. I couldn't help it. I'd thought the bond had been intense, mating with her, but what I felt then with another male looking at me - looking at *Feyre* - it didn't compare. "Hard ride?" Cassian said. He tied his hair back, ready to make good on his promise to beat my ass into the earth for fucking Feyre.

*For fucking my mate. My mate. Cassian with his hazel eyes and Illyrian wings was staring at my mate.*

"When he bashes your teeth in, Cassian, don't come crying to me," Feyre said, sounding entirely composed and unbothered. For *my* sake. I could feel the bond between us, taut, and Feyre on the other side silently willing me to see straight. It helped - a little. Until Cassian crossed his arms and made those muscles in his biceps bulge.

"Mating bond chafing a bit, Rhys?" he said. Feyre looked carefully between us, lips tight. I could do this. For her, I could do this. I'd told her to be patient with me, and Cauldron boil me over, she was. But Cassian - Cassian merely looked my mate up and down and snickered. "Feyre doesn't look too tired. Maybe she could give me a ride-"

I exploded into him, keeping only enough sense about me to avoid knocking Feyre over and bringing the High Lord's powers to my fingertips. Cassian laughed - *laughed* - when my fist connected with his jaw and blood fell from his mouth. He sent his own return blow with vigor, and we pummeled into each other for so long, I lost track of time.

But it felt good, I soon realized. And Cassian was the only person alive who could take it, could spin it out of me without taking any real damage. And enjoy the act while he was at it too.

I was dizzy, high off the bond and tense and on edge. But I was always going to be that way and Cassian knew it. As the time drained and mud met blood on our leathers, I felt some of that horrible ache drain out of me. He'd done that.

Cassian had once said that he was going to wipe the floor with my ass the day Feyre bedded me, and I had known I would only stand a chance of besting him if that day happened to be because Feyre and I were mated, something I thought would never happen. But it had happened. And we were here fighting because of it. And as I stood over Cassian, chest heaving and so full of raw adrenaline to pull my brother out of the mud when it was all over, it turned out that I was right.

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The last of the tension was washed away stepping inside the cabin and spotting Feyre waiting for me with Mor. One look and our eyes burned up the entire room.

I didn't even say hello to Mor before I had Feyre pushed back on the table, my hands working to get her open for me to fuck, and Cassian and Mor made a quick exit. Feyre held on tight as I took her roughly. I hadn't even bothered to remove my pants, just enough to get my cock free. But the release was enough, especially as Feyre's voice climbed high enough to sing my name to every male hiding in the skies.

Cassian smirked through the open doorway when we were finished, handing me a towel. Mor was nowhere in sight until we'd cleaned up and made ourselves presentable enough to winnow home.

To Velaris.

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High above the city, just as the sun had set, I held Feyre's hand and together, we led ourselves down the hall to the dining room at the House of Wind. Where our inner circle was gathered waiting for us.

Cassian, Azriel, Amren, and Mor stood. Stood, and bowed all in unison facing Feyre. I squeezed her hand as she stared at them wide eyed and it was Amren who announced, "We will serve and protect." Each of them placed a fist at their hearts. It was so much more than what I'd ever thought would come at that first initial dinner.

Feyre blinked at them rather sheepishly, but didn't look at me for help. "Thank you," she said, the words almost sounding like a question rather than a declaration. "But I'd rather you were my friends before the serving and protecting."

And it was Mor, my blood, who stepped forward, beaming, and said, “We are. But we will serve and protect.” I felt the bond loosen. From where I stood ever so slightly behind Feyre, I poured all of my thanks and gratitude into the look I gave Morrigan, gave *all* of them.

“Now that we’ve settled that,” I said, taking Feyre to the table, “can we please eat? I’m famished.” Amren opened her mouth, a delectable curve taking shape, and I snapped out, “Do *not* say what you were going to say, Amren.” Cassian almost snorted. *Almost*. But he still grinned at me ear to ear. “Unless you want to have it out on the roof.”

Finally we sat. And my Second turned to Feyre. “I heard you grew fangs in the forest and killed some Hybern beasts. Good for you, girl.”

Mor snorted. “She saved his sorry ass is more like it. Poor little Rhys got himself in a bind.”

She handed Feyre a glass full of wine, and Cauldron damn me, my mate snickered. “He does need unusual amounts of coddling.”

Azriel choked into his wine glass, and the two shared a look. Instantly, just like that, my blood heated. And Feyre felt it. She tore her eyes away from Azriel, and we... we let the moment pass, easier for her than I. But the rest of dinner was peaceful. And pleasant. And everything I’d ever wanted in life.

My friends.

My mate.

My family.

Not my anything, but certainly my everything.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone for reading! Feel free to find my on Tumblr @  
illyrianremors. :)

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