Viciousness & Intelligence

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# Prologue

*“Are you out of your mind?”*

Rhys’s voice echoed in Azriel’s head, dark talons dragging over his ice-slick mental shields.

Azriel donned the frozen mask he’d perfected in his sire’s keep and forced himself not to react, not to snarl at his brother. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His shadows writhed as they were consumed by Rhys’s own dark power, a black void utterly absent of its usual stars.

“I’m talking about *you*, about to kiss Elain, in the middle of a hall where *anyone could see you,*” his High Lord snarled. “*Including her mate.* Hell, you’re lucky Nesta is distracted by Cassian tonight.”

“I doubt Nesta has a vested interest in Elain’s personal affairs after the events of the past year,” Azriel bit out, bristling.

*“Azriel—”*

“What if the Cauldron was wrong?”

Rhysand blinked, his claws retracting from the edges of Azriel’s mind, a sure sign that he thought the conversation was over.

But Azriel couldn’t let it go. He couldn’t keep his cold rage from rising to the surface, the rage he only let Rhysand see because he knew his brother could match it.

This argument would end on his terms.

“The Cauldron chose three sisters,” he said. “Tell me how it’s possible that my two brothers are with two of those sisters and yet the third was given to another.”

Rhys’s face drained of color. “You believe *she* should be your mate?”

Azriel rolled his shoulders. “Who else?”

Rhys held Azriel’s stare for one frozen, silent moment. Rather than fist his hands in his pockets or pick at invisible lint, Rhys merely sat behind his desk, as still and stony as the mountains outside the window.

A trickle of uncertainty washed down Azriel’s spine.

He couldn’t figure out what the absence of Rhys’s usual tells meant.

“Let me make one thing very clear,” Rhys finally said, angling himself toward Azriel. He pitched his voice low, speaking with a deadly chill that reverberated through the room and shivered off the glass windows. “You are to stay away from Elain.”

“You can’t order me to do that.”

“Oh, I can and I will. If Lucien finds out you’re pursuing her, he has every right to defend their bond as he sees fit. Including invoking the Blood Duel.”

“That’s an Autumn—”

*“And,”* Rhys growled, “I will tell Cassian.”

*“Cassian?* What will he do, make me run drills like a whelp in training?”

Rhys rolled his eyes as Azriel fumbled, disdain dripping from him as tangibly as his power. “If he so chooses.” He bared his teeth. “You will leave Elain alone. If you need to fuck someone, go to a pleasure hall and pay for it. Better yet, stay home. Whatever you do, *stay away* from her.”

Azriel growled softly.

“Complain all you want.” Rhys leaned back in his chair. “But if I see you panting after her again, I’ll make you regret it, and then I’ll leave you to Cassian’s tender mercies.”

Every muscle in Azriel’s body pulled tight with surprise.

Rhys rarely pulled rank or threatened punishment, and he had *never* threatened to have anyone but himself carry it out. No, within their Court of Dreams, Rhys did his own dirty work—like interrupting a moonlit interlude to order Azriel into his office—rather than drive a wedge between his family. The mere threat of involving Cassian stunned Azriel enough that it knocked him from his rage.

Rhys jerked his chin toward the door, rage glittering in his eyes. “Get out.”

Azriel tucked in his wings and left without another word, stalking through the house and onto the front lawn to sit in the frigid starlight. To let the frost in his veins match the air around him.

Until he felt nothing. Was again nothing at all.

When he was finally chilled to the bone, shivering despite himself, he flew to the House of Wind, desperate for the warmth and the light that waited for him there.

# Chapter One

The morning after the Solstice party had been… *good*.

Unexpectedly so, Nesta thought as she sipped tea and picked at a breakfast spread with Feyre and Elain in the parlor of the riverside manor. Both sisters were still treading cautiously around her, but their company was comforting in a way it hadn't been for years.

All morning, Feyre had carried the conversation, selecting easy topics with more tact than Nesta ever remembered her little sister possessing. Throughout it all, she kept a tattooed hand on her swollen belly, murmuring quietly to the babe within during lulls in the conversation.

Elain, to their joint dismay, was silent, her eyes glazed over as she stared out the window at the fogged greenhouse that dominated one corner of the sloping lawn. But she was present, eating, and that in itself was blessing enough.

Regardless, Nesta appreciated the kind gleam in Feyre’s eyes whenever she looked at her and the gentle hand Elain had wordlessly rested on her knee when she joined them.

But as nice as it was to spend time with them, as much as she tried to focus on this rare moment of peace with her sisters, Nesta still simmered with desire at the memory of the night before, as if it hadn’t wholly sated her. As if Cassian hadn’t spent hours driving her to madness, holding her, making love to her, fucking her.

Utterly wrecking her for anyone else, just as he intended.

*Forever*.

He had woken her up that morning with the news that he was expected by his brothers, warning her before he left for that ridiculous snowball fight that he needed to travel directly to Illyria afterward to settle some dispute in the camps. And though Nesta knew that he was gone, that he would be for days, some small, insistent part of her still expected him to return to fly her back to the House of Wind.

Some small, insistent part of her wanted him to be driven just as mad with need as she was.

So she was sorely disappointed when only Rhysand and Azriel winnowed into the house’s grand entryway shortly past noon, battered, bruised, and scowling heavily—sore losers through and through. But even that made something in Nesta’s chest ache. In her mind’s eye, she could see Cassian lit up with victory, whooping with joy.

She let the image carry her away, let herself imagine how she might *congratulate* him on his victory...

A thunk pulled her out of the fantasy as Azriel shook a chunk of ice out of the folds of a wing. Rhys glared at him and strode into the parlor, and Nesta looked away as he pressed a reverent kiss to Feyre’s lips, stroking her bump. One of her sister’s tattooed hands rose to trace one of several purple welts forming along his jaw, and he let her click her tongue and fuss for a moment before turning to Nesta.

“Ready to head home?”

*“Rhys,”* Feyre scolded. “It's still Solstice, and we were in the middle of a conversation.”

"Apologies, Feyre darling." Rhys tipped his head, but Nesta could tell it wasn’t a concession.

No, Feyre's eyes went distant, the way they sometimes did when the two of them spoke mind-to-mind, and when Rhys extended a hand to Nesta once more, Feyre didn't protest.

No, this time she flushed.

Rhys’s small smirk turned hungry, his own eyes bearing the slightly-unfocused look of a distracted mind reader. It took everything Nesta had not to wrinkle her nose at him as he said with saccharine cheer, "Happy Solstice, Nesta. May I have the honor of escorting you home?"

*Traitor,* Nesta thought loudly, glaring at Feyre as her peaceful morning shattered. She would trudge through all the slush in Velaris and climb all ten thousand steps back to the House before flying *anywhere* in Rhys's arms.

In the entryway, Azriel’s wings snapped shut.

Rhys didn’t turn toward him. His violet eyes glimmered at Nesta.

And Nesta could only watch as Azriel stalked into the room. He didn’t stop to greet Feyre or even nod to Elain—*Elain!—*who cringed as whorls of darkness curled around the loveseat she and Nesta shared. He didn’t even look at the hand Rhys held out, though the High Lord’s shadow contorted and began to crawl up his legs. Azriel passed them all, cutting a path to Nesta so clear that she was surprised that the rug beneath his feet didn't split in two.

It was such a change from the quiet courtesy and subdued humor that he typically exuded around their family that Nesta set her teacup down on an end table and braced herself.

For what, she didn’t know.

But Azriel simply stopped in front of her. He looked away only once to glance at the small pack on the floor beside her seat that held her overnight essentials and the few Solstice gifts she had received last night.

He didn’t so much as turn as he said with quiet, calm menace, "Careful, Rhys, or you'll be left to face Cassian's *tender mercies."*

Azriel's voice was so low, so flat that Nesta had to strain to hear him. Feyre gaped up at them both, and Rhys—

Rhys *bristled*, stepping between Azriel and Feyre with death in his eyes.

Azriel ignored him and returned his attention to Nesta, his face wiped clean of the cruel, curious warning he'd directed at his brother. “Do you have everything?”

“I do.” Nesta nodded and stood. She shot a glance at Feyre around both Illyrians as she bent to gather her things, and Feyre lifted a single bemused brow back.

"Good. Let's go."

Azriel didn't look away, didn't so much as glance at Elain when she finally looked away from the window and murmured a quiet “*Wait*.” But whatever she meant to say would remain a mystery; the moment Nesta took the arm Azriel offered, a rush of cold shadow spirited them away to the air above the House.

They plummeted. A shriek shredded out of Nesta’s throat, but Azriel caught her in his stone-solid arms, his wings snapping out to catch the wind. He circled the training ring once, twice, banking slowly while Nesta caught her breath and cursed him viciously.

They landed with a gentleness that she knew Rhys and Cassian both weren’t capable of, and Nesta aimed a punch at his arm the moment he set her on her feet.

“What the *hell,* Az!"

Azriel caught her fist and said nothing. He didn’t try to justify himself with a response. He curled his hand around her own, twisting gently. His shadows darkened when she stumbled, still stunned and unbalanced by the shock of the fall.

Azriel’s hand tightened around her own, but she caught herself quickly. Nevertheless, as if her body needed to answer to that simple touch, heat welled up between Nesta’s legs, and she had to swallow down a mortifying, surprised sound.

Azriel’s hand around her fist was the first skin-on-skin contact she'd had since Cassian had left her in bed that morning, sore and aching for more. *More, more, more,* her body had begged as she watched Cassian go. *More, more, more,* it seemed to beg now in response to the brush of Azriel’s calloused fingers against the back of her palm.

A hot blush seared her cheeks.

She grit her teeth and wrested her fist from his grip. "I'd appreciate a little *warning* next time.”

Her thoughts took on a more desperate bent as she swiped her hand against her skirts, trying to brush away the phantom touch that lingered on her skin: *Not Cassian, not Cassian, he's* not *Cassian, you ridiculous tart.*

Azriel let her step back, and she put a safe amount of empty air between them. He didn’t try to knock her on her ass in the middle of the training ring like he did at least once most mornings when she tried to catch him off guard. He just glared, jaw clenched, entirely unamused.

Nesta huffed, crossing her arms over herself to ward off the chill—and to clamp down on her racing heart. If Az wanted a staring contest, he could have it. She wasn’t about to let a pissy, overgrown bat get his way just because he was a sore loser. She had done nothing to earn his ire.

But his hazel eyes, so similar to—

*He’s not Cassian. No one else. Ever.*

She held Azriel's gaze until the fight seemed to go out of him, his shadows drifting out of the weak winter sunlight and into the House. He didn’t sigh, didn’t drop his tense shoulders, he didn't even seem to *breathe*, but his eyes softened. Nesta forced herself to follow suit.

She was all too familiar with the cool rage seeping out of him—and even more familiar with the regret playing across his face now.

He looked away first.

"Your enemies won't give you a warning," he said in the same flat, midnight-dark tone he had used with Rhys.

Nesta stilled.

There was no way he was such a sore loser that a snowball fight would upset him *this* much.

No, whatever stirred Az's anger, the shadow of despair Nesta caught a glimpse of in his blank stare as she looked closer, ran deeper than that. She watched Az lose sparring matches to Cassian every day, and each time he still seemed to come out on top, taunting and teasing until Cassian threw down another challenge—one Az could win. What he'd said to Rhys, the way he hadn't so much as glanced at Feyre and the babe, how he'd *ignored Elain...*

She reached out her hand.

"But you're not my enemy, Az."

Azriel looked at her hand and then up to her. He was stone-faced again.

Nesta waited for a moment, and then let her hand fall back to her side, fisting it in her dress. “Right?”

His eyes cut away. “Right.”

"Do you..." She paused, suddenly feeling awkward, unpracticed. She thought about what Cassian would say, what Gwyn or Emerie might do. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Azriel blinked at the far wall of the training ring, but he shook his head.

“Okay.” Nesta nodded, glancing away from that unbreakable stare. “But if you do…”

Az was silent. But after a moment he dipped his chin and, without another word, retreated after his shadows, his wings stiff and pale with the cold. A dark glint under the talon of one caught her attention before he could fully retreat into the stairwell.

“Your wing is bleeding,” she called after him.

Azriel didn’t even lift a hand to check before he disappeared into the dark.

And so Nesta spent the rest of the day in quiet, dragging solitude.

She took her lunch in her room as she attempted to finish *A Brief History of the Great Sieges,* which wasn’t brief at all. She didn’t make it more than ten pages before her longing for Cassian, who her mind superimposed onto every fearsome, legendary warrior in the damned book, drove her near to insanity. To avoid temptation, she went to the library and practiced her Mind-Stilling until the fire burned down to embers, breathing deeply as each sound crashed against her. She ate dinner staring at the glowing coals and listening to her new Symphonia, and when she picked up her book again, she thought she might finally finish it.

She was wrong. Desperately wrong.

With Azriel having retreated into some dark corner of the House, all Nesta had to occupy her time was her music, her book, and the maddening desire she couldn’t seem to shake.

So instead of finishing her book, she ended up stretched out and shivering with pleasure on the couch, one hand between her legs as the other clutched the Symphonia to her chest.

Only the thought of Azriel walking in on her roused her long enough to lick herself off her fingers and retreat to her bedroom, where she did it all over again until she was too exhausted to miss Cassian.

She even found herself absurdly grateful for Az’s black mood the next morning when he ran them through a series of brutal drills. But even when they collapsed, Gwyn huffing out prayers to the Mother and Emerie muttering threats as Azriel hauled her up for the trip back to Windhaven, all Nesta felt was the same razor-edged lust.

Azriel’s grim scowl didn’t lighten upon his return, regarding the two boneless females sprawled out on the floor of the training ring coolly. Nevertheless, he seemed to take pity on them, racking the wooden swords they had used as lap markers and bringing them each a cup of water.

Nesta poured the cup directly over her head.

“Lunch?” she asked, looking between them. If someone, anyone, would join her, *distract* her…

“No,” Gwyn sputtered, gasping for breath as she finished gulping down her own. “I need to clean up and get back to the library before Merrill blows the stacks down looking for me.”

“Az?”

Azriel shook his head. "Work."

If Nesta were a weaker female, she would have groaned at the thought of being left alone with her dizzying need. Or perhaps she was the weaker female, because a thrill shivered through her as she thought of everything she could do without anyone in the House to interrupt.

Azriel’s jaw clenched, and Nesta caught a glimpse of the long-suffering grimace he wore whenever Cassian was home to work her up. Gwyn’s cheeks, already flushed with exertion, went impossibly pinker.

Az pinned her with a look, and Nesta cursed their ridiculous fae senses.

*NotCassiannotCassiannotCassian.*

"I'll be home after dinner," he muttered, surely for her benefit more than his own, and launched himself into the sky.

Nesta threw a hand over her eyes, unable to watch as he all but threw himself off a mountain to escape her.

"Well, at least Illyrians are good for one thing." Gwyn giggled and pushed herself up on shaky legs. “Those wings stir up a nice breeze."

Nesta groaned. "Just go."

"I thought you'd be harder to embarrass, you know, after the past few months." Gwyn nudged her thigh with the tip of her toe. "Between Cassian and Emerie, I'm sure it's nothing the shadowsinger doesn't already know."

Nesta sucked in a breath. *"Gwyneth."*

Gwyn snickered. "I'll let Clotho know you need the afternoon off.”

And the most mortifying part? She *did.*

Nesta powered through her lunch but spent the rest of the afternoon in bed with her hand between her legs, skimming through her novels for the juiciest parts. When the sun began to set, she dug through the bag she left on her nightstand to find the ingenious little faelight Azriel had given her for Solstice.

*Azriel*. Her cheeks burned. Her fingers slowed. Shame washed through her, and the book and faelight bounced off her coverlet and to the floor. She shouldn't even be thinking the name, shouldn't be *able to* with the way her mind had spent the entire afternoon turning every dashing rogue and scandalous rake that Sellyn Drake had ever written into Cassian.

Cassian, with his towering, thickly muscled form. With the windswept hair she always wanted to bury her fingers into, if only to pull until he groaned her name. With his infuriating, wicked grins that made her—

*Stop.*

Nesta shook herself out of it before her ridiculous body could take control of her rational mind once more.

Mother above, what must Az have thought of her after this afternoon? Never had she been so, *so...*

Not without Cassian to rile her up, at least. Azriel had had his share of close calls when it came to the two of them together, but she had never...

Resolved, mood ruined, Nesta turned off the little faelight and dragged herself to the bathing room. She needed to make an appearance. Needed to act like a rational, sensible adult. Needed to sit down and have a collected conversation with Az. And she would. She could. If her suspicions were correct, he needed a friend right now, and Cassian was...

Cassian was...

Not here.

And it was late, so Azriel would be home.

Nesta scrubbed herself until her skin was raw and red, slipped on a simple dress, and began her hunt.

She didn’t bother trying to be stealthy as she strode through the halls, glancing into rooms as she passed. She kept an eye out for any shadows that seemed out of place, but Azriel either hadn’t returned home yet, or he was keeping a tight leash on his power.

Intuition—or maybe her absurd libido—drew her to the suite of rooms he and Cassian shared.

She let herself into Cassian’s bedroom first, and the undiluted scent of him nearly sent her to her knees. The cloak he had worn to the Solstice party was thrown over a chair, and Nesta had to clench her fists to keep from snatching it up and burying her face in it. She held her breath, looking around the room for something to distract her, to keep her from ruining all the effort she had gone through while bathing.

*There*.

A novel, one that had gone missing from her stack in the House’s library.

Her heart would have burst with tenderness at the thought of Cassian reading her books if he hadn’t left it cracked open, face down on his nightstand. The spine…

Nesta felt a cool wash of silvery, slippery rage trickle down her back.

The spine of her book was cracked. In *multiple* places.

*“Careless bat,”* she hissed beneath her breath.

She crossed the room with her teeth bared and set the book to rights. She didn’t bother to mark Cassian’s page—a small payment for the destruction the great brute wreaked on her poor book.

Before she could do anything more drastic, like chucking the book off Cassian’s balcony and buying a new copy altogether, she turned on her heel and made for his shared sitting room.

Azriel wasn’t there either. The fire was crackling in the hearth, a few knives sat beside a whetstone on the mantle, and the stack of reports that seemed to follow Az everywhere he went sat on the coffee table, but the spymaster himself was nowhere to be found.

She debated with herself as she crossed to his bedroom door before deciding that she was too desperate for company and didn’t care if she woke him up, but no one answered when she knocked.

Nesta suspected she wouldn’t find him unless he wanted her to.

So she let herself back into Cassian's room, collapsing on the untouched bedspread and burying her face in his pillow.

Her resolve to ignore the hollow ache between her legs didn’t last long after that.

And she vowed to herself that she would pull herself together the next morning, that she would find a better, more productive distraction from Cassian’s absence—maybe she could convince Gwyn to stay for dinner after a long shift in the library or invite Emerie to stay the night.

If he hadn't had five centuries of experience with stealth, Azriel would have groaned when Nesta slipped into the shared room between his and Cass's rooms, and not just because his glass of whiskey—from an overpriced bottle he had stolen in a fit of spite from Rhys's stores—disappeared when the door opened.

Instead, Azriel only sunk deeper into the shadows around his chair.

Nesta’s hair was wet and loose around her shoulders, and her freshly bathed, damp skin amplified the scent of her arousal.

Sweet, female arousal, uncut by the scent of any male.

His shadows had slithered up to the House yesterday morning hissing of mating bonds and pillow talk, and he supposed the events of the past few days confirmed it.

Azriel thought Cassian had to be the stupidest, noblest male he knew to resist the frenzy. His brother knew how uneasy Nesta was with their bond, the combined grief and disgust that reared its ugly head whenever Nesta was forced to confront her new life, her new body, but...

But to leave her, smelling like that, just after their bond snapped—

His own *mate—*

Hot, sickening envy burned down Azriel's throat just as strongly as the whiskey had.

He wanted. Cauldron, he *wanted*.

He watched Nesta pad across the floor in her stockings and rap on his door, but he saw Elain. He could sketch out the shape of her now, soft where Nesta was sharp, petite where her sister was tall; their golden-brown hair was the same shade, their skin the same ivory. Would she call his name through the door like that? Would her tongue trip over the syllables, or would it fall off her lips? Would her scent be as enticing as it was Solstice night?

After she'd spent an entire day in a frenzy like Nesta?

He buried his head in his hands. If only that were Elain, lovely Elain, seeking him out. Elain, glowing golden in her garden, saving his wings from Hybern's mutts, giving him his first Solstice gifts in decades that had any thought behind them. He had done his best to avoid her and *her* mate for a year, filling his days with Valkyrie training and gathering intel on the continent, but the temptation to seek her out was unbearable.

Mother above, he couldn’t believe the hold the Archeron sisters had on him. Feyre had read him like an open book the moment she met him during that first family dinner. Even Nesta seemed preternaturally attuned to his moods now, in a way his family had rarely been; he had been blindsided when she sidled up to him at his lonely post in the doorway at the party. And Elain...

*You believe* she *should be your mate?*

Yes.

He just wanted a mate, any mate, *his* mate.

Hell, someone else's mate.

Even if that someone were a hotheaded Autumn Court prick.

Azriel’s hackles rose at the thought of Lucien Vanserra. He may have that Cauldron-blessed bond with Elain, but he didn't have a claim on her. He didn't own her heart, and Azriel knew that Elain didn’t let the bond dictate her choices. Just as Feyre threw herself into danger without giving Rhys a moment's notice, just as Nesta fixed her mind and refused to budge even when Cassian goaded her, Elain would not be controlled by her mating bond. Nor, Azriel suspected, any male.

Especially not Lucien Vanserra.

He nearly snarled at the thought.

But then he felt foolish. *Three brothers, three sisters*. If Elain wouldn’t be ruled by a mating bond, then why should he think she would bend to such a trite idea? Which Archeron sister would? Who among them had ever given the Cauldron, much less a male, a day's peace?

Feyre left Rhys bleeding in the mud when she found out about her bond, and then she'd spent months trying to destroy the oversized cookpot. Nesta stole such power from the Cauldron that it loathed her, and even now, she refused to even acknowledge the depth of her connection to Cassian. Elain had outright ignored the visions that damned thing sent her, just as she still ignored Lucien.

No matter how open she had been to his advances, Azriel knew Elain would not bow to his true desire for a mate. Not even if she had the means to make it reality.

*You believe* she *should be your mate?*

He scrubbed a scarred hand over his face as Nesta finally turned away from his door. She crossed behind him this time—a small mercy—and disappeared into Cassian's room.

*Yes*. Yes, he'd wanted it so badly that he threw rocks and ice at his own brother's head in a fit of petty jealousy. He and Rhys had their share of arguments over the centuries, but lately the battles between them had grown in fervor.

Azriel stiffened as he remembered one of the most recent—the day his shadows tore across the city to find him. He remembered throwing together a basic survival pack as Cassian flew Nesta out of the range of Rhys's rage. He had wanted, even then, even confronted by the sheer panic that radiated between Cass and himself, someone to worry about half as much. He had watched, his heart twinging, to make sure they passed safely through the wards around Velaris. He couldn't help but winnow into the river house to tear into Rhys and buy them more time afterward, even though Feyre blazed into the study in a righteous fury and tore into them both not long after his own tirade had begun.

And, hell, he wanted it even when Feyre threw book after book at Rhys. So much so that Azriel didn't even duck when she threw a book at him, too.

When Cassian handed Nesta off to him for a dance at the ball, his chest had ached with that same longing. He had danced a thousand waltzes in the Court of Nightmares as Rhys's father's spy, but that night he thought he might trip over his feet as he held his brother's mate.

That night, just before the longest of the year, he had *wanted* more than ever before.

The centuries-old ache of wanting to have someone the way Rhys had Feyre and Cassian had Nesta had been too much for him as Solstice rolled around again.

His brothers had never brought a female to Solstice. Had never, in five centuries, hinted that they wanted anything more serious than a bit of fun with their lovers. And now, in the span of two years, two Solstices, they were both mated to a pair of stunning High Fae sisters, one with a child on the way, and happily so.

And what had Azriel gotten for acting on his desire for the same? Azriel, who’d wanted what his brothers had since he was barely more than a gangly youth?

Another argument with Rhys, bruised wings, and lovely Elain, face drawn and flinching away from his shadows this morning.

Azriel's chest ached with wanting.

# Chapter Two

“What do we have here?”

Nesta stopped in the doorway to the dining room, inspecting the male settled at one end. Three days passed since Solstice, and Azriel still only appeared to train the priestesses each morning before vanishing for the rest of the day. She could tell he still slept in the House, if he slept at all; she heard him in the shared sitting room from where she lay in Cassian’s bed every night.

He hummed sometimes, the low and quiet rasp of his voice muffled through the door. His song—always the same three notes—accompanied the rhythmic *schick* of his knives against the whetstone and the scratch of a pen against paper. It was, perhaps, the closest she had ever come to witnessing Azriel let down the thickly armored walls he kept up around himself.

Rising from his seat at the table, Azriel sent Nesta a courteous nod, but he was quiet when they both sat, a stack of foreign newspapers piled high beside his plate. The circles under his eyes were dark.

“Where have you been for the past three days?” she asked, setting aside her surprise and perching on the seat across the table from him.

Azriel gave her a look, as if to say, *Didn’t I* just *have you in a headlock upstairs?*

If it weren’t for her sleepover with Emerie and Gwyn, his silence might have made Nesta combust, the past three days of loneliness and frustration taking control of her sharp tongue and aiming it at Azriel.

Instead, Nesta smoothed her skirt over her thighs and lifted her chin. “I’m not going to ask the House to serve lunch until you talk.”

She thought she saw the corner of his lips quirk up.

“I thought interrogations were my job,” he finally said, refolding the paper he was reading and setting it aside. He tucked his hands beneath the table.

“So they are,” she agreed mildly. “But Cassian makes it look fun when someone he cares about is holding back from him. I thought I might try it out.”

Azriel went still; the only detectable movements were his slow, steady breaths and the shadows fluttering on a wind coming through the window behind him. He considered her for a long moment, and Nesta might have even squirmed if she hadn’t spent years pinned like a rare insect under her mother’s magnifying glass.

Did he remember it all as well as she did—all those interrogations disguised as spats that Cassian had put her through? Az *had* been there, hadn't he? Helping Cassian draw her out of her own self-destructive misery?

Was it still too soon to admit that she cared about him in return?

She was saved when her empty stomach grumbled, the first pangs of hunger begging her to end the stalemate and reward herself for enduring another training session without Cassian to moderate Azriel’s intense teaching methods.

“It’s nothing.” Azriel’s shadows darkened. “House, please serve Nesta’s meal.”

“House, don’t,” Nesta ordered a split second before her lunch could appear. The House obeyed, and a curl of steam carrying the rich scent of roast chicken and lemon wafted away.

“Nesta, you need to eat.”

Azriel’s beautiful face looked pained, even more so than it had a moment before, and Nesta felt it like a sickening tug, low in her gut. Was he remembering, too, the wasted-away shell she had been when she arrived? She let the wave of irritation at the memory of those first weeks crash against her, and then she relented.

* “Tea, please,” she asked the House. A tall glass of iced tea appeared beside her hand.

He inclined his head at her, a silent *thank you.*

Nesta drew the glass toward herself, but she didn’t raise it to her lips.

Azriel sighed. “Perhaps I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s fair.” Dark eyes watched as she sipped at her tea. Her own willful silence had lasted a year; Azriel, with centuries of quiet and solitude behind him, would certainly outlast a single meal if he willed it. She reached out her hand again. “But if you did...”

“If I did,” Azriel allowed, clearing his throat, and Nesta tried not to let her relief show. She watched Azriel follow the beads of cool condensation from the glass as it dripped down her fingers. “I would tell you that my work has been… more demanding than usual, as of late.”

“And…?”

“And nothing." Azriel picked up the napkin beside his empty plate and passed it across the table.

“That’s not everything.” Nesta took a deep breath as she dried her fingers. “Azriel. You...”

She swallowed. This was *Azriel.* Azriel, her ally. Her friend. She could tell him that she cared, that she would keep his secrets.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” Az's voice was dry, but Nesta felt warmth surge in her chest at the fond glint in his eyes, however slight, even as she glared back. Of course he already knew what she was trying to say.

"Well?"

He shrugged and finally looked away, a dark curl shadowing his eyes. “I had a slight… *disagreement*. With Rhys.”

Nesta lifted a brow at that. She knew that Cassian and Azriel bickered often enough, and she remembered watching them fight Rhys over orders they disagreed with during the war, but somehow…

Somehow, she never imagined those arguments following them home afterward. Not to the heart of perfect, shining Velaris, where anything disagreeable was hidden away behind the mountains bordering the city and dealt with out of sight.

Nesta watched Azriel’s shadows pulse, and old, familiar anger filled the gaps between her ribs.

How slight was this disagreement, anyway?

Did their inane snowball fights always end with spilled blood and resentment?

Rhys had been... well, not *kinder,* but less overtly hostile to her in recent weeks. Feyre had confronted him about his reaction when Nesta blurted out the true risks of her pregnancy in that terrible fit of anger, she’d heard. But she had never seen similar coldness that she normally experienced from the High Lord being directed at any of his Inner Circle…

Until that afternoon in the parlor with Az.

Even consumed by the primal, territorial Fae instinct to protect his pregnant mate, Rhys had not once turned such fury on either of his brothers before.

And where was Cassian? What had he seen? Rhys and Az were both so sly, so secretive… And both could be utterly cutthroat whenever they were thwarted. Nesta doubted he would leave them to go at one another without throwing himself between them, the meddling brute.

Did Cassian even *notice* the silent, secret grudge match between his brothers before he left for Illyria?

Reflected silver flame bounced off the glass as Nesta took another sip of her tea, trying to wash away the bitter taste of anger and loneliness. A gentle tendril of shadow curled around her clenched fist.

She had to force some measure of calm into her voice as she asked, “Over what?”

“Nothing,” he said. A dark look at her hand, and the shadow darted back to its master.

Nesta opened her mouth.

*“House,”* Azriel interrupted. Nesta’s opened mouth turned to a dropped jaw. “Please serve Nesta’s lunch.”

The roast chicken appeared on Nesta’s plate alongside greens and potatoes, and a fresh napkin draped itself over her lap. Azriel, apparently seeing that as an end to their conversation, picked up his newspaper without so much as a glance at the empty plate in front of him.

Nesta felt her rage flicker and die. “House, please serve Azriel’s lunch.”

Azriel froze. His plate filled.

His wings dropped.

His shadows twisted and writhed as they darkened, coalescing into a thick, oppressive blanket around their master and obscuring him completely from her view.

“Azriel?” She pushed back her chair with a grating scrape across the stone tiles and stood. *"Az?"*

She took a step.

As quickly as they had appeared, the shadows vanished, falling through the floor to wherever it was they hid until called. Az cleared away the last of some inscrutable expression as they did, before Nesta could see what it was.

Azriel, stone-faced once more, looked up at her.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't..." Nesta wasn't entirely sure what etiquette demanded she do around rogue magical shadows. Whether it was rude to mention them. "You don't need to apologize."

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't."

Those brilliant hazel eyes were empty.

"I mean,” Nesta hedged. Gathered her words. “For myself. I was worried about *you*. I *am* worried about you."

Azriel cleared his throat."...Thank you. But it's unnecessary."

"I don't think so." Nesta watched Azriel for a few more seconds, weighing her options. If she were Feyre or Elain, maybe, she might cross the table to hug him. But the thought of making such an overt display without any excuse for doing so made her joints lock up, and she cursed her mother.

She sat back down.

He didn't say anything more, so she didn't say anything more, and they ate and parted ways in silence. At dinner, he was in his seat again, a book on ancient gods held open by the salt shaker and a stack of notes beside him. This time, she had thought to bring a book of her own and the little faelight, and he smiled at her across the table when he saw it.

For the rest of the week, Azriel was at the table when Nesta arrived for meals, and she cradled the feeling of his company close, savored its sweetness like she did the sugar in her tea. She focused her mind on the small ball of warmth that she felt burrow into her heart when Azriel had given her the faelight in front of everybody and tried to turn it back on him, making sure the House kept his inkwell full and directed its light around his shadows as he read.

If Az knew what she was doing, he didn’t say anything. He simply made sure the House served her sausages and eggs beside the berries and sweet pastries she asked for each morning.

The week after Solstice was the longest of Cassian's life.

He had no business in Illyria, aside from the usual. He breathed down Devlon’s neck and supervised the Blood Rite Qualifier, channeling the burning frenzy that Nesta had ignited in him into stern focus. The most he accomplished, using the insight he'd gleaned from training the more timid priestesses in Velaris, was coaxing another handful of Windhaven's females to join him in the training ring every morning.

And grinding the males into the dirt every afternoon until the bastards stopped complaining about it.

In the evenings, Emerie even helped when she returned from training with the Valkyries and closed up shop—*if* she returned from training with the Valkyries. Cassian had been delighted to note that Emerie had taken to staying at the House of Wind some nights, even if she had started giggling madly whenever she saw him as a result.

And as it turned out, the delivery of winter clothing and supplies Cassian had paid for last Solstice softened the other females to her. Even the most timid and traditional among them no longer seemed to mind how unconventional and brash Emerie could be in comparison anymore.

And though he knew Az accompanied Emerie to and from Windhaven all week, Cassian rarely saw him. Azriel never lingered in the camps any longer than absolutely necessary. The few times Cass had intercepted him to ask after the Valkyries, after Nesta, he was quiet, answering only enough to dull the jagged edge of Cassian’s concern before winnowing away.

And no matter what Az told him about the Valkyries’ continued progress—or how positive those brief reports seemed—such extreme reticence was never a good sign with Az.

When the worst of the mating frenzy finally passed, when Cassian thought his right wrist might permanently go numb from the workout it had gotten every night, he set his sights on Velaris.

On *Nesta*.

He flew home, rather than waiting for Azriel or Mor to come winnow him, trying to burn away the last of that uncontrollable lust before he could put her off with the magnitude of his desire for her. For every last haughty, prickly bit of her and the soft center beneath.

He hoped when Emerie did not return that afternoon that Nesta would be busy when he arrived, hoped for some time to reacquaint himself with her scent in the privacy of his own rooms before he was faced with her irresistible presence, so he might stand a chance of mastering the instinct to steal her away to some dark fortress where he could have her again and again, unchallenged and uninterrupted.

He didn’t get that chance. Her scent assaulted him the moment he landed on the balcony outside his bedroom in the middle of the night, their precious bond pulling taut in his chest.

Whatever Az told him about girlish slumber parties evidently was not the whole truth. Gwyn and Emerie were likely tucked into some other room, because here, sprawled across his bed, lay Nesta.

No, not Nesta.

Lady Death.

His mate, robed in silk and menace.

Wide awake and waiting.

She lifted herself from his pillow with the grace of a goddess, and something in her expression sparked at the sight of him.

Cassian swallowed.

Her nightgown was *nothing,* a short slip of moonlight, the starkest of contrasts to the modest gowns she wore in the light of day. He could see the points of her nipples pebbled through it, the curves and dips of her stomach where it met her legs.

He sucked in a breath at the sight of the damp hem draped between them.

“Three days?” Nesta’s voice was daggers and arrows. “You were gone for a *week.”*

*Fuck.*

And what could he say to that?

What more could he do other than answer the call carved into his bones?

Three long strides, and then he was kneeling beside the bed. Predatory eyes lit with the unholy fire his mate had wrenched from the Cauldron tracked him, narrowed and burning.

He bowed his head under that gaze.

And then he grasped her thighs and pulled her to the edge of the bed. His reverence couldn’t keep him dipping his head further, inhaling the heady scent of her. It couldn’t cut away the thrill of seeing her in his bed or the way his cock ached to be in her, his deadly female.

Or the way his heart seemed to beat louder, stronger, in her presence.

*His*. All his.

He spread her open.

“I’m great, thanks for asking. And how are you?” He breathed each word into the glistening wetness he found between her legs, and she shivered.

He watched as Nesta fought to maintain her composure, the fury that had greeted him faltering. *How hard,* he thought fondly, *does she have to try to cut me when I have her laid bare?*

It was sweet to watch her attempt it, at least.

Finally, Nesta set her jaw. Her thighs flexed in Cassian’s hands, and she drew her nails along the edge of a wing, as wicked as any knife. “Fine. Bored out of my mind. Az helped.”

Despite the spine-tingling sensation on his wing, Cassian stiffened. He waited for the same furious, possessive jealousy he had seen overtake Rhys last year with Feyre to fill him at the sound of another male’s name on his mate’s lips.

It didn’t come.

He didn’t question it.

How could he, with his head between the most beautiful legs he had ever known? When he could just ghost a fingertip over her, swirl it around her clit, *just like that,* and watch her melt as he licked the taste of her off of it instead?

Still, he couldn’t resist teasing, despite how desperately he wanted to feast on her. Their promise rang in his ears, and he intended to make good on it: *No one else. Ever.* “I’m here now, sweetheart.”

“All talk,” Nesta bit out. She curled her fist around the talon at the top of his wing. “Where were you?”

He captured her wrist, laying a kiss on each of her fingertips. Such delicate, dangerous things. He wanted her to point one of them at him; he had some inspired ideas on how she might fulfill *that* death promise.

“Busy.”

Nesta’s mouth tightened. She gripped the hand holding hers, guiding it back down, and Cassian grinned. He was more than happy to oblige, circling the apex of her once more before pressing two fingers deep and curling them upward. “Like this, Nes?”

*Gods, to be inside of her…*

Perhaps the jealousy of a mating frenzy wouldn’t overwhelm him, wouldn’t trigger even the most ancient Illyrian instinct to *tearfightdestroykill* any threat to his union with his mate, but any thought in Cassian’s head of Az and Rhys skittered away at the feeling of her wet, silken heat surrounding him.

“I needed you.”

Nesta’s voice was as sharp as her nails. It rang like ice water being dumped over his wings, and Cassian’s mind returned to him. He saw the vulnerability of those words, the effort it took her to say them raking over their golden bond.

Needed. *Needed,* not wanted.

His heart ached with guilt. He gentled his touch, stroking her clit with the rough pad of his thumb. He laid a kiss first on one thigh, then another, kneading his fingers into the softness of the one he still held.

She traced a finger along the seam of his lips when he looked up. *No excuses.*

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He bowed again, resting his forehead on her stomach. “Let me make it up to you.”

Nails scraped his scalp, gentle fingers winding into his hair. It was tangled, probably filthy from hours of flying, but Nesta didn’t seem to care. A small tug, and he lifted his head. Her eyes were clear again, dark, dilated blue staring out at him. “You have a lot of making up to do.”

“I do,” Cassian agreed easily. What was it to him to spend the rest of his life on his knees? To pass his days wringing out orgasm after orgasm in order to regain her favor? *Bliss*. He curled his fingers against the tender spot inside her and groaned as she tightened around him. “How many times have you come without me this week, sweetheart? I’ll double it.”

Nesta paused, considering, and Cassian bent his head to drag his tongue over her. He sucked before pulling away entirely, and his mate let her head fall back onto the bed.

“And then you’ll talk to me, Nes,” he added.

A nod. “We need to talk.”

Cassian tried to ignore the way his heart swelled, the gentle wave of pride he felt for her. He pressed a kiss to her clit. “We’ll talk. But *right now,* you’re going to come on my tongue.”

“About Azriel.”

Cassian pulled back. None of the Windhaven recruits had managed to get a hit on him all week; was he losing his mind, or had the frenzy driven him to madness? Was he not about to devote his evening to thoroughly eating his mate out? That was the second damn time she’d mentioned another male in their bed, and she hadn’t even had the courtesy to sound distracted this time.

*“What?”*

“We need to talk about Azriel.”

*Fucking Az.* Cassian might not feel the instinctual drive to track him down and tear off his wings for having Nesta to himself all week, but he might if he didn’t get to bury his face in her pussy soon. “Okay, I’ll make you come, and then we’ll talk about Az.”

Nesta lifted her head to narrow her eyes at him.

*So cute,* he thought, and he’d wait to say it to her face for a day when he wanted it rough.

He patted her thigh. “Alright?”

Satisfied, Nesta dropped her head again, stroking the lock of Cassian’s hair between her fingers. “Deal.”

As closed his lips around her clit, the magic of a bargain tattoo burned along the fingers pressed inside Nesta.

Nesta swore.

# Chapter Three

“Sweetheart?”

“Don’t call me that,” Nesta muttered, slipping her cold toes between Cassian’s calves.

He flinched, but he pulled her closer, tucking her icy nose into his neck, “What should I call you then? Unholy Retribution?”

“Better.” She bit her lip. “What?”

“You tell me,” Cassian grumbled as she wedged one chilly hand under the bulge of his bicep. Good, the bat should be uncomfortable. “You’re the one thinking so hard.”

“Ha.” Nesta drew her fingers of her free hand along the edge of his wing, ignoring the shudder that wracked through him, until he freed it from underneath his back and draped it over her. “Me? You’re the one making bargains on your knees.”

Cassian snorted. “You’re upset because I magically bound myself to make you come before we talk?”

“I’m *upset—”* Nesta pulled back. She waved her free hand in front of his face, swirls of Night Court indigo dripping down her two middle fingers and pooling in her palm like liquid starlight. “—because it is so *very fucking obvious* what we were doing when we made the bargain.”

“Only to us.” Cassian kissed her fingers and curled his own callused bear paw around them, inked with identical marks, around them. “I've made worse accidental bargains over the years. It'll fade when we both fulfill our end of the deal."

Nesta rolled her eyes.

"I guess looking like Rhys and Feyre doesn’t help, does it?” Cassian chuckled, wiggling his fingers at their twin tattoos as she hissed. His other hand, large and warm, squeezed her waist. “Come on. Talk to me, Nes.”

“Make me come first.”

“I have, three times,” he countered. Nesta gritted her teeth, swallowing down the growl that threatened to claw its way out of her throat. This. This was the same smug, insufferable male who had hulked and swaggered around her estate below the wall and drove her mad. “And you’re the one who tapped out. You wanted to talk. About…” He paused, his gaze quizzical, and she pursed her lips at him. “About Az?”

The fingers inked with the bargain tattoo tingled, and a matching wave of horror churned in Nesta's stomach.

*Accidental bargains*.

Were they so common they had a name, or were she and Cassian just predisposed to bickering and bartering to drive the other into doing what they wanted? Feyre had warned her about idle dealmaking when she returned from Spring before the war, but Nesta hadn’t imagined that deals made without some sort of hocus-pocus intent would actually mark themselves on her skin.

She had only ever made one other bargain, and Cassian had been dead serious as he laid out the terms then. The air had been full of the sweet, strange scent of magic, and Nesta had felt its anticipation before she agreed to the deal: one training session for one favor.

But this time… Had she been too distracted to notice? When did the magic distinguish between conversation and a true bargain? Would she *ever* get used to this strange faerie world and its magical tricks and traps?

The tingling in her fingers turned to insistent warmth, and she scrambled to piece together her thoughts.

Azriel, though not as aloof as he had been in the days following the Solstice, still made himself scarce. He softened toward her during mealtimes, and his training routines were no longer punishing, but the usual ironclad armor he wore over his emotions was thicker than ever. Despite his regular company, he was quiet, hardly speaking to Nesta at all when he returned to the House from wherever he spent his afternoons and evenings. The dry, sneaky humor that she had gotten used to, had grown fond of, all but disappeared.

“Azriel…” Nesta said, and the tingle faded. Rough fingers pinched her sides.

“I don’t like hearing another male’s name when you’re in my bed,” Cassian teased, entirely without heat. He trailed a line of hot kisses across Nesta’s jaw, his dark stubble scratching her, and she shuddered as the cool night air followed, kissing the damp patches he left in his wake. “Say mine instead.”

“Cass,” she sighed, freeing her hand from his own and curling it around the nape of his neck.

*“Good.”*

She pinched his rounded ear with her tingling, tattooed fingers. "You're the one who made a deal with me to talk about another male."

Cassian laughed against her throat and nipped at her delicate skin. "Alright."

“Stop distracting me.” Nesta wrapped a lock of his sable hair around her fingers and pulled until Cassian looked her in the eye. His were dark with amusement. “Az has been... distant. Moody.”

“Az is always distant and moody.” Cassian wrapped both arms around her and hauled her close. “I noticed it in Windhaven, too. I'd bet he's just giving us some space to figure everything out. He probably knew about our fight on Solstice before we did.”

Nesta scoffed. “He has never given us any space. He made chaperone jokes.”

“He gave us *some,”* Cassian muttered with a grimace.

“Not this much.” Nesta brushed a tangled lock out of his eyes, and the corners of them crinkled up at her. Her heart tugged in her chest, and she cursed her bodily functions for becoming utterly ridiculous after Cassian knelt at her feet and promised himself to her. She couldn't recall ever losing such control over herself—not around the princes and dukes who flocked to her before her father lost their fortune, not with Tomas, and certainly not with Eris, arrogant faerie lordling that he was. “And not when we fight. I’m serious. A few days ago we were eating lunch and his shadows… exploded.”

*“Exploded?”* The hands grasping Nesta tightened. “Did he hurt you?”

Nesta rolled her eyes. *Overgrown, brutish bat.*

“Nesta, did Azriel actually fucking *hurt you?”* Cassian's eyes were dark, but the incredulous disbelief was plain on his face. He scanned her as though he might find some evidence of an injury he hadn't found in the past two hours.

“No!” She shoved at the hands gripping her. “Of course not. I asked the House to serve lunch and they just… covered him. Completely. I couldn’t even see him.”

Cassian paused. "What, just like that?"

*"Yes."*

"Well, what were you talking about? How dark were they?"

"His moodiness, obviously. And they were *dark*. As dark as the bottom floor of the library."

Cassian looked at her for a moment, then to the door into their shared suite. His handsome, wind-hewn face was serious as death, and the thin scar above his lip pulled as he frowned. As his eyes turned brutally sharp with assessment. Her heart thudded again; this wasn't the male who fumbled with romantic overtures or a sly courtier's graces, but the leader who knew how to assess his men and do it well.

He looked back at her, and Nesta could see his questions written in the furrow between his brows. His wing tucked in tighter around her, and he cupped the back of her head with a broad palm.

"He wouldn't hurt you." His voice was soothing, but Nesta heard the uneasy strain beneath that low rumble and thought Cassian might be the one who needed the convincing as he forced a laugh. "You're one of the few people I think he genuinely likes."

And whether he was more worried for her or for Azriel was anyone's guess; he might have promised himself to her on Solstice night, but Nesta knew how he protected Az, how he guarded the tender soul buried beneath the cold, brooding shadows. Of the five elder members of Rhysand's Inner Circle, Cassian alone seemed able to see it—Feyre had confirmed as much to Elain after they moved into the townhouse during the war, and Elain had reported this to Nesta in turn, who wanted all the information she could get on the strange, powerful Fae whom Feyre called family.

And then Nesta had watched as Cassian roped Azriel into training the priestesses—a transparent excuse as any to offer exhausted, restless Az some sort of steady routine between the covert missions Rhys kept sending him on—confirming it himself.

Nesta let her head drop onto one of his broad shoulders. "Of course he wouldn't, but I was worried he might..." She waved a hand. "I don't know. Harm himself."

"His shadows would never hurt him," Cassian said, but he still sounded uncertain. "They were really that dark?"

"Mhmm. Like he'd summoned Bryaxis to join us for dessert."

His chest rose and fell beneath her, measured and tense. "Well, fuck, Nesta. I've never seen him do that before. Az doesn't exactly wear his heart on his sleeve. Mor is the only one who can get him to talk, and she usually has to resort to bribery."

She restrained the sigh that always accompanied that name. *Of course* Mor would be Azriel's only confidant. Nesta was fairly certain the only reason she had managed to get so close to either male in the first place was because beautiful, faultless Mor had been busy on the continent when Nesta had been packed off to the House of Wind.

*Proximity,* a voice not unlike Grandmama’s crooned in the back of her mind. It was just a cruel as her own could be. *What man could resist a beautiful,* available *woman?*

She forced it away.

"I don't think he did it on purpose. It was like a reflex."

"That makes it worse." Cassian heaved a sigh, and the arms around her tightened. She felt his shoulders and wing moving around her as he shrugged. “It's not easy, what Az does, and he's been working hard lately. Rhys has—”

And *him.* Why was it always *him,* too? Nesta stopped trying to cool the ember of anger simmering beneath her breast, thinking of the despair that had floated around Azriel like his shadows for days.

She huffed. "Don't get me started on Rhys."

A low growl, a pull of tangled sheets around her legs, a steely grip on her waist—

And suddenly Nesta was laid out on the mattress beneath Cassian, completely ensconced in the cocoon of his wings. Powerful arms flexed where they bore his weight on either side of her head, and and the finely sculpted, tattooed planes of his chest heaving. Her pulse thrummed in her throat as she caught his dark eyes darting to the Siphons laying on the nightstand.

He bared his teeth, predatory. Furious.

The General Commander of the Night Court, ready to brawl.

*"Rhys?"*

She felt his low snarl settle into her bones, raising the fine hairs on her arms. Felt the static flicker of his power shiver over her bare skin, the same warning prickle before an unforgiving tempest was unleashed on the defenseless world below. Ether coated her tongue, and she swallowed.

Nesta stared, her heart kicking up a hard, inconsistent beat against her ribs. Her fingers went numb with shock and slipped off of Cassian's shoulders, and his eyes darkened as he watched them fall, ensuring each digit landed within the safe confines he had created for her.

Her vision swam. He was...

Gods, if she were sane, she would be terrified. She would run screaming. She’d heard the males in healing tents talking during the war, had witnessed even the most fearsome warriors from the other Courts edge and scurry around him as he stalked through the mud and blood after each battle. She had seen the best and worst of him with her own eyes when she tracked every glimmer of crimson power from his Siphons on those killing fields.

Even at her worst, she hadn’t been able to avoid the unbelievable war stories traded in seedy taverns about him—hadn’t been able to avoid the draw when she heard his name spoken with reverent pride by the citizens of Velaris. A legend, they called him. A *god.*

Maybe she was insane, because the low, steady embers of her desire for him flared back to life with a vengeance at the sight of his fury.

Hell, at the very least she ought to be offended at whatever he was implying with his brutish posturing.

But that *fury.* She could *feel* the fury that burned in Cassian's eyes, reverberating between them on a golden, searing wire.

All of it directed at Rhysand.

The breath caught in Nesta’s throat. This wasn't the same male who curled his lip at her whenever she snapped about his High Lord.

He was *hers*.

She grasped the tether of their shared wrath, pulling it into her as if to coil it around her heart; to have someone share in her rage, to not be so miserably alone against yet another monstrous, cathartic wave of anger... Unlike the frozen silver flame of her own fury, Cassian's seared. But it was just as bright, just as sharp, and Nesta felt something in her crack and spill free.

She held that golden band tightly.

Her legs pressed together as wet heat welled up between them again.

*Fuck.*

On the other end, Cassian held fast, pulling back just as hard. His eyes glinted. “Nesta, *breathe.* What did Rhys do?"

"What?" Her voice was breathless.

Cassian ground down against her. He was hard and ready against her core, but it was not a movement meant to entice; it was reassurance, a *claim*. A shared impulse as they both held onto either end of the connection, begging them to get as close as possible. "To Azriel. What did *Rhys,”*  the name was a snarled curse, “do to Azriel?"

"Rhys?"

What *did* Rhys do to Azriel?

She wrapped her legs around him, rage cresting, and Cassian pressed closer. She could tell he was fighting the urge to shake her off, to remain prepared for a fight, burying his face in her unbound hair and growling again at the sound of Rhys's name on her lips.

*Focus.*

"It was the snowball fight."

Cassian breathed hard, ghosting a kiss over her temple, and the tether cooled by a degree. "What about it?"

"Do you three always come home bleeding?" Nesta freed an arm, wrapping it around Cassian's shoulder. The tether cooled some more.

"What? It's *snow*." Cassian lifted his head to stare at her, bewildered. His brow grew heavy, and the anger Nesta felt on his end of the tether settled into the delicate, honed edge of calculation. "And we usually spend the afternoon sweating it off in the birchin. Any bruises are gone before dinner."

"But you didn't this year," Nesta guessed.

"No... We didn't plan on it. Rhys said he wanted to get home to Feyre earlier this time around, so when they..." Cassian whipped around to stare at the door to the shared sitting room. "Shit."

"Shit?"

"Rhys and Az knocked each other out somehow. I thought it was just a couple of lucky shots and left them in the snow after I made sure they were still breathing." He scrubbed a rough hand over his face. "It happens sometimes. The cheating fuckers get pissed that they’re losing and add a little extra power to their volleys. I figured they'd wake up and stew over it together for a few days before I came home to rub it in their faces."

"Well, they didn't," Nesta said. "They showed up at the river house pissed at each other, looking like they went a few rounds with a brick wall. Az spent a few days brooding, and all he told me was that they had a disagreement."

Cassian cursed again, laying back down and curling himself around her once more. He was tense, his arm a stiff and unyielding band around her waist. When she swept a few dark, curling strands of his hair out of his eyes, she could see his mind working at top speed.

"There's nothing I can do about it tonight,” he said eventually, his wings slumping to the mattress.

"No," Nesta agreed, feeling the pull of exhaustion start to reclaim her as adrenaline and anger abated. “It’s late.”

“It is.” Cassian sighed, and she laid her head back against her pillow as she watched his eyes shift between the door and the window.

*Azriel or Rhys?* she saw in that look. *Should I go after Azriel or Rhys?*

But his eyelids looked as heavy as Nesta's arms and legs felt.

"Sleep," Nesta told him. "Then figure it out."

Cassian looked at her, seemed to take stock of the same exhaustion Nesta saw in him taking over, and pulled her closer. A hand curled into her hair, tucking her nose back into his neck, and the fingers of his other hand traced a pattern up and down her spine.

"Sleep," he agreed.

Nesta inhaled the warm, comforting scent of him, and the tether pulled. "Stay."

"I will."

Boneless, sated, and pleased she was no longer the only one worried about the shadowsinger, she drifted allowed herself to drift off as Cassian murmured in her ear, a steady stream of little nothings and idle thoughts. Already, her mind was conjuring dreams—floating across a sky of soft sheets, bathing in the warmth of a kiss, the tickle of breath combing through her hair like a gentle breeze.

A quiet whisper.

*"...you, sweetheart."*

A week later, Cassian stood atop the House of Wind and whistled.

“I had half a mind to pull aside a priestess to ask if you threatened them with Truth-Teller while I was gone,” he admitted to Azriel, staring at the short end of the ribbon Nesta had sliced into several days earlier. A stack of ribbons now marked the length of the post, each one cut in half by a different female. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so damn proud.”

The week had passed in a haze of lovemaking, ribbon cuttings, and egging the priestesses on with Azriel as they tumbled through the Blood Rite Qualifier he’d introduced into their training regimen after Solstice—and trying, the whole time, to assess Azriel's moods whenever his shadows weren't close enough to catch on. Az's shadows had been unusually dark the first few mornings Cassian had been back, but a few days of goading Emerie, Gwyn, and Nesta had seemed to lighten them up.

The Valkyries, at the very least, seemed inclined toward good humor, spending more time than ever in the House's library giggling with each other over their trashy romances and tiny, inexplicable pegasi while Cassian and Azriel reset the course every evening.

Az glanced at him. His shadows were curling away, slowly but surely, to hide behind his wings.

Cassian shrugged. “Even dragging two lazy bastards up the Breaking during my Blood Rite might not match up.”

Az rolled his eyes, pulling one of the rope obstacles taut and tying it off with practiced hands.

“I mean it. Fuck, they resurrected the Valkyries and gave us the best damn seats in the house to watch them do it.”

Azriel was silent for a moment, his gaze contemplative, and then he straightened up. “You think they’ll see it through?”

*Will the day ever come when the High Lord of the Night Court and his General Commander need to call them in?*

Cassian sucked his teeth as he thought.

Battle, blood, gore… It was a lot to ask of these females who had already survived it before—females who were still healing from its effects on their minds and bodies.

Nesta and Gwyn possessed the mental scars of it, and Cassian knew all too well how long those could last after their physical wounds healed. Emerie carried the call of war in her Illyrian blood as surely as he and Az did, but, as tough as she was, she still possessed a gentle heart. All of them did.

Did they truly know how fiercely the Valkyries fought? Did their history books tell them how vicious those warriors were, always choosing to hold the brutal front lines of any battle? How they would rather fall, rather die in mud and filth, than relent?

Would they be able to face it? Would the other priestesses?

He thought of the way the wind seemed to still when Gwyn slashed through the ribbon. How the birds seemed to stop calling when Emerie swung her sword through silk. The way the sky shone the same clear blue-grey of Nesta’s eyes as she struck.

“I do. If those three have anything to say about it, I really do.”

The shadowsinger nodded, silent agreement, and tucked his wings in close. Cassian watched the slight glimmer of pride in Azriel's eyes fade to something softer*.* “They’re really something.”

“They are,” Cassian agreed, but his own pride was heavier now too, with the same weighty burden he shouldered every spring when he examined the young, haunted faces of the Blood Rite survivors when they reported for their assignments. He sighed. “We just have to make sure they’re prepared to lead when the time comes.”

“We can do that,” Azriel assured him, quieter now. “We’ve done it before.”

“We have.”

A shadow flew to Azriel’s ear as Cassian raised an arm to slap him hard on the back. Az didn’t so much as stumble, catching Cassian's arm and taking advantage of his forward momentum to tumble him over his shoulder.

Cassian barked out a laugh as he slammed into the ground, rolling to avoid crushing his wings beneath his own weight. “Next time!”

Azriel smirked, his attention already shifted to the next obstacle. “That’s what you always say. Now help me hide this trip wire.”

Cassian grinned back. If Azriel had it in him to be a little sadistic, to set up more and more sly tricks to repay the priestesses who seemed to make a game of getting under his skin during training, then whatever argument he and Rhys were having hadn't crushed him entirely.

They finished resetting the course quickly, laying a few more traps to target the weaknesses they had observed in each group of trainees throughout the week, and set off in search of the Valkyries. Cassian realized he was smiling contentedly at Azriel's back as they descended into the House.

Azriel would be fine, because Cassian would make sure of it.

His mate was waiting for him, and she was his.

And, for a moment in time, the world was quiet. Peaceful.

Az's shadows led them, as usual, to the library. As they drew closer, Cassian quieted his steps. Az marked his stealthy approach—as stealthy as Cassian could manage to make it with his boots on the stone floor—with a raised brow, and he shrugged back.

"Do you have a plan to convince Nesta to get in bed?" he whispered.

The corner of Azriel's lip twitched. He said nothing, but Cassian knew that Azriel knew that Cassian could hear the dry *I don't have to convince my partners to join me in bed* anyway.

"To sleep. It's late." Cassian glared. Amused hazel eyes rolled skyward in response.

Az left him in the doorway, nodding a quiet greeting to the females inside and examining a low end table laden with the fruits and cakes the House liked to bestow upon its favorite residents. Gwyn was gone, likely to sleep in her own dormitory below the House, but Emerie still lounged on a loveseat with a book in her hand. In an armchair beside the remains of the dessert buffet, Nesta flagged, the hand holding her own novel drooping.

Cassian made a pointed gesture toward her for a curling tendril of shadow that lingered beside him. *You see?*

As he snuck forward, Az feinted toward a tart but lifted the book from Nesta's hand instead, marking her spot with a thin throwing knife from a sheath at his side. She swatted at him, and he stepped easily out of range.

"You need to be quicker than that," Az warned.

"I was reading that," Nesta snapped, as fierce as only she could get when only half-conscious.

Az nodded sagely. "If you call staring without seeing reading, certainly."

Nesta huffed out an insult, but it was halfhearted at best, and Cassian’s smile grew until his cheeks hurt, watching them bicker back and forth. It was as idyllically domestic as anything he had ever imagined for himself: his mate, safe, warm, and happy in their home, surrounded by the little family of friends they had built together.

Azriel lifted the book and took in the cover. *"A Winter Bride in Summer.* Were Sellyn Drake's melting metaphors putting you to sleep?"

Emerie snorted, her eyes still glued to her own book. "You've read it?"

"No, but it was an easy guess."

A delicious swath of pink stained Nesta's cheeks as Az flipped through a few pages toward the back, and the last thread of Cassian's patience snapped.

"Excuse me, ladies. Az." He bent over the back of the chair and pulled his mate into his arms, slinging her over a shoulder. With a furious gasp, she thrashed, but he captured one of her hands in his own and wrapped an arm around her legs to secure his hold when she tried to knee him and roll off his shoulder.

"Put me down, you brute!"

The hand he held tightened around his own once and then relaxed.

Not too angry, then.

"I don't think I will."

Cassian felt her weight shift as her head turned, hopefully surveying the room for allies, and then,

"Azriel, *please."*

And, although he was proud of his bucking mate for finding a weakness and exploiting it, he wouldn't allow Azriel's penchant for rushing after damsels in distress to ruin his evening. Cassian levelled a look at his brother, who looked tempted.

"I've been told it's your bedtime," Azriel said mildly instead, settling into Nesta's vacated seat with the tart he had been eyeing.

"Wings!" Emerie called out like a spectator at a boxing match, finally paying attention, but whether it was advice or a warning, Cassian couldn't tell until... "Go for his wings!"

A slender hand stretched in his peripheral vision—the one he hadn't bothered to secure, *dammit*—and sharp nails brushed against the membrane of one wing just as he jerked it out of reach. He shuddered, willing himself not to go hard in front of Nesta's friend.

"I meant the wing joints," Emerie said, her voice small and mortified. "On his *back*. Save *that* for the bedroom."

Az cut a look at her, a silent *Do you see what I have to live with now?*

Emerie's eyes were wide, her nose wrinkled.

"I won’t forget this," Nesta said to the room at large as Cassian turned and strode for the door, her voice dark with promise.

He barked out a laugh when he heard Emerie mutter a stunned, *"Neither will I."*

"Cut it out." He bounced Nesta twice on his shoulder, striding for the door, and he felt her stomach jolt with a silent, precious laugh. When they crossed the threshold and turned the corner, she slumped, evidently giving over to her exhaustion.

"I can walk, you know."

He flexed the arm holding her. "You can, but why would you?"

"Because you're going to poke my eye out with this talon."

"It's a thumb, actually," Cassian said. He shifted her forward, raising his wing to just above her eye level so she could examine it safely.

*"What?"*

Cassian shrugged, and Nesta laughed again as his shoulder pressed into her middle. "Wings share the same basic anatomy as arms. That *talon* you're poking is just the nail on the tip of the thumb."

Nesta loosed a breath that Cassian figured meant something like *damn*. When she spoke again, her voice was curious and as unsure as Nesta ever allowed herself to be in front of someone else, "Does it grow?"

The House swung the door to her bedroom open as he approached, and he swallowed another chuckle.

"No... I guess it would be more accurate to say it's like exposed bone. Or teeth, maybe."

"Why the lesson?" Nesta asked.

He deposited her in a chair in the small sitting area as she *hmm*'ed curiously. Her eyes were still locked on his wings, so he flexed for her, grinning as he stretched them wide and rolled his shoulders.

Her eyes went dark, and he didn't have to convince her to stay seated while he undressed; she rolled her head back against the low back of the chair, relaxed and half-asleep already as she watched without a lick of shame.

"Because I think you just tarnished poor Emerie's virtue," he told her, kneeling down to unlace his boots.

She laughed, a gentle, amused trill that tugged at his heartstrings, and Cassian had to give it to her. Considering Emerie and Nesta’s shared taste in smutty books, there was likely nothing virtuous left to tarnish.

"How?"

"I told you our wings are sensitive, right?" Nesta nodded as he rounded her chair. He stroked his hands over her shoulders, leaning down to graze his teeth along the shell of her ear, relishing the small shiver that wracked her body. “If you did that in the middle of Windhaven, we'd be saying our vows in front of a priestess right now, sweetheart."

Her scent turned warm, heady with arousal, until Cassian nearly groaned. All she said was, *"Oh."*

"Would you like that, Nes?" He nuzzled her cheek and straightened up before the hand Nesta was reaching behind her could make contact with his wing, shucking off his leather jacket instead. She might not put a name to their bond yet, might not be able to speak the three small words he most wanted to hear, but…

Cassian braced himself, his voice a quiet rasp, and asked, "Would you like to be my wife someday?"

Nesta Archeron, his *wife*.

The idea, human as it was when they already had the unnamed mating bond between them, heated his blood. The quiet, unsteady intake of breath he heard her take turned it molten.

The question lingered in the thick air between them, weighing down the silence.

"…Maybe," she finally said, coy as ever, just a split-second before Cassian collapsed under that weight.

His heart was pounding when he turned around, when he spotted the naked temptation on her face, the considering way she studied him—studied his *wings*—with her lip between her teeth as he hooked his jacket and tunic over the second chair.

She waited until he settled his hands on his hips, arching a brow at her, before she tilted her head back without another word. "Help me take down my hair?"

Cassian froze.

Nesta waited for just a moment, and then he watched as her shoulders curl inward, her soft expression wiped away and replaced with something carefully blank. She reached a hand up toward her head.

He caught it and squeezed. "You'll have to tell me how."

So she did, pointing out the curved ends of the pins scattered throughout the braid wreathing her head, and he set to hunting them all down. He had seen her with her hair down plenty of times now, had spent the week observing her small, twice-daily ritual as she bound up her beautiful waves and then took them back down, but she had never involved him before. Had never invited him.

His fingers felt overlarge and clumsy among the soft, delicate strands, but she didn't wince or bat them away even when he jabbed her.

Finally, when she finished showing him how to unwind the braid, she asked, "Why did you hesitate?"

*Why did you?* Cassian wanted to ask. But that was an answer he already knew—damn her mother and damn that human piece of shit who’d attacked her when she’d refused him and damn *himself* and damn anyone else who had ever made her feel less worthy of love than she was.

He combed his fingers through her hair.

In silence, Nesta waited.

"My mother," he said eventually. "It's one of a few things I remember about her. She had long hair, same color as mine. Some grey, though. It was always tangled, and I always wanted to help her fix it."

"Did you?"

"Did she let a toddler try to comb her hair? I can't remember, but I doubt it." He wound her hair into a neat coil and deposited it on her shoulder. For a moment, the bond between them glowed. *An honor,* he tried to tell her through it. *It's my honor to be trusted with yours*.

"I wish..." Nesta began, wrapping her hand around his.

Cassian cleared his throat and twined their fingers together. "Me too."

Even though they weren't talking about Azriel, they both seemed tense, uncertain how to proceed, until Nesta wiggled her fingers around his.

She cleared her throat. "We talked."

"That's the trouble with accidental bargains." Cassian scooped her into his arms, grateful for the distraction and filing away memories of a woman with his hair and a week of bloody, nightmarish vengeance where they couldn't trouble him. Not tonight, not in Nesta's arms. "Come on, sweetheart, we have a deal to fulfill."

# Chapter Four

*The General approaches.*

Azriel stifled a sigh and set aside the paperwork was skimming while he neglected his breakfast.

Cassian and Nesta had fallen asleep early last night, so he’d taken advantage of the Cauldron-blessed silence to get some rest as well. He had hoped to rise early to sort through the latest reports from his spies and summarize his findings into a briefing he could have Nuala or Cerridwen deliver to Rhysand.

But, evidently, it was not to be.

Worn down by two weeks of avoiding his High Lord and shadow-walking to the continent every afternoon to creep through countless empty stretches of forest to map the bounds of Briallyn’s influence, his centuries-long history of insomnia betrayed him.

For the first time in years, Azriel Shadowsinger had slept in.

He had woken two hours later than planned that morning, a pair of rogue shadows gleefully reporting what he could already hear: Cassian was in the midst of waking Nesta with his mouth. Blanching, Az had banished the shadows once he gained enough lucidity to understand what they were telling him, the lewd detail they sang in his ear.

His gut clenched with disgust at the memory.

After five centuries of their near-constant companionship, Azriel didn’t know exactly how his shadows worked—whether they were some separate, spectral entity or a perverse manifestation of his own subconscious. They certainly possessed some cognizance of his innermost thoughts. They must, to be able to read his desires and shape themselves to his needs... And regularly mortify him by betraying both to anyone with eyes.

They were like a swarm of fond, overbearing friends in that way. When he was feeling kind, Azriel often thought it was not unlike the direct, boisterous affection Cassian, Mor, and now Feyre brought to bear on him whenever they were bored. When he wasn't...

Well.

All that mattered was that he could keep them under control and direct their attention when ordered. That was all any High Lord or Illyrian commander had ever wanted of them.

But lately the horrible little voyeurs had gone against his rules—the ones he had established not long after he had been dumped at Windhaven in order to maintain his own sanity.

Lately, his shadows had taken rabid interest in his housemates’ sexual habits.

Azriel pressed the tips of his fingers into his throbbing temples.

Cassian’s appetites were hardly a secret to him. They had fought and fucked together for centuries, and shared their females more often than not during the long decades trapped in Velaris under Rhys’s shield. Options were limited, and most of their time was spent making sure the city didn't starve or fall apart anyway. Focusing their limited time and energy on charming one female was simpler. Neater, quicker.

With two males involved, most females knew better than to try forming any messy emotional entanglements that neither Az nor Cassian had any time for.

So, as a result, Azriel knew *exactly* what Cassian liked.

And Nesta...

Well, he knew enough about Nesta, too.

Knowing the most private details of strangers' lives was nothing new to Azriel. His occupation required infringing on the boundaries of polite society as a matter of course in order to steal or charm or torture information from his subjects.

After so many centuries as a spy, it was practically habitual.

Besides, most of his time between conflicts was spent compiling thick, encrypted dossiers on any person with an ounce of power or influence who might someday turn their attention to the Night Court. One facet the files covered, in extreme detail? Sexual histories.

Azriel knew each mistress in by name, knew which would talk if offered enough coin, and knew which of those would tell the truth. He knew the routes of rings of black market merchants who traded in flesh, and he knew how to unravel their supply chain link-by-link if he needed answers. He knew which rumors were humiliating or damning enough to force an opponent's hand and where to find rock-solid evidence that they were true.

Hell, he and Cassian weren't strangers to having such tactics turned on them, either. Rhys had only been High Lord for a few years when he called them into his office and ordered them to stop sharing females, if only to spare their brother's sanity. Watching the vein throb in Rhys’s forehead when he discovered the new rumors kicked up around Velaris during his fifty-year absence had been equal parts amusing and concerning—and now he and Cassian had a standing bet over which continental ambassador would get wind of it first and craft it into a pretty threat for Mor to brush off as she tried to negotiate the treaty.

It was quite remarkable it hadn't yet come up, really. Az knew it wouldn’t be pretty when she came home to report it to Rhys and berate them for it, but, gods, it would be funny.

Sometimes in the act of collecting and wielding information, though, the line between mark and master blurred. Habit often overruled common sense.

On this, Azriel tried not to moralize too much. All information was useful information eventually.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that knowing Nesta's sexual history went beyond *privacy* *infringement* and dove headlong into the clotted, red-tinged waters of *violation.*

The best example was this: the entire city knew how and when Nesta Archeron lost her maidenhead. The male who’d taken it had gone back to the tavern where she’d guzzled wine until the early hours of the morning and decided to take him home at closing time. That bastard, as it turned out, was a chatty drunk; a few days later, he started to boast about bedding the High Lady's untouched sister after a few drinks without a care for who was listening—or the crimes he’d admitted to.

And so Azriel himself learned of it not through spies or shadows, but from a trashy Velaris society paper on display at a newsstand beside the Sidra.

Ten minutes later, he’d started the Inner Circle's weekly meeting by dumping that entire stack of pamphlets onto the desk in Rhys’s study. Cassian and Feyre had lost their minds over it. Even Amren had looked a bit nauseous on Nesta's behalf.

But Elain… Elain had reacted with the sort of abject, genteel horror that only a formerly human female might feel watching her sister's honor thoroughly slandered in the press. Azriel hadn't possessed the heart to tell her that Nesta's *honor* was not the reason Rhys had hastily thrown up thick bands of magic to keep Cassian caged in the study like a ravenous, pacing tiger.

Only after Rhys winnowed away to find Nuala and Cerridwen and order them to burn every in the city had Feyre said aloud what they were all thinking. Then, Elain had dissolved into inconsolable tears.

Azriel hadn’t been able to stand any of it—Elain's tears or Cassian's pacing or the way Feyre was pulling her hair as if she might snap. He’d stalked from the study with a plan to spend the rest of the day in a familiar haze of shadowed, midnight wrath. He just needed to figure out which underground printing press published the rag and which sick fuck had penned the article in order to hunt down the dishonorable bastard who'd put his hands on the eldest Archeron.

Rhys had intercepted him in the sunny foyer, his hands fisted in his pockets and tendrils of errant darkness writhing in the air around his shoulders.

"He'll face charges in a court of law. He's as good as damned himself, and our journalists should know better than this," his brother had ordered, following Azriel out of the estate where Cassian and Feyre seethed on. The stars in his brother’s eyes had guttered, and Rhys had clenched the collar of Azriel's leathers in a fist so tight that he would later discover a fading bruise there. "We can set an example with them. I don't want to see a single scratch."

It was a convenient time for the Lord of Nightmares to develop a sense of restraint, Azriel thought. But Cassian had stayed his hand with Eris Vanserra for so many centuries. Mor deserved a shot at him first, Cassian often said, and Az was sure that Cass would also insist on leaving this male alive, too. Not to face the Night Court's brutal justice system, but to face Nesta's vengeance in addition to whatever justice Rhysand's favorite judge meted out, should she ever wake up from her self-destructive fugue state.

An hour later, Azriel had found the piece of shit cowering in the backroom of a tavern. He'd left him whimpering in the darkest cell in Velaris and delivered plausible deniability to the Inner Circle on a silver platter.

Leaving evidence was an amateur mistake. Azriel had been trained in the blackest of pits beneath the Court of Nightmares; he didn’t need to use Truth-Teller to get a confession.

The shadows had taken an interest in Nesta after that, and Azriel worked hard to keep them out of her apartment. To respect what little privacy she had left. She was so vehemently opposed to Cassian checking up on her; how would she react to the spymaster's umbral legion of spies tracking her?

Those efforts didn't wash the stain of *knowing—*and of Nesta not knowing that he did—from Azriel's soul.

And now, with Nesta *and* Cassian together…

Well, they hardly made a secret of enjoying each other. Sometimes Azriel thought Nesta got off on the risk of being caught as much as Cassian did. They were well suited in that regard.

And in the past two weeks, the more permanent addition of Nesta to their neat little equation changed everything. It was as if the shadows could scent the newly snapped mating bond as well as Azriel—and they fawned over it as if they were intoxicated by it. It was nothing like Rhys and Feyre's too-sweet citrus and pear scent or the pungent aroma of Elain's bond with Lucien: wilted, rotting jasmine on the hottest day of the year.

No, Nesta and Cassian were all clean snow and freshly forged steel, underscored by the lavender soap Nesta preferred.

If the shadows possessed any logic behind their sudden fixation, they didn't tell Azriel. They merely acted.

When Rhys mocked Nesta in front of her sisters, scenting so strongly of her mating bond that Azriel had nearly stumbled? The shadows snapped their leash and tried to drag his brother into their depthless darkness.

When the unholy silver fire that heralded Death raged in Nesta's eyes flashed at him? They tried to hold her hand.

When she ground his cracked-open heart beneath her heel with a pale imitation of the mating ceremony he so badly wanted? The shadows swarmed.

When Cassian lingered in the doorway while Azriel went to Nesta? A shadow stayed by Cass’s side until he joined them.

Azriel had realized what the damned things were doing when they attacked Rhys, and he had barely held them off for the long week alone with Nesta. He’d done his best to avoid her, but the shadows pulled at him until the constant droning in his head grew unbearable. In the end, it was easier to just be with her whenever he was in the House, rather than attempt to control them. Even without their help, he could tell what she was doing every night in Cassian’s bed. All week, quiet little whimpers and the pure, heady scent of her arousal permeated the House, teasing him on every breath of wind.

*In here,* *Shadowsinger*, shadows seemed to whisper whenever his attention slipped, trying to drag him to the door. Several times, they had consumed him and pulled him halfway down the hall before he realized what happened, hissing, *Death* needs *you, Shadowsinger. Don't deny her.*

He thought he might get some relief when Cassian came back, and he was wrong. The shadows simply added him to their absurd game, hissing, *The General worries, Shadowsinger. He misses. He wants. They* need *you, Shadowsinger.*

Azriel ignored them, but without fail, his cock swelled, imagining Nesta in the countless time-blurred memories of himself and Cassian indulging in a female together.

But it couldn’t be.

It could *never* be.

Nameless one night stands were one thing. A mate—a High Fae mate—was another.

So Azriel could do nothing but make a nightly ritual of submerging himself in a cold bath and biting down on a fist to silence himself while he weathered the sickening, painful pull in his chest that echoed the shadows.

He was a gods-damned sick bastard for it. She was Elain’s sister. His best friend’s mate.

*The General...*

*The General...*

*The General!* his shadows sang as familiar footsteps sounded, interrupting Azriel's familiar downward spiral into guilt.

Oblivious to the mass of self-loathing seated at the table, Cassian sauntered into the dining room, kicking out a chair with a grating screech. He fell into it with his usual rough grace and slouched against the high back, legs spread wide and wings drooping lazily.

The very picture of a freshly mated male.

*Content,* the shadows murmured appreciatively. *Good.*

Azriel swallowed back a fresh wave of guilt.

"How's Briallyn this morning?"

Cassian swiped two fingers branded with fresh bargain ink through a baked berry custard and deposited them in his mouth. He grinned smugly as he sucked the custard off.

Azriel huffed, peering at the ink as he tried, yet again, to figure out what it meant. "Still cloistered in that damn palace."

"And Mor?" Another swipe. Another lick. It grated on his fraught nerves.

"Still listening for news about that damn palace," Azriel said as he leaned across the table, staring Cassian in the eyes as he did, and slid the dish out of his immediate reach. Anything to ignore the perverse desire that welled up in him to be the one licking something else off of those fingers.

*Never again,* he reminded himself, and he felt it like a poisoned bolt to the chest.

Cassian grinned again, and Azriel braced for impact.

"And Rhys?" Cass finally asked, with all the subtlety and tact of a hungry river wraith.

Azriel controlled the urge to wince. Cassian had been watching him like a hawk all week, and Az was only mildly surprised that he'd figured him out.

More likely, though, Nesta had simply told him.

Azriel shrugged. "Still refusing to let me get closer to that damn palace."

Cassian nodded and wiped his fingers off on the hem of his tunic, dodging the napkin the House threw at his head.

*Nesta's creature,* Azriel thought with no small amount of vindication.

The plate in front of Cassian filled with sausages and eggs and a colorful riot of steamed vegetables. Azriel watched, making sure his control over his shadows was unbreakable, as Cassian started directing the House to fill the plate at the seat beside him with the same, perching an additional blueberry scone on the edge.

His eyes were soft when they returned to Azriel's. The barbed-wire throbbing in his chest bloomed into a heart-wrenching ache.

"And you, Az?"

Azriel imagined what he could say.

*Rhys won't, but do you think Feyre would be kind enough to wipe my mind of the things the shadows tell me about you every morning?*

*I tried to bed Elain at Solstice, Rhys handed me my ass, and now my shadows want me to fuck you and your mate instead.*

*There is a line, right? Between sharing anonymous one-night-stands and sleeping with your mate?*

*I think I broke Nesta's little sister's heart, but now I might want Nesta.*

*Elain didn't deserve that. You don't deserve this.*

At the very least, Nesta would put him out of his misery like the rabid dog he was for one transgression or another soon. He dipped his spoon into his stolen custard, trying and failing not to think about where Cassian's fingers had been this morning. For the time being, Azriel decided, if he couldn’t be a good friend, he would at least do his due diligence for his court.

So he redirected. “I think I should be asking you.”

Annoyance tightened the corners of Cassian's mouth, the smallest of shadows appearing to caress the lines there, but he shrugged. “About what?"

“It’s been a week," Azriel told him. *Are you going to tell me why you're watching me?* "And you've been so focused on running the Valkyries through the Qualifier that you haven't said anything about the Illyrians who will actually take part in the Blood Rite."

"Am I supposed to believe *you* don't already know?" Cassian's voice was dry. *Bitter,* the shadow by his mouth returned to tell Azriel, but he already knew. Cassian had been furious this time last year when he and Rhys revealed what they knew about the Illyrian rebels—what they had hidden from Cassian until after the Solstice festivities.

"You usually tell me anyway. Any reason you're not boasting about your novices this year?"

*Death,* the shadows sighed, and Azriel ordered them away. Ominous little bastards.

"Because I've been busy training the females here." Cassian snorted. "And because you couldn't care less."

"Fair." Azriel hadn't cared for the Blood Rite since he touched the obelisk atop Ramiel during his own. Change of subject, then. "Are you going to brag about your sex bargain, or should I keep waiting for the magic to stop our general's heart when you don’t make Nesta scream loud enough to wake Velaris every evening? I'd hate to be the one to inform Devlon about the circumstances of such a sudden promotion.”

The shadows tittered.

“That would never happen.” The corner of Cassian’s mouth lifted with a smug, rakish grin Azriel knew too well. “And don’t tell her it’s that obvious, but I don’t think I will.”

Azriel made a mental note to leash his shadows more tightly in the evenings once the tug of envy in his chest abated.

“Can I trust that you haven’t roped any death gods or shadow monsters into your relationship as a mating present, at the very least?” he finally asked, pressing his own fingertips hard into his temples. Rhys wasn’t here to feel the sting of that barb, but it still felt good.

A shocked bark of laughter burst from Cassian. He stared at Azriel, eyes glittering, until Azriel scowled back, and then he threw his head back, laughing harder.

“It’ll fade in a few days,” Cassian said between rasping chuckles. "Don't you worry."

A whisper of silk in the hall caught Azriel’s attention.

*Death,* the shadows sighed again.

Nesta, sleep mussed and clad in a long, dove-grey robe, shuffled into the dining room, slippered feet peeking out beneath her hem with every step. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, tangled and much longer than he imagined, curling over her full breasts and down to her waist in gentle waves. She looked more comfortable in her own skin than Azriel had ever seen her.

Had she gone back to sleep for a few hours after Cassian wore her out this morning?

She hid a yawn behind her own tattooed fingers and then traced them under one eye, blinking hard as she stepped into the sunlight streaming into the room.

The bright rays gilded her hair, shimmering off of her robe like the last wash of moonlight before dawn.

Azriel blinked.

"Good morning, sweetheart." Cassian extended an arm to her, shifting to sit fully upright as she surveyed the table. A little smile touched her lips when she saw the full plate beside his own.

When she reached her mate, Nesta bent at the waist, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. The blatant show of affection was new, shocking from a female as rigid as Nesta could be, but more surprising was the way the movement exposed her perfect, unbound breasts; Azriel even caught a glimpse of her smooth stomach as her robe and nightgown gaped.

She had a dark freckle beside her navel, and he idly wondered what it might be like to kiss it. To lathe his tongue over her petal-pink nipples. He remembered the feeling of the supple curve of her waist beneath his hand from the ball in the Hewn City, her small, strong hand in his, and imagined what that hand in his hair might feel like as he held her waist again and knelt between her legs...

The stain grew darker.

He cleared his throat, looking away. Had she seen him when she walked in? Or had she forgotten he was present?

But Nesta hardly started at the reminder. She pulled away from her mate, smiling a greeting across the table, Azriel very carefully stared into her eyes as he nodded back.

Ignoring him, Cassian pulled out her chair and ushered her to begin eating.

"What's all this?" she asked after a bite of eggs, staring between them. All the affection in the world couldn't lessen the wary suspicion radiating off of her in waves.

Cassian wiggled the fingers clutched around his own fork. "Az is worried that we took a leaf from Feyre and Rhys's book and bound ourselves to death gods and shadow monsters with our bargain."

Nesta's cheeks pinked, but Az could see a scowl threatening at the reminder of Rhys's existence. The sweet, savage strength of her solidarity with him against their High Lord soothed him.

But then a small smirk turned up her lips, and she said, her tone loaded with mischief, "Well, I don't know about *death gods..."*

The boom of Cassian's laughter echoed off the stone walls again, oblivious to Azriel’s staring. Nesta wasn't, and she turned the full power of that smirk on him, one sculpted brow lifted in challenge.

"You're going to be worse than him," Azriel warned her.

*"Going* to be?" Nesta picked up her scone and took a bite. As she chewed, she lifted herself out of her seat and leaned over the table, unknowingly exposing herself again as she stole back the custard.

Cassian leaned in to smack a fond kiss against her cheek as resettled herself and the wet tip of her tongue peeked out, tracing the corners of her full lips in search of crumbs. Azriel clenched every muscle to suppress a shudder and nearly groaned with frustration as his cock twitched anyway. He focused on keeping his breathing steady as he stared down at his plate, forcing his shadows to gather around the cuffs of his leathers and his pulse points—any spot that might amplify and project the scent of his sudden arousal.

Once Azriel was safely ensconced in his shadows, he allowed himself a moment to marvel at her. At them. Blunt, brutal Cassian with an arm around sharp, powerful Nesta. A sword and a dagger from the same forge, both wicked and deadly and perfectly matched.

And Azriel, adept at wielding both—

He refused to entertain it. If not for his own sake, then to avoid the horrific death they would wreak upon him. He collected his reports and the shredded remains of his dignity in one scarred hand.

*There is strength in knowing when you are beaten,* he told himself as he pushed back from the table and beat a hasty retreat for the door. For fuck’s sake, if he’d thought he wanted Nesta before…

He glanced at her as she started at the sound of his chair scraping the tile floor, and her eyes wide and her lips wrapped around her fork.

Fuck.

Maybe the shadows were onto something.

Distantly, he heard her ask something about whether or not he'd eaten—yes, that *was* his untouched plate, wasn't it? So much for not leaving evidence—but he waved her off with the stack in his hand.

Cassian wasn't looking at him. His eyes were flicking between the dark shadows ringing Azriel's wrists and knees.

He made it to the hall before the remaining shadows in the dining room left Nesta and Cassian at the table and caught up to him.

*The General knows.*

Azriel swatted at the shadow, hissing a dark, *"Yes, thank you, I gathered that,"* back.

That afternoon, Nesta returned from the library grateful for Cassian's hellish obstacle course.

Because, if it hadn’t been for the brutal ache in her muscles, she might have climbed the stairs with an embarrassingly girlish skip in her step.

Still, she couldn't deny her good mood.

Sometime after the Solstice, the entire world seemed to shift. She felt *free* . Freer than she had been for years.

She had a net beneath her to catch her if she stumbled or fell, woven with the same brilliant threads as the new bracelet tied around her wrist. Gwyn and Emerie, Azriel and Cassian, the priestesses... They would stand by her. They trusted that she would do the same for them. That, more than anything, warmed her to the very core whenever she doubted herself.

Occasionally, in the darkest, quietest parts of the night, Nesta even allowed herself to hope that Feyre and Elain might feel the same way someday. Elain had once, but Nesta doubted she did anymore. She wasn't sure if Feyre had ever felt safe around her—a fact that made her throat grow tight with regret. Now, though, Nesta was determined to change that, possessed the tools to change that.

She would stop at nothing to do so.

And even though the path had been rocky, even though she still harbored some resentment over how she had come to know such lovely feelings as hope and joy and freedom again… For the most part, she was grateful she had walked it.

She was grateful for the people who had walked it with her.

Now, her body and mind were a less vicious place to be. She didn't feel like she was fighting the muscles in her face when she smiled anymore, and laughter came easier, bubbling up and out instead of scraping her throat raw. The nauseating, mind-shredding numbness that haunted her after the war didn’t consume her now. Her power, though it was still terrifying in an unquantifiable, wild way, no longer paralyzed her the way it once had whenever she brushed up against that depthless and entirely inhuman well inside herself.

Even sex, even Cassian, even the wine that had flowed freely at Solstice—none of these things came part-and-parcel with the gut-roiling sickness of guilt and regret anymore.

At some point, the library beneath the House had even begun to put the Rainbow to shame, filled with brilliant leather covers in every color and titles stamped in gold foil. At some point, she had begun to wake up and find herself excited to begin a new day.

At some point, she had found happiness.

Pure, simple happiness.

And Cassian...

Nesta felt herself softening even more around him, now that they had promised themselves to one another. Her spine didn't crawl with the feeling of being undeserving of him nearly as often as it once had. Instead of feeling as if she had somehow tricked him into liking her, the softest, tenderest part of her heart squeezed fondly at the memory of him calling himself her *friend* in the Prison instead.

The bond between them only grew stronger with every night she spent in his bed—or he in hers—because he *never* left her after seeking her out anymore. No, even on the nights that they didn’t find pleasure in each other’s bodies, he’d made a habit of kissing her temple and tracing the tattoo inking her spine until she melted into him. She fell asleep every night to quiet stories whispered into her ear in the rumbling timbre of his voice.

She would have bad days. She knew that. But for now...

Just blissful, golden contentedness.

Even the shadowy corners in the deepest halls of the House seemed softer, as if they were beckoning her closer, welcoming her into the safety they could provide. And Cassian seemed to sense it, too, because he always took full advantage of them.

Case in point: Nesta turned the corner onto the final landing at the top of the stairs, and strong arms curled around her, drawing her into a patch of darkness before pinning her to the wall.

*"Let's talk,"* her lover purred in the dark voice that made her want to crawl to hear more, bunching her skirts around her waist with one hand and pushing her undergarments to the side. The other wasted no time pulling her leg around his waist.

"About what?" Her hand grasped his shoulder, seeking some sort of leverage as he cupped her ass and lifted her effortlessly. She snaked her other hand down his firm chest, toward—

He growled, catching her wrist and pressing her harder into the wall while he unbuttoned his pants, and bared his teeth in a feral grin. Trapped, right where he wanted her. "Weddings or Azriel."

Her mind emptied of thought.

*Weddings.*

Whatever kept prompting him to use marriage as a bizarre form of foreplay couldn't be serious, but a fantasy flashed in front of her eyes: herself, fucked out and hopelessly shattered, gasping out ideas as he made her plan a wedding while he took her against this wall.

Herself, in the expensive white silk wedding dress she had wished for since she was old enough to daydream, pushed against a wall in some hidden alcove behind the altar where they’d been married, coming around his cock.

Cassian sunk two fingers into her, and she shivered at the delicious stretch.

"Choose, Nes. Weddings or Az."

*"Azriel,"* she finally gasped, trying and failing to compose herself as he licked a long stripe up her neck to the spot behind her ear. Her eyes closed and her head fell back. "Az. He was acting strange this morning. How is he?"

She must have imagined the flicker of disappointment in his lust-blown eyes when she opened her own. Whatever he was thinking, his hand didn't let up, fingers curling against the sweet spot deep inside her.

His mouth found hers before she could backtrack, pressing a hard kiss to it before he said, "I don't know."

"You... you don't *know?"* Nesta gaped, blinking hard, as Cassian removed his soaked fingers from her, swiped her slick arousal up the shaft of his cock, and then licked them clean.

"He didn't tell me." He positioned himself at her entrance, made sure she was watching, and sunk into her to the hilt. Nesta gasped at the perfect, burning pressure of him, and he buried his face in her neck, breathing hard for a moment. "I told you. Az doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve."

"Of *course* he didn't *tell* you," she said, gripping a handful of his hair at the roots and pulling back to look him in the eyes. "I thought you were watching him."

"Gods, you sound just like him." He slammed into the sweet spot inside of her at the same time his pelvis dragged against her clit, and Nesta clenched around him. Cassian groaned, his teeth bared. "Waiting and watching won't work. He’ll... He'll need a friend. Someone willing to build rapport."

Nesta tightened her legs around his waist, desperate to keep him there. "You're his friend. You have five centuries of rapport."

Cassian laughed, dark and low, and her stomach erupted with butterflies. He pushed his hips into hers again, watching her squirm on his cock, and dipped his head, tangling their tongues. He drank from her, unrelenting until she moaned for—

For air, for relief, for the orgasm she was chasing. She didn't know.

"A lot can happen in five centuries," was all he said when he finally granted her a reprieve. Then, after another filthy kiss and a hard thrust that left her reeling, "Az responds best to a female touch, anyway."

Fuck. *Fuck* .

A needy whimper escaped from Nesta's throat before she could do anything to stop it.

It was the morning after Solstice all over again, her body betraying the strange, unfulfilled desperation she had felt that week—the desperation that still lingered and tugged after Cassian finished with her every time they came together like this, if she was being honest with herself. A new rush of wetness slicked her thighs as that heated, insatiable lust burned hotter than ever beneath her breast.

Cassian swallowed the whimper with a kiss but paused, no doubt feeling her traitorous, unfaithful reaction. Shame washed over her, almost eclipsing the inescapable sense of fullness between her legs as he fucked her.

A gentle tug behind her ribs guided her attention back to him. She found no hate, no disgust, just...

Dark, intense curiosity.

He looked fascinated.

No, he looked...

Nesta's lips parted.

*Bewitched.* He looked bewitched. Infatuated, even.

His thrusts slowed until he was merely holding her against the wall and grinding against her, turning every small movement into a torturous drag against her clit. The hands on her hips tightened, and she knew he would leave bruises.

His gaze was steady, unflinching, and as open and earnest as she had ever seen it. "Does that interest you? Az?"

With every second that passed without answer, the tattoo on her hand seemed to twinge harder. Her tongue was tied, though, and she couldn't think of how to answer: admit to her failure, her infidelity, or wipe away the enraptured look on Cassian's face?

His pulse thrummed alongside hers, his blood hot.

He curled his hand around her ample backside, giving it a squeeze. Reassurance. His head lowered, and he paused to busk a soft kiss over her heated cheek. "Have you ever imagined it, love?"

*Love.*

*Love, love, love,* her thoughts sang. *Love. Have you ever imagined it,* love?

Her fantasies from the earliest days in the House returned to the front of her mind, mostly the same but... different, as well. Familiar thoughts of being utterly consumed, of Azriel pounding into her from behind, each movement sending Cassian deeper into her throat. These were underscored with images of herself and Az tangled together under a second set of wings. A scarred hand wrapped around her throat as she sank onto Cassian's cock, sensuous male lips stealing a kiss as Nesta moaned, cradled against a chest marked with entirely unfamiliar tattoos.

The same shadows that curled, snakelike, around his shoulders teasing her breasts, slithering between her legs...

A little shockwave rocked through her, and she had to lock her legs around Cassian to keep from falling.

"I have," Cassian breathed into her ear when the burning on their fingers began to truly hurt, nipping the lobe. He hoisted her up and held her against the wall with the bulk of his body, smiling when she moaned at the shift in the angle, raising one hand to trace the panicked pulse fluttering at her throat with a calloused thumb. "I think about it a lot. I think Az does too."

"Azriel—" He thrust again when she said Az's name, and she moaned. "You two... talk about me?"

"Not like that, sweetheart," he said, lifting that hand to run a soothing caress over her lips. "But he does have *some* tells."

"Oh," Nesta breathed. What the hell sort of tell indicated that Azriel wanted to fuck someone?

When had she been stupid enough to miss it?

"You've had two at once before, right?"

She would have been mortified that he knew that if the hand Cassian kept on her ass didn't wander lower, fingers teasing the spot where they were joined. "I... *Yes,* but... You were so *jealous* when you..."

When he saw or scented her other partners anywhere near her apartment. He hardly tried to hide his disdain for them whenever Rhys or Feyre sent him to fetch her. It had never escaped Nesta’s notice that he was always in a far darker mood whenever more than one distinct scent was present, too.

"They weren't Az," he growled against her skin, dipping his head to taste her again.

Nesta's thoughts ground to a halt.

No, Cassian had never been jealous of Azriel, had he? Not during training, not at the Solstice ball, not when she said his name in their bed...

"Come on, Nes. You think you're up for that? For Az?”

He picked up his pace again. With the first hard slam of his hips into hers, the filthy sound of wet skin against skin echoed through the hall, and the pieces clicked together.

"A lot can happen in five hundred years, hmm?" she asked, and Cassian's answering rumble made her knees go weak. The pressure, the sweet draw and release, started to build up between her thighs, and the rest of her legs followed suit, trembling hard around him. "Would *he?* Be up for that?"

Azriel was so reserved, after all. Like nearly everyone else in Velaris, she saw him send longing stares after Mor and then Elain. But… he hadn't bothered to seek either female out in weeks, as far as she knew. Nesta had been surprised when he’d begun to spend so many nights in the House with her after Solstice, instead of humoring Elain's culinary experiments and wandering the new night-blooming section of her garden with her as he once had.

Would it make her a bad person to fuck Azriel when he wanted Elain? Elain hadn't indicated to Nesta whether she returned Azriel's affection… And they weren’t speaking much these days to begin with, anyway.

But on the rare occasion that they’d spoken about it, Elain had seemed quite insistent that she wanting nothing to do with *any* male at all, mate or not.

"Oh, sweetheart, I know he would." Cassian's fingers rolled over her clit, and she moaned again as her entire body clenched.

*Have you ever imagined it,* *love?*

"Cassian," she said, her mind reeling. This was happening, she told herself. This wasn't some bizarre dream, and she hadn't fallen down the stairs up from the library and hit her head. All she could do was hold tight to the golden tether between them, flaring with shared lust, and send the strange, excited gratitude she was feeling down it. *"Cassian..."*

"Say his name, Nesta." Gods, *gods,* he sounded desperate, like he— like he really wanted it. Like he *needed* it to get off this time. Nesta's eyes rolled back, and her head hit the wall. "Say his name while you come, sweetheart. *Say it."*

"Az," she gasped, her back arching and pressing her breasts into the hard lines of Cassian's leathers. Would Azriel's feel the same? Would he fuck her like this? *"Az."*

"Full thing, Nes. Azriel. Say it," Cassian growled, his pace starting to stutter and falter as she tightened around him.

The tension within her snapped, and Nesta moaned his name as she came, "Azriel. *Azriel."*

Was that her voice? That frantic, frenzied sound?

Cassian shouted when he came, wings flaring with a single, deafening beat. He thrusted hard once, twice, pulsing within her, and she shivered, filled with heat from the inside out.

For once, the tug in her chest lessened, and Nesta gasped for air.

Strong arms held her for a long moment, a hot mouth trailing sweet kisses over her neck and shoulder. When her legs stopped shaking, Cassian pulled out of her and set her on her feet gently, righting her skirts and wrapping himself around her.

“Azriel doesn't break," he murmured into her hair.

Nesta blinked, shaking off the mind-bending sensation of what was left of him trickling down her thigh. "Hmm?"

"If you think you'll get answers out of him by fucking him, you won't. He doesn't break," Cassian said again, smoothing down the back of her hair. "You'll need to be gentle with him, let him take charge, and maybe he'll start to let things slip."

"Oh."

When he spoke next, his voice was gentle, hesitant—allowing her to back out of their shared fantasy. "Are you sure you really want to...?"

But, *oh* . Underneath it, the heat was still there. He was serious. She pulled back to look him in the eyes and found the same enraptured look from before.

Nesta didn't bother hiding her surprise. "You'll let me?"

"I don't *let* you do anything, Nes," Cassian huffed, his face flushed and his eyes still bright with pleasure as he chuckled. "I've learned that much. I just ask that you let me participate, let me moderate. You and Az both tend to get a little... intense."

Nesta's core clenched again at the thought that Cassian knew what Azriel was like, and she pressed her thighs together.

"And Azriel really wants to do this?"

"Believe me, he does. Who wouldn't?" Cassian bent, rubbing the tip of his nose against hers. "But there is a catch, sweetheart."

"What?"

A wicked grin slashed across his face. "Az won't be gentle back."

The hall went silent or her heart stopped beating or perhaps the world stopped spinning. Everything seemed to still, the moment distilled down to Cassian's dark eyes and the darker shadows in the edges of her vision.

*"Fuck,"* Nesta breathed, dragging him in for a kiss. Cassian would know, wouldn't he? How hard she liked it, how addicted she was to feeling a male pounding into her with abandon, biting as he ate her and smacking her when she begged and pulling her hair while he came down her throat?

Cassian laughed into her mouth and bent, draping her weak knees over his arm and lifting. He carried her to his room and dropped her onto his bed, stripping her dress from her.

In an instant, he was sheathed inside her again.

He strategized while he fucked her, his voice stern, unbending—the general from the war tents, rather than her lover. He shared what he knew—titillating tales of safe words and power exchanges and Azriel's preferred methods for restraining his partners—while she shuddered apart. When she asked for more, he gave it to her, recounting stories from their youth that made Nesta’s pulse race while she knelt before him and tasted herself on his cock. He knelt between her thighs, deciding when Az would be most receptive, when their chances were best, and she came again and again and again on his tongue.

And then they lay together, long into the night, picking at the dinner the House delivered to them as the tether strung between them thrummed happily.

# Chapter Five

"*Footwork*, Dierdre! Watch your footwork!"

From his position at the edge of the Blood Rite Qualifier course, Cassian watched Azriel's shadows skitter with amusement.

"They're novices, not Hewn City boxers," Az said as Cassian marched past that shadowy mass against the wall. "You shouldn't be helping them."

Cassian held up a single finger without looking back. “They're *our* novices, asshole, and I'll do what I want when—"

Dierdre must have heard his foul language, because she gasped, her foot slipping in a rope ladder. Her ankle caught and she flipped, and her silky blue robes spilled over her head as Ananke grabbed for her.

Cassian turned, averting his eyes quickly enough to see Az do the same. Behind him, Roslin groaned her frustration from the top of the ladder. Somewhere within the second section of the course, Gwyn cackled.

"Check yourself, Berdara!" Cassian shouted, keeping his eyes locked on Az.

Nesta was the next to laugh, probably at some face Gwyn made at his back in retaliation.

So he crossed his arms and rustled his wings, shooting off a perfunctory, "You too, Archeron!"

His mate's annoyed "She's decent!" rang out over the transformed training ring in return.

Emerie smothered her own embarrassed laugh with a cough to mutter a quiet, "But Nesta's not," and Cassian watched the fine, sharp angle of Azriel's jaw tighten.

Cassian bit his lip.

Because Az apparently *liked* Nesta when she was indecent. Particularly when she was bent over a table in one of her silky little nightgowns.

Cassian hadn’t betrayed many of Azriel’s tells to Nesta—half the pleasure she would get from taking him to bed would come from learning those on her own time—but he spent his days tracking where Azriel’s eyes lingered, reporting back to his mate and refining their strategy for seducing the shadowsinger with each piece of additional information. They both collected little observations about Azriel now, hoarding them like firedrakes and swapping them after each of Nesta’s orgasms, and Cassian needed something to tell her after training when he dragged her away to bury his head between her thighs before lunch.

Afterward, they’d even started talking about other things. Books and nightmares and past lovers, their educations and their hopes and their mothers. Cassian was almost proud he’d struck this foolish accidental bargain; never had he made one with such a high risk-reward payoff. Normally, he was stuck paying the tab at Rita’s to uphold his end of some drunken bet lost to Mor or Az.

Azriel’s eyes shifted back to the course, and Cassian followed suit. When he turned, this time to the sound of a more demure giggle from Gwyn as Emerie no doubt relayed the events from the night in the private library, Dierdre's robes were righted, and Roslin and Ananke were already struggling to haul her up the ladder once more.

Before he could gently correct them, a shadow stalked past.

Azriel surveyed them from the edge of the course, his stony expression wiped clean. But when they froze under the weight of his gaze, he merely said, "Lift on your *exhales*."

The priestesses scrambled to correct their form, and Az didn't so much as blink as he scanned the rest of the course. Cassian watched that gaze as it slid, as sharply and smoothly as any dagger in Azriel’s scarred hand, to the three Valkyries leading the pack. Az observed them all before settling his attention on Nesta.

He did that often, Cassian realized now that he was watching for it.

His mate was radiant against the blue sky, her cheeks flushed and determination glinting hard in her eyes. Sweat saturated the edges of her braid, and her leathers strained against her chest as she worked to catch her breath.

For a half-second, he burned with irrational envy. *He* wanted to be the reason she looked so beautifully disheveled, not a damned run through a Blood Rite Qualifier.

He turned his attention to the next group before he got carried away.

Lorelei and Ilana were hopping across a dozen raised platforms, each barely large enough for a single footfall, and—

And a flash caught Cassian’s eye.

The cobalt Siphon atop Azriel's right hand shimmered—almost imperceptibly. Whether it was reflected sunlight or Azriel's power, he couldn't tell. The band of the Siphon shifted too quickly over the back of Az's flexed palm for Cassian to make that call. Gnarled fingers clenched and released as Nesta puzzled over a logic obstacle for a beat too long, nearly allowing another to knock all three Valkyries off their feet.

*Concern.*

And then...

Nesta solved the puzzle, and the same proud desire Cassian felt was mirrored in the clenched set of Az's jaw, in the shadows obscuring his eyes and his pulse points.

Az stretched and readjusted his wings, and suddenly it was all so clear in Cassian’s mind—the shifting muscle in Az’s back and the flare of his wings as he pinned Nesta, moving inside her. She would drag her nails across his tattooed skin, glistening with sweat, and Azriel would look up. His hazel eyes would glow with feral lust, and his head would tilt to beckon Cassian closer…

Cassian huffed.

It had been days since the mating frenzy had abated in the wake of the bond snapping, and aside from his prying about the new bargain tattoo Cassian and Nesta shared, Azriel remained as chaste as a damned monk around them both.

He knew Az held some sort of reverence for mating bonds. Az had always been the most spiritual of their friends, oddly enough. Whether that was the influence of his shadows or the result of eleven long, hopeless years locked away in the dark as a youngling… Cassian didn’t know. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know.

But Azriel’s sudden prudish lifestyle change bordered on absurd for most full-blooded Illyrians, even one as strange as Az.

Cassian had appreciated the space during the rocky months he and Nesta spent slinging barbs at one another. He had *needed* it the week after he had returned from Illyria starved for Nesta and half out of his mind as his mating instincts raged. But he’d thought…

It didn’t matter what he’d thought, because Az still made himself scarce at night. Azriel had two mated housemates who were less and less discreet every time they sought one another out, and he hadn’t done anything about it aside from teasing Cassian just a handful of times.

He and Nes weren't Rhys and Feyre, for Cauldron's sake. That was becoming more and more apparent as they settled into their bond. Cassian had no High Fae blood or magic to temper the roaring flow of the bond's impulses in his Illyrian blood. Nesta, Made as she was, didn't seem to have any High Fae magic either, only the raw power she had torn from the Cauldron.

Hell, that was one of his and Azriel's oldest inside jokes. In thirties, when Rhys decided he had *grown out* of sharing females with them, he and Az could only come up with one excuse: *it’s that uptight High Fae father to blame.*

Just a couple of years ago, the first time Rhys brought the Cursebreaker he had been mooning over for months to Velaris and refused to let them enter the townhouse proper before she had left the room, Az had been the one to roll his eyes and hiss a wryly amused, *“Fae father,”* at Cassian.

Cassian snorted at the memory of it, just as he had laughed with the relief he felt when Az had practically tripped over himself to get away from Nesta during breakfast two days ago.

Azriel wanted it. He had been unbalanced enough by the sight of Nesta’s magnificent breasts to let that much slip past his stony exterior.

And so it was decided, Cassian thought.

If Az wouldn’t pursue them, then they would pursue him.

“Az,” he called, leaning back against the wall. Azriel turned, Cassian jerked his chin at the spot next to him. "What happened to not helping them?"

Azriel raised a brow, but he took his place beside Cassian, crossing his arms and veiling them both in shadow. "They're priestesses, not Illyrians."

"Yeah? I can still think of one or two who will be pissed if we coach them through the whole thing without giving them the chance to beat it themselves.”

On cue, Nesta, Gwyn, and Emerie fell for one of Azriel’s oldest tricks—a concealed, raised pit meant to mimic steep slopes and hidden crevasses of the Breaking—with a chorus of hair-raising shrieks. Cassian grimaced. He was fairly sure they didn’t know how to boost one another over high, ninety-degree ledges yet. With no ladders or hand-holds, they would be trapped for the next quarter of an hour until training ended.

“Couldn't coach them out of that,” Azriel murmured. His dark voice was tinged with mirth. "Bet we won't hear the end of it, either."

Cassian shrugged. “From Nesta? No. I wouldn’t be surprised if the House gave us pits instead of beds tonight.”

Az snickered. The shadows must have let the sound escape and carry across the stones because several exhausted priestesses turned to glare, and a rude *“Motherfuckers!*” echoed out of the pit.

At that, Azriel's quiet snicker turned to a single, sharp bite of full-blown laughter.

What would Az do if he could feel the greedy wave of lust that traveled down the bond toward Cassian at that rare sound?

"Tsk," Azriel said once he calmed himself. "Does she realize she's picking up your filthy habits?"

It was Cassian's turn to laugh. A golden opportunity finer than anything any master in the Night Court could craft, sharpened and delivered by Az himself.

*Don't show your hand all at once, Cass,* Az told him when he and Nesta had first begun circling one another.

Cassian appreciated that advice for a moment. Then he shook it off.

"Her mouth was filthy long before I got to it, Az." He winked. "She likes it that way."

*"Cassian..."* His name was a long-suffering sigh.

Cassian knocked him with a wing, stepping out of the shadows to go watch another group on the rope ladder.

"Just trying to keep you in the loop, *chaperone."*

Nesta sighed.

She stretched her legs out and propped her feet on the edge of the low table in front of her. The House-warmed air caressed her skin as the edges of her robe fell away, baring her legs.

*Cozy*. That's what this room was. If only...

She rolled her head back. An involuntary moan passed her parted lips when a few stiff joints popped, loosening deliciously. She relaxed back against the plush cushion of the chair she occupied, content as a cat in sunshine, and let her book fall to the side while she rested her eyes.

She was exhausted. Two days had passed since Cassian brought up the idea of coaxing Azriel into bed with them. Two magnificent days of fucking and planning. Tonight, however, between Cassian, the obstacle course, and Merrill running her roughshod around the library all afternoon, the thought of *sleeping with Az* was far more literal than it was titillating.

"Nesta?"

Though her heart thudded hard, she was still tired and comfortable, so she blinked her eyes open slowly. Azriel stood beside her chair, a small bowl in his hand, and his brow was furrowed.

"Hmm?" she asked, tilting her hips to pop another stiff joint low in her back.

If it had the added effect of arching her back and presenting her breasts well in the low-cut silk set she wore, well, that was hardly her fault. She wasn't the type to buy this immodest sort of thing anyway.

But she would wear it. It was silky and breezy, it didn't tangle around her legs or confine her breasts uncomfortably like her old nightgowns did, and it drove Cassian wild.

Cassian was even the one who figured out that the House was tailoring her clothing as her figure changed—months ago, too, when she first sized up in her leathers. He demonstrated his theory for her a few weeks before Solstice; on his request, one of her lesser-used slips was promptly cut up and resewn as a slinky little negligee.

She just hoped they had the same effect on Az.

*Throw him off the cliff and see if he flies,* Cassian told her earlier in the evening as he watched her change before kissing her temple and throwing *himself* off of his balcony into the wind over the House.

"Az? Is something wrong?" Nesta asked when no answer seemed forthcoming.

A dark curl fell down over Az's eyes. Nesta caught them flickering between her skin and an empty chair by the door, two of three armchairs built for wings in the shared sitting room. The third armchair didn't bear the same signs of use as the other three, still full of stuffing and upholstered in bright, new brocade. The fourth, missing wing cutouts and topped with a tacky golden pillow, was clearly Morrigan's, so Nesta hadn't bothered.

Judging by Az's reaction, she chose correctly with the one by the window stuffed with almost as many knives as downy goose feathers.

"You’re reading in the dark again." He sounded faintly amused.

"I came in before the sun set," Nesta said, nodding her head back at the window beside her. Content and catlike as she might have felt, though, even the Night Court's brilliant wash of starlight wasn't enough to read by. "Didn't think I'd be up this late."

Because she had miscalculated and forgotten that *this* overgrown bat was nocturnal. It made Nesta wonder if she actually had lucked out with Cassian and his strict sleep hygiene.

Az nodded toward the unlit hearth as he stepped away. "No fire? It's cold out today."

"Not tonight," Nesta said. He seemed to accept that as answer enough, because he didn't so much as shoot her a quizzical look.

He set the bowl on the arm of the chair by Cassian's door and straightened again, taking a few steps toward it. "Where's the faelight?"

"What?"

Azriel eyed the book in her hand. "Are you going to keep reading?"

"Well, I wanted to…” She flashed the cover of *A Winter Bride in Summer* at him, and his handsome mouth curved into a grin. “I haven't gotten the chance to finish it since you let Cassian cart me off the other evening."

A quick, quiet breath escaped him, the slightest of laughs that seemed to slip against Nesta's skin as sweetly as the balmy air. "Then where's the faelight, Nes?"

*Nes*.

It rocked her almost as strongly as Cassian's *love* had. His entire circle of friends seemed to default to first-syllable nicknames—Rhys, Mor, Cass, Az, even the too on-the-nose *Fey* from time to time—but Azriel always defaulted to formal, full names in front of anyone deemed *outsider* .

As Nesta's heart twanged with warm fondness, a different kind of warmth started to spread as she thought of other reasons he might not manage to say her full name...

Azriel's nostrils flared.

"It's... on the nightstand," Nesta said, watching him hold that single breath. He turned, walking quickly toward Cassian’s door, and she spoke at his back, "Upstairs, I mean. In my room."

"Alright. I'll be right back."

She pressed her thighs together, desperate for friction, trying to take mental stock of how she had left her room this morning. Nothing too embarrassing, unless Az counted an unmade bed a sin... But surely the House had replaced the sheets she and Cassian had thoroughly wrecked last night.

Right?

Nesta breathed through her arousal, both to calm herself before Azriel returned and to soothe the edge of anxiety that followed in its wake.

When Az returned, again through Cassian's room, his footsteps were louder, warning her of his imminent presence. He slipped inside, flipping the little light through his fingers, and tossed it to her as he sank into Cassian's chair.

She caught it easily.

"You know, I got that for you so you *wouldn't* ruin your eyes in the dark," he said.

Clipping the light onto the spine of her book as he had once demonstrated, Nesta leveled the full force of her sickliest smile at him. "Thank you, Az."

Az picked up the bowl and took a cherry from within, popping it into his mouth. As he chewed, he seemed to be fighting with himself, shadows swirling. Nesta watched as his tongue peeked out from his lips, and he lifted the cherry's pit from it, licking a bit of juice from his fingertips before he shrugged.

"You're welcome, *Nes."*

When Cassian returned home, Nesta was already fast asleep in Azriel's chair, and across the sitting room, Azriel was watching her breathe with a stack of blank reports in front of him.

His face was soft.

It hardened when Cassian stepped into the room.

"Whatever you're planning with her, Cass..."

Cassian didn't bother entertaining Az's dramatics with a response; he simply rustled a hand through that short mop of raven hair as he passed on his way to pick Nesta up. "You know, Az, she's your friend too. That means she trusts you."

"She's your mate," Az said, scowling down at his scarred hands. His fingers spread, a ghost of a gesture Cassian had caught him making for centuries—one he’d made whenever Mor flashed Azriel a strained smile and then flounced away.

Cassian’s chest pulled tight with sorrow as he bent, scooping Nesta up. “Maybe so.”

And his prickly mate woke when he lifted her, pushing against his shoulder until he put her down.

"I can walk, you brute," she mumbled. Her eyes were still closed as she began shuffling in the direction of his door, and he kept a careful hand at her waist, despite her attempts to swat it away.

Azriel’s shadows sagged as he watched her.

"You're thinking too hard," Cassian whispered to him, tapping his foot against Az's on his way back across the room. Nesta's breathing was already evening out again, even as she walked. "Try not to do that."

A scowl from the shadowsinger ended the conversation, and Cassian pretended not to notice as a ribbon of darkness followed them to bed.

Azriel's wings slumped upon landing on his balcony the next evening. He let them hang over the ledge for a moment to catch the gentle breeze, weightless and leaden all at once.

The shadows were as unsettled as he, a riled nest of starved vipers hissing frantic nonsense in his ear. As they worked themselves into a fit, they grew, snaring and consuming the long shadows cast by the amber seeping out of the House’s tall windows. With a thought from Azriel, they were all banished, no doubt slithering away to find Nesta or Cassian.

For once, he couldn't find it in himself to care.

His first visit to the river house since Solstice had been...

Not peaceful. Not nice.

But he and Rhys hadn't come to blows, though the thick tension in the air made it clear that the past fortnight hadn't lessened the ire on either side of the fight.

As it was, Rhys took his report, passed him a thick stack of dusty old tomes, and dismissed him with a disgusted wrinkle of his nose. Azriel lowered his mental shields long enough to imagine breaking that nose *(again,* he made sure to think loudly), and a wave of dark power had suffocated his shadows on his way out in retaliation.

Elain had been sitting in the parlor when he passed, staring blankly at the fire, no doubt caught in the grip of a vision. Azriel had frozen at the sight of a flush high on her cheeks, but didn't linger long enough to get caught by her or by Rhys. The passing glimpse of her golden-brown hair in the dim light still scraped something inside him raw. He’d wasted a year agonizing over her, and he thought he might go mad if he spent a second more calculating how to salvage the mess he’d made.

He would endure, he decided. He had known endurance long before his shadows first greeted him, when he endured the darkness and loneliness of his cell in his sire’s keep. He had endured seventeen years in the camps, training relentlessly amongst the ignorant, superstitious Illyrians who’d sooner crucify him for witchcraft than accept shadowsinging as a natural ability. Then, he’d endured seven more as the sole lesser fae in the Hewn City, separated from his brothers during the war.

In his long, long life, Azriel had endured fight after fight, wound after wound. Now, if he had to pass five more centuries with meaningless, emotionless fucking on his own before he found a mate, he would.

So be it.

He doubted the Mother deigned to bless stained, ruined monsters like him with such a bond, but he would endure the wait for that slim possibility. And he would do it without cracking open lovely Elain's heart any further along the way, too.

She was his friend, his dear friend, and that was all she would ever be.

Not for Rhys’s benefit, the meddling bastard, or even for the Vanserra boy. Azriel would do it for Elain, so she didn’t feel any reason to fucking flinch in his presence again.

And…

Azriel pushed out a breath.

And it helped that he could hardly look at Elain without hearing her older sister begging for him.

*Az, please.*

He had nearly come undone that night in the library, watching her beg for him while the tips of her fingers grazed Cassian’s wings. Mastering himself long enough to shadow-walk Emerie back to Windhaven for the evening without embarrassing her further took every bit of the skill and patience he had cultivated throughout five centuries of covert work.

*Az, please.*

He shoved the memory down; he would endure this, too. Regardless of whatever scheme Cassian and Nesta were cooking up, this was nothing but a conditioned response to watching Cassian take a lover, and he couldn’t go another night fisting his own cock to the thought of either sister.

Instead, he summoned the stack of books he’d rather burn than read from his shadows, intent on distracting himself with more dull research, and shoved past his bed—not a pit, he noted, though he knew what he might like to do with one in its place—and into the shared sitting room.

And froze.

“Az, please... Please, please, Azriel,” Nesta *was* begging, perched fully clothed in Cassian’s lap and circling her hips against his in a slow, filthy grind. Her head was thrown back, her eyes clenched shut. The sitting room was thick with the scent of sex, Nesta’s sweet female arousal cut by Cassian’s deeper, sharper male scent, all mixed up with the cool, smoky notes of their mating bond.

Cassian’s mouth was on her throat, biting until she released a low, tortured moan. His eyes were locked on the door.

On Azriel.

“Az,” Cassian said, unlatching, in casual greeting.

Nesta released a shuddering breath, her movements stalling, but Cassian’s hands gripped her hips and dragged her back and forth over him.

"Eyes on me, sweetheart," he ordered when Nesta nearly turned to look at Azriel as well, and Azriel watched, enthralled, as Nesta Archeron—prickly, contrary Nesta Archeron—obeyed with a sweet kiss.

Azriel laid the books on a slim table by his door.

“What is this?”

But he knew.

Dammit, he already knew what this was, what his shadows tried telling him when he landed. What they were shifting across the room to inspect and report back.

Cassian and Nesta's shadows were thrown against the far wall, writhing in shared pleasure. Two phantom hands reached back to reel Azriel's shadow in for a messy kiss. His cock, already hard, throbbed against the fastening of his trousers at the sight.

Centuries ago, *centuries*, he gave Cassian permission to engineer these little scenes with consenting females. Cassian got off on the thrill of getting caught, while Azriel got off on…

“It’s an invitation, Az,” Cassian said, lifting one hand to stroke it down the modest cotton dress covering Nesta’s spine with unbearable tenderness. “Or a challenge. Whichever works.”

Azriel set his jaw.

His *mate*. That was their plan. Cassian was offering his fucking mate up on a silver platter, knowing full well that Azriel couldn’t resist a challenge, completely aware of what Azriel would do to her, inviting him to ruin her…

He was tempted to call bullshit.

Instead, he shut the door behind himself and followed his shadow to them, until each gust of air kicked up by every minute movement caught in the folds of his wings and made him ache with need.

*Fuck,* he wanted them.

“And did Nesta agree to this when you started training her to say my name while you fuck her?” he asked, slicing a look toward Cassian to warn him to stay silent.

A gasp worked its way from Nesta’s throat at the sound of her name, and she nodded. He watched her creamy thighs, completely exposed at this angle, tighten around Cassian’s hips.

Azriel licked his lips impatiently. A verbal response, he needed a verbal response…

"I think she's beyond words, Az," Cassian told him, his eyes glimmering with silent laughter when he glanced away from where Nesta’s full breasts strained against her bodice to Azriel. "She gets like this when she's close."

Azriel took another deep breath. Fucking addicting, that’s what that scent was. His skin was overheated beneath his leathers as he imagined what they might taste like, his muscles tense and twitching, desperate for exertion…

And his patience was wearing thin again.

“*Come,* Nesta."

Nesta’s head whipped around, her jaw dropping open, and wide blue-grey eyes met his for a split second before they clenched shut and she gasped out an “Ah, Az!” that went straight to his cock. Color bloomed high on her cheeks, trailing down the graceful column of her throat and into her dress, and Cassian groaned as she trembled around him.

The things Azriel wanted to do to her for looking away from Cassian...

The shadows sighed and melted with her, and Azriel leashed them before they could dare to reach out and touch her.

*How low does her blush carry?* he mused idly. To the taut nipples he dreamed of biting? The freckle he wanted to kiss?

He waited until her breathing calmed and knelt beside her.

“Well?” he asked. “Did you agree to this, or am I going to turn around and forget I walked in on this, just like I always do?”

"No... *Yes,”* Nesta breathed. She blinked hard, some of the blissed-out haze clearing from her eyes. Azriel held back a sigh of relief. “I did. Don't go.”

Azriel nodded and stood. He felt more than saw her pale blue eyes track him as he turned and strode across the room to his usual chair, the upholstery still layered with the scent of Nesta's arousal from the night before.

Nesta's tattooed fingers flexed against Cassian's shoulder, and she turned her head. Two large hands anchored her to him at the small of her back and the top of her spine, crimson Siphons glinting.

"He's in a mood tonight," she murmured into Cassian's ear.

Cassian’s eyes locked on Az, and he dipped his head to her ear and whispered, just loud enough so he could hear it across the room, "Why don't you take a minute and then go apologize for interrupting his evening, hm?"

So Nesta did. Azriel watched, his anticipation ratcheting higher and higher with each passing second, as she lay boneless against Cassian for a long moment, sharing breath with him whenever he bent his head to steal a kiss from her cheek, her nose, her lips. When she finally seemed to recover, Cassian tapped her, pushing back until she looked him in the eyes. They didn't speak, but Cassian curled the hand around her neck tighter and pulled her in for a fierce kiss before bodily lifting Nesta from his lap and depositing her on her feet.

She licked her lips, swaying before she steadied herself.

When she spoke, her tone was sweeter than Azriel had ever heard it. “We owe you an apology, Az.”

*Fuck.*

"Do you?"

“We’ve been so rude,” she said when she reached his seat. Her knees were still weak, trembling with the effort to keep her upright. “I know how you hate that. You try so hard to make Cassian behave, but I’ve been encouraging him all these months.”

Nesta knelt before him. Azriel’s cock twitched again, and the old ache of longing in his chest twinged even as he rebuked himself, trying to draw on the ironclad will everyone seemed to think he possessed. Nesta laid her head on his knee, slender, gentle fingers trailing over his calves.

Every breath was scented with the fresh arousal slicking her thighs beneath her dress. Cassian stretched out in his chair, his wings unfurled and catching the weak evening sunlight streaming through the window. His cock was still hard, proud, coated in Nesta’s wetness as it jutted from his trousers.

He looked like any smug, contented Illyrian male watching his female play.

It wrecked Azriel.

His grip tightened on the arms of his chair. Cassian shouldn’t be turned on by this. He shouldn’t be touching himself to the sight of his mate’s hand inching its way towards another male’s cock. He should be sawing Azriel’s hands off at the wrist for daring to look at Nesta as she offered herself to him. For not shadow-walking out of Velaris and locking himself into the dankest, darkest cell under the Hewn City the moment he walked in on them.

“You’re thinking too hard again, Az,” Cass said, shifting further back in his seat. He spread his long legs even further, planting his feet.

Azriel glared, but it had no heat. No, that was all focused on Nesta between his legs. With their permission, then, he would savor this for however long it lasted.

Until Nesta or Cassian or, hell, godsdamned Rhysand snapped him out of this delirium. *Violently,* most likely.

Nesta looked up at him through her lashes as her fingers crept up his thigh, hooking into the edge of Truth-Teller’s holster. That minuscule, teasing touch sent his blood rushing back to his cock.

*Holy gods*.

What would it be like to feel those small hands on his bare skin? To see them bound in his shadows, flexing as he made her come?

“Azriel…”

His name sounded so good falling from her vicious tongue.

He gingerly traced the braid that wrapped around Nesta’s head, expecting something. The crimson glare of a Siphon or brutal silver flame or the flash of Ataraxia swinging coming down on his scarred fingers. Anything.

But nothing happened.

So soft, so golden—his cobalt Siphon appeared brighter, clearer than it ever had in contrast. He sank his fingers into that braid, pulling her head back.

Her cheeks flushed, a shadow snaking over her shoulder to tease and taste the pinkness, and then she relaxed into his touch, her teeth sinking into her full bottom lip when he pulled harder.

*She holds her breath, Shadowsinger*, it sang.

“Cassian told you how I treat my lovers?” He let his thumb stroke the bit of skin behind her ear.

Nesta shuddered.

*Lover of Death,* the shadows sang merrily. Azriel suppressed a shudder of his own at the thought: for all her experience over the past two years, she was still new to this. New to sex.

*So much to teach her*. He beat back the thought, beat back the mental image of Nesta, blindfolded, bound, begging, as he taught her everything he knew. He would consider himself lucky if Nesta didn't turn her head and snap his fingers off one by one with nothing but her teeth for daring to touch her.

But instead, she simply nodded, silver flashing in her eyes. “Yes.”

Azriel's fingers tightened on her braid, and he saw Cassian's do the same around his cock.

“Tell me.”

Nesta obeyed. She didn't falter or blush as she listed his sexual proclivities, going on and on, repeating all the things he and Cassian knew from experience that his lovers needed to understand before Azriel joined them.

When she did stop, seemingly wracking her brain for more, Azriel offered her a small, encouraging tilt of his lips as a reward. “Good, Nesta. Go on.”

Her lower lip went slack in response to his praise, and a silent whimper shivered up her throat.

With his self-control dangling by the thinnest of threads, he tucked away that information for later.

“...I should break your rules or ask about the Hewn City," she paused and her eyes narrowed suspiciously, as if she suspected a joke being played on her, and Azriel felt a bead of moisture gather at the tip of his cock, *"'at my own risk,'* according to Cassian.”

*Death in the Hewn City,* a shadow sighed. From another, *Disobedient Death!*

Azriel nodded, but didn't elaborate. “If you need a moment to talk to me or collect yourself?”

“I should say Velaris.”

“If you want to stop entirely, what do you say?” Azriel tugged the lock of hair wrapped around his index finger, making sure her eyes were clear and focused.

“Windhaven,” Nesta’s pert nose wrinkled, and this time Azriel gave her a full-blown smile without fully meaning to.

At least *she* got his little jokes.

He nodded again. “And if your mouth is occupied and you can’t speak at all?”

Nesta paused. Cassian smirked, meeting Azriel’s gaze, and lifted a rakish brow at him.

Azriel sighed. Of course Cassian would leave this to him to explain, though he couldn't complain about the way Nesta's fingers tightened on his thigh.

“If you can’t speak, I’ll place a shadow around your pretty throat,” he told her, trailing his fingers down the back of her neck. He let the tips of them brush her carotid artery, feeling for the sweet thrum of her pulse. “You should hum for it if you want to stop, and it will let me know. Instantly.”

Nesta's pulse jumped, her gaze half-lidded, but her brow furrowed.

“You have a question. What is it?”

“The shadows can do that?”

"Do what?" Azriel waited for her to gather her thoughts, to put her concern into words, but when no further details seemed to be forthcoming he shifted his attention. “Cassian.”

Cassian’s fingers flexed.

“I’m sure you know that Nes here is loud. Can the shadows tell the difference between her needy moaning and a hum?”

“Yes, they can. If your breathing falters or your pulse gets too irregular, they'll tell me then, too." He watched Nesta's blush deepen.

Across the room, Cassian grinned at him in anticipation. His eyes flickered to his kneeling mate, going soft, and he cleared his throat. "Ready, Nes?"

Nesta nodded as best she could. "Mhmm."

"Out loud," Azriel ordered.

"Yes," Nesta gasped.

Heady awe blossomed in his chest, and he let out a breath, trying to gain control himself, the heat scorching through his veins. She was willing to play with him; she looked *excited* to play with him. Nesta, cold Lady Death, gentling herself—all so she could submit. It had been centuries since any female managed to surprised him so thoroughly, if one ever had.

“You want to apologize?” Nesta tried to nod again, but he returned his hand to her hair and fisted it around her braid again. The mottled shine of his scars couldn't compare to the locks between his fingers. “Say it.”

“Yes,” she gasped a second time.

But he pulled again, unsatisfied. Her eyes went dark, unfocused, and Cassian barked out a laugh as Az jostled the leg she was gripping with no small amount of amusement himself. Nesta tried to turn her neck, tried to glare at Cassian, but Azriel held firm until she relented, letting herself gaze soften again. *Sweet,* he thought, and his shadows agreed, *So sweet.*

She stroked his thigh contritely. “I’m sorry.”

"Thank you," he said. “But what are you apologizing for, Nesta?”

She was quick to answer. “For encouraging Cassian's behavior.”

Azriel lifted a brow. Cassian clicked his tongue.

“And my own," she tacked on quickly, though the way those full lips curled up as she bowed against his grip made it clear that she wouldn’t have minded if he’d tugged her hair again.

“And?” Azriel glanced at the female on her knees before him and then pointedly over her head.

“And… for fucking Cassian in the sitting room…” Azriel let a cool shadow curl around her throat and listened to her pulse skip beneath it. “Without you.”

He didn’t gentle his hold as he unclenched his other hand from the arm of his chair and began to unbutton his leather trousers, desperate for some release of that torturous pressure as his cock ached and throbbed with want. Nesta’s eyes followed the movement hungrily.

He took his time.

Waiting, he supposed, for her to recoil with horror.

He paused at the last button, no shame or disgust to be found on her pretty face. Instead, he saw a glare beginning to form because she felt he’d denied her what she wanted—*how could* he *be what she wanted?*—but she wisely didn’t voice it.

*Savor it,* he reminded himself.

“Are you going to do it again?”

Nesta started, and her nose wrinkled adorably again, this time with confusion. “What?”

Azriel clicked his tongue. “An apology means nothing without action to back it up.”

“I…” He watched the wheels turn in her head. This time when she tried to turn to Cassian, Azriel let her, petting her ruined braid as she did.

Cassian grinned at Azriel over her head. His arm was moving as he stroked himself, and Az wished he weren't sitting across the room. He was certain she already knew, that they had planned this to some extent, but he wished Nesta could watch what Cassian thought of their back-and-forth while she was on her knees in front of his best friend.

He wanted her to see her mate touching himself while Azriel disciplined her. He wanted her to see Cassian touch himself while he made a mess of his mate.

“Are you ever going to suck my cock in the dining room again, sweetheart?” Cassian asked Nesta gently. “Will you keep letting me eat your pretty little cunt in the library?”

Azriel tamped down his own grin. Years had passed since he and Cass last played this old game, and he didn’t remember it ever feeling so damned good. Even his shadows complied, still twisting and curling around Nesta’s elegant neck.

“You like it when I take you against the wall of the training ring,” Cass added as Nesta’s jaw dropped. “Or bend you over the balcony railing. What about that?”

“No.”

“No? Sweetheart…” Cassian shook his head, chuckling. "I'm sorry to hear that."

“I mean, *no,* we are not going to stop doing those things,” she bit at him. Her head turned, and she pinned Azriel with that glare, as if the mere suggestion were unforgivable.

The look made Azriel’s heart clench, but he simply curled a loose lock of her hair around his finger. No, he wouldn't dare curtail their ridiculous sex life. Not when it granted him such gifts as this.

Still, he yanked, relishing the strangled moan he earned in response. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Cassian hummed thoughtfully, palming the head of his cock. “I guess we’ll have to keep apologizing then, Nes.”

The thought reverberated around Nesta’s skull, even as Azriel’s hand in her hair—so rough, so gentle—and the cool kiss of his shadows against her neck drove her to distraction.

*I guess we’ll have to keep apologizing then, Nes.*

From some place outside of her body, she watched the hard, beautiful corner of Azriel's jaw clench.

How many ways could she apologize? How often could she and Cassian make such an apology necessary? She would be on her knees begging Azriel’s indulgence day in and day out. And when her knees got tired—

If that was her fate, so be it. She’d live the rest of her life in happy, mindless bliss pressed between her two Illyrians. She could already feel her arousal dripping down her thighs at the thought, her pulse pounding out a hard rhythm at their apex.

She let her breath rush out of her, and she rested her forehead on Azriel's thigh. Oh, *so close* to the thick outline she could see against his leathers, but his hand was still in her way. Her mouth watered.

“Alright.”

A rush of proud lust that wasn't her own washed over her, and she moaned. The cock just inches from her eyes and the thick band of muscle beneath her cheek both twitched.

"You heard the lady, Az," Cassian said behind her.

She also heard the slow wet rasp of skin on skin coming from his direction and shifted one of her legs until she sat on the heel of her foot, desperate to relieve some of the pressure between her legs. Azriel tugged again on her hair, sending yet another shock down her spine.

When she looked up, he shook his head, popping the last button on his trousers and unsheathing himself entirely. "I hope you aren't planning on touching yourself while you apologize."

But Nesta hardly heard what he was saying. The outline through his trousers didn't do him justice.

His cock, hard and gently curved up against his stomach, was the biggest she had ever seen.

A brief, hysterical thought about wingspans flashed through her mind. Amusement glimmered within her somewhere from Cassian's direction, probably in response to the absurd wave of sheer, panicked *want* that had Nesta rocking on her heel.

All she could see was rich brown skin. So much of it.

Azriel was *big*. That was the only word she could think: a simple, astonished *big.*

Not much longer than Cassian, if at all, but the difference in girth was obvious. Nesta wondered for a moment if she might even get her lips around the head. Her hands would get a workout tonight, because there was no way she could take him in her throat without practice. Lots and lots of practice.

She curled her fingers around the strap anchoring Truth-Teller to Azriel's thigh and took a breath.

"Come here."

The hand abandoned her hair, and Azriel gathered both of her wrists in one broad hand, directing her upward until she had no choice but to stand. Her lips pursed as the distance between her mouth and his cock grew, deep disappointment welling, but Azriel merely gripped her around the waist, turning her until she faced Cassian, and then pulled her back onto his lap. He deposited each of her hands on the arms of his chair, trailing his own upward, skimming over her breasts to her neck. The moment she settled against him, the other grasped one of her thighs and spread her apart, hooking each of her knees around his legs to keep her open for him.

"Surely you didn't think I would let you suck my cock tonight, Nes?"

Only the thin cotton of her dress remained between her ass and the heated, throbbing length she felt pressed against it. She shifted, testing the position, and the hands on her thighs came down like vices to keep her in place.

"None of that," Azriel warned, his voice low and dangerous. "Do you like it when he bites you?"

His thumb circled a spot on her neck where Nesta knew Cassian left a mark, and she felt the shadows there dissipate.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Az lower his head, bare teeth so white they seemed to shine with warning, and bite that same spot. He lathed his tongue over her, sucking hard, and she couldn't... She couldn't...

Azriel let her go.

Across the room, Cassian's eyes were dark as Az fisted bunches of her skirt and lifted until the front of it was around her waist, exposing Nesta to their audience of one. Cassian worked his own cock rapidly, hips shifting and crimson Siphon glinting with each pass, and he paused to flash a crooked, conspiratory smile. Nesta couldn't tell if it was for her or for Azriel.

Hands rougher and colder than Cassian's grasped her bare legs. They traced meandering paths from her knees to the apex of her thighs, resting in the creases between her sex and her legs.

He squeezed, and Nesta’s head spun.

"Relax, *sweetheart,"* Az breathed in her ear, dry and mocking. Nesta let herself melt, dropped her head back onto his shoulder, tilted her neck until she could look at him. Az was watching her with lethal attention. "Good girl."

Almost at odds with his hard voice, his hands squeezed her again. Gently, fondly. Reassuringly.

Gods, she couldn't breathe. The bodice of her dress strained against her ribcage, against her breasts, in this position. She was tangled in the best way, trapped in a web of her own making.

The cool shadow around her neck writhed as the first finger dipped into her, and she gasped. Across the room, Cassian groaned.

Az circled her clit with that finger slowly, patiently, building the heat inside her until the flames licked at her throat, her ankles. When she began to tremble, he shifted, cupping her with his whole hand until the fire banked and she calmed. The whole time, Cassian stared, molten desire and longing written across his beautiful face.

Again and again and again Azriel did this, until her wetness dripped down into her skirt and he hissed as it soaked through to his cock.

And Nesta had an idea.

She unclenched one hand from where it was gripping the arm of the chair, reaching behind her for that teasing, terrifying length pressed against her ass. It was hot and silky and *big* in the palm of her hand, and the topmost layer of skin shifted with her as she stroked downward, testing, exploring...

*Smack.*

Azriel's full palm came down on her sex, and she yelped at the shockwave it sent ringing through her entire body. From neck to ankle she trembled.

"None of that," he growled, but he didn't remove her hand from him. He shifted his hips upward, thrusting into her fist—and thrusting her even harder into his next punishing slap. "If you needed something to occupy yourself, you should have asked."

It seemed her distraction reset his internal clock, whatever well of patience he drew from filled again as he started his game with her clit again. He had begun to stopp, she learned, whenever she *moved* her hand instead of merely gripping him, which became harder and harder not to do as she got closer and closer to coming each time.

When Nesta thought she might lose her mind, he abandoned that delicious bundle of nerve endings entirely, venturing lower. The tip of one finger dipped inside her, testing... And then two, and then three, until Nesta felt a different, deeper burn as he stretched her. She dared a glance downward; the band of his Siphon was soaked, the entirety of his hand wet and shining with her slick, and he was buried in her to the third knuckle, twisting his wrist and forgoing her clit entirely.

"Az," she murmured, blinking at the sight.

Azriel hooked his chin around her shoulder, watching with her as he found the sweet, spongy spot inside and curled his fingers upward—hard. Her body jerked.

"Have you ever come just from this?" he asked, curious and conversational, pressing into that spot again.

With some unknown reserve of self-control, Nesta tore her eyes from Az's hand and looked to Cassian, her cheeks hot. His teeth were sunken deep into his bottom lip, wings flexing with pleasure.

"Answer him, sweetheart."

"I've never, not... on it's... own," she gasped.

Azriel's hand froze.

*"Cass..."* He sounded disappointed.

Nesta surged against that hand, desperate to please him instead.

"What?" Cassian grunted, shifting his hips as Nesta shifted hers. "I like to play with her sweet cunt while I fuck her."

A dark, disdainful laugh tickled her ear, and Azriel nosed the mark he'd darkened. "Don't worry, Nesta. You will."

And then it began. Az wasted no time pressing back into her. The steady campaign to keep her on edge was over; this was an all-out assault against that spot inside her. Nesta tried to tell him when it began to overwhelm her, tried to shy away as her muscles tightened and tightened and tightened, but the shadow around her neck simply shifted, cooling her overheated cheeks. Az grunted when her hand flexed around him as the tension within her *snapped.*

This climax was like nothing, *nothing*, she had ever felt, deeper within her than ever before, no outside sensation to distract from the way she clenched around Azriel's fingers, the way her entire core seemed to draw him in before coming completely undone. She heard more than felt the splash of liquid against the flagstone floor, both Cassian and Azriel cursing as they came in tandem, her own voice broken and whining wordlessly for...

Something.

Time passed as her head lolled against the shoulder behind it, a sharp metal buckle digging into her skull. Azriel's warm arm came around her, shifting until she was no longer spread open around his legs, but draped across his lap instead. Her skirt was tugged and rearranged until she no longer felt the wet spot on it, used to dry her dripping sex and her hand, but she watched as Azriel lifted his own scarred, dripping hand to his mouth and licked it clean, eyelids fluttering.

Had he always had such beautifully thick eyelashes? Nesta was jealous.

Azriel held her and held her and held her, shushing her when she began to shiver, wrapping a blanketaround her shoulders. She breathed and felt him breathing beneath her, and the cord around her chest went deliciously slack and warm with affection.

Cassian chased the dawning sun, flying into the horizon until the light blinded him. Then, he banked, turning to chase the final threads of night back to the mountains, to Velaris. He circled the city, higher and higher with each pass, and swept past the dark windows and carved balconies atop the tallest mountain.

Twin threads tugged at his chest. One, bright and new, thrumming with possibility and anticipation, and the other... nearly as old as he was, worn like the tattered edge of a favorite blanket, unnoticed until he was tangled in it.

He dove.

The river house was sleeping when he landed in the garden, but one window was still bright. Cassian let himself in through the kitchen, where a rising mass of dough ready to be kneaded and a bowl of washed fruit sat waiting for breakfast.

His brother looked up when he entered the study, violet eyes ringed by dark circles. For the first time in months, Cassian didn't have it in himself to pity him.

*Fucking liar.*

He would never hear a word against Rhys, never stand by when his High Lord's name was slandered, but for once... He didn't stop the vicious, hungry little boy that had always lived in the back of his mind from snarling at the sight of him.

Cassian threw himself down onto the loveseat in the study and crunched into the apple he grabbed on his way in, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

"A little birdie told me you beat the shit out of Az a few weeks ago, Rhysie."

# Chapter Six

Rhys pushed his chair back from his desk.

"I didn't beat the shit out of him. I threw snowballs full of ice at him, and he threw rocks back at me." He thumbed a spot on his jaw, a black scowl written on his face. "And I wouldn't have to resort to such childish measures if you and Nesta would get over yourselves."

Cassian burned with the urge to fight, to punch and grapple and go for blood. He barely restrained himself as he bit out one word.

*"What."*

"Azriel. I caught him the night before Solstice trying to get into Elain's bed while *you* were in Nesta's," Rhys imparted this news with a snarl that bared his teeth at Cassian, every word dripping with venom. His eyes glittered, and Cassian could read the smug, silent *See? Now can you beat his ass* with *me?* in them.

Cassian swallowed back his own fury while he took another loud bite of the apple. He chewed slowly, giving the bloodthirst in Rhys's gaze a chance to cool. When it didn't, he double-checked his mental shields and held up a placating hand.

"Rhys, he's been panting after Elain for years now."

Rhys's tattooed hand slammed onto the desktop, an ear-splitting *CRACK* cleaving the air. *"Exactly!"*

The desk’s wooden veneer shattered under the force of that blow, and dark waves of power poured off his brother's back.

*Mother's tits.*

Rhys stood and prowled around the ruined desk, baring down on him, but Cassian didn't bother to push himself up from his lazy sprawl across the loveseat. If Rhys wanted a fight, he would get it, but Cassian needed to keep his head about him if he wanted to get anything out of Rhys when he was in a mood like this.

"Elain already has a fucking *mate,"* Rhys growled.

His brother's words were hard, cruel, and utterly unyielding. *Elain already has a fucking mate,* and that was that. The Cauldron may have bound Elain and Lucien, but Rhysand’s word made it law.

It was exactly the sort of unchecked arrogance that dug irritating claws into the nods of Cassian's spine, the same pompous entitlement that never failed to make him want to duel with Rhys as a youngling.

He let the flames of his anger burn bright and hot for just a moment, and then he forced it to cool, imagining Nesta's frozen silver flames washing away the heat in his veins.

He gave a nonchalant rustle of his wings. "We all know Lucien isn't getting anywhere with her."

Rhys held up a single, self-righteous finger that shook with rage, his face twisting into a beastly snarl. “I don’t give a shit about Lucien Vanserra.”

The temptation to snap that finger off was strong, and Cassian found himself idly imagining what he might do if Rhys were only a few feet closer. He flipped the thought around in his mind like he might the hilt of his sword in battle, desperate to shake off some of the excess energy rattling his bones.

He shrugged. "Then why not Az, if that's what Elain wants?"

"Why not Az?" Rhys repeated, jerking back. He composed himself quickly, chuckling with droll disbelief, as if the world was upside down and he was the only one left upright. A hand still trembling with fury combed through his inky hair before he made tight fists of both and shoved them deep into his pockets. "Why not Az, Cass? Really?"

“Why not, Rhys? What's your issue with him?" Cassian set aside his half-eaten apple and returned his feet to the floor, bracing himself. "Say it."

Another consciousness brushed against his mind, razor-tipped talons prodding at Cassian's shields of sinew and bone and Illyrian steel. They were gentle, almost heartbreakingly so, and at complete odds with the ferocious power still rippling off of Rhys and staining the study with impenetrable darkness. There were no playful stars to be found in it tonight.

Cassian didn't open his shields.

His brother sneered, looking out the window in the direction of the House of Wind with unforgiving eyes. *"Azriel* already has fucking mates."

The bonds pulled taut as if they knew they were the topic of conversation, and Cassian stroked down the golden one, feeling for the soul at the other end. Sleeping, deeply, just as he and Azriel left her after helping her change into a warm nightgown. The other, insubstantial and still unsnapped, remained just beyond his reach.

Cassian took a breath and spoke words that reopened wounds that had just barely begun to scab over in the past few weeks. "So? If Az wants to sleep around—"

Rhys squared his shoulders. "You would endure that again? Really?"

Keeping his gaze steady, Cassian sucked his teeth and shrugged.

"Setting aside the fact that Elain is Feyre's sister..." Another pulse of dark magic filled the air, and Rhys's mental voice reverberated against Cassian's shields like a battering ram. *My mate. His High Lady.* "And the fact that he could very well call the Autumn Court down on our heads, Azriel wants to do more than *sleep around."*

Cassian kept silent, his eyes locked on Rhys.

Rhys made a face and spat the next words out like a particularly shocking sip of turned wine, "He's obsessed with her."

The wounds opened deeper, and Cassian shoved the fresh hurt down. He thought whatever Elain and Azriel shared was simple lust—something brought on by proximity and friendship rather than any deeper entanglement.

But if Az was still determined to chase Elain's skirts after bedding Nesta... If he wanted more than a night's pleasure with Nesta’s little sister…

It would get messy.

*Bloody.*

He scrubbed a hand over his face. Nesta hadn't seemed to detect any bond last night, and he doubted Azriel felt anything at all yet. But what *would* she do if she knew about it? If she knew Azriel was her mate and that he might want her sister instead?

Suddenly, he remembered with shocking clarity how Elain and Nesta worked together so seamlessly to rid the King of Hybern of his head. At the time, he had been wildly impressed and madly in love and suffering from extreme blood loss. Now, though...

Shit.

Cassian sighed, turning back the covers of the bed he had made and preparing to lie in it.

"And you know this because...?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter." Rhys sliced a hand dismissively through the air. The darkness fell away, and the gentle glow of the faelight lamps that dotted the study was blinding as it came back into focus. "Their little flirtation has gone on for months, and I was fool enough to let it. I thought he would move on when he realized..."

"It does matter, Rhys." The correction was sharp, immediate, and Cassian ignored the warning look his High Lord flashed at him. He grit his teeth. "It does matter, even if he doesn't move on. Even if he never realizes it."

Rhys picked a bit of lint off his sleeve and flicked it away. "Cass..."

Cassian shook his head. "No. 'To defend, to honor, to cherish.' *Your* words. *Your* Court of Dreams. You used to trust Azriel, Rhys. You used to let him get away with murder. What happened to that?"

His shoulders were tight, and the furious indignation building beneath his breastbone made it hard to breathe. Whether it was at Rhys's obvious suspicions regarding Azriel or some deeper betrayal... He didn't know. His Siphons began to glow, casting crimson light that slashed across the shelves lining the room in harsh, uneven lines.

"Azriel has become a threat to this entire court, and he doesn't just have a duty to this court now. He has a duty to his mates. To *you*. Setting aside the situation with Autumn, what part of taking Elain to bed at your expense, at Nesta's and Elain's, is honorable?" Disgust etched itself onto Rhys's features, and he waved a hand at Cassian. "To defend: What kind of brother would I be to you or to them if I let that happen?"

Cassian scoffed, but tucked the confirmation, the knowledge that Rhys also saw the bonds, that this was *real,* safely away in the chambers of his heart.

And all this brotherly concern… Where had it been for Nesta a year ago? Where had it been just weeks ago, when the same arrogant piece of shit who once left Mor to die in slow agony amongst the rotting leaves of Autumn bartered for Nesta's hand in marriage?

"I need defending now? Are you also going to stand there and tell me you cherish Nesta, too?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "You know, I seem to recall three months of listening to you agonize over your own wayward mate when she chose to marry another male, but you didn't insert yourself in *that* situation until she asked."

"That was different," Rhys snapped.

"You're right, it is. Feyre called for help. She needed you." Cassian leaned forward and let loose his own power, let the ancient Illyrian killing force settle over his tensed muscles, let his Siphons paint his face with blood. Let Rhys see the Lord of Bloodshed. "I don't."

"And the Autumn Court? What about that, General?"

"I think if you read the threat assessment Azriel and I ran on Lucien Vanserra, you would know it points to one thing: a reluctance to act. He can't even ask Elain to court him properly, but you think he'll challenge the Shadowsinger of the Night Court to a Blood Duel over her?"

"We can't take that chance. We don't have the resources for war with another court after Hybern, not with Koschei and Briallyn on the horizon. You of all people should know that."

"But you took that chance with the Spring Court when you kidnapped their lady."

"And now we're on the other side of that war, the Spring Court is in shambles, and we need Autumn to help bring Tamlin into line!" Rhys's eyes were hard, and he gestured at Cassian. "What of Az, Cassian? After he kills Elain's mate and tears out a bit of her soul in an effort to win her heart? Are you going to fight that battle for him, too?"

"That's different."

Rhys retreated to his desk, tracing a carefully disinterested finger along the crack in the surface. "Oh?"

Cassian bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"He's my mate," he snarled. "I get to fight for him."

Rhys was quiet for a long moment, staring at the portrait of Feyre hanging behind his desk.

"When did you figure it out?"

With Rhys a safe distance from him, Cassian leaned back in his seat, thinking. He had first felt it, in retrospect, when Azriel sunk his teeth into Nesta's throat over Cassian's mark. Indulging in another Illyrian’s mate was one thing, but that?

Cassian had wanted to seal his lips to Azriel's and share the sweet-salt taste of Nesta's skin between them instead of slaughtering the audacious bastard. Something deep within him had purred, contented at last, and Cassian had *known.*

He was certain, though, that he would find a million more moments just like it if he tried.

Five hundred years of them.

And when did he admit to himself what he’d felt? When Nesta curled into Azriel afterward without pushing him away, and the faintest hint of a new-old bond latched onto Cassian's ribcage as he sat breathless and stunned in the aftermath.

He shrugged. “Last night.”

Dull violet eyes stared blankly at Cassian for one long, interminable moment. Slowly, so slowly he thought Rhys might be fighting off some sort of nausea or dizziness, his brother melted back into his desk chair, tendons in his neck stretching and joints cracking as he leaned back so far that Cassian couldn't read his lips when he muttered something like *un-fucking-believable* .

Rhys covered his face with a hand, pressing his fingertips hard into the eye sockets. He opened and closed his mouth once, twice, mulling over his words before he finally spoke. “Five hundred years taking home the same females and not *once—”*

Cassian stared, unimpressed. “More like one-fifty, one-seventy-five, all totaled up. Thanks for that, *High Lord.”*

Rhys took one look at Cassian, who watched as a terrible, hysterical laugh bubbled out of his brother.

"I'm not taking the blame for *that.* Your female wouldn't be alive for centuries, and you have no clue the filth Montesere and the Autumn Court kept threatening to print—”

"What was there to expose? More Night Court debauchery? I'd think that would work in our favor—”

"Because you reacted so graciously when Nesta was the target of trash journalism, and Az has always been so gentle with the fools who leak our secrets," Rhys countered, quick and sharp as a whip cracking through the air, and Cassian bristled at the memory. "I was *trying* to assassinate my father's old Darkbringer commanders and install you and Az as my General Commander and Spymaster at the time, if you remember correctly. I couldn’t have the rest of the world thinking you’d gotten there with your cocks—”

"And we both know a female's not necessary to snap an Illyrian bond—"

His brother cut him off with a snort, a loud, unflattering sound that Cassian was sure Rhys had only ever made around Azriel and himself. Tears of mirth shone in the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, right. You and Az were always so romantic when it came to fucking one another."

"Dammit, Rhysand, shut up!" Cassian growled, breathing hard, but his burning lungs wouldn't fill. Feyre couldn't practice her magic for a few more months, but maybe Rhys had finally done something to piss her off enough to suck the air from the room and suffocate them both. “How did *you* know? How long have you known?”

Rhys held up both hands in a conciliatory gesture and then waved toward his temple with one, old shorthand for something between *I have eyes* and *I am a daemati, you useless fucking doorknob* .

Cassian clenched his fists, knowing... knowing that he wouldn't be able to stop himself if Rhys gave an unsatisfactory answer. His perception of time had shifted after a few centuries, decades turning to years, years turning to days, days turning to little more than a drop in their bottomless well of life, but even Cassian knew he wouldn't be able to forgive anything more than a few months. A few years, at most. His wings shifted, opened, and the muscles in his legs felt like coiled springs, ready to launch him across the room.

“Did you know..." Rhys paused, swallowing back the last of his humor, and his face turned serious. "Did you know that Azriel beat the shit out of *me* for threatening to kill Nesta that day before Feyre arrived to finish what he started? Fully feral. I had to crawl into his mind like a damn cockroach to get through his shields and convince him to stop. I didn’t touch the memory, but I don’t think he remembers much of it clearly. That's when I first guessed.”

Something bright and warm clicked into place. Concern for Az beat steadily in time with his heart, for what might happen to the male who always defended those he loved so ferociously when he was faced with a mating bond, but...

Perhaps it was his Illyrian blood talking, some instinctual remnant from their evolution eons ago...

But for a brief, blinding second, the walls of worry in his mind, the ones that grew taller and deeper with every encounter Nesta had with kings and Cauldrons, kelpies and undead armies, Lanthys and the Trove, Briallyn and Koschei... Those walls collapsed entirely, and he felt only relief that his mate, his Nes, would have an extra layer of protection bonded to her in the form of Azriel Shadowsinger.

That extra layer of protection came at the cost of Nesta and himself protecting Azriel from his own enemies and reckless impulses in return… But Cassian couldn't deny that he felt a sense of relief there too, knowing he would never need any other excuse to follow Azriel into danger again.

Rhys's eyes went soft, and a polite wall of cool adamant pushed gently at the edge of that relief. Cassian blinked, and Rhys removed the wall, leaning back into his chair as Cassian forced himself to relax and rebuild his mental shields.

When he was finished, Rhys nodded in thanks and continued. “So I had my suspicions. They were confirmed when you handed Nesta off to him without a second thought at the ball. You had very nearly gone feral yourself over her dance with Eris, and then you almost challenged the courtiers watching them to a duel."

Cassian nodded silently, thoughtfully, casting his mind back to that night. He had been struck dumb by how beautiful they were together, and his thoughts had been cutthroat, imagining what he might do if any Court of Nightmares swell possessed the nerve to ask her for a dance and separate them, before Rhys had cut in.

Having reined in his temper, Cassian looked around the room and imagined what spectacular feat Az must have managed when he was feral to make Rhys feel like a cockroach. If it were anything like his fight with Eris at the High Lords' summit before the war.

When he cast his eyes to the corner behind the desk, where the edge of one shelf was dented in the exact shape of his High Lord’s skull, Rhys winced.

Cassian whistled, low and impressed in spite of himself. “Shit.”

Rhys raised a judgmental brow at him.

Too judgmental.

Cassian crossed his arms. "Which of us fell in love with a human who'd just bathed herself in wyrm shit?"

"You didn't see the bone javelin. Completely untrained, broken arm, perfect form." The corners of Rhysand’s smug mouth tugged upward with fondness that didn't fade as cast a glance back at the dented shelf and said dryly, “I hope you realize you’re going to spend Azriel’s mating frenzy locked in the damn cabin.”

*If* there was a mating frenzy…

Cassian grimaced, but he couldn't help himself. "I think he'd prefer a dungeon, if we're planning for locks and chains."

Rhys barely smothered another ugly, sinus-clearing snicker behind a hand. "Done. Don't wake the beasts and the Hewn City is yours for the week."

"I can't make that deal with you, brother," Cassian said. Indeed, between Nesta's her unholy power and the strange fondness Azriel inspired in the monsters by virtue of being the only one to feed them, the beasts beneath the dungeons would be up and crawling at his mates' feet in a heartbeat.

His mates.

Quiet came over the study as he thought about them. About what they might become, all three of them, if they ever became anything at all.

His blood still raced, his temper a carefully controlled burn, but he wouldn't find his fight here unless he challenged Rhys to a round in the ring, and Rhys...

Well, he watched as his brother understood Cassian’s silence as a ceasefire, and Rhys's head slowly dropped until it was pressed to the desktop, exhaustion written across every slack line of his body.

He would make a lousy opponent, distracted and tired as he was.

It was he who eventually broke their silence, speaking as if all the weight of their brotherhood bore down upon him. "I am so godsdamned disappointed in you right now, Cass. Five hundred years?"

“Mhmm," Cassian pushed himself to his feet and tossed his apple into the wastebasket across the room. "Back at you.”

Rhys lifted his head, violet eyes suddenly alert and locked on Cassian.

"You're stressed, and you're tired, and you're making bad calls. *Bad* calls, Rhys. Between Feyre, and Nesta, and Az..." Rhys's lip curled, accusatory, and Cassian held up a hand before he could retort. "No, no. I went along with it. I let you make those calls, and I supported them. The difference is that I can see they're tearing us apart."

He crossed the room.

"They are, Rhys. You want me call it like I see it, so I'm calling it. The Night Court may not be suffering yet, but the Court of Dreams is. Mor is burnt out from dealing with Vallahan without any aid. Amren has been just as vitriolic and unpredictable as Nesta since losing her power, but unlike Nesta, she's gone completely unchecked."

Rhys winced at some memory, and Cassian nodded decisively.

"You're also forgetting that Azriel doesn't have a duty to Nesta and me, not if he doesn't make that choice, and the same can be said for Elain with Lucien. And Nesta... Nesta lives in terror of returning to Velaris proper like any one of the priestesses under that House, and your mate..."

Rhys snarled, quietly, softly, but there was no fight left in it.

"Then what do I do, Cass?" He cast his eyes over the stack of books and papers on his desk, and Cassian saw anatomical diagrams, terrible sketches of wings and pregnant bodies. "What do I do?"

Cassian sighed. There was no answer for that, not yet, but there was one thing he could offer Rhys.

"Stop the self-sacrificial bullshit. You already died for us once. Let us help you. You don't pay us to train all day and look pretty, so get your shit together and then *delegate,* High Lord. If you keep this up, I'm binding your wings and hauling *you* back to Windhaven like a runaway youngling."

Rhys's fingers tapped over the medical diagrams to a stack of papers atop an Illyrian leather satchel, all windbeaten and weathered from the journey into Velaris. Cassian snatched it up and away.

"Good. I'll let Az know to expect Nuala and Cerridwen with whatever reports you're keeping from him tomorrow afternoon, and they will organize with Mor. Now..."

Cassian tidied the papers and tucked them under his arm, reaching out to clasp Rhys's shoulder with one hand.

“The bonds might not have snapped yet, but as Az’s *fucking* mate..." Cassian snarled, and he tightened his grip on Rhys's shoulder and bent low over his cracked desk, flaring his wings. Rhys's hands curled into fists, his own wings twitching open in response. “And as Nesta’s *fucking* mate. Back the *fuck* off.”

He executed a perfect about face and marched for the door.

“How are you going to tell Nesta?” Rhys asked.

Cassian paused beside a decorative pedestal next to the door. He lifted a blown-glass orb off of it, some useless trinket pilfered from the shops in the Rainbow, and tested its weight. It was pretty, flecked with bits of silver that looked like constellations, and he'd put money down that it was Rhys or Feyre's star map.

He spun and hurled it at Rhys’s head.

The orb disintegrated into dust with one lazy wave of Rhys’s hand, as anticipated.

Cassian didn't bother to stifle the growl that clawed out of his throat. “I say this with all the love in the world, brother: *Back. Off.”*

When he finally made his way out, Feyre was in the hallway in leggings and one of Rhys's faded old shirts, her hair mussed and a hand bracing her rounded belly. Her eyes were bleary, offering up no doubt that they had woken her, either with their noise or some other disturbance through the bond she shared with Rhys.

Suddenly, Cassian felt very, very guilty.

"Cass? What's all this? Is Nesta alright?"

He took her by the shoulders, dropped a kiss on top of her head, and slipped past. "Everything's fine, Fey."

"But..."

Cassian shook his head.

"Everything's fine. I promise."

Cassian was in his office chewing on a crust of bread when Nesta entered and shut the door behind her, leaning back against it. She was already in her leathers, ready for training, and she looked shellshocked.

He set aside the paltry remnants of his breakfast blindly and pushed away the tedious paperwork from the Blood Rite Commission.

"Nesta?"

Pale eyes, more silver than blue this morning, stared back. She didn't respond, only furrowed her brow at him.

Raw anxiety tightened his throat. Cassian rose from his chair, his arms already reaching for her, pproaching slowly, cautiously.

Was this it?

Had he been too hasty turning a fantasy to reality? He knew—he *knew, dammit—* the habit Nesta made of divorcing intimacy from sex; hell, after the last few months he'd say he knew it better than she did. Now, with a secondary bond in play and sand dripping down through the hourglass…

He wrapped his arms and wings around her, burying his face in her hair.

Mother damn it all, she still scented of Azriel beneath the floral notes of her soap. Any priestess with a nose who came within five paces of her during training would know something happened.

His mind raced, spiraling further and faster with each turn, until all that was left was a horrified chorus: *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

His own voice, distant, from a thousand paces, asked, "What's going on, Nes?"

But instead of shoving him away, she melted into his embrace. A soft hand curled around his bicep.

"The sheets smelled like Azriel this morning."

Her words carried a mix of emotions down the bond. The molded, rotting thread of disgust with her fae physiology twisted his stomach; it made an appearance every morning as Nesta carefully avoided touching her arched ears while she pinned up her hair. Familiar unease tugged at his heartstrings, likely borne from the vulnerability of falling asleep in Azriel’s arms.

"He laid down with us for a few minutes last night. Wanted to make sure you got to sleep before he left," he told her, tracing the long center seam of her leathers down her back. "Is that alright, sweetheart?"

Nesta was quiet for a long moment, her face buried in his chest, and he imagined he could feel the cogs of her mind ticking against his breastbone.

"Is it alright with you?" she finally asked. For once, her voice was so small and uncertain it made him want to... Gods, he didn't know. Fight a hundred wars. Buy her a thousand Symphonias. Build a bookshelf for every room in the House and fill them all to bursting with her smutty romances. Spend his last coin commissioning a music hall unlike anything Prythian had ever seen for her, where she could dance to live music every night.

He didn't hesitate. "Yeah, Nes. Az and I have shared plenty of tents and bedrolls over the years."

She had been fast asleep by the time Azriel deemed her fit to move. It was as Cassian said: Az stayed until he was sure she remained asleep through the transition from his lap to their bed, where he ensured she was warm and snugly cocooned beneath Cassian's wings before disappearing into the shadows.

The shadowsinger's diligence in taking care of his partners, making sure they came down gently and safely, was the stuff of quiet legend in the nightlife district of Velaris. It was why Cassian felt comfortable letting Azriel take over last night, though truthfully, he had been too floored by the twin bonds pulling at him to do much more than hand Az a blanket and follow his directions.

"But not with your..."

Cassian buried his nose in Nesta's hair, seeking out whatever calm he might find in the scent of her lavender soap. He knew the word she was avoiding, the label she tiptoed around. It gutted him every time.

And thinking of being gutted brought him right back around to thinking about Azriel.

Another loud, resounding *fuck* ricocheted off the walls of his mental shield. Rhys had been right; he had no clue how to tell Nesta, no clue how to introduce her to the intricacies of the Illyrian mating bond that he thought his High Fae mate wouldn't trigger, but he needed to do it before the bond with Az fell into place for her.

"I'm sure Az enjoyed the switch up. I've been accused of hogging the bedroll plenty."

Finally, she pulled back to look at him, dislodging him from her braid.

"I think Az and I can agree on that," she said. A slight smirk played about her mouth; although he knew her teeth and tongue were wickedly sharp behind it, her eyes gleamed with something kinder, something someone less familiar might miss entirely.

Like he'd flown into a mountainside, everything stopped. The lingering panic drained, and Cassian's mind went quiet, calm. He loosed a relieved breath that carried the tension from his shoulders out with it and bent his head to kiss that smirk.

Nesta poked him in the side. "You know, I hadn't pegged him for a cuddler."

"He's usually not," Cassian said with a huff of laughter, removing his lips from the corner of her mouth. "But I'm guessing that's a point in our book. I told you he liked you, didn't I?"

Nesta pursed her lips. "Did you ask? What’s been bothering him, lately?"

He mastered the urge to sigh. "No."

Nesta shoved him off of her with a dramatic roll of her eyes. She bent, giving him an incredible glimpse of her ass, and scooped up a crumpled sheet of paper from the floor beside his desk to throw at his head. Laughing, he snatched it out of the air.

"Was he still in his leathers?" Her nose wrinkled, clearly thinking of the mess she'd made of them. Her eyes went distant, dark, and the twinge of desire down the golden thread slung between their souls left Cassian no doubt that she was reliving the breathtaking conclusion of her night.

He couldn’t blame her. About every five minutes or so, he found his mind drifting off to think of it, too. He prided himself in making her come entirely undone, but he had never seen her do *that* . Still, to bring it up now would either embarrass her or make them late for training.

Instead, he simply mimed tapping his Siphons, shaking his head. "Just his civvies."

"What, so he only leaves the leathers on while he—"

"Oh yes, Nes." Cassian spun the ball of paper into the air and caught it again. Anything to redirect the blood he felt making its way south at Nesta's curious look. "He tends to do that."

Bright, white teeth sunk into Nesta's bottom lip, and Cassian groaned. In two steps he was beside her, herding her with an arm around her waist, until he was once again sprawled in his seat, this time with his pretty mate— *just* one *of his pretty mates,* he thought rather deliriously—perched on his lap.

He bounced her on his thigh, and she grinned and smacked his chest as her eyes scanned his office curiously, wordlessly.

He followed that gaze. She rarely came in here, likely because *he* rarely came in here, preferring to buckle down and power through paperwork and correspondence on a balcony or rooftop in the open air. The walls were lined with a veritable treasure trove of weapons that had come into his possession over the centuries, some ceremonial and gleaming, others heavily nicked and dull after years of brutal use. Several burnt-out crimson Siphons were framed on a shelf behind his head alongside a score of medals and awards; dim and cracked, they were utterly useless, but the damn things still held sentimental value.

He squeezed her waist. "See anything you want to try out, Valkyrie?"

She shifted on his lap, her scent shifting as she clearly remembered the last one she was settled upon.

"Maybe." Her gaze met his again, and she traced a slim finger around the collar of his leathers. Then, her attention shifted to a spot on the wall over his shoulder, her smirk shifting into interested, sharklike intent. "Is that a mace?"

Cassian chuckled. "You'll have to increase your weight training if you want to use that, sweetheart."

Nesta nodded thoughtfully, looking around again. He had no doubt she intended to do just that, if only to prove she could. He watched as her eyes caught on a set of hunting knives styled vaguely after Truth-Teller—a full decade of Azriel's sly Solstice gag-gifts after he found the dagger and became inseparable with it.

"I know you're jealous," he had jibed each year with an affectionate hand on Truth-Teller's hilt. "So just in case you were planning anything..."

Cassian took a bracing breath.

"What did you think of it? Last night?"

"Last night?" Nesta tilted her head until it rested on his shoulder. He could feel her stiffening beneath his hands, and the breath tickling his throat was too even. Mind-stilling. "I enjoyed it."

Cassian held back his sigh, willing himself to relax. Not to jump to conclusions like he wanted to. Reticence was the name of the game with his Nes. With Azriel, too.

"How are you feeling about it today, sweetheart? About Az?"

"Fine," she said, shrugging. "I'm only sorry I fell asleep."

Cassian chuckled with disbelief. "Sorry? Nes, I think that's the best compliment you could have paid Az last night."

He would be surprised if Azriel *wasn’t* unbearably smug about wearing Nesta out so thoroughly during training this morning.

An elegant fist made contact with his gut, and Cassian pretended to be winded by the hit, catching Nesta's hand and pressing his lips to her reddened knuckles.

"I meant that he's been in a better mood lately, but sometimes he still looks so… morose. I could practically feel it on him when he first walked in on us last night," she said. "I wanted to know why."

That was... heartening, Cassian thought, even though their plan was utterly useless now that Rhys had come clean about his tampering in Azriel and Elain's affairs.

… *Affair?*

Cassian curled his fingers around Nesta's hand, seeking what comfort he could in that small touch.

"I told you it would be slow going with him, and I don't think one night of pillow talk would make much of a difference. But..." He leaned back until she sat up, meeting his eyes. He wouldn't keep this truth from her, at the very least. "I don't think we need to keep pursuing getting answers from him that way, sweetheart. I didn’t ask Az, but I saw Rhys this morning. He told me what happened between them. It's been dealt with."

Disappointment flooded the bond, drowning out Cassian's lingering satisfaction at the memory of throwing that orb at Rhys's head. It was followed by a wave of taut, unsettled worry.

"Well? What is it?" Nesta asked.

And as if sticky, acrid tar coated his throat, the words wouldn't come.

Nesta deserved to know. She would *want* to know. He had learned that hard lesson from the vote over letting her know about the weapons she’d made at the blacksmith’s forge.

But she couldn't even acknowledge their own bond, snapped and golden as it was, regardless of how adept she was becoming at using it to communicate with him. What would she do if she learned that she likely had a second preparing to latch onto her? Learned that she didn’t have a mystical, civilized High Fae mating bond like her sisters, but two untameable Illyrian bonds…

What would that do to her?

And what would it do to Az, if he were rejected before his mating bonds fully manifested?

Cassian had known Nesta was his mate from the moment he met her, and the memory of rejection after rejection still tore at him, even as she sat on his lap, their souls as entwined as their hands, her heart promised to him. How would he have taken it if Rhys and Azriel were both happily mated instead, and he were the one on the outside looking in, his soul dragging him toward his brother's mate? If she shredded his bond before he knew it existed?

Did it make him a horrible male to keep it to himself a little longer?

He pressed another kiss to her hand and said, "Nes, if I knew it wouldn't hurt someone, I would tell you. But I can't right now."

Silver flickered in her pale eyes, and the temperature of the air surrounding them dropped by several degrees as she asked sharply, "Someone? Who?"

"Someone," Cassian said. He curled a warm hand around the back of her neck, the only bit of skin peeking out of her leathers aside from her hands and face. Her skin was cold. "Maybe Az. Maybe... someone else. I don't know."

Soon. *Soon.* He would find a way to ease her into it and tell her soon.

He had to.

Still, he felt like a coward.

Nesta's mouth turned down in a moue of displeasure, and he pulled her closer to him as the temperature dropped again.

But, for now... He cleared his throat.

"You know, we don't need an excuse to do it again, right?" he asked. Silver eyes turned toward him, and he held her close, doing his best to convey something approaching a sense of calm. "We can just do it, if everyone wants to."

Nesta thought for a moment, and he gave that time to her in quiet understanding, and then the corners of her lips curled up slightly. Just slightly, but it made the new-old bond pull gratefully in his chest nevertheless.

"Well, if it won't give two ancient old bats any heart attacks..." she teased. Cassian jostled her again, and she laughed.

He committed the sound to memory, and then lifted her off his lap, unable to resist giving her pert backside a playful slap as she turned.

Nesta glared.

He smiled back. "We can talk about this more later. Go get some breakfast, Archeron. We have training in fifteen."

When Nesta rounded the corner into the dining room, she found Azriel already at the table, facing the window with his back toward her. He was slicing a bit of fried ham with expert precision.

"Come in, Nesta. I'm not going to bite," Azriel said, turning his head just slightly so she could see the barest hint of amusement in the corners of his eyes.

His voice was quiet, solemn as ever, and utterly lacking the authority he had used on her last night. Nevertheless, her toes curled in her boots as she remembered the hard edge to his quiet commands, the feeling of his fist in her braid, his fingers torturing her so slowly while she held the shaft of his cock in her palm...

Nesta swallowed, mentally grasping her jangling nerves with one hand and strangling them.

Azriel spread his wings as she came up behind him, keeping them carefully out of reach.

"I don't know about that," she said tartly. "I have the bruise to prove it."

The shadows fluttering around Azriel's wings froze in the air.

"Still?"

His voice was quiet, firm... Assessing.

Nesta, standing just behind his chair, folded her hands together atop his head and rested her chin on them. His scarred hands were as frozen as his shadows, clutching the knife and fork on either side of his plate so hard his knuckles were white.

"I heal quickly, but not as quickly as Illyrians," she told him. "Especially when two of them bite me in the same spot."

The only sign Azriel heard her was the sound of a sudden, quick breath from beneath her.

"Don't worry, it's hidden under my collar," she said, sinking her fingers into his inky hair. She relished the sensation of those coarse, thick waves tickling her skin. "Where did you get the cherries?"

Azriel's head tilted upward at her careful non-sequitur, as if he was trying to meet her eyes. "Excuse me?"

"The other day. You were eating cherries, but it's the middle of winter."

She scratched her nails along his scalp. The wing to her right shuddered before going stiff and still, but Azriel's shadows started swirling again. She tightened her lips to hide her smile.

Turnabout was fair play, after all.

"So where did you get them?"

Azriel's shoulders were tense, but a glance downward told her his eyes were closed before he blinked them open and said, "The Summer Court, obviously."

"Obviously," Nesta agreed, drawing little circles and stars with her fingertips. "But the Summer Court barely trades with the Night Court now."

Az let go of his utensils, arranging them in a perfect, polite formation on his plate for a mid-meal pause. It pleased Nesta. So few faeries had good manners.

"How do you know that?"

She shrugged, blowing a bit of air at a tendril of shadow that wiggled in front of her face. "I *am* still one of the Night Court's emissaries, according to Amren. I try to keep up."

Not entirely true. She read what she could when she came across a newspaper, availed herself of more than just the romances stored in the High Lord's personal library in the House of Wind, and listened whenever Rhys and Feyre deigned to discuss state matters in front of her, but she had been *persona non-grata* for over a year.

During that time, she hadn’t given a single ounce of thought to the affairs of the Night Court.

But lately, Cassian had been up in arms that the Illyrians couldn't get enough salt to cure their meats, and Nesta had quickly clued in on the fact that the Night Court couldn't keep up with demand without the sea salt that Summer’s expansive salt harvesting industry could provide.

Azriel made an impressed noise of assent and said, "I have a friend in Adriata."

"So you got the cherries from a friend in the Summer Court," Nesta confirmed, though she was uncertain whether Azriel's friend was an informant... or just a friend. He didn't seem to have many companions outside of the Night Court's Inner Circle, though she supposed she didn't either. "Where are you hiding them?"

"Where am I *hiding* them?" This time, the amusement was clear in Azriel's voice, and a short, dry chuckle followed his words.

"I asked the House, and it couldn't find any cherries. It just kept bringing me a dusty old jar of cherry preserves."

Over and over again, until Nesta threw up her hands in defeat, and the House turned that jar into a decadent cherry-chocolate gateau in apology.

"That's because I *ate* them all, Nesta." Azriel's wings and shoulders trembled with laughter, the sight pulling at Nesta until she was smiling too. She plucked a dark hair from his scalp as payment for his laughter at her expense, and a scarred hand, the same that had tormented and unwound her last night, lifted to catch her wrist. She suppressed a shudder of her own as he pulled it downward, toward the knife on his plate. "Your interrogation techniques haven't improved much. Might I offer you something more efficient?"

"Yes, well, the master has been too busy to teach me," she sniped, flicking the knife away.

His grasp on her gentled and then let go entirely as she reached for his plate instead, eyes locked on a half-eaten pastry. Poor manners or not, it was the only croissant in sight, and he owed her more than the hair she let drift to the floor.

"Do you like fresh cherries, Nes?"

Nesta tilted her head, resting her cheek on Azriel's soft waves. She lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "They're my favorite fruit."

A shadow reached out, wavering in front of her face until she made a face at it. It drew a line down her nose.

"Mine too. I'll ask my friend for extra next time we speak."

Nesta smiled, biting into the croissant. Little flakes drifted down into Azriel's black hair, only to be whisked away by an irate shadow.

A sharp whistle broke the silence.

"Archeron." Cassian stood in the doorway, and when she glanced up, he jerked his chin toward the stairs. He paused, shooting a strange look at Azriel, who had stilled again. "You too, Shadowsinger."

Nesta was still panting for breath after training, her aching limbs overheated and wobbly as gelatin in her leathers, as she followed the priestesses back down the stairs that led into the heart of the mountain. She was halfway to the entrance to the House when an arm wound itself around her shoulders. Her knees nearly buckled under the added weight.

"Steady there, Nes," Cassian's voice husked in her ear, and his arm shifted from her shoulders to her waist. "You did good today."

"I didn't end up in a pit today, you mean," she said, casting a hard look at him.

No, she hadn't ended up in a pit. She ended up tangled in some horrible, elevated rope contraption, like a fly in a spider's web, for ten minutes before Emerie figured out how to get them free.

She found herself slightly less inclined to drag him to one of their bedrooms after training these days.

Cassian chuckled and smacked a kiss on her temple. "I need to go to lllyria for a few days. Come with me?"

"A few days..." Nesta said, buying herself some time as her mind raced. "I think I've heard that one before."

He wanted her to go back to that horrible place, full of cocky warriors stuffed with machismo until it spilled from their ears?

Her mouth tightened. She couldn't see why Cassian liked it so much, why he defended them even though she had only ever seen him spurned and insulted. Emerie's insistence on staying, too, baffled her; Nesta couldn’t imagine how she had any peace there, surrounded by the same males who had clipped her wings and stolen her ability to fly.

A fresh course of shame flooded her as she remembered that she had been one of those insulting Cassian the last time she had visited. Her resistance to the early days of her botched intervention was fair enough, she thought, but she still harbored some guilt that Cassian's reputation may have suffered for it, knowing how hard he had to work to gain any ground in Windhaven.

"Come on, Nes," Cassian ushered her through the door and into the long hallway of the House, stopping to kiss her again when they passed the stretch of wall just outside the dining room that they had both become so fond of. "I think you'll like it, and if you come with, we'll be together if a few days turns into a week again. No training necessary."

Nesta bit the inside of her cheek, embarrassed but thankful that Cassian had handed her another excuse to refuse him. "But Gwyn and Emerie need me at training here. What about the course?"

"Az or Mor can winnow you back and forth with Emerie. We won't be staying too far from her," Cassian shrugged, and then his face lit up with a tentative grin. Strange, to see anything tentative on her brash... On her brash lover. "Hell, maybe you'll manage to convince Az to stay with us for a night or two."

"I doubt that."

"I think you'd be surprised. He doesn't like Windhaven, but he's always been willing to stay with me with enough incentive."

Nesta rolled her eyes. "And now the incentive is...?"

"You." They turned the corner to her hallway, and Cassian paused. He waited until she stopped walking too and took both of her hands in his own. "If you don't want him to come, he doesn't have to. But I would like you there, Nes. I know you didn't get the best introduction to Illyria before the war... or after. I want to show you my people, the way I see them."

His face was painfully earnest, and Nesta felt like she was staring into the sun, her reluctance melting under its rays.

She bit her lip, and Cassian's expression collapsed, just slightly.

"Okay," she said before that look could devastate her any further. "Alright. When are we leaving, and what do I need to pack?"

The tether tugged sweetly, and Cassian smiled, bright and wide. "Bare essentials, sweetheart. We'll leave after you bathe and get some lunch."

Nesta nodded, shoving back the discomfiting regret she already felt for agreeing, and then paused. Azriel had quietly winnowed Emerie away without any promise to be back for lunch or dinner. He was likely tied up handling state secrets she wasn't privy to, and she was fairly certain Mor was back on the continent now that Solstice and the New Year had passed.

"Are we flying?"

Cassian's smile grew.

Nesta winced. "I think we'd better skip the lunch, then."

# Chapter Seven

Nesta exited her bathing room in a cloud of steam, wringing the excess moisture out of her hair with a corner of her towel, and found Cassian sprawled out on her bed with one of her books, a small pack on the ground beside him.

She balled up her towel and threw it at his face.

“Shoes. Off.”

Cassian leered at her naked body, but removed his shoes from her bedspread and set them on the floor.

“Dress warmly, sweetheart,” he said, his eyes locked somewhere between her chest and her hips. “I can shield us on the way there, but it will be cold when we arrive.”

Nesta only hummed, but she heeded his warning, digging her warmest undergarments from her drawers—leggings, a long sleeved tunic, and thick socks. The House rustled up a woolen dress, and she held it up for Cassian’s inspection.

It was something no fashionable citizen of Velaris or the Hewn City would be caught dead wearing, perhaps, but it looked like it would be warm and mostly waterproof; the long skirt offered the added benefit of acting as a blanket, and Nesta decided never to be one to deny herself such small, familiar comforts again— *especially* if she was planning to spend several hours in flight.

He nodded in approval. “Where are your leathers?”

“In the bathing room. Why?” Nesta followed him, only half paying attention as she donned the dress and tightened the laces holding the bodice shut. “I was going to leave them here and change before training.”

Cassian was already inspecting the various interconnecting bits and pieces of her leathers, unbuckling and dismantling parts that Nesta never bothered to separate on her own. He paused to nudge her boots toward her.

“You’ll want those,” he said, so she made sure her leggings were tucked into her socks and toed into them.

When she was done, he held up his spoils: the scaled chestplate that covered her from her collar to her hips, the sturdy bracers that she wore over her wrists and forearms, and the belt that slung across her waist, which Cassian or Azriel loaded with different weights before training each day to get her used to carrying a variety of weapons on it. She raised a brow at him, but he only smiled back, gesturing her forward so he could reassemble the pieces he selected on top of her dress.

It was a curious choice, but the leathers fit nicely over her dress. It didn’t escape Nesta’s attention that all of the seams aligned, as if they were meant to be worn like this.

“There you go,” he grunted when he finished tightening the last strap around her shoulders, shooing her out of the bathroom. “Pack up, Nes, I’ll be right back.”

Nesta made a face at Cassian’s back as he exited.

Bare essentials—she wasn’t entirely sure what *bare essentials* meant to Cassian. When she looked inside the pack beside her bed, she found only paperwork wrapped in a leather folio and a few sheathed knives. So she did her best, adding a new bar of soap, the Symphonia, the reading faelight, and the book she had been reading to the bag. She added several more when she tallied the pages left in the first against the prospect of spending more than a few days in Windhaven.

She peered into her drawers again and huffed.

All of her undergarments had disappeared save for the slinky nightgowns she had taken to wearing.

“Very funny,” she hissed at the House, but packed them anyway.

Her wardrobe was just as empty when she checked there, too, and she stared in silent bemusement until Cassian chuckled from the doorway.

She turned to glower at him.

“There are clothes in the Steppes, Nes.”

*“My* clothes aren’t in the Steppes, *Cass,”* she told him, crossing her arms.

“Your clothes are flimsy little bits of cotton. Not that I’m complaining,” he countered, grinning. “But you’d freeze to death before breakfast.” As if to punctuate his point, he shook a mass of fabric and fur at her. “Hold onto this for me while I fly?”

It was a cloak, she realized, made of wool thicker than her dress and dyed the same blue-grey as the winter sky outside. A ruff of silky white fur bordered the collar—clouds floating atop the backdrop provided by the woolen sky.

She reached out, unable to resist, running her hand over a bit of that fur. It slipped through her fingers like water, warm and smooth.

“Is this yours?”

“Technically it belonged to Rhys’s mother, but I doubt she’d mind.” His hazel eyes gleamed.

Nesta took a wary step back, dropping that sumptuous cloak like it had been set aflame. “And Rhys won’t?”

“No,” Cassian’s voice was softer now, his eyes locked on the cloak he still held out for her. He traced a neat seam with his thumb. “She gave it to me.”

“Oh?” Nesta wasn’t entirely certain what to say to that.

Cassian only shook the cloak out, holding it out for her again. There were cleverly concealed slits for wings in the back, buttoned shut securely enough to keep out any chill, and smaller openings for her arms, with more wide slits for pockets on each of the two front panels. Luxurious as the cloak felt, it was clearly an item meant for hard wearing, for working.

Nesta felt her chest tighten as she stared at the hem, much too short for a towering male of Cassian’s size.

He twirled a finger, and she turned.

“She took me in, you know that. When I was… nine or ten, maybe, I’m not entirely sure.” Nesta’s heart throbbed painfully, their golden tether aching, and Cassian’s lips landed on the crown of her head as heavy wool and fur settled on her shoulders. “Pretended to be pissed at Rhys for dragging home a stray after I’d won the shirt off his back in a fight, but she was treating me like one of her own within the week.”

Even speared as she was under Cassian’s watchful gaze, Nesta wasn’t able to resist lifting the fur collar to her face, rubbing it against her cheek. It had been long enough that the cloak smelled only of the House, not whichever Illyrian woman had worn it last.

“It’s amazing.”

Large hands on her shoulders turned her, and when she looked, Cassian looked satisfied, eyes half-lidded as he drank in the sight of her in her leathers and his cloak. A calloused thumb caressed her cheek, and then his hand was cupping her jaw as he pulled her in for a hard kiss.

“Pretty Nes,” he said, mostly to himself, when he pulled back, tracing the pad of his thumb across her lips. He cleared his throat, took the pack from her, and peeked inside. With a laugh, he nodded and lifted an arm for her. “Works for me. Let’s grab something to eat and get going before it gets dark, hmm?”

They made it to the massive balcony beside the dining room, two sandwiches Nesta knew she wouldn’t be able to eat wrapped in paper and stacked in one of Cassian’s hands, just as Azriel landed with enough force to make the floor shudder, shaking snow off of his wings.

He stared at Nesta for a long moment, his expression unreadable, before shooting a more pointed glance at the bag slung over Cassian’s shoulder.

“Going somewhere?”

“Devlon is putting up a fuss about who’s meant to be signing off on the novices who pass the Blood Rite Qualifier and riling up the other camp lords,” Cassian told him, stuffing the sandwiches into the pack. “Rhys had the paperwork buried under everything else on his desk. I had to go digging for it this morning.”

“Stubborn bastard,” Az muttered darkly, stomping snow off his boots. Nesta didn’t bother to hold back a snicker, and she saw the tiniest twist to his lips in response. Beside her, Cassian took a deep breath and rubbed at the bridge of his nose—as he often did when he was stressed, she was beginning to note. “I’m off to the Hewn City.”

At the reminder of that dark, underground territory, and, more specifically, whatever Azriel did there when he wasn’t working that Cassian wouldn’t tell her about, she felt heat blossom on her cheeks and drip down her throat, pooling beneath the layers and layers of clothing she wore. A shadow she hadn’t noticed peeked out of the collar of the cloak, testing the air beside her cheek.

Cassian’s nostrils flared, and then he chuckled. Nesta pursed her lips at him, but he only winked at her—or, perhaps, at the shadow.

Azriel’s dark eyes slid back to her, his jaw tight, taking stock of the cloak and the disassembled leathers she wore atop her dress beneath it. “I’m guessing you aren’t planning to winnow into Windhaven, then?”

“Can’t winnow where we’re going,” Cassian said.

Nesta blinked and opened her mouth, but the words dried up in her throat when she saw the look of boyish excitement that was plain on his face at the prospect of a long flight.

He was already bouncing on the balls of his feet, stretching his wings. The massive limbs extended out to the side, then over his head, back and forth in small wingbeats that stirred up short gusts of air. The light streaming in through the window caught in the membranes, turning them to shining, burnished gold, cut through with webs of long scars.

Though she knew where they came from, remembered feeling faint at the horrible sight of shredded, dangling membrane and pooling blood on the worst day of her life, she thought the scars that remained lovely.

Az raised a brow at the display, but he betrayed no emotion as he folded his hands together in front of himself. “Have fun.”

“How long will you be gone? I was planning to fly Nes to Emerie’s shop each morning so you three could winnow into training from there.” The large joint at the bent of Cassian’s left wing cracked, and he sighed with relief, letting both sag. “Otherwise, we’ll have to leave a note for Gwyn and the priestesses.”

Nesta dug an elbow into Cassian’s side. She wasn’t entirely sure Gwyn wouldn’t drive herself into the ground trying to complete the course without his supervision, and she didn’t want to take that chance.

“I’m not letting Gwyn run that course herself.”

“That’s what I like to hear, Archeron,” Cassian teased, chucking her under the chin. “Teamwork.”

As she batted his hand away, irritation itching under her skin, Az shook his head at them both and said, “Just tonight. I can be there for you tomorrow morning, Nesta.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Cassian knocked a wing against Azriel’s shoulder.

“He means ‘thank you,’” Nesta corrected, unable to suppress a smile at the unnerved look on Az’s face as he stared at the wing Cassian was shaking out.

Azriel took a deep breath, and the look disappeared as he surveyed her, a smirk turning up his lips instead.

“Keeping him on his best behavior?” he asked, swirling shadows ringing his fingers.

"Not a chance," Nesta told him as she breezed past, following Cassian to the balcony. She couldn't ignore the thrill of molten lightning in her veins when she caught Az staring after her, his eyes dark and intent.

If he had any inkling of the effect he had on her, he didn't show it as he nodded them off, stepping out of range of Cassian’s wings. “I’ll be expecting you both bright and early then.”

“Have we ever let you down?” Cassian asked as he scooped her into his arms, chuckling as Az rolled his eyes at them. The tether lit up with golden happiness, and he whispered in her ear as she got comfortable, “Considering round two, Nes?”

“Yes,” was all she said in return, hooking her arms around his shoulders as the shadow in the collar of her cloak drifted back toward Azriel and Cassian threw them into the sky.

The sun was low in the sky by the time they soared over Windhaven, which Nesta was only able to distinguish from the other camps they had passed by its sheer size. It stretched out beneath them, tents and squat cabins and pens full of bleating livestock dominating the mountainside. She prepared herself for the jolt of landing when Cassian dipped low enough to be seen, to hear grunting and the *smack* of skin hitting skin from the training rings at the heart of the camp, but he banked, beating his wings hard as they started flying against the wind.

“Where are we going?!” she shouted over the deafening sound of air catching in his wing membranes.

“You’ll see!” He grinned down at her, his eyes bright. “Not much farther!”

Cassian didn’t swoop or dive with her, not once, though she felt the temptation to ride the air’s currents in the way his muscles shifted and tensed around her.

No more than fifteen minutes could have passed before he began another smooth descent as a tight cluster of mountains blanketed with snow came into view. He circled the perimeter, slowly returning to the peak where they’d first approached.

In the valley at the heart of those mountains, a colorful ring of lights illuminated a glassy lake. More lights were scattered through the peaks, sturdy cabins of stone and wood nestled between ancient, ice-crusted pines.

It was a village.

Not a war camp, but… a village.

She didn’t have long to gawk; she sensed Cassian’s focus shift, his eyes locked on a single point within the trees on the only mountain without any lights on it. His wings started beating hard, and Nesta buried her face in his neck.

The vibration of his quiet chuckle tickled her cheek. “I’m not going to run us into a tree, you know?”

She scowled into his collar. “But you might turn us into a smear on the ground.”

“If I had to turn into a smear with anyone, I’d turn into a smear with you, Nes,” he purred in a low, seductive timbre, his hands tightening on her.

His muscles stopped shifting as his wings stretched one final time.

They landed hard enough to make her bones shake, but Cassian was gentle as he set her on her feet, keeping her anchored with his arms until she found her balance in the thick snow, glancing around at the pristine wonderland around them.

The long, reaching branches of the pines were bejeweled, dripping in icicles that sparkled like diamonds in the setting sun. Snow drifts as plush as the collar of her cloak softened the stony mountainside, downy and plump and as inviting as any enchanted faerie bed from the cautionary tales Nesta’s governess had once whispered in her ear at night. A glance through the thick trunks of the evergreens revealed a dozen other peaks, each one reaching toward a sky dripping with a million shades of dusk.

And behind her, alone on this mountain…

A cabin.

It was modestly sized and dark, no lights on in the windows or smoke drifting from the massive stone chimney, but she could already tell it would be magnificent when it came alive, warm and inviting in all the best ways. The logs that made up most of the structure shone golden against the sheets of pure white snow in the low light, and a full wall of thickly glassed windows reflected the wintry scene back at her. A long balcony populated with braziers, wooden furniture, and empty clay pots wrapped around the second story, drifting off into snow where the steep mountainside rose up to meet it on one end.

When she turned back to Cassian, her jaw long-since dropped, he was busying himself overturning another, larger brazier, tipping out the snow collected in its basin and stacking cut logs—from a pile tucked beneath the raised foundation of the cabin, she saw—atop it.

“Are we staying out here?” she asked, curling her arms around herself and eyeing the handful of squat, snow-drowned chairs around the brazier. The cloak he had given her was warm, but the brutal cold was beginning to seep through her boots and her socks and bite at her toes.

“No, Nes, I’m just letting them know I’m home,” he said, pulling a bit of steel and flint from a pocket on his trousers.

*Home.*

His voice was soft, fond.

Nesta turned, staring out across the air at the cabins on the other mountains. “They are so many of them…”

Those she *could* see among the trees were modestly sized compared to the sprawling human estates Nesta had grown up visiting and the towering townhouses—slim as they were—that lined the streets of Velaris. Each cabin was the roughly same size as the one behind her, two or two-and-a-half levels climbing the mountains like vines. There were scores more than there were in Windhaven, each one resembling something similar to the High Lord’s relatively luxurious cabin more than the squat, one-room structures, precariously leaning shops, and serviceable pup tents that populated most of the war camp.

Simple, but comfortable. A cabin like the one behind her would have seemed like an unattainable luxury just a few years ago.

She took a deep, steadying breath as the fire started crackling, and Cassian’s arm curled around her shoulders.

“What do Illyrians have plenty of?”

Nesta couldn’t answer. Most everyone in Velaris, even those in the High Lord’s Inner Circle, spoke of poor, impoverished Illyria with something caught between pity and distaste. But looking out at the vista in front of her…

“Timber, stone, strength, and time,” Cassian listed, ticking each one off with a finger. “It’s not uncommon for camp lords to send the novices into villages like this as apprentices for a few years to learn a trade and build some strength before they’re mature enough to start wielding steel and training in earnest.”

Nesta’s brows ticked upward, and she glanced at Cassian. At the thick curve of his shoulder beneath his leathers and the spread of his chest. She couldn’t imagine him needing to build any strength to weild the Illyrian longsword sheathed down his spine.

“I got stuck cutting wood for a carpenter.” He shrugged. “And don’t tell anyone, but the High Lord of the Night Court is a skilled stonemason. Was. It’s been ages.”

Nesta chewed on her lip. “Why all the tents in Windhaven then?”

“The novices,” Cassian said again. “Another reason I targeted Rhys when he first joined the camp; the rich little snot was living in a cabin, not a tent. Unless they have children, most from the recent batches of warriors fresh from their Blood Rites usually stick around in tents for a few years too, while they’re evaluated for assignment to a more permanent post. But, look…”

He pointed toward the heart of the mountain cluster, the valley with the frozen, glittering lake, and Nesta saw what she didn’t before. Tents, larger, rounder, and more spectacular than those in the war camps, glowed from the inside. Smoke rose up through holes cut in the tops, and little bits of life were scattered around them—fires pits and laundry lines and snowed-over garden beds.

Permanent homes.

“Some Illyrians do prefer tents. Say they feel closer to the wind in them,” he said behind her. His finger guided her eyes to one toward the far edge of the lake, draped in jewel-colored tapestries. “A seamstress, laundress, and weaver live there together. It’s unbelievable up close. I can take you to see it tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Nesta said distractedly, still peering down as a pair of heavily bundled winged children ducked out of a tent. One kicked powdery snow at the other, and the echo of laughter drifted up to her ears.

“Like it?” His breath was warm on her ear, voice cocky, but the hand on her shoulder was tight. Stiff.

She shook it off, turning back around to survey the cabin behind her with a more critical eye.

“You built yours at the top of the tallest peak?” she asked when she finally heard Cassian shake out his wings after a long moment, lifting a playful brow back at him. “You must think highly of yourself, General.”

“I *think* I’ll be the first to see a threat.” Cassian chuckled, his wings and shoulders relaxing, and pointed again; this time, at the other cabins across the valley. “The able-bodied warriors live on the high ground. Anyone trying to take the valley would have to climb the mountains or fly. By the time they make it past the mountains, they're as good as dead.”

“The village is warded against winnowing,” Nesta said, the pieces clicking into place.

“Exactly. For a few hundred paces on either side.” Cassian gestured to the setting sun to their left, and then behind himself. “We are on the southernmost peak—where, historically, most intruders into this area have come from.”

“Why here? Why not Windhaven?”

“I have a command tent in Windhaven—or the General Commander of the Night Court has a tent in Windhaven, it’s only technically mine—with a cot, and Rhys lets me use his mother’s cabin when I need some place larger since he cleared it out during the war. Both of those are for business, though; you’ll never get a quiet moment after the camp lords hear you're in residence. You’ll see soon I spend most of my days there knocking their heads together. But..." Cassian shrugged, looking almost bashful. "You accumulate a lot of stuff over the centuries, so I needed my own place. This is…”

One of the children in the valley shrieked, and Cassian’s satisfied smile melted into a hesitant grimace.

Nesta’s stomach swooped as she glanced back at the cabin. It was large. Large enough to be...

“A home.” Nesta swallowed. A home for Cassian’s family.

“I was hopeful,” Cassian said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Young... er. Back when I broke ground on this place—"

Nesta's eyes went wide, and she held up a hand. Cassian’s mouth snapped shut, and she hated the glimpse of the walls she thought she’d torn down building themselves back up behind his eyes. "You did all of this?"

"Illyria... It's not a kind place, Nes." Cassian cocked his head, and suddenly the deep drifts of snow looked unforgiving, and the icicles dripping from the pines as sharp as daggers. “Villages like this are populated mostly by wounded veterans, the elderly and infirm, widows, orphans...” His expression darkened. “Single mothers. People who aren't welcome or safe anywhere else in Illyria.”

"So you... established a village. Villages."

"I've been alive for a while, Nesta." Cassian's posture was perfect, spine straight, for just a moment, and then he shrugged. "If you hadn't noticed, I'm pretty close to the male in charge around these parts, too."

“Don't...” Don't *what?* Downplay this, whatever *this* was? More proof of Cassian's unrelenting goodness? Nesta still didn't know enough to know whether he was being humble, but she would bet on it. He swaggered and boasted about everything but his own achievements.

Her heart beat hard, like it would escape her chest, and she felt small as she waved at the cabin. "When did you build this?"

“Oh, centuries ago." The answer made the heavy feeling in Nesta's stomach lighten, and she knew Cassian could tell. He gave her a tight smile. "I update it from time to time, expand it when the mood strikes or I need to burn off some steam without punching anyone. I've spent a lot of time here since the war.”

Nesta saw what he wasn't telling her written on his face. He’d spent a lot of time here burning off steam generated by a very specific stressor.

"And," he hurried to say, waving across the mountains, "They kept up the exterior for me while we were all stuck under the shield in Velaris, but they weren't able to pass the wards to maintain the inside. I just finished the repairs."

"Fifty years…” Nesta breathed. “You were really trapped in Velaris for fifty years?"

It still seemed like a lifetime to her. She remembered very clearly thinking on the night of her twentieth birthday, huddled in that awful bed with her sisters as the last freeze of late winter and early spring chilled them to the bone, that she would be extremely lucky to see another forty.

Cassian gave her a shrug, as if he didn't entirely know what to say.

So Nesta nodded tightly, wrapping her arms around herself beneath the cloak. "So this is where Azriel comes with the right incentive."

"The right incentive is usually a hot meal and a promise that I'll shut up for a few hours," Cassian joked, more tension easing from him. A violent shiver wracked her body, and he pulled her back under his shield. It wasn't much warmer, containing only the warmth generated by his massive body.

"I think we might be able to provide something else to convince him to stay longer. I get the feeling I'll need all the body heat I can get," Nesta chattered out between shivers.

"Body heat," Cassian snorted, but his voice was warm enough to hold the chill at bay as he led her away from the overlook and toward the long staircase to the balcony. “Do you want the grand tour, sweetheart? Get the lay of the land before you start building a trap for your target?"

She nodded again, leaning into his side. Yes, she could imagine Az here, quiet as the forest surrounding them, a welcome refuge of shadow amongst the blinding snow. “If you tell me *Rhysand* built that chimney, I’ll make you eat snow.”

“Don’t you worry about that. He only provided the magic: cooling and heating, warding...” Cassian smiled down at her, a true, proud smile. “I built the rest.”

Looking back, Cassian had to admit that Nesta's self-control was impressive; she made it to his bedroom, perched over the second floor of the cabin with its wall of windows and the enormous hearth he’d built ages ago before she dragged him down to her level and made slow, devoted love to him that left him breathless and starry-eyed.

Not that he’d been expecting it, but her eyes *had* gone dark with arousal the moment they stepped through the front door. He’d spent most of the tour planning to take Nesta against whichever wall was closest when they finished.

The cabin was already magically warmed when they entered, but after checking with Nesta, he lit another fire in the hearth that took up most of the wide-open main room to beat back the rest of the chill weather that would descend on them come nightfall.

He tried to view his home through fresh eyes—Nesta’s eyes—as he led her through it. The entire cabin was all amber, soaring beams—big enough for “bats his size” to hang from, according to Nesta’s wry assessment. They held aloft the vaulted ceiling above a room packed with overstuffed leather couches, plush wool blankets and pillows he’d found in Velaris, and wide, intricately patterned rugs in every color of the rainbow—the Illyrian style, made by the weaver down below, Cassian told her when he caught her staring. The kitchen off to the side was simple, small, with a cozy nook just big enough for a handful of people to squeeze into for breakfast.

He didn’t tell her he’d built it with younglings in mind, daydreaming of the day the little hellions would climb all over it and build forts beneath the knotty pine table while he and his mates ate at the stools tucked beneath the counter.

That conversation could wait.

And then, beyond the kitchen: the windows. He had caught himself spreading his wings again, preening like a damn fool, when he watched Nesta subtly gape at all the windows.

It wasn’t evident from the outside, but every year or so he pruned trees around the cabin strategically, so that each and every huge window looked out into another airy vista over the mountains that made him feel like he was flying.

The second story contained all of Cassian's projects. One room, chock full of wooden furniture in various stages of completion had made her eyes go wide. Another, just like his office in the House of Wind, contained more weapons and bits of armor and the tools he needed to maintain them. A bathing room painted a mossy green color he liked with a shining, claw-footed copper tub made for bathers with wings.

The final room on that level was one of his newer projects, which he presented to Nesta with an uneasy weight in his gut. What had once been an unused guest bedroom was now empty, still smelling of fresh varnish, even though he’d tried to air it out before the snow in the mountains grew too frequent and thick.

All four walls were lined with row after row of barren shelves, a pair of window seats carved out before two small, round windows and tucked away behind by thick blue curtains.

More dreaming on his part, if he were being honest, and when he’d gutted the room and rebuilt it from the floorboards up, he hadn’t anticipated needing both window seats quite so soon.

But it was then, when Nesta was staring at those shelves he had built for her and he was overcome with the knowledge that at least one half of that dream had come true that he couldn’t resist anymore. He’d wrapped his arms and wings around her from behind and said, quietly, "Welcome home, Nes."

So, yes.

It *was* admirable that either of them had maintained the presence of mind to find a bedroom. That Nesta was the one to grab his hand, set off in search of a serviceable bed, and spend the next several hours showing him how much she adored the home he’d built for her made Cassian a very proud male indeed.

Azriel crept through the shadows in the dungeon beneath the Hewn City, slipping unseen past dripping stalactites and moaning prisoners. Only the beasts carved into the walls seemed to slink along with him in the darkness, peering hungrily into the cells as they passed.

Usually, he stalked these halls veiled in just enough shadow to make himself a sinister outline in the dim light. He let his boots click on the stone floors worn smooth by millennia of use so all could hear him coming, tracking the scent of terror seeping from the cells as it grew tenfold.

Today was not one of those days.

More of Eris's Autumn Court soldiers, this time floating off the Day Court's northeastern coast with some of the human queens’ sailors, had been found by a crew of Darkbringers running naval exercises. Their confused call for aid had come in just as he delivered Emerie to the threshold of her shop—and in just enough time for Azriel and Rhys to make it to the coast, wipe the incident from the Darkbringers’ minds, and winnow the Autumn Court soldiers and their human escort into the lowest and most secure cells without Keir’s knowledge.

But Rhys had denied his request to get closer to the queen’s palace, to try to see what Briallyn was doing shut up in there on her own, why she was sending ships into Prythian’s waters now. Instead, Azriel was commanded to waste his afternoon questioning their new prisoners. It was a dead end, he’d warned Rhys, but his High Lord hadn’t budged.

Frustrated and furious, all Azriel wanted was to jot down his notes—nothing, the Crown-enchanted husks gave him *nothing,* again, and the damned human sailors hadn’t given him much of use even after Truth-Teller became involved—before taking a long bath to wash off the taint of the dungeons.

And so, to avoid the clumsy spies Keir always left to track the Spymaster, Azriel concealed himself in the shadows as he climbed the two flights of stairs to his apartments.

They were located in the lowest level of the city—a gesture from Rhys's father that was once meant to be demeaning in an underground metropolis where getting as close as possible to the moonstone palace that crowned the mountain had been the goal. The sting had faded with time, since Azriel’s little suite of rooms was perfect for a spy coming and going from the dungeons anyway. No one ventured so low, so close to the real beasts below the mountain and to the trappings of social ruin without exceptionally good reason, which left him undisturbed and free to move about as he pleased.

He slipped through the shadows under his door, the wards Rhys laid centuries ago buzzing over his skin, foregoing the bedroom and bathing room in favor of continuing through the antechamber to yet another carved relief monsters and mayhem that dominated the opposite end of the space.

Azriel pressed a thumb into one of the beasts’ eyes, drawing up a crackle of cobalt power from the Siphon on the back of his hand, and the entire stone panel slid to one side on a well-oiled track.

The dim angles of his office came into view—a small, hidden annex where Nuala and Cerridwen were already flitting about when he stepped through the small portal.

The wraiths were busy, organizing various piles of papers and ledgers as they slid in and out of the shadows—collecting reports from informants throughout Prythian. Their hair and skin were so dark they nearly faded into the blue-black stone walls that sucked up every bit of weak light the faelights hovering above them put out.

"Cassian left a note for you," Nuala told him before he even left the shadows, pointing a long finger at a jauntily folded scrap of paper propped upright on his desk. Cerridwen glanced up, the whites of her eyes brilliant in the dark, and her mouth twitched upward in a feline smile.

Azriel said nothing as he laid Truth-Teller, still bloody, on the cloth he'd left out for it and unfolded the note. It was written on the official letterhead of the High Lord of the Night Court, and it was likely stolen straight off of Rhys's desk, because it contained Cassian’s urgent, knifelike scrawl, accompanied by three rough doodles: one winged male, smiling widely beside another male and a smaller female, both of whom were scowling.

*FILE YOUR REPORT.*

*CALL MOR HOME.*

*TELL RHYS TO GET FUCKED.*

*JOIN US.*

*- C*

Azriel let the smallest of disbelieving breaths leave him as he set the note back down, as if the concept of leisure time were unheard of.

For him, it very nearly was. He itched at the thought of taking breaks, loathed the nagging feeling of forgetting something important when he returned to the field after a few days without constant updates from his networks. His people were good, but he didn't trust that his spies would share every relevant piece of information that he might need unless he was breathing down their necks.

"I think he's right," Cerridwen said when he sat and picked up a pen. "You need a break."

"I think I didn't ask for your opinion," Azriel countered, but it was flat, cold without a bite. He didn't bother to look up from jotting down his notes, all in blessedly quick encrypted shorthand, from the Autumn Court soldiers.

The twins were quiet, shuffling a bit of paperwork back and forth and murmuring between themselves, and then it was Nuala's turn to speak. "It's just a few days."

Azriel frowned.

"If you're not careful, your face will freeze like that, and then you'll regret being so sour," Cerridwen told him, breezing past in a bit of darkness to pull a box of files from the shelves behind him.

Nuala looked up at them both, gesturing again at Cassian's note. "Oh, but it's already captured for posterity, sister."

"And to think Feyre once asked me why you were so *quiet* around her..." Azriel muttered. “I regret hiring you.”

The twins shared a sly smile between themselves.

"Who else is going to keep up with *these—"* As if an informant heard Cerridwen speaking from across the channel, another file coded with Hybern's marks appeared in the overflowing inbox at the corner of his desk. "—after we send you off?"

"I will," Azriel said, slipping his near-empty report onto their table and opening a drawer. He licked a finger and selected a blank sheet from a stack of notepaper, dipping his pen into his inkwell and jotting down a brief, innocuous to-do list in Mor’s handwriting.

Cerridwen, still hovering over his shoulder, slid the paper away after three items and lifted the pen from his hand. "Now go. General's orders. We’ll deliver anything important to your office in the House."

Azriel tilted his head back to look at her and lifted a brow. "I don't take orders from the General."

“Yes, you do," Nuala said.

And then Cerridwen drawled, *"Sometimes."*

Azriel entertained the brief idea that he had, perhaps, trained his protégés too well.

“Am I not also under orders to tell our High Lord to get fucked, then?" he asked the room.

“She said ‘sometimes,’” Nuala said, clicking her finely manicured fingernails together nervously.

Azriel sighed. After fifty years of tending to Rhys Under the Mountain—and living under his protection as his only confidants—neither twin was willing to do anything but dote on him. They rarely talked about it, save for the rare occasion that Rhys indicated they should.

“Go,” Cerridwen pointed his pen at the door.

And, unlike most Illyrians, Azriel could admit that there was strength in acknowledging a losing battle from time to time, so he pushed back his chair and picked up Truth-Teller and the cloth. “Reports in my desk by noon.”

*“If* it’s important,” Cerridwen said, her nose high in the air.

Azriel cut a glance at Nuala, who gave him a short nod, and he left.

He found a steaming bath waiting for him in the bathing room beyond his chambers, warm towels stacked on the sink, no doubt courtesy of one of the wraiths. He laid his dagger on the lip of the tub and, with a tap of his Siphons, he was out of his leathers and in his undergarments, dragging his thick cotton and canvas over his wings and legs and throwing it all in the hamper in the corner of the room.

With a groan, he dropped his gauntlets on the vanity, savoring the unrestrained crackle of his power as it flowed across his limbs. Another moment had him sinking into the water up to his nose, shuddering as it rose up and then consumed his wings entirely.

He soaked in the dark for a few long moments, eyes closed and shadows unleashed, allowing the heat to penetrate his skin and relax his tense muscles. Then, he opened his eyes just enough to take Truth-Teller in one hand, dip a clean edge of the polishing cloth into the bath with the other, and clean the blood from his blade.

He worked slowly, methodically, edging the cloth and the nail of his thumb into the fuller that ran the length of Truth-Teller until the obsidian dagger was spotless once more, gobbling up the dim light of the bathing room.

All the while, he set about opening the doors and compartments in his mind that remained sealed any time he ventured below the Hewn City. He thought of Nesta, the sight of her in an Illyrian dress and a bride’s cloak as punishing and tempting as Truth-Teller honed edge, and Cassian, stretching his maimed wings for her like a green youngling trying to show off for a girl he wanted to impress.

And both of them, together, utterly besotted with one another in their own strange, quarrelsome way, as they did their level best to unravel him.

Azriel let the knife and the cloth fall to the plush mat beside the bath and pressed a firm fist to the round, blackened scar beside his heart as his chest pulled and pulled.

His other hand—the one that had pleasured Nesta, pressed into the hot silk of her cunt until she writhed on his lap and came apart with a sweet sob that had haunted him every hour since—drifted lower, and he hissed through his teeth as he squeezed the base of his hard cock, remembering the taste of her on his fingers and the starving, dizzy look on Cassian’s face as he watched them together.

The next morning, Nesta took an extra five minutes to braid her hair before she deemed it secure enough for the obstacle course.

And Cassian, usually an annoying stickler for punctuality, spared ten minutes to give her a scenic flying tour of the valley so she could get a glimpse of his settlement in the bright morning sun. He pointed out areas to note—the healer and apothecary’s tent, the butchers’ cabin, a tent where all the children were already gathered for lessons, the trading post situated atop the mountain beside their own.

They made it to Windhaven just as the sun began its ascent, and he’d groaned a spiteful curse into her ear when the assembled camp lords came into view near the training rings, all scowling and watching the sky for him.

“You’re late,” Az told them when they entered Emerie’s shop a moment later.

The tether quivered with quicksilver anticipation.

The shadowsinger leaned on a tall stool in front of the counter, a steaming mug in front of him. Nesta’s eyes caught on the magazine spread on the countertop between him and Emerie, and she felt briefly silly for not having realized how close the pair must have gotten, considering how often Azriel ended up winnowing her home.

“You looked cozy. We hated to interrupt,” Nesta said, brushing aside her surprise and a bit of snow from her cloak as Emerie sputtered.

Nesta glanced at her, concerned, but Emerie waved her off and pointed at her mug in answer, bending at the waist as she coughed. The hand Cassian had kept on her shoulder to guide her through the slush at the center of the war camp stiffened, and Nesta turned back toward him, a brow lifted. His hazel eyes were fixed on Emerie, a concerned groove between his brows.

“Make me proud, Nes,” was all Cassian said when she finally caught his eye, clapping her on the back like any trainee as he stepped back toward the exit. Then he glanced toward Azriel, whose expression was unmoved, and jerked his chin at the door. “Az.”

With a quiet shrug, Az lifted himself from the stool and crossed the shop in just a few long strides.

The door hadn’t fully closed when Emerie popped up from behind the counter, her watery eyes as round as saucers. She gestured at Nesta, her mouth moving soundlessly for a moment before she managed to form any words *.*

*“Mother,* Nesta, when were you going to tell me—and after *yesterday—!”*

Nesta’s brow furrowed, the doorbell tinkling behind her, and she crossed her arms, playing dumb. She wasn't entirely certain what to say, or what Emerie imagined must have happened. “Tell you what?”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Emerie’s jaw dropped, and she poked a finger at a display of clothing to Nesta’s left.

Thick winter dresses, dozens of them in every shade of the rainbow, in the same style as the one she wore—the same one the House had given her yesterday. A styled outfit hanging on display against the wall even had bits of leather layered atop the dress. It was obvious that *these* leather embellishments were less for protection and more for fashion and domestic labor—the belt didn’t bear weapons, but a purse and the components of a miniature sewing kit, a mirror image of the chatelaine worn by her mother’s ladies’ maid when she was just a girl below the wall.

And there… On a shelf in the corner, stacks and stacks of uncut wool cloth in every shade of blue Nesta had ever seen in the sky. A trunk of furs was propped open beside it, uncut and ready to be used. There was so much of it that it had to serve a purpose, had to be somehow distinct from the kaleidoscope dresses beside it.

Nesta looked down at herself. ”He *didn’t…”*

”He did!” Emerie crowed.

Nesta had been dressed—and *claimed* —as an Illyrian female.

“Fucking Cassian,” she huffed, annoyance pushing at her ribs. She turned her face away from her friend and pursed her lips to hide a smile as a delighted curl of happiness suffocated it.

“He didn’t tell you? Typical.” Emerie came up beside Nesta and snorted, even though she was staring with dreamy eyes through the window at the two males as they spoke, the low rumble of their voices seeping through the crack under the wooden door. Cassian’s wing twitched, knocking against Az’s shoulder, and Emerie sucked in a breath. When she turned her attention back to Nesta awed glee was written on her face. *“Nesta.”*

Emerie let out a low whistle. Let that impressed sound speak for her.

“If your eyebrows go any higher, you’ll lose them in your hair,” Nesta muttered, stealing a sip from Azriel’s mug after she watched Cassian, the devious ass, square his shoulders and tromp back toward the camp lords.

Bitterness assaulted her tongue, and Nesta wrinkled her nose.

*“What—”*

“It’s coffee.” Emerie shrugged, grinning wildly. “Now, I have questions.”

"Those will have to wait." A scarred hand lifted the mug from Nesta's grip, saving the liquid inside from her startled jolt. Azriel's eyes seared into the side of her face as he took the final sip and set the mug back on the counter and murmured his thanks to Emerie. "We're already late."

# Chapter Eight

“Holy shit.”

“Gwyneth!” Emerie’s eyes were wide with mock distress at Gwyn’s blasphemy, but her mouth twitched with a poorly concealed grin.

“No, it was a ‘holy shit’ moment, Em,” Nesta confirmed, keeping her voice quiet. Just recounting the events of the past week to her friends made her pulse begin to race.

“He asked you to marry him!” Gwyn’s hand shot out, grasping at Emerie’s arm as if to steady herself as she stared, astounded, at Nesta.

“He did *not—”*

“He built you a *house,”* Gwyn hissed. At this, even Emerie nodded, impressed.

Nesta *hmm*-ed tightly. She may have ridden Cassian within an inch of his life for sharing the cabin and the village with her, but… “He built himself a house. Centuries ago.”

Gwyn went on, unhearing, her blush so dark it nearly matched her hair. “And then he asked you to—”

She whipped her head around to stare at Azriel, who was on the far side of the training ring coaching a set of priestesses through marching together as a unit. For once, he wasn’t blanketed in shadow—the whorls of inky darkness that usually followed him everywhere were avoiding the bright morning sunshine in the dim stairwell at the edge of the ring—and he was moving with the priestesses, patiently demonstrating the way they should watch and anticipate one another’s movements.

It was a striking change from the brutal drills he’d been conducting just a few weeks ago. Nesta would even go as far as to say he seemed almost cheery, or as cheery as a male like Az could get. For gods’ sake, he was even allowing the groups that he decided didn’t need the refresher to sit and chatter while they pretended to stretch and he pretended not to notice.

Nesta might have wondered what Cassian said to him before they left Windhaven to put him in such a pleasant mood…

If his head hadn’t turned, his eyes scanning the rooftop. Laughter ghosted over his face as the priestesses surrounding Nesta quickly bent into stretching poses, joints snapping and quiet groans echoing. She didn’t bother, meeting his gaze head-on. That hazel gaze lingered on her, and she lifted her chin at him.

Gwyn turned back to Nesta wearing the same wonderstruck look Emerie had given in her Windhaven and repeated, “Holy shit.”

Emerie, blunt as ever, tilted her head. “So did you do it?”

“Emerie!” Gwyn hissed. Evidently, she still retained some sense of propriety that Nesta and Emerie didn’t, because she gaped at the third member of their trio.

“What? She reeked of both of them yesterday, and now she’s living with Cassian in Illyria. I’m curious!” Emerie whisper-shouted, and Nesta prayed they were still quiet enough that Azriel’s shadows or his acute fae hearing wouldn’t pick up on their conversation.

Another group of priestesses pretending to do crunches nearby was suspiciously quiet, their necks craning toward Nesta’s group. Finally, Nesta bent over her outstretched legs and reached for her toes, so she wouldn’t have to look anyone in the eye if they overheard.

“Cassian didn’t actually propose, and I’m not living there,” she told her knees, avoiding the subject that had both of her friends tying themselves in knots. Had she truly reeked of both males? She’d bathed thoroughly, and thought that the only lingering hint of cedar and mist was on Cassian’s bedlinens, not herself. “I didn’t even bring any clothes.”

And, as she said it, she heard the way it sounded.

After a beat of strained silence broken only by Ananke’s shocked tittering, Nesta rolled up from her stretch. Emerie’s mouth hung open, and Gwyn’s face was buried in her hands, an alarmingly high-pitched sound issuing from behind her fingers as a teal eye peeked out at Nesta.

Nesta schooled her features to suppress her own grin—a knee-jerk response to the feeling between smugness and embarrassment burbling in her stomach.

Maybe it sounded salacious… but that was only because it was. Cassian was right that the thin cotton and silk dresses she wore in the House and the library weren’t suited for the snow drifts as tall as she was in the village—they were barely suited for Velaris—but she had spent the entire night in that cabin naked in Cassian’s massive bed.

“I didn’t have any clothes suited for the weather,” she corrected herself. At the very least, she needed to spare poor Dierdre, who had lowered herself for a breather between crunches and still hadn’t come back up. “I’ll actually need your help with that, Em, if you have the time.”

Emerie nodded, but her eyes were already shifting toward the shadowsinger on the other side of the ring.

Nesta sighed, feeling the weight of everyone’s attention. She needed to quash the whole conversation before it could be blown out of proportion. She was looking forward to getting Az and Cassian alone in the cabin—for a few days, too, Cassian promised—but all of Velaris didn’t need to know that.

She could think of a dozen different ways to spend a few days with two males as physically fit and handsome as they were.

“Almost nothing happened, and Cassian only mentioned weddings because he was teaching me about Illyrian customs. Is it really that interesting?”

Gwyn’s jaw dropped behind her hands. “Almost?”

But Emerie tapped rapidly at Gwyn’s leg, shushing her, and turned back to Nesta.

“It's interesting because you’re *living the dream,* Nesta. Every female in Prythian wants those two, even if they won't admit it. Mother, you should hear what the people in Windhaven still say about the things they did when they were younger…”

Burning, irrational jealousy flared, razor-sharp talons slicing at Nesta’s lungs. She didn’t hear another word Emerie said as she grit her teeth against the slick, hateful feeling that rocked her.

She examined her nails instead, picking at one that had broken off on the headboard of Cassian’s bed last night while he ate her after he’d fed her dinner and then begged for her to straddle his face for dessert.

*Begged,* she reminded herself.

She’d need to fetch a nail file from the House before returning to the Steppes.

She took a deep breath and shrugged, all expertly feigned nonchalance when Emerie stopped talking.

“Why should I care about rumors? It’s not like I need to live vicariously through females they’ve already forgotten.”

Gwyn’s knees slowly rose until she was curled into a ball, her head tucking into her knees. Her entire body trembled with the force of her silent laughter.

*“Oh... My… Gods!”* she gasped between giggles.

Emerie reached out and gathered Nesta’s hands in her own, whispered a dazzled “You magnificent bitch,” and then turned back to shush Gwyn again.

As Nesta watched them, grinning in spite of herself, the shadows beneath both of her friends elongated, stretching unnaturally in the morning sunshine. Her heartbeat stumbled—and then resume beating twice as quickly as the shadow beneath her own hand rose, curling around her wrist like a bracelet.

Or, she thought as it grew darker, wider, and sturdier. Like a cuff.

She turned to stare at Az, but he was wholly focused on his marching priestesses.

Nesta swallowed. She wasn’t foolish enough to wonder how much he heard.

“Can we talk about books now?” she asked, trying once more to change the subject as the shadows faded back to their natural positions. Gwyn and Emerie, calmer now, both blinked at her vacantly. “Cassian’s started asking for recommendations.”

*“Oh my gods,”* Gwyn muttered again, like she were in rapturous prayer. “He even likes your books?”

Nesta bit back another smile and jerked her head at the eavesdropping priestesses.

Emerie nodded, Gwyn swallowed back more giggling, and Nesta felt only gratitude that she had such perceptive friends.

“What about Sellyn Drake’s new book? It should be out next week. *Falling for Fall?”* Emerie asked.

Nesta cringed. Perceptive or not, the three of them hadn’t discussed Eris—or her brief plan to accept his proposal—at all. She thought she ought to spare them the heart attack this morning by refraining from piling more information on top of what they had already learned.

“I don’t think he’ll like that one.”

“Have you…” Emerie chewed on her lip. Her eyes flickered toward Azriel, and then at the empty spot where Cassian usually conducted their lessons. Gwyn nudged her. “Have you ever read anything by Faustina Amata?”

Gwyn’s lips parted like she was familiar with the author, but Nesta shook her head. “I don’t recognize the name. What has she written?”

“She writes Illyrian warrior romances,” Emerie said. “Those were popular a few decades ago, but I think she might be the only actual Illyrian who was writing them, now that I think about it. She’s the only one who gets it right.”

When Nesta only shrugged, Emerie continued, “Have you ever heard of *Three Stars Over Ramiel* or The Blood Rite Brotherhood series?”

Nesta shook her head. No, neither rung a bell, though she thought she could take a fairly accurate guess at the inspiration for the series, if her bats’ escapades were as infamous as Emerie seemed to imply.

Emerie nodded. “I’ll try to dig up a few copies. I had to steal the ones I read from one of my cousins ages ago.”

Gwyn wiggled her brows at Nesta. “Rumor has it they’re filthy.”

“There’s a reason I had to sneak them out of someone else’s house,” Emerie said with a grin. “They have great action scenes, too, so Cassian—”

“Ladies.” Azriel’s voice, deep and quiet as ever, echoed across the ring as the priestesses he was working with started lining up at the beginning of the obstacle course. Nesta felt his eyes on her, her wrist tingling, as everyone went still and silent. “If you’re finished warming up…”

Gwyn was the first to recover. She grinned at him, clear-eyed and determined, standing with a wink to Nesta and offering Emerie a hand to help her up.

When Nesta stood, brushing dust and dirt off her leathers, she found Azriel's back turned to her as he ushered the groups into a neat line at the start of the obstacle course. As he counted down and waved a trio into the course, a shadow curled around his ear. He tilted his head toward it, stretching one wing in the opposite direction.

Nesta bit her lip as her eyes followed the long, long line of his wing. Fully extended, it was nearly the length of one of the tight sparring rings.

Emerie's strong hands grasped her waist from behind as her friend dropped her forehead onto the back of Nesta’s neck, as if she suddenly needed to steady herself, her long, thick braid falling over Nesta’s shoulder.

“Holy shit.”

While Azriel flew Emerie out of the wards surrounding the House and winnowed her back to her shop after another brutal run of the obstacle course, Nesta packed the essentials she’d forgotten. Some conditioner, her favorite perfume, the undergarments that had gone missing yesterday, and a few thick, fuzzy pairs of socks all went into a bag the House provided.

She was re-braiding her hair when a quiet knock on her door caught her attention.

Az folded his hands. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” Nesta said, shoving the last pin into her braid and slipping the wool dress the House had laundered and folded into her bag.

He sent a pointed look at the full set of leathers she still wore beneath her cloak.

“I’ll change at the cabin,” she said.

“Very well.” A shade of amusement passed over the fine planes of his face as Azriel inclined his head and gestured her from the room, following as she made her way to a balcony more suited for flight. “We’ll winnow to the shop. Emerie said she needed to speak with you.”

Nesta could only nod as they approached the balcony. Her mouth had gone dry.

Flying with Cassian over that steep drop off the edge of House of Wind was one thing… but flying with someone else?

One of Azriel’s hands settled on her back between her shoulder blades. It twitched when her breath caught in response, as if he were second-guessing the casual touch.

“We’ll be in the air for all of thirty seconds before we winnow,” he told her quietly, correctly surmising the cause of her hesitation. “And we will arrive on solid ground just in front of Emerie’s shop.”

“Right,” Nesta said, her eyes locked on the ground far, far below them.

“I’m a much smoother flier than Cassian.”

Nesta turned to Azriel, her eyes wide. She wondered if he remembered the morning after Solstice as well as she did, when he winnowed them into the air above the training ring. He had caught them, yes, but not before that terrifying plunge.

She wondered if she should try punching him again as a reminder.

“Usually.” His head dipped—again reading her correctly, as if he were the one with daemati power.

“Braggart,” Nesta murmured without heat, her eyes back on the ground.

Az lifted one shoulder, his face shadowed.

“It isn’t you,” she felt compelled to say, glancing at the spot where his dark fringe blended into the shadows over his eyes. She waved a hand at the open air in front of them and swallowed, forcing out the next words. “It’s… that.”

“I know,” he said. “You didn’t get a very easy introduction to flight.”

Nesta looked back toward tiny, distant Velaris. The riverside manor was a speck on the far side of the Sidra. “Does anyone?”

“No.” Az’s hand shifted lower, to the spot above her waist where it would rest in flight, silently coaxing. “Maybe the Peregryns. Cass thinks they use the feathers they shed to stuff mattresses to land on if they fall.”

Nesta huffed, laughing as much as she was scolding herself, and crossed the long strap of the bag over her torso, making sure it was secure. “This is ridiculous.”

“It’s not. They Peregryns have always been soft,” Azriel said with deliberate obtuseness that seemed almost out of place coming from him. Nesta turned back to him, incredulous, and his lips quirked.

“You aren’t going to throw us off the edge, are you?” she asked. She had seen the way Rhys and Cassian and even wingless Morrigan tended to jump from the balconies, only catching themselves at what seemed the last moment before they splattered onto the rocks below. She didn’t recall ever seeing Az do the same, but she wouldn’t be surprised if he did.

His face was suddenly serious. “Do you want that?”

“No,” Nesta said, clutching the railing.

“Then no.” He spoke like it was a foregone conclusion. “I can fly us straight up to the boundary of the wards to winnow as well as I can winnow during a fall.”

“Okay.”

The hand on her back nudged her. “I can blindfold you, if you’d like.”

“I’ll kill you if you try.” She unclenched her hands, letting his soft, surprised laugh wash over her as she shook out the chill from the frozen stone. “Let’s go. Now.”

Az didn’t waste time with words, sensing that she might just make a break for the ten thousand steps if he gave her the chance. He bent, gathering her neatly in his arms. His grip on her waist and her thighs was strong, reassuring. She held her breath and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

He spread his wings, and she lost her nerve, burying her face in the collar of his leathers.

With a deep inhale from him and one massive wing beat, they were in the air.

True to his word, they did not drop a single inch; Az flew them directly upward through the wards above the House, and then the shadows consumed them. The strange, black realm of shadow should have been more frightening, perhaps, but all Nesta felt was cool relief.

Then they were on the doorstep of Emerie’s shop, and Azriel tucked his wings, settled her gently on the ground, and opened the door for her.

“I’ll wait out here,” he murmured lowly. The almost imperceptible softening of his features at the House had hardened somewhere between the balcony and Windhaven, and his expression was crafted of stone once more.

Nesta swallowed at the honed edge in Azriel’s eyes as he surveyed the small row of shops. No, not the shops—the Illyrians bustling between them.

“Alright.”

As it turned out, Emerie didn’t need much. She wrestled Nesta’s dress from her bag to gauge her size, showed Nesta a few dresses of thicker, warmer wool than the material the House scrounged up, asked which colors she preferred. Nesta was sent her on her way with a sly wink toward Az as a harried Illyrian female hustled into the shop with a handful of children clinging to her navy cloak.

Azriel was still at his post beside Emerie’s door, now staring coldly at a group of Illyrian males. His shadows were back in full force, so thick around his wings that they started to spill over onto Nesta’s shoulders the moment she stepped outside.

“I’ll take you to Cass.”

He held out an arm to her, barely looking in her direction as the proprietor of a tavern across the tiny square propped himself in his window, scowling at them. His thick arms crossed over his barrel chest, and Nesta heard his disgruntled Harrumph through the glass.

Nesta took Azriel’s arm. She recognized this bitterly cold shell better than she cared to admit, and, unlike Cassian, knew better than to try arguing with it.

Az reined in his shadows as they walked, but the darkness still trailed both of them like a cloak, the slight blue glint of his Siphons the only hint of light shining through the gloom.

They set off across the camp efficiently and wordlessly, Azriel guiding Nesta through the thinner patches of mud and slush. He kept her subtly upright every time one of her boots got stuck, pulling her gently forward until she managed to free herself, as if he were unwilling to allow the barest hint of weakness from either of them to show through. He was firm, not flinching even once as she tugged at him, his entire body cast in unyielding iron.

And she was glad for it. Every step they took revealed a new group of Illyrians gawking at them with blatant fear and disgust. Novices whose grips tightened on the weapons they trained with, females who dropped brooms and dishes, young children who seemed to make a shrieking, horrible game of finding the brightest spot in the sun or near the cookfires as Azriel passed that made Nesta’s face flush with rage for him.

She knew little of his youth, but her heart throbbed painfully as she imagined decades of the same treatment during his own training.

When they finally passed the training rings, shops, and cabins, some newer but smaller than those in Cassian’s village, Az guided her through the semi-permanent cluster of tents that housed the novices and warriors on the other side of Windhaven, angling for the largest. The hardened warriors populating the muddy trenches between tents seemed to have some respect for Azriel—or, more likely, some respect for the seven Siphons glowing even more brightly through his shadows now—though they too paused what they were doing to monitor him while he passed. She met the eyes of each male brave enough to meet hers.

There weren’t many.

They arrived quickly at the same grand, oversized tent Feyre and Rhysand had claimed during the war, still draped in a black banner bearing the Night Court’s symbol. The shadows around it were roiled as Azriel approached, and one speared up through the air to curl around Azriel’s ear and whisper its secrets to him.

He turned to Nesta. He didn’t say anything—didn’t need to say anything that she could not already surmise from his dead, dark eyes and carefully impassive face.

She nodded, and he lifted one of the flaps of the tent for her.

Inside, she spotted Cassian bent low over a massive desk with the other lords, weariness written into every line of his body.

“...will examine the grounds tomorrow,” he was saying, his voice tight. “And if there are any signs of tampering, an investigation into their origins can be opened.”

The stocky male she recognized as Devlon seemed to be vaguely amused as he stared down his nose at Cassian.

Beside Devlon, another camp lord’s chest puffed with self-importance. “It is forbidden to enter the grounds unless you are a participant.”

Cassian didn’t allow his shoulders or wings to slump, but beneath the immediate rush of throat-tightening frustration that barrelled down the tether, Nesta felt a pang of defeat so unlike him that she squared her own shoulders.

His tone was as unyielding as the longsword of Illyrian steel sheathed along the length of his spine. “I am the general of this army, and I’ll do what I damn well please if it means the novices who actually qualified get a fair—”

He paused, and his eyes lifted to Nesta and Azriel as cold air leaked into the tent, the braziers heating the space flickering.

Still lit from inside with anger on Azriel’s behalf, Nesta lifted her chin and strode forward, shadows parting the sea of grizzled warriors in front of her. Az’s cool presence lurked a half-step behind her, and she tightened her grip on the crook of his arm, slowing her steps until he walked at her side.

Devlon was not the only one to sneer as they passed, but he was the most vocal. “What is she doing here?”

But Cassian only stood as they approached, silently wrapping an arm around her shoulders and ghosting a possessive kiss over her cheek as he pulled her close. Nesta responded by swiping a fond finger over the light scar that cut through his lip.

“You don’t remember?” she asked Devlon, wiggling that finger at him.

Cassian pursed his lips at her—biting back a chuckle, she could tell, not disapproval. “I’m sure you all remember Nesta Archeron, Emissary of the Night Court.”

She raised her chin in the dismissive, imperious way that always made Rhysand’s jaw clench and surveyed the gathered males. The last time she had been here, she had humiliated Cassian by refusing to train with him as some of these same warriors watched and goaded him; she would do no such thing now. If hindsight granted clarity, then she could clearly see the hurt, rejection, and uncertainty that had been written on his face that day, made to feel small because he hadn’t fully known what to do with her.

But he was hers now. Hers, in ways she hadn’t dared to dream of during the war or afterward.

And Nesta Archeron would allow no one she loved to bear the judgment of these pathetic, small males without the threat of her wrath, especially not when he was clearly doing the same for her by embracing her in front of them after that painfully public rejection all those months ago.

Almost as if he could tell what she was thinking, Cassian passed a fond, forgiving hand down the back of her cloak, exactly where her wings might be if she were Illyrian.

Toward the back of the tent, someone scoffed.

“And him?” the self-important lord asked. Derision was clear in his voice, though it still shook as he pointed at the mass of shadow beside Nesta. “We hardly need the shadowsinger—”

“The High Lord is concerned that the negligence that has led to this discussion was deliberate,” Azriel said from his sanctuary of darkness, his voice smooth and midnight-chilled, cutting through the tent with as much ease as Truth-Teller slid through flesh and bone. Nesta was certain Azriel hadn't spoken to Rhysand lately; she could taste the lie on her tongue like a chip of melting ice.

Lies or not, the promise of violence in Azriel’s words silenced the lords. An uneasy shift went through the tent, eyes darting toward the shadowy corners—just like the children in the camp outside.

Slowly, deliberately, Nesta smiled.

The lords turned their attention back toward Cassian, only to find his teeth bared. “Who better to lead an investigation into your claims of tampering?”

A vein throbbed in Devlon’s forehead.

“As I said the last time she was here,” Devlon finally said, his hard eyes skipping over Cassian and Azriel both and narrowing on Nesta and the full set of leathers beneath her cloak. “The *witch* stays away from the females and the younglings, and anything she touches, we bury. Emissary or not.”

Azriel’s arm jerked beneath Nesta’s hand, his muscles shifting beneath his leathers as his fists clenched. Cobalt light bounced off the coarse, waxed canvas of the inner lining of the tent as his Siphons glimmered to life.

Cassian’s arm rose behind her, and she heard the hardened leather of the pauldron covering Azriel’s shoulder creak as Cass clamped his hand down onto it. Nesta held tight too, digging her fingers into the crook of his elbow to keep him by her side.

But what she didn’t bother to do was to tamp down the cold flame of her own temper; she let it burn and burn, the way she hadn’t had the energy to do the last time she visited this camp, until the tent cooled so much that frost crackled on the steel poles and pegs keeping it aloft.

She set aside her fear of her power and didn’t try to contain the calamitous, overwhelming pain beneath her breast as the barb hit its mark, but converted it into fuel for her fire instead. She thought of the horrendous little children outside who were being taught to mock and fear Azriel by fathers like Devlon. Thought of the two winged children from the village playing and laughing in the snow. Thought of Feyre and her own winged babe and the precious little time her youngest sister might have left.

She thought of Emerie, her first true friend in Prythian, and let the fire rage.

Devlon’s eyes widened, and the rest of the camp lords took a step back, their wings flaring uncomfortably as they glanced between Nesta and the two seven-Siphon warriors on either side of her.

And, with a cruel grin, she noticed that these lords, the most powerful men in Illyria, only had two or three Siphons apiece.

One toward the back—younger, his hair a deep, inky black instead of the salt-and-pepper of the others, with a jagged scar cutting through his cheek as if he’d been impaled on something face-first—even had the nerve to draw his sword. The singing of steel rang in the silence, and Nesta turned her fiery gaze on him.

And then she softened her grin to a bland, ladylike smile.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said pleasantly. Lifted her pointer finger and traced an idle line across the wooden desk in front of her, pointing at each lord who had disrespected Cassian and Azriel and herself in turn. Ice burned a clean black line that followed her path into the table, and Nesta had to channel every rare moment of true calm she had ever known to keep from showing the shocked jolt of surprise she felt at the sight of it.

She lifted her finger and inspected it curiously, no more than a discerning, dismissive lady checking for dust.

“I just arrived from training elsewhere, as a matter of fact,” she heard herself say. “The Spymaster and I were simply coming to coordinate with the General before we set to work.”

“With pleasure, Emissary.” Cassian’s eyes were very carefully on her face. He lifted a hand to guide her back through the tent, tossing a grin full of savage promise over his shoulder as they left. “I’ll be back in five minutes to go over the eliminated Qualifiers, and if any of you are not here at that time, I will consider it an admission of guilt.”

Azriel could not contain himself as they exited the tent; he shook Nesta’s elegant hand off of his elbow and instead placed the palm of his own scarred, tainted hand on the small of her back over her bride’s cloak—all to get a rise from the assembled camp lords.

He would rather flay them, gut them, slowly and sweetly, the pompous, small-minded, hateful bastards… but he was already in hot water with Rhysand, and he knew that pouring another boiling bucket into his scalding bath simply wouldn’t be worth it.

And, he reminded himself, Cassian had promised to thoroughly piss them off on his behalf this morning.

Among other things.

The grim satisfaction he felt as the shadows relayed the lords’ murmurs of loathing and horror as he and Cassian flanked a Made female was payment enough. In her leathers, still rumpled from training, radiating the chill of Death itself and the scent of their general... Azriel couldn’t imagine anything they might fear more.

“Witch,” someone hissed, and Azriel basked in the terror behind that insult.

Once they left the tent, more whispers followed them to the edge of the camp, riling his shadows until they hissed and writhed like vipers.

Cassian, perceptive even without the help of the shadows, steered them to a steep, barren cliff at the edge of Windhaven where no one else would overhear them.

The sight of the cliff and the harsh, bitter wind rushing up from below made Nesta shift nervously on the balls of her feet, despite the frigid silver embers burning down in her own eyes. Azriel shifted his hand from her back to her waist again, palm tingling, and tightened his grip on her.

“Never a quiet day with you two,” Cassian crooned, playful and pleased and utterly unfazed by the sight of that possessive, protective touch.

He bent to give Nesta a kiss. He was close enough that a lock of dark, curled hair whipped up by the breeze tangled in the scales of Azriel’s armor, and he kept his lips on Nesta’s, sweet and coaxing, until the unnatural, unholy cold surrounding them was replaced by Windhaven’s mundane chill.

Azriel was tempted to follow him down, to curl his hand in that wild sable hair and dedicate the taut, furious energy in his limbs to devouring them both.

When he finally broke away from his mate, Cassian chuckled under his breath as he examined them. He raised a brow at Nesta’s leathers—the sight of a female wearing them alone would be enough to infuriate any male here, one way or another. Azriel had thought her choice not to change amusing back at the House, but the camp lords had soured his entertainment at their expense, as usual.

Then he turned his wary gaze to Azriel.

“Alright, Az?” His low timbre was tender, and Azriel locked his muscles to keep from bristling.

He only managed to pass two words through his gritted teeth in response. “They overstep.”

His attention slid back to the tent looming over all the others in the middle of the encampment of its own volition as fresh rage rose in his throat. To deny Nesta the use of their training rings and equipment was well within their rights—and it meant little to him when he knew the House could provide a better, safer space for her to train.

But to attempt to reject her from Cassian’s people completely, to keep her separate from the females and younglings like she was a threat, a disease…

A stain.

His hands itched and burned as his mind resurrected the memory of another arrogant, domineering camp lord just like them.

He felt Nesta’s eyes on him, his shadows whispering curious, curious into his ear. His jaw locked; he couldn’t answer her unasked questions even if he wanted to.

Which he didn’t.

Cass, Mother bless him, knew it.

“The camp lords only have power over their legions,” he told his mate, redirecting that sharp prickle of her keen attention to himself. “The soldiers, the camp mothers, the families that follow along on campaigns. That gives them authority over most Illyrians living in the Steppes, some more than others—” Cassian’s pointed glance at Azriel pressed an ancient wound, but Azriel remained silent. “—but they can’t enforce a ban like that outside their own camps, sweetheart.”

Nesta tilted her head, looking between them just once, and then took mercy on him. “Good, because Emerie will be expecting payment for a few winter dresses tomorrow morning anyway.”

This time, Azriel didn’t resist the temptation to give Nesta a once-over that mirrored the long, heated look Cassian gave her. To distract himself with the sight of her. Even beneath the cloak, every generous dip and curve was made visible by her leathers; her arms, crossed as they were over her chest against the chill, pushed up her already ample breasts.

He let the memory of the way they flushed and heaved with her breath as she came around his fingers with a cry douse the ancient fire burning them.

To see her in a dress like that again, bits of those leathers added atop it, the skirt easy enough to push aside and slip a hand or a head beneath…

He made a mental adjustment to his plan for the evening as the eager shadow from the training ring locked around Nesta’s wrist once more.

“We’re the only ones on the mountain, Nes. I’m sure Az won’t mind if you forgo the dresses,” Cassian said, stealing another kiss. His voice was dark with desire. “I won’t.”

“I’ll freeze before breakfast, Cass.” Nesta’s voice was a terribly pitched sing-song that told Azriel she was mocking some other conversation they’d already had.

“Shame.” Cassian shrugged, but he looked genuinely put-out beneath his grin. “But if you insist…”

“I do.” Nesta reached up and pulled the same lock of his hair that had gotten caught in Azriel’s armor.

“Always happy to support her shop,” Cassian sighed obligingly. He straightened then, rustling some blood back into his wings and glancing back toward the camp, serious once more. “Alright, my five minutes are up, and I’d rather not hunt down any errant assholes to make an example of before noon. Az, can you fly Nesta to the cabin? There should be some food in the kitchen for lunch, and I can bring supplies for dinner.”

Azriel looked to Nesta for his answer. The corners of her lips were upturned, satisfaction clear on her face as her pale eyes stared up at him, the ghostly pallor of fright replaced with rosy, cold-flushed cheeks. Nevertheless, her limbs were still locked, and he could tell was doing her best to keep her eyes on him instead of taking a sidelong glance at the cliff beside them. The shadow curled lazily in the plush fur collar of her cloak ticked in time with her heartbeat—too fast.

Azriel let go of her waist and pretended to reach for the scrap of black cotton in the pocket hidden beneath Truth-Teller’s sheathed blade.

“The offer to blindfold you still stands,” he told her, not at all serious.

“As does mine to kill you,” Nesta said, clasping his wrist in one shaking hand as Cassian’s brows shot up. “The flight is only, what, ten minutes? Fifteen?”

“Five. I can winnow us closer.”

“Show off,” Cassian grumbled, but Azriel caught him adjusting himself, his eyes on their hands. “I can tell them to go fuck themselves and fly you home myself, Nes.”

“No,” Nesta said. She set her expression, her eyes steely, her mouth a sharp, resolute line that Azriel wanted to taste. “Az flew me here. He can fly me there.”

Azriel squeezed her hand. “I can.”

“See?” Neither he nor Cassian pointed out that her voice trembled, and Azriel committed himself to making this the smoothest flight he had ever taken as he bent, tapping a Siphon to activate his shield and gathering Nesta’s warm, soft body into his arms once more.

Cassian waited until they were settled to press one more kiss to her lips and bump a wing against his shoulder in the alarming way that always sent a concerned bolt of heat through Azriel. “Don’t have too much fun without me.”

Azriel rolled his eyes even as his body reacted and tightened his grip on Nesta, raising his chin so she could tuck her face into his neck. He did his best to focus on the gray sky and the brutal cold as he leapt—directly upward—into the air.

# Chapter Nine

Standing in a shallow puddle of warm water collected in the bottom of the copper bathtub, scrubbing at her skin with a damp cloth, Nesta bit her lip, her eyes sliding shut.

*She hadn’t packed any clothes.*

The same thing that had been so funny to Emerie and Gwyn just two hours ago wasn’t so amusing now that Emerie had taken possession of her one gown. Her leathers weren’t an option, either, coated in so much dust and sweat that she would feel guilty wearing them on Cassian’s furniture.

It was a predicament.

And that was the best and only word her mind would provide for it, too: a predicament. Not frightening enough to be a nightmare, but not funny enough to just laugh it off, either.

Her shins and the thin, near-translucent scar on the palm of her handached as the memory of a ruler coming down on them washed over her. Grandmama had always enforced one adamant rule above the rest: Nesta was to be primped and groomed to her satisfaction by breakfast each and every day.

Well-groomed, fastidious girls were a cut above the rest, in Grandmama’s book. In a society full of slothful maidens who slept till noon after balls and relied on their maids to bathe and dress them, a girl who was not only awake, but alert, pert, and pretty, was all the more likely to find a husband with a similar disposition.

With an *ambitious* disposition.

Nesta let out a slow breath through her nose and resumed rinsing the soap from her legs.

She was a grown woman—or female, she supposed. The wretched old bitch was dead and buried an entire continent away. But that didn’t soothe away the phantom sting of the ruler, and Nesta’s paltry attempt at Mind-stilling was no match for the cooling water lapping at her ankles.

Lounging around the House in her nightgowns in the evenings was one thing. Letting Cassian and Azriel look their fill was another, and the amazing confidence boost that resulted from the way both males seemed magnetically drawn to her whenever she wore them was gratifying in the extreme.

Just last week Cassian had even bent her over the desk in his bedroom when she’d woken before dawn and tried to pull on her leathers. He’d succeeded in convincing her that staying comfortable for an extra hour every morning and eating breakfast in her nightwear wasn’t an unforgivable sin.

Since Nesta had already promised herself to him, she supposed it wouldn’t hurt to indulge herself.

But in the middle of the day?

Her skin crawled at the thought of wearing a nightgown to lunch.

When she finished bathing and toweling herself off, she stared at the pale blue nightgown and matching robe she’d left on the small vanity in a rush of panic.

Azriel, true to his word, had flown them smoothly and quickly to the cabin, landing gently at the foot of the steps leading up to it with a quiet crunch of snow beneath his boots. He’d even carried Nesta up the steps before she could protest, too focused on restoring her even, calm breaths now that they were on solid land again.

He’d set her on her feet just inside the door and silently edged into the kitchen, his face still grim and cold, and offered to prepare lunch while she bathed. She hadn’t protested, but simply shucked her cloak and boots by the door and climbed the stairs to Cassian’s bedroom and the attached en-suite. There was no room for any thought in her head but the uncomfortable grit of sweat and dirt beneath her leathers, which had finally cooled enough during the flight across Illyria to irritate her.

But now it was just her and Az and a damned nightgown that barely even reached her thighs at one o’clock in the afternoon.

Ridiculous. She was being ridiculous to entertain her mortal primness at a time like this.

But still, the nightgown just seemed so… *wanton.* So shameless.

The thought made Nesta feel even more ridiculous. Az had certainly encountered her in more than one shameless, wanton position over the past few months.

Az had been *inside of her,* for fuck’s sake. He was going to be inside of her again soon if she had anything to say about it.

Just… not in the middle of the afternoon when the sun was still high in the sky. She’d even kept her clothes firmly *on* the first few times she and Cassian had gone at each other during the day.

And not without Cassian present to moderate, as she’d promised.

*No one else. Ever.*

Weeks later, that vow was still a balm to that raw, uneasy part of her that felt undeserving of Cassian and his goodness.

To it, her mind tacked on a tentative qualifier that soothed that ragged edge even further. *Except for Azriel. Together.*

Azriel and the stoic, calm way he cared for them both.

Nesta took another deep breath as she dropped the towel and slipped on the nightgown anyway; her only other options were the towel itself or the leathers, and those were not an option at all. She belted the robe tightly around her waist, made sure she was properly covered in the mirror… and hesitated again. Even with her hair still bound in its tight braid, she looked soft. Delicate.

Intimate.

That’s what the nightgown was.

It was *intimate.*

Not wanton. Not shameless.

She heard a quiet shuffle of feet on the stairs.

*Perfect timing,* she thought wryly, casting a curious look at the shadows in the bathroom. She doubted Azriel was capable of anything else.

“Nesta?” His voice sounded on the other side of the door, a soft tap of knuckles against wood accompanying it. “Food’s ready.”

Nesta let a breath out through her nose, steeled herself, and opened the door *.*

And there he was, standing with the same unflinching stillness that Nesta liked about him. His eyes raked over her from head to toe, and the only sign that he registered anything different about her—and that he *liked* it—was the way his pupils dilated as she watched him back.

“I thought you’d be naked.”

She leveled an unimpressed glare at him.

He smirked. “Seems like you did pack *some* clothes.”

*“Night* clothes,” Nesta bit out, though her discomfort was melting, turning to humor.

Az lifted a shoulder and gestured her from the room. “This is the *Night* Court.”

“Ha,” Nesta huffed dryly, heading for the steep stairs, and decided to take his bait. “How much did you hear, anyway?”

A low chuckle sounded behind her.

*“Nothing much.”* Azriel’s breath whispered across the shell of her ear and drew an involuntary shiver up her spine.

The shadows darkened and curled sensuously around her, and then he was gone.

She descended the stairs alone, beating down her anticipation and schooling her face into something unruffled before she reached the main floor. Still, her heart pounded in her chest, the first hint of quicksilver adrenaline sliding into her veins.

“You should take up comedy if espionage doesn’t work out,” she sniped when she stepped out onto the final landing, finding Az waiting in the shadows cast by the cabinets in the kitchen. “I can recommend a few venues in Velaris, if you’d like.”

“I might take you up on that.” Azriel turned, a tray in his hands with two bowls and two mugs, his expression once again as empty as it had been when they left Windhaven. Nesta opened her mouth, but he nodded his head behind her. “The warming spell is strongest in the sitting room.”

So Nesta curled herself into the corner of one of the long leather couches, tucking her robe neatly around herself. Az joined her, the cushions dipping as he placed the tray on the low table in front of them and made himself comfortable. He passed her a bowl of simple chicken soup and a spoon before picking up his own.

She spotted the book she’d been reading over breakfast while Cassian sorted his plan for the camp lords on the tray atop a stack of Az’s dark file folders. Assuming they were going to eat in the companionable silence she was coming to expect from meals with Azriel, she reached for it, but a shadow curled around her fingers before she could pick it up. The dark little wisp traced the tattoo over her fingers as if it recognized the dripping ink.

“I have a question.”

She blinked at Azriel. His expression was still impassive, even as he jerked his chin at the shadows to disperse them. She sat back, careful not to slosh her lunch over herself, and nodded.

“Very well.”

“How well are you able to manipulate your power?”

Nesta stilled. She glanced back down at the soup, at the chunks of carrot and celery, and felt her appetite disappear.

She took a breath to steady herself. “What do you mean?”

“You are in a more stable place—” Nesta scoffed, but Azriel didn’t react. He didn’t even look at her, as if he knew she might combust if he dared to pin her with that canny stare he possessed. “Mentally, emotionally, you *are* . But the incidences of your power appearing seem to be growing. In force and in frequency.”

“I’ve tried controlling it,” Nesta told him, a hard edge in her voice. She shifted from her perch on the couch, and Azriel shifted too—politely maintaining the space between them. The fight went out of her; she wasn’t sure she could storm out on Azriel the same way she did her sisters or Cassian. Not when he was being so damned *gentle* . “Perhaps you remember the wall?”

“Exactly,” Azriel said calmly. “You were trying to *control* it.”

Nesta tried to stay just as calm as Azriel, tried not to let his slow, patient tactics piss her off again. Nevertheless, her fingers went cold, and the curl of steam over her soup disappeared.

The ceramic bowl crackled in her hand as it rapidly cooled.

“As opposed to…?”

Azriel lifted his own hand, a twist of darkness ringing his fingers. “I don’t mean to upset you, Nesta. But there is only a *degree* to which power like this can be controlled.” He laid his palm flat before her. The shadow shifted into different shapes: a pen, a ring, a dagger. “It often has a mind of its own.”

A flick of his wrist, and it disappeared into the rest of the shadows over his shoulders that seemed to peer curiously at her.

“You think this—” Nesta waved a cold hand in the air. “—is like shadowsinging?”

“It is an avenue we haven’t explored,” was all Azriel said in response.

“Amren already tried to teach me how to use it,” she said. A crack appeared in her bowl.

*Pathetic waste of life.*

As if he heard that brittle voice echoing in her mind, the shadows on Azriel’s face darkened. “Amren tried to train you to use the power you took from the Cauldron to accomplish a specific goal in an impossible amount of time. In the end, she failed, just as I thought she would.”

*“I* failed, you mean.” Bitterness seeped through Nesta, sour and vile in the back of her throat.

How many humans had been slaughtered because of her failure? How many families like the Beddors were lost? How many of the children she’d humiliated herself begging the queens to keep safe had died?

*“No,”* Azriel’s voice was hard, almost approaching a snarl as the placid calm disappeared from his face, his posture. *“Amren* failed.”

Nesta felt her eyes go wide.

“I know you kept meeting her after the war. I know that Amren, without any powers of her own, kept attempting to control yours—”

It was like ice water being dumped over her head, completely unrelated to the frigid ember burning inside of her.

“How?” she asked, sharp and suspicious. If he had been watching her… Her teeth bared in an instinctual, purely fae expression of warning.

Azriel looked at her, really looked at her, as if assessing whether or not she was trustworthy. Just as Nesta began to stand, he said, “I keep eyes on Amren. I always have.”

That… That gave Nesta pause. “You don’t trust her?”

“No.”

She swallowed back some of her outrage and sat back down.

“You were scared when your power rose to the surface in the tent this morning.” Azriel seemed to be making an effort to relax the wings that had flared at the mention of Amren, lower the shoulders that had tensed. He set his bowl aside and lifted Nesta’s from her hands, placing it onto the tray carefully, so as not to split the crack even further. “But I don’t think this power is a thing you should fear. I think it’s trying to protect you.”

“So, what are you proposing? More training?” The last of the anger disappeared, and Nesta closed her eyes at the thought of more training. Cassian’s routines centered her, soothed her, but so tired after running that course every morning. If Azriel’s lessons were anything like the frustrating power struggle with Amren...

A calloused hand curled around her silk-covered knee. “No. This would be… teaching. Tutoring. Showing you how to communicate with your power, if such a thing is possible.”

*Communicate…* Nesta had never tried to communicate with her power. She hadn’t known that was an option. Amren had only ever told her to control it. To make it bow to her will.

But… she remembered the strange way the deep well of cold within her moved, sometimes, when she thought about it. The way it had made her ill when the wall fell. How it rose to greet her when she suspected that she and the Bone Carver and the Weaver and Koschei might be more similar than she thought. The dreams and the nightmares it sent her. The way it responded to her fury.

She blew out a breath and opened her eyes. For once, Az’s face was earnest, open.

She eyed his shadows. “I can’t sing.”

“You don’t have to.” His lips twitched, and he lifted his hand from her knee. He placed his bowl of soup in her hands. “Think about it, Nes.”

And that was that. Az didn’t push her to set a date for whatever lessons he had planned; he simply nodded at her to eat and then picked up his work again, making notes in the margins of whatever he was reading, occasionally sipping the tea he had also prepared for them.

The soup was only lukewarm, affected by her cold spell, and Nesta was shivering by the time she set it aside and reached for her book. Cassian was right; her clothes were thin, unsuited for Illyria’s relentless winter, and neither she nor Az had so much as glimpsed at the hearth…

“Are you cold?”

Nesta sighed and nodded. *Yes.*

Az nodded back at her, and she braced herself for a fire. But he didn’t stand.

Instead, she caught a shadow slipping into the bag she left on a hook beside the door, and then it was in front of Azriel, a pair of her socks held aloft in a curl of darkness. He nodded again at Nesta and it shifted to her, a midnight-chill kissing her fingers as she plucked the socks from its grasp.

“They told you what I packed?” Nesta cut him an amused—and somewhat mortified—glance as she uncurled only enough to slip a sock onto each foot, wiggling her toes as they were encased by the embarrassingly bright fluff. Az only lifted his report at her, as if to say, *Spymaster, remember?* “You couldn’t do that with my faelight the other day?”

“It’s rude,” Az said. He nodded at the bright sunlight glaring off the snow drifts outside. “They need firsthand knowledge of an item and the space it occupies to do it. I try to keep them out of my housemates’ bedrooms unless otherwise invited, but they hid in your bag on the flight here.”

As she watched, a dark swath of color lit Az’s golden cheeks from within.

“Come here,” he said, shaking his head as if he were shaking away the flush.

He tapped the Siphon on his left hand, and the leathers covering his top half receded into his gauntlets, until he was left in a soft, cotton shirt laced at the throat. Then, Nesta watched, heart racing, as he lifted an arm to her.

She curled her fingers around her book. “You want to cuddle?”

Humor lit up Az’s eyes. “Cass told me you need body heat up here.”

*“Ass,”* Nesta muttered, but the place deep inside of her where her love for Cassian lay twinged with heart-aching fondness as she scooted across the couch anyway. She sighed at the warmth that greeted her as she pressed into Az’s side. He laid his arm over her shoulders softly, hesitantly; it was a touch utterly unlike the smugness in his tone until she dared to grab his wrist and pulled it tighter around herself.

Then they were quiet, her head on his shoulder, each reading what they’d brought to the cabin with them.

Nesta was nearly to the climax of her tawdry romance, the lord begging on his knees before his runaway governess, when something cool and mist-like and *ticklish* curled around her ankle. She jumped, nearly upending herself onto Az’s lap.

He huffed a near-silent chuckle.

And did nothing to help.

She yanked up the hem of her robe, catching sight of a swath of darkness around her leg before it darted away—higher, back under her robe, to press into the sensitive skin behind her knee until her breath caught, the first hint of heat sparking between her legs.

*“Azriel.”*

“Something wrong, *sweetheart?”*

His voice was composed again, the same mocking thing it had been when he’d sat her on his lap and tormented her before Cassian for what must have been hours. Those hazel eyes were obscured by darkness when she looked, but she could feel them on her, glancing down at her breasts, almost entirely exposed by her gaping robe and the low, low neckline of her nightgown.

“No.” Nesta swallowed and covered her leg with the silk length of her robe again, determined not to let whatever game Azriel was playing shake her. She knew what she wanted, and it seemed he did, too. Even if his trick with the shadows was not part of her own plan, well, Nesta would get what she wanted, one way or another.

So she didn’t adjust the nightgown over her breasts.

She went back to reading, and the shadow behind her knee stayed there for several pages until the lord laid the governess out on the bed, ripping her bodice right down the midd—

The tendrils snaked up Nesta’s thigh, that mist-like sensation kissing her hips, phantom hands grasping her waist.

Nesta shifted, stretching out her legs. Wetness slicked between them in the one place the shadows seemed to be avoiding, and Azriel’s firm body didn’t so much as tremble as he pulled in a deep, greedy breath beside her.

She bit her lip, blinking away the tunnel-vision of arousal, and read on.

The lord's mouth descended on the governess’s breast; the shadows ventured up her sides and teased her own. The governess gasped as he bit the peak of one; Nesta’s breasts tightened, her face hot, as the shadows licked at them until her nipples were visible through the silk. She gasped, and the shadows wrapped around her throat, one rising to brush her lips—

And finally, Nesta gave in, letting out a shuddering breath. “You don’t try to keep the shadows out of your housemates’ skirts, do you?”

“Only when my housemates want me to.” Azriel didn’t even look up from the report in his hand.

Nesta took a quick, cooling breath and glanced at the closed door, the empty sky through the window. “I promised Cassian—”

“I’m not going to do anything more until he gets home.” The scarred hand on her shoulder, warming her through the thin silk of her robe, stayed respectfully where she placed it, though the shadows at her breast flickered again.

When Nesta’s breath quickened in response, the hand tightened.

She shifted again and turned back to her book, skimming through the next scene with the lord and governess, and Az’s shadows calmed into a complex, complacent net of gossamer darkness around her body. Cradling her, holding her a dozen places a lover might all at once, but going no further. As if they heard her and listened when she set her boundary.

And as the sky darkened, the shadows warm with her own body heat and soft as cashmere against her skin, the teasing turned soothing. Her eyelids grew heavier and heavier as she read, until, eventually, she drifted off.

When Cassian returned to the command tent without Azriel’s head in his arms, without a pair of wings to pin to the canvas walls as a trophy and a warning to any others daring enough to touch Nesta’s back, the tension in the space grew so thick that even he might have struggled to cut it with a knife.

The camp lords were silent, as if a terrifying new opponent had entered the ring with them instead of the same male they’d been going toe-to-toe with for the past four centuries. As if they could sense the deeper bond that existed between all Illyrian brothers-in-arms was finally on the verge of shifting into something greater for the Lord of Bloodshed and the Shadowsinger after all these years, the way they’d once feared, with an equally fearsome female now in the mix. As if they remembered what he and Azriel had each done—slowly, painfully, publicly—to the males who’d hurt the other females in their lives and were fiercely regretting casting their judgment so quickly and so openly upon Nesta now.

As if they remembered the all-out slaughter that occurred during their own Blood Rite as he and Azriel fought their way to one another, and then to Rhys.

Cassian was in such a good mood by the time he finished tearing into each one in turn that he almost regretted promising to bring dinner home as he soared past the cabin. It was lit from within with soft faelight, and he let out a mournful sound as he soared toward the village below.

But it wasn’t all bad.

The soft-spoken butcher’s wife clasped his hand between gentle, papery fingers that were wrinkled and spotted with age, gasping happily when she detected the shift in his scent. She pushed a parcel heavy with lamb into his arms; on his way out, Cassian hid the payment she hadn’t accepted in the small mailbox by the door.

The gruff male who ran the trading post, Cato, grunted at him as usual, but grinned when Cassian ordered triple the normal amount of food he bought when he was in the village. Cato had no qualms about accepting his money, though when one of Cato’s mates stuck his head out of the curtained door to the back room to greet Cassian, he spotted their third at the counter, discreetly packing an extra jar of something sweet into the box they prepared for him with a conspiratorial wink.

And when he shoved his way into his home, huffing and rustling his wings to dislodge the thin layer of sleet on the membrane and dropping that heavy box onto the table by the door, he was greeted not by his mates, but by a wall of shadow to the face.

Across the room, Az’s dark voice hissed, *“Quiet.”*

The hilt of his longsword was in his palm before the box hit the table.

Cassian bounced on the balls of his feet, tucking his wings even as he sought out the golden thread and the older almost-thread of his bonds. The shadows dissipated as he plucked them, finding nothing but sleepy contentment from Nesta and irritation from Azriel—

And there they were.

His mates.

His hand dropped from his weapon.

The darkness from Windhaven had bled away from Azriel’s expression in the hours since Cassian had last seen him, the tension and murderous calculation that usually lingered for days after crossing paths with the lords of Illyria gone entirely.

The scent of Nesta’s arousal greeted him from across the room, too, all heady sweetness mixed with freshly-forged steel and cold fire. Now, though… Cassian bit back a fond chuckle as her head lolled on Azriel’s shoulder, her eyes closed and her breathing deep.

He racked his brain, but could not recall a single female ever falling asleep on Az like that. Not even after their gentlest nights together, not even after Azriel ensured she was warm and full and content afterward. If a female fell asleep at all, she unconsciously reached for Cassian without fail, shying away from Az and his shadows. It didn’t matter whether or not the shadows had gotten involved earlier in the evening; it was simply the pattern that repeated time and time again.

Azriel looked almost as shocked as Cassian felt—or, well, as shocked as Azriel *could* look. His scarred hand lay on Nesta’s shoulder, his cheek hovering just over her hair, and his eyes were wide, half-wild.

“Well this wasn’t what I was expecting,” Cassian said quietly, unbuckling his sword and hanging it on the hook beside Nesta’s cloak. His foolish, sentimental heart squeezed at the sight.

Azriel shook off his blank look of alarm and smirked at him as a shadow slithered out of the collar of Nesta’s robe. Cassian’s mouth went dry at the sight of it.

He knew what Az liked to do with those shadows.

With calculated calm to counteract the wildfire consuming his blood, he tilted his head as he tapped his Siphons to retract the icy leathers covering him. “Even more interesting.”

“You have a very loyal mate,” Azriel whispered.

Cassian hated the glimpse of shame he caught in Az’s eyes, the ghost of that centuries-old feeling of worthlessness that tortured Azriel echoing down their old almost-bond.

His heart squeezed again with the thought that he, very likely, had contributed to that feeling.

We *have a very loyal mate,* he wanted to say. But, knowing the tangle that would create, he settled on, “You managed to get her to wear the socks?”

Az blinked. “She was cold.”

*Undoubtedly,* Cassian thought as he eyed the unlit hearth. Rhys's warming spell could only do so much, and between Nesta’s icy flame and Azriel’s cool shadows, both with their own fear of fire…

He might have to ask Rhys to come cast a few more.

Whenever he stopped wanting to throw things at Rhys’s head.

“Are the socks… abnormal?” Azriel’s head tilted, and he stared down at the fuzzy teal socks on Nesta’s feet.

“She’s embarrassed by them,” Cassian said. He’d never been able to get the *why* out of Nesta, but he suspected it landed somewhere between the bright, childlike colors of the socks the House knitted for her and her heartbreaking, deep-seated inability to feel deserving of comfort. “Only puts them on after I fall asleep.”

Az didn’t move, but Cassian saw his lips twitch, saw that familiar, vicious gleam of competitiveness in his eyes. *Victory,* he was sure Az was thinking.

Not for long. “Mind telling me why my mate’s scent is unsatisfied?”

Unsatisfied, uncut by Az’s scent. Same thing.

He’d been expecting to find at least one of them on their knees for the other when he returned.

Az tracked him as he walked into the living room, pushed aside the tray on the coffee table, and sat on its surface. Cassian spread his legs and his wings, all cocky male challenge, and the spread of Azriel’s wings tightened at the sight of him—already hardening from the scent of Nesta alone, pressing against the seam of his trousers.

“I told you. She’s loyal.” Az ground out, voice quiet, his offense obvious in the way his shadows darkened. “And she’s *your* mate. You think I would touch her without you?”

Cassian lifted his hands, placating and non-threatening.

“She wanted to wait for you.”

And that alone would be enough to stay Azriel’s hand, to make him halt whatever game he played.

Cassian took a breath in through his nose and resisted the urge to let his head fall back. *Let me moderate,* he remembered asking of Nesta. Now, in retrospect, he could have decked himself for asking.

They were his mates. They *should* take pleasure from one another, regardless of whether or not he was present. He *wanted* them to enjoy one another, *wanted* to come home to them fucked out and intoxicated with one another, almost as much as he wanted to be the one buried inside them.

But all he’d told Az this morning was that he might be able to keep Nesta warm while Cassian ripped into the camp lords, that she’d mentioned wanting to share a little body heat. Hadn’t given either of them any sign beyond innuendo that he was comfortable with them seeking each other out for more without him—he, the male so fresh from the mating frenzy that he might still lose his senses if any male but Azriel touched Nesta.

He supposed he’d have to be clearer about what he wanted in the future.

“I’m here now,” he said instead, reaching forward to hook two fingers in the low neckline of Nesta’s nightgown. He tugged at it, barely grazing the swell of her breasts, until she shifted and slapped at his hand, her eyes fluttering open.

“What?” she grumbled. He watched Azriel’s eyes slide shut as Nesta pushed herself off of him, but his displeasure shifted, lightened, when she stayed close to his side anyway.

And Cassian let his hand fall, instead snatching away the forgotten book in her lap. “You read this filth while you snuggled with Az, sweetheart?”

“Cassian!” Nesta’s eyes were wide open now, still bright with sleep, and she reached for the book. Cassian leaned back, cracking it open—

Just as a shadow pulled at the tie to Nesta’s robe.

It fell open, and Cassian snorted.

“Wouldn’t touch her without me,” he muttered, teasing, reaching out one hand to trail his fingers over the intricate knot of shadows between Nesta’s glorious breasts.

Pink stained Nesta’s cheeks as she scowled at him, uncertainty traveling across the bond. He sent back the desire pulsing between his legs, in his chest.

And Azriel merely tilted his head at him, the fingers on Nesta’s shoulder tapping, as if to say, *I’m not* inside *of her, am I?*

Another shadow wiggled into the pages of the book, a magical bookmark, and Cassian flipped to the page it indicated. His brows lifted. “What’s this, Nes? The lord and the governess?”

“She’s been reading that smut the entire time she’s been sitting beside me,” Azriel intoned, solemn once more. “Shocking, isn’t it?”

Cassian snorted again as he read a scene concerned with the governess’s mouth, spreading his legs further as his trousers tightened again imagining what Nesta must have made of it, and then flipped through a few pages, skimming until he found what he wanted. He dog-eared both pages, dodging the hand Nesta swiped at him for doing so, and passed the book to Az.

*“Azriel…”* Nesta growled in warning, wearing her *I Will Slay My Enemies* look.

But Az shot her a stern look—a terrifying one that Cassian had long ago named *I Will Do As I Please With You and You Will Thank Me When I Finish—* and leaned over the edge of the couch so she couldn’t reach him. The shadows roped around Nesta writhed until she shuddered and stopped trying to steal back her book,

She cast a guilty glance at Cassian.

Cassian merely grinned at her, palming his cock through his pants.

They both watched, silent and breathless, as Azriel took his sweet time reading the first passage and then the second. One side of his mouth lifted upward.

His dark eyes slid to them, and he cocked his head, considering Nesta first. Then Cassian. Reading them with as much ease as he had read Nesta’s book.

“At the same time?”

“I think she can take it.”

“And which part are you taking, Cass?”

“The first.” Nesta’s mouth.

Which left…

Azriel went still. He turned back to Nesta, revealing to her only the edge of the book—and the approximate location of each of the dog-eared pages. Nesta stared and stared until her pale blue eyes were almost navy with desire, her mouth dropping open in a perfectly round O.

She nodded.

Azriel threw the book onto the coffee table with a *slap* that made her jump and stood.

“Go upstairs, Nesta.”

“What?”

Azriel didn’t repeat himself. Nesta glared at him, halfhearted and heated, and Cassian almost laughed when she followed him up on trembling legs, still a head-and-then-some shorter than Az.

Finally, when the shadows started to skitter with amusement, Azriel said evenly, belying the growing bulge in his trousers, “If you want me to fuck you, go upstairs. Don’t make me tell you again.”

Nesta rolled her eyes before Cassian could warn her not to and took off for the stairwell, pulling at the bond with so much desperate, dark lust that Cassian stumbled to his feet and followed a few steps.

A hand grasped his arm, and Azriel clicked his tongue.

“You know the routine.”

Three glasses, a pitcher, a towel.

Cassian collected them all, filling the pitcher with fresh water, and followed Nesta up the stairs. He found her perched on the edge of the bed, her nerves and excitement apparent on her face, and swooped down to kiss her before Azriel could make his appearance, cupping her chin in one hand.

“Alright, Nes?”

Her eyes didn’t stray from the door. “Yes.”

The moment Cassian set everything on the dresser, Azriel stepped out of the shadows.

“Cassian. Undress.”

So Cassian did. He stripped out of the simple cotton shirt and pants he layered beneath his armor, winking at Nesta when he caught sight of her gaze locked on his ass, her tongue flicking over her sensuously full lower lip.

Azriel methodically disarmed himself, too, lining his knives up on the top of the dresser. Every click of the buckles, every hiss of leather against leather as he slid straps through slits ratcheted up the anticipation crackling across the bond. The slim throwing knives at his side, the thick leather gauntlets that housed his Siphons. Truth-Teller was the last to go, place with reverence above the rest.

He pulled his shirt over his head next, folding it neatly, and Cassian drank in the sight of him. He didn't allow himself to look in the training ring; this sort of indulgence was reserved only for the bedroom.

Or the sitting room.

Or the alleyway behind Rita’s.

Where his own tattoos were thick, brutal lines and angular edges, Azriel's were all sweeping curves and sharp points, arcing like the blade of a scythe against his skin. A set of runes was stamped down the length of his spine, inked carefully between his wings, and matched the silver lettering on Truth-Teller's sheath. Cassian didn't know what they meant, what sort of ancient magic they invoked, but Azriel did—had dedicated decades to studying them before he'd gone to a defected Illyrian tattoo artist Rhys's mother had once been friendly with in Velaris to commission that work.

Az took his boots off last, placing them neatly beside the dresser, and padded to Cassian where he stood beside Nesta, clad only in his trousers.

And kissed him.

Nesta gaped.

Azriel kissed like he fought. She caught a glimpse of his tongue pushing into Cassian’s mouth, his teeth tearing at Cassian’s lips, unrelenting, hard, punishing. His hands wound themselves into Cassian’s hair, keeping him in exactly the spot Azriel wanted him as he drank from Cassian’s mouth.

None of the other males she’d ever brought home together had dared touch each other, had dared leave their firmly assigned positions at either end of her. But Cassian and Azriel…

They were the two most feared warriors in Prythian—Nesta got the sense they could do this for days. That they could kiss and kiss and when they were tired take up blades and spar until they fell into one another like this again…

It was a claiming kiss, a display of dominance. Cassian resisted, eyes open and nearly black, until Azriel growled, teeth flashing—and the shadows curled upward, coalescing into two wide strips that wrapped around each of Cassian’s wings like bands of iron. Cassian snarled, the tether flaring with primal rage, and then gasped when Azriel licked a possessive stripe up the roof of his mouth, his eyelids shuttering closed.

Nesta’s heart thudded hard in her chest, the space between her thighs pulsin. The tether calmed, and the coppery scent of blood filled the air. At the sight of a small stream of red trickled down Cassian’s chin, Nesta’s lips parted.

Azriel pulled away, teeth still bared, blood smeared over his handsome mouth.

The cut was minuscule, practically disappearing as Cassian licked at it, the back of one hand wiping away the mess on his face. When Azriel pushed him backwards wordlessly, Cassian went, laying where Azriel positioned him at the center of the bed beside Nesta. His wings were still bound behind his back, his cock jutting proudly toward his navel.

“Nesta.”

Gentle, scarred hands lifted her to her feet before she could reach out and touch, and she went, still enraptured by the sight of Cassian. By the punch-drunk look on his face.

Azriel must have been able to sense or, *fuck,* scent the wetness dripping down her thighs, because his nostrils flared as a hand skimmed over her stomach. Down, further, toward the center of her body—

“Not yet.” He gripped her by the shoulders and turned her to face Cassian.

Nesta lost herself as Azriel slid her robe and then her nightgown from her shoulders. Cassian’s eyes were burning, glowing golden as he watched them—as he watched Azriel’s hands graze every inch of bare skin as it was revealed. When Az cupped both of Nesta’s breasts in his palms, thumbing her nipples until they tightened, Cassian’s cock strained against his stomach, dripping tempting pearls of wetness onto the sculpted planes beneath.

He didn’t touch it, though. His hands were fisted in the sheets, his feet planted on the floor.

When Nesta was fully bare, Azriel even bent at the waist, nostrils and wings flaring, and lifted each of her feet to slip them out of her socks with a low, pointed laugh toward Cassian's expense.

"He's never let me bind his wings in front of anyone else," Azriel murmured into her ear after he straightened, a secret just for her, and then bit into the lobe.

Nesta trembled.

A damp kiss left the metallic tang of Cassian’s blood and Azriel’s scent on her shoulder.

“Go on,” Azriel coaxed her toward the bed, his hands smoothing down her arms.

Nesta turned to him, even though Cassian inhaled sharply, his hips shifting in anticipation. “What?”

“Stretch yourself on him,” Azriel said, one hand tracing her hip, moving inward… Pausing. He pushed his own hips forward, and she felt the considerable length beneath his trousers press against her ass. “Prepare yourself for me.”

“Come on, sweetheart.” Cassian’s thighs flexed, the muscles across his stomach rippling. His cock bobbed, and she licked her lips, craving the taste of it. “You’ll thank him for it later.”

“You will,” Azriel confirmed quietly, the tip of one finger dipping just low enough to stroke her clit.

Just once.

It was enough to spur Nesta into action, to reach back and brush her hand over Azriel’s covered cock before obeying his order.

Azriel hissed, and she grinned, crawling back onto the bed to straddle Cassian. She was so ready that she dripped onto him before she even touched him. He groaned, his head falling back, and Nesta didn’t waste another minute before lining him up and sinking down on him, rolling her hips once, twice to test the sweet pull of his cock inside her.

She said a silent prayer of thanks to the Cassian of earlier this morning, who’d bent her over and taken her hard on the edge of this bed.

She panted while she rode him. The tension between her legs built higher and higher, burning in the muscles of her thighs, her stomach. The bed dipped behind her, and alloused hands grasped her hips, pressing her forward and adjusting her pace.

“Like that,” Az murmured when she fell forward, unbalanced, bracing her hands against Cassian’s chest. Below her, Cass laughed breathlessly, eyes glazed as he stared down toward the place where they were joined, where Az’s hands controlled how they fucked.

But Az was right—the new angle stretched her further. Cassian’s cock dragged deliciously against her front wall with each pass, her clit grinding down onto his length.

She closed the distance with Cassian, and his starstruck expression shifted to something soft as she kissed him, lathing her tongue over the raw spot where Azriel had drawn blood.

“Alright, Nes?” he asked against her mouth, his hips flexing up into her.

But she was already aiming for another kiss, desperate to feel his tongue against hers, to sync their breaths and fall into him.

*“Mhmm.”*

She circled her hips, and Azriel let her, over and over and over again until she began to tighten around Cassian—

And then she was on her back beside him, so empty and wet and exposed that she whined. But Az was right there, between her legs, crowding her, his lips already on her breast.

Cassian propped himself on an elbow to watch.

“She likes it when you bite,” Cassian said, and wicked teeth scraped over Nesta’s nipple.

Her back arched in response, but Azriel’s eyes pinned her, his wings stretching as he switched to her other breast and repeated the movement, shifting an inch and biting into the pale flesh until she cried out his name. A purple mark remained when he lifted his head, examining her.

“Az, please,” she begged. She needed more. Needed the hardness she felt between her legs inside of her, splitting her. Needed Cassian in her mouth, the weight of him on her tongue.

Maybe it was selfish to want them both. Maybe she was setting herself up to crash and burn for daring to ask for so much. But, like a compulsion, she couldn’t stop herself as she reached for Azriel.

She remembered the first time she’d been with Cassian—when he’d called her Lady Death, and she’d imagined him as her sword. If Cassian was her sword, if he was her Ataraxia, then Azriel had to be the slim dagger she’d Made that day, the one she’d pictured concealing in a sheath as black as her leathers, unassuming and terrifying and *hers.*

A cool collar of shadow locked around her neck.

“What are your words?” Azriel asked as he hauled her across the bed, his palm cradling her head as the mattress fell out from beneath it.

“Velaris to pause, Windhaven to stop,” Nesta gasped, the buttons of his leathers pushing hard against her clit.

“If you need to stop, make a noise for the shadow,” he instructed her, his voice as tight as his eyes were hard. “You can also tap Cassian's leg once to continue, twice to stop.”

Familiar. That was familiar—she already did that with Cassian when they played like this. Cassian grinned down at her, knowing what she was thinking. He shifted and rose from the bed, and Nesta swallowed at the sight of his cock bobbing into view, slicked with her own arousal. She opened her mouth, waiting for it.

Azriel chuckled and pulled at the hair he was holding, bending to bite her neck.

“Not yet, Nes.” He let go of her, let her head fall over the edge until she was left staring at Cassian’s hips, his thighs, his cock. Cass replaced Azriel’s hand and lifted her head so she could watch Az unbutton his trousers and fist his length, drawing himself and stroking his cock once, twice, three times.

*“Fuck,”* she whispered, and Cassian barked a laugh above her. Azriel’s mouth quirked.

Her legs spread in anticipation, her sex pulsing with need, but Azriel flicked his fingers. The shadows—more solid than she’d ever felt—curled around her thighs and dragged them further apart, bending her knees upward toward her chest.

“Need to take you like this the first time, Nes,” Azriel explained, patient and firm, crawling back up her body. He pushed his cock through her wetness, the head catching on the ridge of her clit and making Nesta’s toes curl. He stroked his fingers through her next, dipped them into her and laughed when she moaned, and used her arousal to slick his cock.

The blunt head pressed against her entrance, and Nesta held her breath.

When he sank the first few inches into her, her head fell back into Cassian’s palm, a low groan she had no control over pulled from her throat. But Cassian’s hand was just as unyielding as the stretch of Az’s cock within her, his eyes intent, his face serious, as he watched them.

*“Look* ,” Cass rumbled. The tether lit up, golden and singing and reverberating with soft, heartbreaking warmth. “Watch Az take you, sweetheart.”

Another inch, and Nesta’s chest pulled.

“You can take it.” Azriel’s encouragement sent a wash of heat up her spine. “A little bit more…”

But nothing about Az could be described as *little,* especially not the length remaining. He pushed into her, catching the tender spot within, and pulled back. He did it again, sinking another inch into her as she trembled. Then again and again, until he was fully seated in her, breathing hard through his nose, and she was split so wide around him that she thought she might fall to pieces if it weren’t for the hands he kept on her waist, one of Cassian’s working a breast roughly, grounding her.

“Now you can open up for Cass, precious,” Azriel ordered, cutting off a short groan when she clenched around him, but his dark eyes were on the male above her.

Cassian’s hands fell away, and Nesta’s head dropped over the edge of the bed once more, her lips parting. In the same second, the tip of Cassian’s cock kissed her lips, and she licked the broad slit. Azriel stayed frustratingly still, until Nesta could feel his pulse where they were joined, as Cassian worked himself into her. As she swirled her tongue around him, tasting herself, more and more until Cassian was at the back of her mouth and she swallowed him, breathing through her nose.

The tether was blazing, burning sweetly, solid and strong. Nesta’s chest felt too small to contain it, her ribs constricting as Azriel pushed into her again, pushed Cassian further down her throat.

She tapped him once, and Cassian made a strained sound of pleasure. “You like that?”

Another tap, and she kept her hand on him, reaching around to dig into his ass and draw him forward.

“Think that means you can—” Another thrust from Az as the pleasure curled and coiled within her, more of Cassian’s cock in her throat. Az pulled back, and so did Cassian, granting Nesta a second to breathe. “—go harder, Az.”

“I know,” Az sounded amused as he pounded into her, laying himself over her and setting the pace again. A calloused finger flicked Nesta’s clit. “You think I don’t hear her begging for it? *Every. Fucking. Day?”*

Each word was another hard thrust into her, the pressure between her legs building, and Cassian’s hand was on her throat, massaging as she swallowed him again and again.

“Come, Nesta,” Azriel’s voice was hard, cold, and Nesta broke, pulling against her restraints as she came on command, moaning on Cassian’s cock. Gods, gods, gods, how did he have such control over her?

Cassian cursed.

“You’re going to give me another,” Azriel told her, never once slowing as Nesta clenched and fell apart around his cock.

But she couldn’t imagine feeling better than she already did, coasting on the high of her orgasm, each male doing their best to make her lose her senses. She was lightheaded, could feel each of them within her and above her and around her, the hot tether pulling a heady, seductive line from her mouth to her cunt as they worked her over.

*“Where?”* Rough. Growling. Az shifted, lifting himself off of Nesta, and she groaned in protest around Cassian’s cock as the exquisite weight of him disappeared.

But Cassian heard him, knew what was he was asking and snarled, “Inside her, Az.”

Nesta moaned again, needy and desperate with the thought of feeling Az drip out of her, down her thighs, of being claimed by him that way.

“Inside you?” Azriel pressed into her again and growled into her ear, his voice thick with intrigue.

Nesta slapped Cassian's thigh once, loudly, and made two frantic sounds. *Mm-hmm.*

The second syllable turned into a high, choked whimper as Az slammed into her so hard that Cassian’s cock pushed as far down her throat as she'd ever been able to take it. Cass shouted when she swallowed, shushing her as he pulled back to let her breathe, and brushed her hair back. She tapped his thigh.

“Hold on, sweetheart,” Cassian grunted as he gripped her shoulders, pressing them down beside her shoulders to steady her. His fingers dug in so deeply that she could already picture the bruises that would blossom in their wake. “So good, so— *Fuck.”*

She felt surrounded, consumed, entirely subject to the pleasure of the males above her as they pleasured her in turn. As Cassian fucked into her mouth, Azriel curled himself around her again, the heat and press of his chest against her aching breasts a relief she couldn’t have put into words even if her mouth weren’t occupied.

Something just as cool and intangible as the darkness around her throat curled around her clit, swirling faster and faster as Az’s measured thrusts picked up the pace, his cock punishing that sore, sweet spot inside of her.

She whimpered again. *Please* .

“Patience, precious.” Az’s whisper was ragged and breathless in her ear, his teeth dragging against the corner of her jaw. A hand spread over the slight curve of her stomach between her hips, holding her where each thrust pushed into her. “I’ll fill you, don’t worry.”

The next sound out of her was sob of relief, cathartic and full-bodied, and Cassian shouted as her tongue pressed hard against the tip of him, catching the ridge under the head. His hands flexed once around her wrists as Azriel pushed him back into her throat, and then he was throbbing, hard, against her lips, coming so far back that she didn’t even taste it, didn’t even have to swallow.

His climax crashed through him and into her, all lightning-sharpness and molten heat, and Nesta cried out as she shattered around Azriel’s cock, clenching, pulling him deeper as he, too, cursed under his breath and pressed as close and as deep as he could, his mouth on her neck. He filled her as promised, delicious warmth spreading inside of her, and Nesta keened as it dripped out of her around him.

Time slowed, the seconds stretching, and all Nesta knew was the boundless bliss etching itself onto every fiber of her being, reshaping every shard of her soul, and them.

*Them, them, them.*

*Them.*

Cassian drew back first, kneeling beside her. Kiss after kiss was dropped to her sore mouth as she gasped for air, her throat and her jaw aching.

“So fucking good, Nes, that was so *fucking* good,” Cassian rumbled against her lips, and she shivered with pleasure. Her body felt far away, distant, but the clench of her core and the filthy curse Azriel hissed into the crook of her neck sent a fresh wave of it tingling up her spine.

As if he had reminded the magic himself, her tattooed fingers burned. She rasped a laugh that made Azriel raise his head from her shoulder, and Cassian’s hand flexed where it was once again supporting her neck.

Had Cass been the one to make her come? Nesta didn’t care. The burn grew more and more urgent with every passing moment, and magical technicalities were of no interest to her when Azriel’s cock was still buried inside her.

She tilted her head to gaze up at Cassian, who was still watching her with soft, dilated eyes.

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had,” she told him, giggling hoarsely, struck by how ridiculous and embarrassing their bargain was. Cassian’s expression lit up at the sound of it, pure joy on his handsome face, matching the warmth in her belly. “He felt so good coming inside me. I want him to do it again.”

Cassian’s shoulders shook with a silent laugh, and he bent to whisper in her ear, “I forgot that I sold the guest bed when I fixed up your reading room, so he’s sharing with us tonight, sweetheart. The chances of that are good.”

Her fingers burned again, and a sting of magic enveloped her hand. She lifted it to her face, catching Azriel watching them with lidded eyes as the tattoo disappeared.

*“Bastard,”* Azriel said, teeth bared at Cassian but shadows skittering with amusement. His eyes rolled skyward, and then strong arms dragged Nesta away from Cassian and fully onto the bed, cradling her in a tender embrace that made her ribs feel too small again.

But all Cassian had to say was, “About fucking time, Nes,” examining his own, newly-bared hand to make the pair of them dissolve into laughter again.

Warmth.

Delicious warmth.

Nesta stretched, groaning low in her throat. She soaked it in: soft sheets beneath her legs, the steel band of Cassian’s arm around her waist, a large, hot hand cupping her breast, a velveteen wing draped over her shoulder. He was behind her, every breath deep and even, his nose buried in her hair.

Even before she opened her eyes, she could tell the dim light streaming in through the windows was filtered through the thin, scarred membrane of his wing, turning it mottled and golden.

And, in front of her…

The mattress dipped in front of her, too.

She blinked her bleary eyes open, rubbing at the one that had been buried in Cassian’s pillow.

Soft, shadowed eyes stared back at her.

The small smile on Azriel’s lips faded as she looked, until he was once again a fortress, but a scarred hand reached out, unbearably gentle as it traced the line down her neck where her pulse had begun to rush under his scrutiny. He was cocooned beneath Cassian’s wing with her, stiff as a board. His gaze very pointedly did not shift toward that long, delicate limb; his own wings were tucked in tight to his back, shadows hidden.

*Good morning,* he mouthed at her. She smiled back, and he went still at the sight of it, like he hadn’t expected it.

They hadn't gone again last night. Nesta had been too sore and too sated to do more than bury her face in Azriel's chest and laugh, mortified and pleased, as Cassian read her book aloud for them. To make sure they had given Nesta the full experience, he’d said with a filthy grin. Cass had fed them both bits of the lamb stew he'd thrown together while they recovered, and it had been good, quiet—something she'd never pictured Azriel doing.

But Az had merely stroked her hair, holding her close and running his fingers over the bruises he'd left on her while she came down from the high. He'd done the same for Cassian, too; though he didn't dare to touch Cassian’s wings after the shadows binding them fell away, Az had spent a good twenty minutes kneading his mottled fingers into the muscles around them on Cassian's back—knowing from experience just where he'd feel the restraints the most, Nesta surmised.

Behind her, Cassian’s breathing faltered. His arm shifted, tightening and moving lower. He woke quickly, silently, just the way a trained soldier should, and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head.

His cock was hard, nestled against the curve of her backside.

Without a word, his callused hand grasped her hip, massaging, and then traveled down her thigh to her knee. Nesta was given no warning before Cassian dragged that leg upward and hooked her foot around the back of his calf. Spreading her open for him.

Liquid desire dripped into her, pooling into her belly, and she arched into him. His hand traveled back up the path he’d marked, drawing ticklish circles up the inside of her thigh until he found the dripping seam of her body.

Azriel watched, silent and serious. His eyes tattooed a line down from his scarred hand on her throat to Cassian’s hand between her thighs.

*“Cass,”* she moaned as he dipped a fingertip into her, testing, and kept drawing circles—smaller and tighter now—around her clit.

“Shh, sweetheart, I’ll give you what you need,” Cassian purred with his sleep-thick voice into her ear, pressing a wet kiss to her jaw. He shifted again, adjusting her hips, and then the blunt head of his cock was nocked at her entrance.

“Please,” she begged, closing her eyes as the thrill of anticipation seized her.

“So polite,” Az’s dark voice murmured, his thumb rising from her throat to grip her chin. “Look at me.”

Nesta opened her eyes just in time for Azriel to watch them go wide as Cassian sank into her to the hilt. Her lips parted around a gasp at the pinching, burning stretch of the way he’d positioned her.

With a sharp intake of breath through his nose, Azriel dipped his thumb into her open mouth, testing the sharp edge of her teeth against the calloused pad of it. When she regained enough of her mind to think, Nesta closed her lips around his knuckle and curled her tongue around the pad of his thumb, working it like she would a cock.

“Good,” he praised, curling his other fingers below her chin to keep her in place as he pushed his thumb deeper into her.

Nesta made a broken noise around it; Cassian’s fingers were playing her expertly, and he rolled his hips lazily, hardly moving as his cock ground into the sweet spot inside her again and again.

“Help Az, Nes.” The order was growled into her ear.

She was already moving before Cassian finished speaking, tracing the wickedly sharp tattoos on one golden-brown shoulder to urge Az closer. He obeyed her silent request with a wry smile, pulling his thumb from her mouth with a slick *pop* and closing the remaining distance between them until she was firmly trapped between two unending spans of firm, hot skin and muscle.

Her mind emptied as Azriel’s hand wrapped around her neck again. His cock, unseen beneath the sheets that covered them all to the waist, lined up with her stomach, spanning from her cunt to her navel and smearing beads of wetness onto her skin. Cassian was moving within her beneath Azriel’s cock, and Nesta went breathless, her runaway mind imagining how they might look lined up like that, how it might feel if they were *both* inside her…

Delicious bolts of golden lightning crackled and snapped across the thread tying her to Cassian.

This time, she didn’t care if Az kept her on edge and denied her orgasms for days.

She *had* to touch him.

Gathering as much moisture as she could on her tongue, Nesta licked her palm, her breath catching as Az’s stare turned ravenous. White teeth sliced into his lush bottom lip when she wrapped that hand around the silken shaft of his cock, committing to memory the flutter of his lashes and the heady, pulsing throb of him against her fingers.

Cassian nipped at her ear, his chest vibrating against her back as he rumbled sweet nothings. “Just like that, sweetheart. Just like that. Doing so well, Nes, so good for us…”

Over and over, she took Cassian’s cock and stroked Az from base to tip, twisting her wrist, using her thumb to circle the wide, thick head. She moved in time with the fingers Cassian rolled over her clit, stoking the embers burning between her legs.

*“Nesta,* ” Az’s whisper of breath washed over her face, his wings twitching; the wing that wasn’t pinned to the bed lifted, curved, until it formed the innermost layer of the cocoon surrounding all three of them.

Nesta could only moan, her world fading to nothing more than dim umber light and warm skin. Cassian cursed in her ear, murmuring every detail that came into his mind about how tight and sweet and pliant and wet she was to Az.

They could have made love to her forever and she would have been none the wiser to the passing time as the thread sang with music; the minutes and seconds shifted and lengthened beneath that veil of wings until Nesta cried out, the tension within her building and snapping as she tumbled over the edge into climax, so full and so overwhelmed that she sobbed with it, hot tears on her cheeks.

*“Shit,* Nes.” Az’s hand tightened on the sides of her throat and then released as his hips flexed forward, trapping her against Cassian.

Her head swam, and with a low, near-silent groan, Azriel came in her hand, streaking ropes of come over her hand, her stomach, *his* stomach in perfect time with the throbbing aftershocks of her own orgasm.

Nesta clenched again around Cassian’s cock in response, coming a second time with a pathetic whine. Her thighs shook uncontrollably until Az’s unyielding hands shifted away from her throat to keep her open for Cassian instead, who repaid him by pressing her forward until Azriel was on his back and she was laying on his chest, her head tucked against his shoulder. Her leg fell from behind Cassian’s calf to splay around Azriel’s hip.

The press of them on either side of her body satisfied something deeper in Nesta than any orgasm had, unspooling her further as she cried out with a voice that wasn’t hers, all rational thought rushing away from a mind that wasn’t hers either.

“Cass!” All she knew was warmth and the tether and the sweet stretch of the cock inside her and the desperate need to have both males as close as possible. “Cass, please, inside me. I need—I *need—”*

As if he felt it too, Cassian braced his arms on either side of her and Az, careful of Az’s tucked wings, and pounded into her, tripling his pace. He chased his own release relentlessly, and aftershock after aftershock rocked through Nesta, his balls slapping her clit with each thrust.

“Fucking dripping onto me while he fucks you,” Az bit out into her ear. His hands were gripping her waist, keeping her steady for Cassian, whose hard thrusts threatened to push her up the bed. “So messy. Who’s going to clean me up, Nesta?”

But Nesta couldn’t answer, still couldn’t *think.* All she could do was continue to moan as Cassian bore down on her.

*“Cass... Cass…”*

A soft, condescending laugh sounded from the male underneath her. “Mm. If you say so.”

“Anything you want, love,” Cassian growled in agreement, his hands fisting in the sheets beside Azriel’s head. His breathing was even and measured even as his thrusts became shorter, needier. “Close, so fucking close.”

“Look at me,” Az ordered again.

Nesta barely registered it. Her entire body was limp with sated exhaustion, but she still knew it was an order for her. Utterly spent, she simply raised her head and rested her forehead against Azriel’s. Her hair and his shadows obscured the edges of her vision, his eyes consuming her. She didn’t keep her own open, couldn’t have if she tried, but Az didn’t hold it against her. She guessed hazily that he was feeling just as soul-rendingly content and blissed out as she did.

But Cassian wasn’t there. Not yet. His teeth scraped a line across her shoulder. “Taste him, Nes. Put those sweet little fingers in your mouth and taste him.”

Nesta was helpless to do anything but obey as Az laughed again and gripped the wrist of the hand she had left pinned between their stomachs, sparing her the energy required to raise it to her mouth. Held captive between them, in their twin hazel gazes, she sucked that wetness off her fingers, all bitterness and salt.

“So good,” Cassian groaned, his hips snapping. “You like that, sweetheart? You want Az to come on your tongue next time, down your throat, while I take your hot cunt like this?”

*Holy gods.* She didn’t want it; she needed it.

*“Yes.”*

Cassian roared behind her as he came, pressing so deep into her that Nesta knew she would have felt it for days if Az hadn’t worked her so hard last night.

She drifted. Cassian laid kiss after kiss over her shoulders, her back, the nape of her neck. He pulled out of her, and she moaned, but he simply laid her on her side beside Azriel, letting her rest her head on his shoulder as he laid behind her again.

“Sweet girl,” Azriel whispered as he shifted Nesta, one hand tangled in her hair behind her neck, the other stroking her back.

Nesta was curled on her side, tucked against him in a way that was rapidly becoming a strange habit for her. Her head rested on his shoulder without a care in the world, without a single fearful thought spared for the shadows twining with her hair. And Cassian…

The bed behind Nesta shifted, and he heard quiet footsteps on the smooth wooden floor. He tightened his arm around her; anticipation and fierce warning warred in his gut. As absurd as it was, he might snap at Cassian if he dared to take the warm, soft female body away from the space beside him.

Nesta chuffed, her own arm banding around Azriel’s waist and grasping his ribs in silent agreement. Comfortable, content—and, on Azriel’s part, utterly awed—they watched together as Cassian appeared at the end of the bed, his eyes dark and hungry and drinking in the sight of them. With one clean, quick movement, he whipped the sheet off of them and groaned, deep and low and satisfied, at the sight of them tangled up in one another and covered in the mess all three of them had made together.

Nesta shivered, and Azriel’s heartstrings pulled taut. He bared his teeth at Cassian, and Cassian’s mouth turned up in a grin that he scrubbed his hand over.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” Cass muttered, glancing between them.

Azriel forced himself to calm and watched Nesta bite her lip, blinking hard as Cassian crawled up the end of the bed. He settled over Azriel’s long legs, nudging his wings aside with his knees just to make Azriel shudder.

Bastard.

Cass parted Nesta’s legs then, staring at the mess he’d made of her cunt with the ravenous look of a starved male.

Did Nesta remember the task she’d assigned to Cass in the throes of her orgasm?

“You look so fucking good when you’re full of me like this, Nes,” Cassian murmured, dragging a fingertip through the mess Azriel could only imagine. Cass lifted that fingertip to his mouth to taste it, a low sound of pleasure vibrating out of his broad chest.

One dark eye winked at Azriel, and then Cassian bent over Nesta and licked up the few streaks of Azriel’s spend on her stomach with broad, flat strokes of his tongue. When Nesta let out a strangled gasp, Cassian pressed a kiss to her mound that made her curl up her legs, a quiet, exhausted moan on her lips that Azriel wanted to drink from her.

Cassian took her knee in one hand, refusing to let her shy away, and dipped his head—

Nesta grasped blindly for purchase, shoving against Azriel’s chest. She caught the talon of Cassian’s wing in one fist. Cassian shuddered, and Azriel hissed sympathetically—

And then she gasped, “No!”

Cold steel replaced Azriel’s spine. His hand knotted itself Cassian’s hair before he registered the movement, dragging him back. Cassian’s hand slipping away from Nesta’s thigh and onto Azriel’s—

Nesta curled her hand around his scarred fist.

“It’s just too much,” she said, her face stained pink and her pale eyes looking at Azriel. He gentled his grip on Cassian, but didn’t let go when Cass rested his chin on one of his hips to watch as his mate explained, her expression tight, “I can’t.”

“Does it hurt?” Azriel asked, casting a glance over her—assessing the damage he had done.

Bruises littered her skin where they’d bitten her; red rashes spanned broad swaths where their stubble had scraped her. Her legs still trembled, crossed at the ankle and pulled tight to her body. He hid the grimace he wanted to make, but felt Cassian’s jaw clench. They knew better than to let a female take one of them so soon after her first time stretched around Azriel’s considerable girth.

But Nesta didn’t seem to care, rubbing her thighs together as if she wanted more, but simply couldn’t take it.

“No,” she said, something like sullen regret on her face. She pouted in the direction of Cassian’s mouth. “It’s just too much.”

Cassian’s wings drooped, a relieved breath huffing against the cooling mess on Azriel’s stomach. “Aw, Az, we wore her out.”

“That’s too bad,” Azriel said, pulling back on Cassian’s hair until darkened hazel eyes met his. “I had plans for her.”

Plans that included a warm bath, those thick, colorful socks, and some tea on the couch while one of them held her, but Nesta didn’t need to know that.

Not when her hand tightened on Azriel’s waist, her breathing unsteady.

“Poor Nes,” Cass crooned, kissing the spot on her stomach that made her come so hard around Azriel last night. Azriel’s cock swelled with interest at the sight, at the memory, at the scent of himself still clearly detectable on Nesta.

When he finished teasing his mate, Cassian moved on to Az, who groaned under his breath as Cass bowed his head again to lick their combined mess from the hard planes of his stomach, too. The shadows thickened as Nesta’s lips parted, a near-silent *“Oh,”* gusting from her. Azriel’s vision narrowed to the fall of her unbound hair on his skin, to Cassian’s tongue and the rapture on his face, and his own cock, straining once more with need scant inches from Cassian’s cheek. Cass gave the come that had dripped onto it from Nesta’s cunt a considering glance.

*“Fuck,”* Nesta breathed.

Azriel’s hand tightened in Cassian’s hair, keeping him in place.

Gods, Mother, the fucking Cauldron, *anything* that might answer his prayers. He wanted it, needed it, felt like his skin was too taut and hot without it.

Ages ago, they had done this all too often—had fallen into bed together as desperate youths who found someone willing and convenient to fuck when females were scarce. It had grown more and more rare over the years, but they’d never quite stopped; Cassian had always been more than willing to indulge him when the need rose again. But *fuck,* suddenly all Az had ever needed was to listen to Nesta’s filthy mouth run as Cassian sucked his cock. His chest tugged hard, heating with lust, and the shadows sang a low, sensual note as he watched Cass lick his lips…

Cassian raised his eyes to Nesta’s, that copper gaze sparkling with delighted laughter that he muffled by biting into the defined line of Azriel’s hip.

But Azriel couldn’t wait. He pulled at Cassian’s hair again and turned his head toward Nesta.

“Ask.” His voice was low, gravelly with need and hard with warning, and he knew it didn’t escape Nesta’s attention that his hips gave a minute twitch when his cock bobbed.

“Well, Nes?” Cassian’s eyes were soft when they looked at her, playful, and he winked at her even as his own hand flattened against Az’s thigh to keep him in place. “Do you want me to suck Azriel’s cock for you, sweetheart?”

Silence.

Every breath was a battle as Nesta stilled. Her own hand lifted, tracing the edge of one wing and then tangling in Cassian’s hair beside Azriel’s, their fingers knocking. A bead of moisture dripped onto Azriel’s stomach, and he watched as she licked her own lips, blue eyes turning to him. Assessing. Asking.

Azriel nodded at her, his cock aching, his heart thundering, and a feline smile curved her mouth upward.

“Yes.”

# Chapter Ten

Nesta jolted back to awareness when the sun rose high enough to glare past the treetops and through the tall window beside the bed. She gasped when a firm hand grasped her hip, but it was just Cassian trying to pull her down again, grumbling.

An off-kilter feeling lingered beneath her breast, like she’d been tilted upside down and then set on her feet. Its stubborn talons were latched into the space between her shoulder blades. She stretched, but it did nothing to calm her racing heart or to dislodge the strange discomfort.

A dream, perhaps... But what had she been dreaming?

She couldn't remember.

She closed her eyes, breathed deeply. Evenly. I am the rock against which the surf crashes…

When she opened them again, she glanced at Cassian. He seemed utterly unbothered, already dozing off again. So she focused her attention on the brilliant view beyond the window. The white-capped mountains, the trees dressed in snow, the cottony clouds in the blue sky. The sun shone into the room and shattered through a bit of hoarfrost on the window, splitting into a dozen rainbows on the walls. It was the sort of beauty Nesta had never encountered as a human, either because her weak mortal eyes couldn’t detect it or because the slim strip of land below the wall was so utterly devoid of magic that such small wonders of nature simply didn't exist.

She stared, willing it to distract her, but instead jolted again, examining once more the position of the sun in the sky. Her throat tightened.

"Cass." She shook his shoulder, staring out the window. "Wake up!"

“'Ssaturday,” Cassian mumbled into his pillow, calm and drowsy, already well-aware of the source of her panic. Or, at least, part of it.

For once, he seemed content to sleep in, burrowing further into the nest of blankets Azriel had tossed atop him before Nesta had fallen asleep again with a wry snort. Cassian's wings were the only part of him that wasn’t buried beneath cotton and down, draping off the bed and onto the floor behind him, the thin membrane bathed in fractured sunlight. A hand snaked out again, bypassing her hip in favor of curling around her waist, as if to pull her under with him.

This time, Nesta let him, still unsettled enough by whatever she had dreamt of to take the comfort being freely offered to her. She tried to beat down that feeling and shoved at the sheets until she and Cassian were pressed skin-to-skin. He didn't even flinch as she nestled her frigid fingers between his arms and his ribs, just lifted his chin so she could bury her cold nose in his neck next. She inhaled deep lungfuls of his scent, sleep-warm and enticing as it was, and felt her tense shoulders drop. He turned his head, the stubble on his cheek scratching over her temple, and laid a kiss on her hairline.

Saturday. The priestesses attended services all day on Saturdays, their holy day, and were forbidden from strenuous activity.

She sent up a small wave of gratitude to the priestesses’ Mother and rubbed her thighs together, assessing the delicious ache between them and the soreness in the hinges of her jaw. She wasn’t so sure she could withstand any more strenuous activity herself today.

But the heat of Cassian against her front only served to heighten her awareness of how cold the bed was behind her, despite Cassian's best effort to warm her—one way or another—by curling his arms around her and grabbing greedy handfuls of her ass. Nesta swallowed down her instinct to tease, to ask him if he really thought he could perform again so soon at his age, and wiggled her fingers against his sides until he huffed and tried to shift away without losing his grip on her.

"Where's Azriel?"

Cassian snorted. "That sadist? Probably out torturing himself and shoveling snow since we're not available."

"I’m serious.” Nesta pinched his side. "He didn't come back to bed."

That captured Cassian's attention. He pushed himself upright, his sable hair a messy tangle crowning his head, and scanned the room. She watched him lick his lips as he did, tonguing the shining, pink edge Azriel had bitten into last night, and Nesta bit her own in an attempt to quell the rising tide of desire at the sight of it.

She and Az had made quick work of Cassian this morning. As soon as Nesta allowed it, Cassian had swallowed half of Az's length, covering the other half with the broad span of one hand, and moved obediently. Azriel had untangled his hand from Cassian's hair and given Nesta control with a devilish wink. She had been able to see the veiled threat in the way Azriel’s eyes darkened and danced, the stern set of his mouth a warning—pleasure him well or face the consequences.

So Nesta had set the same pace Cassian liked when he used her mouth, guiding him on Azriel’s cock as the heartbeat thumping through the smooth, tattooed chest beneath her head quickened, every minute twitch of pleasure moving her, too. Cassian took every inch she demanded of him.

It wasn’t long until Az grasped her own hair to force her to meet his eyes again, and then she’d changed tactics. She liked it when Cassian closed his lips around her clit and sucked, so she held Cassian still while Azriel’s core flexed, his muscles rippling, and made sure Cass was kept firmly in place when Azriel fucked up into his mouth instead, chasing his release.

Every inch of her had burned with pleasure, as if just controlling Cassian and pressing herself to Azriel, drinking in the dark scent of his arousal and cataloging every too-shallow breath and near-silent moan, was enough to get her off too. By the time Azriel squeezed his eyes shut and came with a quiet groan in Cassian's mouth, her heart had been pounding as hard and fast as the pulse beating a tattoo beneath her cheek, her thighs slick.

Cassian cut her an amused glance, no doubt scenting her fresh arousal as she basked in the memory she would undoubtedly cherish until the day she died.

"His knives are still here." He nodded to his dresser, where a half-dozen small knives were still neatly lined up. Truth-Teller and the fingerless gauntlets that housed Azriel's cobalt Siphons had disappeared, but they had been replaced by a stack of finely woven, brightly colored wool. "He can't be far."

“Are those..." Nesta stared at the wool, and then looked out the window to see how high, exactly, the sun was in the sky. Not very. "Are those the dresses I ordered from Emerie?"

Cassian smirked at her. "He was probably on her doorstep the moment she opened shop this morning. I bet he didn't even go back to sleep."

"I didn't."

Nesta jumped, stealing one of Cassian’s sheets to cover herself and turning so fast she felt her spine crack in several places. She hadn’t heard the door open, nor had she seen the shadowed figure now in front of it step inside on silent feet.

Azriel's eyes gleamed, as if he knew he startled her and found it infinitely amusing.

"Unlike some members of this household," he continued coolly, "I don't have to sleep off every round before getting on with my day."

Nesta's jaw dropped and Azriel snickered under his breath, but Cassian just scoffed and lobbed back,

"It's called snuggling, asshole. I was under the impression that you were finally catching on."

Nesta brushed off her shock. This was the same male who had been tormenting her with that damn obstacle course for a week now, wasn't it? She rolled her shoulders back, lifting her chin. "Basking in the afterglow, if you need a bit of romance. You were awfully invested in my book last night, weren't you?"

Azriel’s snicker turned to a strange huff, and he ducked his head, ostensibly to examine whatever he was holding in his hands.

His hair and his shadows concealing his eyes, but she felt them on her as he asked lowly, “Planning to romance me, Nesta?”

The suddenness of her desire to do just that was a knife between her ribs. One of Cassian’s hands returned to her thigh, squeezing tightly as… as something radiated down the tether connecting them, but it was lost among the disorienting tangle that had plagued her since she woke.

Blessedly, before she could answer, a sheathed sword landed on the bed at her feet. Nesta's brow ticked upward, the breathless feeling gusting from her lungs, and a flash of teeth glinted out from Azriel's shadows. Cassian merely whooped at the sight of it, jostling her leg happily, and launched himself out of bed. Their playful argument was entirely forgotten as he grabbed his Siphons and a bundle of clothes from the dresser before bounding into the bathing room.

Azriel turned and bent to strap the remaining knives on the dresser to his leathers, and Nesta noticed another sword already running the length of his spine.

"You know, it's called aftercare in the circles I run in," he told her when he straightened, closing the distance between them with a few silent steps. One hand remained on Truth-Teller's hilt, the other curling under her chin. His voice was a quiet taunt, a dare. Suddenly, Nesta was very aware that she was naked beneath the sheet she clutched to her chest. "And I thought you two were satisfied when you drifted off so sweetly for me after I made you breakfast in bed."

Nesta blinked, confused. "You didn't..."

But as she spoke, Azriel's small smirk transformed into something she could only call shit-eating.

“Didn't I?"

Her cheeks were on fire as he let go of her chin and grabbed her hand—the same she had used on him and then buried in Cassian’s hair earlier in the morning—and pressed a kiss to it that made her stomach flip. The golden thread in her chest twanged.

"It's cold in here," he said against her palm, eyes flicking pointedly to the frosted window. She followed his gaze, only to find the frost wasn't on the outside of the window, but lining the sashing inside the panes, slowly dripping onto the small sill below as the sun heated the glass.

"What...?"

"Are you alright?"

Nesta swallowed against the remnants of the feeling she had woken to. "...Fine. Bad dream, I think."

Azriel accepted her answer with a nod, inadvertently nuzzling her hand. Her stomach flipped again when he breathed deeply and murmured, "Smells good."

"What?"

"I've got food downstairs," he said abruptly, a thumb running over the back of her hand before he let her go. "Pancakes. No blueberries in Illyria this early in the year, but plenty of syrup. Smells good, doesn't it?"

What?

Nesta was sure she must look like a fish with all the slack-jawed gaping she was doing.

A shadow deposited a bundle of periwinkle wool and a few panels of her leathers, so clean they nearly sparkled, in her lap.

"Get dressed," was all he said, heading for the door. A bit of shadow stayed curled like a cat in her lap until he stopped at the threshold. His wings flexed, and then the shadow darted off to rejoin the mass of darkness haloing the dark talons topping them.

A few moments later, she was still staring at the door when Cassian exited the bathing room in full fighting gear. He strapped the sword to his back while she watched, his predator’s expression focused, looking more like he was preparing for battle than breakfast.

He tilted his head at her in silent question.

“He’s… smooth.” The words tumbled out of her. It didn’t escape her notice that the dress on top of the stack was crimson so deep it matched Cassian’s Siphons, or that the periwinkle one in her lap was trimmed with cobalt around the hem. “And…”

Cassian laughed. “And fucking infuriating?”

Nesta could only nod.

"I told you it takes a few rolls in the sheets to bring it out of him." He bent over the bed to press his lips to hers. He pulled back just enough so she could see his own shit-eating grin as he said, "But I think Az may have finally sussed you out, too, sweetheart. You're not going to start reading more books about books, are you?"

She halfheartedly smacked him with the breastplate of her leathers.

“You were interested in my books about books.”

He chuckled again.

“Go wash up. You have a front row seat for a snowball fight rematch.”

Holy shit, indeed.

Cassian and Azriel ate breakfast in dead silence, sizing each other up as they scarfed down the eggs and bacon Az had made alongside the pancakes Nesta chose. She ate quickly, distractedly, burning with the knowledge that she had been in the middle of that shared, intense focus just hours ago.

To distract herself as the heat rose again, to secure her chance to watch them go at one another the way she secretly adored, she cleared her throat. “Thank you for picking up my order from Emerie. You didn’t have to do that.”

And to his credit, Azriel tore his eyes away from Cassian, set down the knife he was using to pointedly, expertly maim the last of the bacon with a small shrug. “You’re welcome, and… I wanted to.”

Nesta’s heart warmed, and she smiled at him. Again, he blinked at the sight of it.

“So did you get a lot done this morning?”

He nodded, polite as ever, and entertained her small talk. “Before I visited Emerie’s store, I cleared the snow on the pathway to lift and tested it. It’s in working order if you want to go down into the village.”

Cassian simply coughed to cover a laugh, shooting Nesta a poorly hidden look that said, See?

But Nesta had no clue what he meant and asked, confused, “The lift?”

A thud sounded below the table as the shadows in the kitchen darkened.

Cassian jolted, glaring briefly at Azriel, but then dropped his fork and rubbed the back of his neck. “A Dawn Court invention. Benches suspended on wires that run up and down the sides of the mountains, powered by a bit of magic. They’re useful for the females who had their wings clipped before…” Something like shame colored his expression. “Well. The elders and younglings use them, too. I meant to get it running the night we got here, but…”

A lift. Nesta’s mind went quiet as she considered it.

“It’s safe down there, if you want to go explore the village today while I follow up on the lords’ complaints this afternoon.” Again, Cassian looked hesitant, almost embarrassed. Of his people, or something else? “Or you could wait and I could show you around.”

At that, Nesta shifted her gaze to Azriel, but his jaw was tight, his eyes locked on a blank stretch of wall well away from where she and Cassian sat. She started to reach out a hand, but a slight shake of Cassian’s head caught her attention.

No, it said, Azriel wouldn’t be willing to go with her.

After witnessing the way the Illyrians in Windhaven had treated him, she supposed she couldn't blame him.

“I… might do that,” she hedged. At the very least, she’d have to see this bench first, gauge the distance between it and the solid ground, how it ran. Then…

Well, she’d consider it.

Cassian’s smile in response was soft.

Azriel stood, still not meeting her eyes. He gathered their dirty dishes and dumped them in the sink. “Hot chocolate, Nesta? It’s cold out there.”

In the ten minutes it took him to bathe, shave, and dress this morning, Azriel Shadowsinger had resigned himself to falling in love with Nesta Archeron.

He was a damned fool for it, too.

Two nights. Just two. Two nights and a morning and a bit of some fucking snuggling was all it had taken, and now he was even more of a fool than he’d been a month ago in the foyer of the townhouse.

But just thinking of her… Of difficult, biting Nesta Archeron, who wielded words and the jut of her chin like knives. Protective, defensive Nesta, who coaxed priestesses into self-defense lessons and bowed herself over Azriel’s dearest, oldest friend in the face of death, rather than leave him to suffer his fate alone. Soft, quiet Nes, who liked stealing his sweets and quiet evenings curled up beside him and cuddling after sex.

Strange Nesta, with powers as frightening and rare as his own.

Brave Nesta, who had never once shied away from him as even his brothers sometimes did.

Tender-hearted Nesta, who Cassian loved.

And how could Azriel not love her, too?

“Dirty, cheating fucker.”

Heart pounding, Azriel smacked the flat of his blade against a tall, snow-laden branch with all the force he could muster.

“Fucker,” Cassian gasped again, briefly flailing as a small avalanche drowned him. He recovered in a mere half-second. Admirable, quicker than anyone else alive might regain their bearings, but not quick enough to avoid the shadow that roped around his ankle to drag him off-balance.

He jumped, kicking through it, but Azriel had already slipped into the shadows and crept behind him to dump another handful of snow into the collar of his leathers, blocking the blade Cassian thrust blindly behind himself.

Azriel narrowly dodged a bit of red-tinged power thrown at him—enough to slam him into the ground just hard enough to steal his breath without concussing him—and got a fistful of snow to the face for his effort.

They were careful to avoid Nesta. For a long while, she had seemed content to sit beside a brazier of lit coals on the balcony and watch as she sipped her drink, the pink on her cheeks bleeding down into the collar of her cloak the longer she stared. The maddening scent of her arousal mixed with what remained of his own on her added a new vector to the challenge of fighting in hip-high snow every time the breeze shifted from her direction. Every time he’d scented it, Cassian had grinned at him, as if waiting for him to snap, to lose focus.

Like he knew.

But—

Hell no. Azriel had already lost one snowball fight to the bastard after a full year of planning his strategy. He’d fight all day and into the night before losing another.

They started with just the swords, trying to pretend for a few moments that they were training in earnest. But their disciplined sparring devolved into a childish, rapid-fire battle of snowballs and Siphons and swords once they'd well and truly ruined the fresh snowdrift they had chosen as their ring. Nesta had rolled her eyes at the first handful of snow Azriel made Cassian eat, an indulgent grin curving her lips upward and the heady scent of her desire on the wind. But then she'd risen and picked her way across the path he cleared for her with a burst of power from his own Siphons at dawn in an attempt to dispel some of the anxious energy beneath his skin.

Cassian got a lucky blow to his solar plexus when Azriel first spotted Nesta making her way down the stairs, his shadows escorting her—pointing out each patch of ice before she could step on it. And, though the irritating voyeurs had gotten quieter after the first night he’d perched her on his lap and made her come for him in front of her mate, they still sang the song of Death and desire that seemed to dominate their strange consciousness these days as they walked with her.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she'd crooned when they paused on her way past them, her voice low and her eyes raking over them both.

So they didn’t. No, Cassian had launched into a flurry of movement, showing off as much as driving Azriel back. Azriel simply gritted his teeth, braced his wrists with a bit of blue power, and took it, waiting for Cass to tire out the predictable series of moves he expected before dumping that branchful of snow over his head when Cass paused for a split-second to catch his breath.

Now, Nesta was examining the small, open-sided shed that housed the lift carefully, the wires hidden beneath the canopy of the trees. She made a good show of surveying the sheer drop down the side of the mountain and the village at the heart of the valley when she wasn’t sneaking glances at them that made his heart throb.

Cassian shifted, and Azriel caught him. They circled, eyeing each other warily, swords raised. Cassian’s arm rose, preparing to break the stalemate—

His eyes flicked to the side and widened.

“Not too close, Nes!” Cassian shouted, wings flaring, the worried boom of his voice deafening. His blade, guided by momentum, still came down over Azriel’s head in a smooth, perfect arc as his attention faltered.

Panic bloomed like blood from a wound.

Azriel locked his sword with Cassian’s out of simple muscle memory. He caught the crimson-Siphoned fist flying at his face and threw shadows over Cassian’s eyes to blind him as he whipped his head around, all thoughts but her eddying from his mind.

*Nesta, Nesta, Nesta.*

Nesta, who was afraid of heights and falling.

*Nesta*.

Why wasn’t her fucking mate doing anything, fighting him—

But she was standing nowhere near the steep drop where the lift left the shed. Nowhere near the live blades he and Cassian were using.

Nesta.

Gowned in the rest of his shadows, she cocked her head at him and lifted a brow at Cassian’s shrouded eyes, but her voice was breathless, shivering with cold and asked, “So, the blindfolds…?”

But Azriel could only snarl, rage freezing the marrow in his bones. Not directed at her, at Cassian, but—

Mother help him, his head. He couldn’t think, couldn’t piece together the frayed edges of his thoughts.

Mentally, he kicked himself. It was such a cheap shot at distraction, and his gut roiled with the knowledge that his reaction was too strong, too invested.

That it gave away too much of what he'd decided was inevitable as he bathed this morning.

Cassian’s blade slid along his own, taunting and fierce, the metal ringing.

A warning.

He knew. He had to know.

Azriel did the only thing he could do. The only thing Cassian would accept.

He answered the challenge.

He dragged his shadows away from Cassian and Nesta both, seeing only darkness, as if he were the one blindfolded.

Cassian twisted his wrist and freed his blade, and Azriel blocked and then parried his next attack.

It was the possibility, the mere possibility, of something happening to Nesta that had spawned the numbing, mind-bending fury that curling around his lungs, squeezing until he could barely breathe. It was a feeling so familiar that it brought to mind—

Oh, fuck. He was going to be sick.

Azriel’s head swam, the lack of oxygen settling in. His tongue soured, and he had no control over his body when it bent at the waist. Anxiety swelled higher, a wave of it sending his shadows out to deal with Cassian for a moment while he shoved down that roiling feeling—

This couldn’t be happening, not again—

Not when Azriel had just freed himself from the snare of his tangled, ancient infatuation with—

Cassian’s knee slammed into his stomach with such force that it reverberated through Azriel, vibrating into the very marrow of his bones and shaking the tips of his wings.

Azriel fell to his knees. The wards around the village buzzed over his skin, preventing him from winnowing away outright to catch his breath from a safer distance. Trapped, he merely turned from Cassian, heaving, just in time to hear Nesta’s outraged gasp.

*“Cassian!”*

*Death is angry,* the shadows assured him before he could panic again. *Safe. Angry. Safe.*

He groaned, trying to recapture the breath Cassian had knocked out of him. That was anger in her voice, not fear. Not terror.

Azriel loosed the last of the air in his lungs, let his chest cave in, waiting for his body to adjust itself. He let the shadows swarm, let them cool his overheated skin, blind his hazy eyes. He tried breathing past the panic, the anger, until beneath it he found…

Soft, warm affection, the sort that made his heart skip a beat when a sharp female voice cut through the air above his head.

“Cassian, I swear on—”

The shadow at his ear hissed, *The General.*

Heavy, gentle hands came down on his shoulders, the scent of pine and warmth clouding his senses. Cassian didn’t try to make him stand or leave his shadows or even open his eyes; just held him by the shoulders, tapping out counted breaths the way he used to when they were young, when Azriel also used to look out at the horrifying drops from cliff sides and panic.

More aching fondness tangled itself around his heart, garrotting the arteries. It was that, more than anything, that made his pulse finally slow and allowed him to fill his lungs with sweet, clean air so cold it felt like a million small razor blades scoring his airway.

Azriel turned and retched, salt and sourness filling his mouth. Another pair of hands pushed his hair back from his forehead, and he retched again.

“How hard did you hit him?!”

“I pulled it, but he leaned into it!” Cassian hissed back. “Shit, Az, what happened?”

He was stupid. So gods-damned stupid. He took their bait and made a colossal fucking mess of it, that’s what happened.

And all of this useless emotion. The display. He faded deeper into the cool sanctuary of his shadows, away from their hands. Even after all this time he was pathetic, unpracticed, incapable of just letting them touch him, comfort him.

Fucking pathetic.

And to imagine himself falling in love— No. He was beginning to think he wasn’t capable of something as pure as that. As what Rhys and Feyre or Nesta and Cassian had.

No, Azriel existed only to covet. Preferably from afar. He shouldn’t have sullied her skin or tainted her mating bond with his hideous, blood-stained hands—

But given the chance, he had taken it like the selfish bastard he was.

He should have known; he should have refused and cut the irrational thread of affection he felt for her the moment the friendship and camaraderie, that warm, glowing thing he felt when Nesta had thrown herself into his arms at Solstice, started spinning into something stronger on his end. Always, always on his end. He should have removed himself entirely instead of sitting and reading with her all those nights, taking all of those meals with her, cataloging the ways she lived her soft, simple life in the House where only he and Cassian could bear witness.

Cassian’s voice was hard. “Azriel.”

He never imagined he’d long for the days he thought himself in love with Mor.

He pushed himself to his feet, disregarding the hands that clutched at him on either side, and felt jealous of the oblivious idiot he had been. Not oblivious of Mor’s obvious distaste for his feelings—no, he had been aware enough of that to hold his tongue all that time—but of the absolute fool he would make of himself in just a couple of years after finally setting those feelings aside over the two eldest Archeron sisters.

Sisters.

He wanted to keel over beside the nearest tree and bash his head open on the trunk. Mother, he was too old for this shit.

When he blinked open his eyes, drawing away the veil of shadow, Nesta’s eyes were wide, her face pale. Cassian’s grimace was too knowing for comfort, guilt carved into the furrow between his brows.

Azriel didn’t sigh. He didn’t let his wings or shoulders slump. He was too used to wanting someone only Cassian could have. He knew the rhythm of loving a female with Cassian between them—and of loving Cassian with a female between them.

But he knew would take what was freely given this time. Every time it was offered, he would take it, like the dog he was. And every time he had before, Cassian only caught his eye and smiled. Smiled, truly smiled, encouraging it. It was so unlike the rakish winks he shot at Azriel with the other females they’d shared or the awful, wincing looks whenever it was Mor trapped between them.

Even when Azriel had been buried in Nesta last night, curled around her and dragging her away from her mate, Cassian had only smiled.

He would take what was offered until Nesta stopped offering or Cassian stopped smiling.

“…happens sometimes,” Cassian was saying to Nesta behind his back. Azriel didn’t pay attention, taking the sheathed sword across Cassian’s back as a sign. He shook them off, rustled the slush off the ends of his wings, and sheathed his own. “Come on, I need to go survey the Blood Rite grounds anyway.”

He was even covering for Azriel now. Gods, Cassian deserved better. Cassian, who had bled with him, slipped in mud and shit and gore beside him on countless battlefields, taught him to fly. His first, truest friend.

Cassian thumped him on the shoulder, a signal to start walking. Azriel was unable to control himself; as if he were observing the scene from the treetops above, he watched himself extend an arm to Nesta. His heart swooped when she took it, and he led her through the snow and back up the stairs.

It was goading, perhaps, but Cassian didn’t say anything. He simply trailed them both, humming something off-tune and putting on a terrible show of pretending to be happily oblivious.

Nesta, as if she too sensed Azriel’s tense need to ignore the last five minutes, said with saccharine sweetness, “Need to borrow the Symphonia, Cass?”

“Sweetheart, if you want me to record myself serenading you, all you have to do is ask.”

“If I wanted to listen to screeching catfights, I would move back in with my sisters,” Nesta sniped.

Cassian scoffed, lobbing a snowball just to the left of her. Azriel threw up a wing, guarding her back. “You’re one to talk.”

The hand in the crook of Azriel’s elbow twitched, and Nesta sniffed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

"Come on, Nes, we're a perfectly matched duet. I know a few romantic operas we could learn and..."

Azriel paused near the top of the stairs, venomous envy burning through his veins. The top of his wing itched where Rhys had clipped it with a chunk of ice during their disastrous snowball fight a month ago.

Just once. He would allow himself just this once.

He saw Nesta safely to the landing, and then twisted and hooked an arm in Cassian’s elbow before he could second-guess himself. With a grunt, he dragged Cassian's massive frame over his shoulder, over the railing, and into the deep pile of snow below. Another thought, and his shadows scooped the snow from the roof, burying Cass completely.

“I win,” Azriel announced to the hand that punched up out of the white mass a few seconds later. Cassian made a vulgar gesture blindly upward—a sore loser's concession.

Too close to his own home to use his Siphons to blast it off of himself, Cassian would have to drag himself out of the snow the hard way.

Nesta coughed, shock written on every line of her face, and then she was laughing that rare, precious laugh, covering her mouth with one hand. “Az!”

Ugly, tainted pride filling his chest—for her feeling comfortable enough to laugh, for him making her laugh like that—Azriel opened the door for her and ushered her inside.

Nesta felt Cassian before she saw him, a wave of incandescent fury spearing through the sky.

Her intake of breath must have been enough to capture Azriel’s attention from across the reading room, where he’d been silently skimming through a stack of books since Cassian launched himself into the air with a roll his eyes at the camp lords’ dramatics and a promise to be home in time for dinner. Nesta glanced at her own book, trying to gauge whether or not she'd lost time, but no. She hadn't gotten further than a few chapters; there was no way Cassian had been gone longer than an hour.

She breathed hard, simmering with fury that wasn’t her own, and Azriel was at her side in an instant.

Keen hazel eyes peered through her window, and his shadows swept the shelves and then melted into a dozen long tendrils, slithering beneath the crack under the door and out of sight.

The question in his narrowed eyes was answered for her when the deafening beating of Cassian’s wings reverberated off the windowpane beside her head. The snow outside muffled his landing, but amplified the furious crimson light of his Siphons. The entire clearing looked as if it were coated in fresh blood. Nesta shifted to her knees on the small cushion lining the window seat, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the fearsome, scowling warrior outside. She caught only a glimmer of a Siphon on his shoulder before his boots stomped up the stairs outside, ice snapping viciously beneath them.

Nesta winced at the cracking, breaking sound. A rough hand cupped the back of her neck.

"Come on."

One floor beneath them, the wind howled as the door opened and then slammed shut with enough force to shake the walls. Nesta could even feel the way the wards around the cabin trembled and pulled at Cassian, sticking like cobwebs as they reluctantly admitted their furious master entrance.

They found him waiting in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs, rifling through a small closet. He assessed Azriel with one sweep of his eyes, nodding in satisfaction at whatever he found, and then Nesta. The hard look on his face—the General Commander at work—softened for just a second before he closed the closet and jerked his head at the door.

“Azriel.”

In his hands, he carried a strangely curved knife and a stack of folded canvas. He didn't elaborate as he shook out a few folds of canvas to reveal a bag and shoved the knife inside.

Azriel's spine snapped to attention, and he kept a hand between Nesta’s shoulders as they descended the stairs together, his mouth at her ear. “Do not go outside. Do not open the door. If you must, there is enchanted paper in the folder under my books upstairs. The small, white slips. Write on them—” Azriel lifted a hand, and pulled a pen of carved ebony out from behind his ear that Nesta hadn’t seen, “—with this, and then will them to appear to Rhys. He will receive them instantly, and he can be here in three minutes.”

Nesta rubbed her chest, massaged the rib where the tether pulled and snapped. "Azriel, what...?"

But it was Cassian's hand that curled around her cheek and Cassian's lips in a stern line that busked a soft kiss over her temple. "It's safe, Nes. We'll be back by dark."

When she opened her eyes, he was already gone, sweeping back down the stairs outside, fists clenching and wings held taut.

"Cassian!"

Azriel sighed, his hand flexing on her back before it too fell away. "I'll bring him back in one piece."

# Chapter Eleven

For several long minutes, Nesta’s mind bleated with panic. Increasingly outlandish possibilities for whatever Cassian must have found in the mountains to warrant such a reaction—whatever Azriel seemed to think might not leave him in one piece—cycled through her mind. A band of rebel Illyrians. More of Briallyn’s enchanted soldiers. Escaped convicts from the Prison. An entire nest of kelpies.

She forced herself to snap out of it. She wouldn’t know until they returned, and they were more than capable. They were centuries-old warriors, for the gods’ sakes. They had been slaying creatures and winning wars long before Grandmama’s grandmama was even a twinkle in her ancestors’ eyes.

And although the edge of her anxiety dulled, slowly but surely, but she remained incapable of focusing in the hours that followed.

The first thing she did was locate a scrap of that enchanted paper; she carried it and the fine pen Azriel had handed her in her pocket all afternoon. They were an unwelcome weight dragging her down, but she caught herself patting her pocket whenever she dared to glance at the empty sky.

Would Rhys even come if she called? If something happened?

Her favored distractions didn’t work to pass the time. Reading was impossible when all the words on every page blurred together. Listening to the Symphonia drove her nearly mad, since the tempo of the measured waltzes and symphonies were too slow to match her racing thoughts. Playing solitaire with a deck of cards she found in the reading room only settled her mind until the silence pressed in, oppressive and thick.

Eventually, after pacing up and down stairs for far too long, Nesta stripped the bed in a fit of irritation, filled the tub, and scrubbed the sheets, desperate for something physical to quiet her thoughts. By the time she wrung them out and hung them over the bath, remaking the bed with fresh linens she found in a closet on the second floor, she was resigned to weathering the directionless, worried churning in her gut.

Cassian and Azriel returned just as dusk faded into night, each carrying half a dozen enormous canvas sacks full of weapons.

Azriel entered first, grim-faced and cloaked in shadow. He dropped the bags he carried on one of the couches and took up a place beside her. Nesta felt his eyes on her and turned, assessing him in return. Save for a slight sheen of sweat and the tired way he held his wings, he appeared untouched. Still, Nesta didn’t resist the compulsion to brush the tangle of black hair off his brow, running her fingers through it until she manipulated it into some semblance of neatness and the firm line of his mouth softened.

And then Cassian was there, filling the room with thick, silent fury.

His eyes were sharp as splinters while he and Azriel upended the contents of bag after bag onto the low table between the couches until it overflowed with weapons. Nesta watched with a morbid sort of curiosity as Cassian sorted them with lightning-quick efficiency. Bows and knives, swords and ropes, even small packs of darts bound in leather and twine, weapons she couldn’t begin to name—it never seemed to end.

She struggled to discern how he decided which weapons belonged in which piles until he extended a wing, wordlessly ushering her back, and upended the final bag onto the floor in front of the coffee table. This one, Nesta could tell at a glance, was already sorted: thick daggers made of ash wood, swords of iron inlaid with long strips of it, and thick, expensive arrows identical to the one Feyre once shot through the side of a faerie wolf.

Human weapons.

“Where did you find those?” she breathed, staring in growing horror at the armory in the middle of the sitting room.

The other piles started making sense. She could pick out the long, brutal Illyrian swords, massive longbows nearly as tall as Nesta herself, and slippery steel throwing knives identical to the ones Azriel wore, designed to puncture the wings of flying warriors. The plated armor and spears she recognized from Hybern’s forces; Cassian once picked one up off a muddy battlefield and threw it with such deadly force and accuracy at one of Hybern’s commanders that he’d ended a battle. Ready-made torches and thick wooden staffs crafted of Autumn Court redwood gleamed in the low light.

Cassian didn’t answer her, too busy dragging a trunk across the room. He tossed the assortment of pillows and blankets inside to the ground and replaced them with the ash weapons, dropping the lid with a horrible clash. His jaw clenched until she heard his teeth creaking, the Siphons atop his hands flaring.

It was Azriel who lifted his shadowed eyes to her. As quickly as Cassian had sorted the trove of weapons, Azriel was examining them, pulling knives from sheaths and arrows from quivers.

“The Blood Rite grounds.”

Nesta stepped forward, nudging a crudely forged short sword with the toe of her sock-clad foot. The blade was sheathed in a ragged, half-eaten leather scabbard.

Azriel jerked his chin at that pile, but didn’t look up again. “Hungry beasts dug them out of the snow for the leather. Cass spotted them during his inspection, and I winnowed down to collect them.”

Nesta grimaced. There had been a couple of long winters where Feyre had ended up cutting away at bits of the hides they used as blankets; her jaw ached with the memory of the tough hide, her stomach roiling at the thought of the rancid, gelatinous broths that she and Elain had never been able to make palatable. Whatever the beasts were, she didn’t envy them.

Azriel came to the end of the piles in a matter of minutes and twirled the final arrow between his fingers, a stack of several more full quivers discarded beside him.

“Brand new. No maker’s marks.”

Uneasy silence reigned, and then Cassian kicked the trunk full of ash weapons hard enough to send it scraping across the floor. The crash when it hit the wall was deafening, and Nesta flinched back on instinct. Azriel’s hand was already behind her, steadying her, as if he’d anticipated Cassian’s outburst and her reaction to it.

*“Shit!”* Cassian snarled, running his hands through his hair.

Nesta looked back to Azriel. “I thought outside weapons were forbidden during the Blood Rite?”

“They are,” he muttered darkly. He threw down the arrow he was holding and shifted his attention to Cassian, who had begun to pace the narrow aisle between the Illyrian weapons and the spears from Hybern. “Go outside and calm down.”

“We need—”

Azriel shook his head just once, pure, hard authority in his voice when he said, “Go.”

Cassian glanced at Nesta, then at Azriel’s hand on her shoulder. Regret shone in his eyes, but Nesta tilted her head toward Azriel.

*Listen to him,* she tried to say, stroking the burning tether between them.

He made a low sound, but spun on his heel. He stalked from the cabin, closing the door behind him with enough force to knock a few glittering icicles from the eaves.

Nesta and Azriel watched them fall in silence.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?”

“Devlon’s concerns were just proven right, and Cassian’s pride took a hit,” Azriel said with a too-casual shrug.

Nesta leveled her sharpest look at him. The molten rage seeping into her from where Cassian stood just outside the door, testily stretching his wings, was not caused by anything as petty as pride.

“And?”

A roiling, agitated mass of shadow snuffed out the nearest faelights.

“The Blood Rite...” Azriel blew out a breath through his nose. “It’s a week of barbaric bloodshed, but it does cull the more hotheaded fools from the ranks of the incoming legions before they can be fully instated as Illyrian warriors with all the rights that entails. The only mercy granted to the other recruits is the fact that they all have to craft their own weapons, catch their own food, find their own shelter... The smart ones band together and focus on surviving the elements, and the cruel, weak, and reckless die at each other’s hands before they can become their commander’s problem.”

Nesta’s thoughts halted, horrified.

The concept of the Blood Rite was not new to her; Cassian spent most of his time preparing to deal with the aftermath of it when they weren’t training, and he had told her enough about his own Rite for her to form a rough idea of the week-long fight to survive.

But the simple, impersonal way Azriel described a week of culling the ranks, completely devoid of the passion that infused Cassian’s voice when he spoke of it...

When she glanced at him, Azriel nodded at her. It was exactly as horrible as it sounded, exactly as horrible as she must imagine it, if not worse.

And if the novices had the stockpile of weapons crowding the sitting room... Gods.

Azriel folded his hands together in front of himself in the careful, practiced way that hid his scars behind his gauntlets. Thick shadows wreathed the edges of his figure, blurring the lines between Azriel and the darkness.

“Some novices will occasionally band together to kill off enemies and settle grudges. Last spring, for example, a rebel leader and some of his cronies were killed during the Rite over a blood feud with another clan, and his death essentially ended the rebellion. It took a load off of Cassian’s shoulders, and he was able to focus on maintaining the peace and training the new recruits that came back from the Rite to rebuild the ranks we lost during the war.”

Nesta traced a finger down the smooth arch of one of the Illyrian bows closest to her, shoving down the sickening flash of the Cauldron’s power and the rain of ashes over a battlefield that flashed in her mind.

How many of his cohort could one foolish young male trying to make a name for himself kill in one week with one bow and a handful of arrows? she wondered instead.

“And he’s so upset only because it’s unfair? Because of the death toll during a Rite with weapons like this?” she asked. When she turned back to look at him, Azriel was gone.

No, not gone.

The vague shape of him was nothing more than a smear of darkness against the wall. The shadowy figure was stretched and warped by the low faelight, the talons of his wings scraping the high ceiling.

Her lips parted. This was the shadowsinger that Prythian feared.

Azriel’s voice was cold, lifeless, when he said, “Because bastards and the lords’ sons are favored targets. With weapons like this, none of them would survive the right.”

Oh.

Feyre had told Nesta and Elain what she knew of Azriel’s past when she returned from the Spring Court before the war—not much, but enough so they wouldn’t make any grievous missteps or offend the stoic, secretive male by asking. A bastard, confined inside his father’s keep and tormented by his half-brothers before he was dumped in Windhaven with orders to train. They gave him the scars, so *don’t ask* and *don’t stare* and *don’t embarrass him.*

But now, staring into the sea of shadows in the corner of the room, slick dread dripped down Nesta’s throat and pooled, cold and nauseating, in her stomach.

His reaction to the camp lords in Windhaven had been his tell, hadn’t it? She’d assumed the way he disappeared into the shadows then and the cool, hateful disdain in his voice were just carried over from the humiliating walk through the camp, but she had been wrong.

She blew out a breath.

The exchange she witnessed between Cassian and Azriel afterward told her everything. The careful way Cassian had spoken about the camp lords for Azriel, the way Azriel hadn’t looked back as they left, that terrible, suffocating silence that always accompanied the worst of his moods...

Her mind reverted to her mother’s most basic lessons.

What sort of man was rich enough to own a keep? To humiliate his wife by housing and feeding his bastards, to test otherwise unwanted children and see if they grew to be of any value, rather than cast an expectant mistress out to the wolves?

Nesta’s eyes slid shut. If rich Illyrian males were anything like rich human men...

“Azriel,” she murmured, but he continued speaking as if he hadn’t heard her at all.

“The Blood Rite is the only Illyrian ritual that places everyone on even ground. It’s the only chance bastards get to prove themselves and earn some semblance of a place in their society,” Azriel’s silhouette sank deeper into its surroundings, the shape of him dissipating like smoke, and when he spoke, the words seemed to seep out of all of the shadows in the room, surrounding her. “Cassian and Rhys think that makes the slaughter worth it, but I think it’s a black fucking stain on Illyria.”

Nesta shook her head. “It can’t be that simple.”

“It’s not.” Icy wind blew in from the doorway, and Cassian stepped back into the cabin. His mouth was drawn into a severe, stern line, and his hair had been scraped into a messy knot to protect it from tangling in the howling wind. His teeth chattered—but that was better than grinding and cracking them, Nesta thought.

He shut the door quickly before she could truly feel the chill. He nodded at her raised brow, sending a soft caress across the room on their tether, and Nesta felt the smallest bit of tension melt out of her shoulders.

When she turned back around, Azriel was seated on the arm of one of the couches, his shadows banished. He was studiously examining the fletching on a dart.

“But that’s not important right now,” Cassian said tightly before she could open her mouth to ask, walking past the sitting room to the small, open kitchen. He was calm once more, but no less dangerous, his sharp strides purposeful and predatory. His wings snapped with each and every step.

“What was the endgame here, now? Leave the weapons in the snow and hope it melted in time to reveal them during the Rite this year?”

A dip of Azriel’s dark head indicated his agreement. “And then what? A blood bath? For what purpose?”

“You said it. Lord Pollux was furious and humiliated when Kallon died.” Nesta settled herself on the opposite end of the couch and watched Cassian shuffle through the reports and papers stacked atop one of the counters. With a quiet, annoyed grunt, he produced the leather folio. “And someone is falsifying the Qualifiers in a handful of camps. Devlon caught it, and his aerial patrols alerted him to something strange happening in the Rite grounds not long after. He sent word to Rhys. Novices who are too young and too stupid are being waved through to run the Rite this year. Ironcrest isn’t listed among the suspect camps, but they had enough time to relocate a handful of their novices and pass them through a rigged Qualifier somewhere else if that’s their goal. The rebels could be stirring again.”

“If Pollux was going to fix any year, he would have fixed his son’s,” Azriel volleyed back. There was no sign of the dark, menacing creature that had loomed large against the wall in the calm male next to her, save for the fact that he would not look up and meet Nesta’s eyes.

“Then see what you can make of it.” From behind the couch, Cassian dropped the folio into Azriel’s lap.

“I’m amazed that Devlon managed to put two and two together and come up with four,” Azriel said, laying the dart carefully back in the roll with its brethren. “Does Rhys know?”

“Not unless he read the report before I took it,” Cassian said. He took a sharp breath inward. “Speaking of...”

“Then he doesn’t need to know,” Azriel cut in curtly, flipping through the papers. A glance upward through his dark lashes, still avoiding Nesta, and he caught the way Cassian’s nostrils flared, the way his muscles flexed in his crossed arms, and amended, “Not yet.”

Like Azriel had cupped it between his hands and blown on its last, dying embers, Nesta felt Cassian’s rage flare and catch.

“So, what, then? Wait until the Rite is over and we have to tally the corpses for the official report?” he snapped. “How many weapons are still out there? How many have to die in a rigged Rite before we tell Rhys, Az?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

Cassian scoffed. “Like it would be any surprise if it was.”

Azriel bared his teeth, and Nesta scrambled as the embers flared again, reaching behind her to grip Cassian’s arm when he lurched forward.

“What are we going to tell him, Cassian? The Qualifier is being falsified for what purpose? We found weapons on the Blood Rite grounds, but who put them there? Why? We have no answers. If Rhys isn’t paying attention to this, then what else—”

Cassian scoffed. “So we get Mor to come evaluate the novices, see who actually qualified on honest merit alone, and then—”

Nesta couldn’t contain the way her nose wrinkled at the thought of Mor coming to Illyria, coming to intrude on the quiet and calm inside the cabin. Azriel’s gaze finally flickered to her before he locked his sights on Cassian again.

“All of them? Every novice from each camp and village?” he asked, hard and doubtful. “And the weapons? Who is putting them on the fields? Why? How the fuck did Illyrians get—” Azriel set the folio aside and stood, pointing out weapons as he spoke. “Autumn Court bo staffs, poison darts from Dawn, human ash blades?”

Irritated, writhing shadows curled up through the floorboards to follow Azriel’s finger, curling around each pile and rattling them as if to illustrate his point.

“War trophies,” Cassian said, but the annoyed curl of his lip seemed unconvinced. “They could have been picked up off of any battlefield in the last year and a half.”

“This many? In this condition, with no maker’s marks?” Azriel scoffed. The shadows moved, blanketing three more piles of weapons. “And what about these? Rask, Vallahan, mortal Scythia? If Mor sees this, if any officials from Vallahan supplied this while she’s been over there working out the terms of the new treaty...”

Around and around Cassian and Azriel debated and planned and fought, talking through the night as Nesta tried to contain her growing anxiety. Eventually, when it became clear they were arguing in circles, they descended into silence with her.

At some point, they each took turns bathing and changing into soft clothes before returning to the sitting room, and Cassian fixed a pot of strong, bitter coffee for himself and Azriel and an herbal tea for Nesta. Once, he gathered Nesta onto his lap and dozed off with her while Azriel sorted the weapons into new piles; when she woke, Azriel had still been alert, sitting in a heavy armchair with his head tilted back and his wings twitching with pure agitation.

The first rays of dawn were breaking over the mountains when Cassian sighed.

“We can’t lose any of our legions to a rebellion. We don’t have the numbers for it.”

“They would really fight their own people?” Nesta asked, daring a glance at the village just beginning to wake up beyond the darkened windows. There had been so many children ringing the small schoolhouse yesterday morning...

Azriel pressed his fingers into his temples. “Rhys won’t let them live long enough to try if he hears a whisper of defiance."

Nesta had nothing to say to that—or she was simply too tired to have anything to say that wasn't laced with biting condemnation, so she kept her mouth shut.

Silence fell again, and Azriel stood to prepare a more substantial breakfast that went mostly uneaten. Nesta ripped apart a few slices of toast while Cassian and Azriel only stood and stretched.

“If whoever dropped these finds out we know...” Cassian started.

Azriel hummed in tired agreement. “We need to go back out to see if any other caches surfaced in the night and make sure our tracks are covered.”

“And then?” Cassian asked. “How do we find out who is tampering with the Blood Rite?”

"I can try to recall some agents from Day and Dawn," Azriel said. The tired way he smoothed a finger over the crease in his brow said it wouldn't be easy. "And Mor probably should station herself in Windhaven if Amren can keep managing the Hewn City."

Privately, Nesta hated the thought of them leaving again. Yesterday had been nerve-wracking and mind-numbingly dull enough.

And all those months of training, of coaxing priestesses up to lessons and learning the trick of shelving books, of stepping back into some sort of role as an emissary of the Night Court, of slowly but surely finding her footing with Cassian again... They felt pointless when she was stuck in the cabin waiting for them to return.

Rationally, she knew she wasn’t equipped to fly over the Illyrian Steppes and dig clandestine weapons out of the snow. But now, surrounded by talk of qualifiers and rituals and names she only recognized from maps and cold, petty Mor...

She felt useless.

Nesta didn’t like feeling useless.

“I could scry for the weapons and whoever had a part in placing them on the grounds.”

Shock slackened Cassian’s tight expression. “What?”

“I scried for the Trove, didn’t I?” she asked, glancing between them. "You said you could teach me to use my powers, Azriel."

“That is not what I meant when I offered,” Azriel said, his eyes narrowed on her.

Cassian’s steady anger faded, the dangerous gleam in his eyes finally snuffing out. “You offered to train her powers? When?”

“I mentioned practicing with them when we were waiting for you to finish meeting with the camp lords. Honing her ability to work with them.” Azriel crossed his arms and turned back to Nesta. “Quashing an Illyrian rebellion isn’t worth the trouble we invite every time you attempt a scrying—”

“That’s why I would train,” Nesta snapped, impatient.

Cassian cast an uneasy glance at the shadows wending their way up Azriel’s legs and then a more pointed look at the weapons. “Az, you said it yourself. There’s no way the Illyrians could manage all of this without outside aid."

“So we subject Nesta to untold dangers? The last time you scried, you were trapped in the vision, Nesta. Before that, you nearly destroyed the House with the night terror it gave you. And before that—”

“Subject,” Nesta sniffed. “I’m offering. Teach me to understand my powers, and maybe the dangers won’t be untold the next time I attempt a scrying.”

Quick and poisonous as one of those darts, Azriel asked in his soft, cold voice, “Why?”

Nesta didn’t bother to answer him.

“We’d need Rhys and Amren anyway if you’re going to try,” Cassian smoothed his hands over her shoulders. “And they’ll want to know why you're scrying in the first place.”

Nesta shrugged him off. “I won’t need them. Not if you two are there.”

“Are you sure?” Cassian let out a sharp exhale, and something that felt light and warm traveled the length of the tether to her.

Azriel made a low, furious sound in the back of his throat. “You are not considering this.”

“I am considering this," Nesta said, lifting her chin. "Cassian has nothing to do with it."

Azriel turned away. “Well I’m not. I can't even scry, so it’s not possible. It's not up for discussion."

"You can't scry, but you might be able to teach me to communicate with my powers. Those powers include scrying, which requires communication. I have to ask for what I want to see," Nesta said, ticking off each point on her fingers.

"Nes—"

She leaned forward, and Azriel pinned her with a glance. "Shall we sit here for another twelve hours and fight it out?”

“If that’s what it takes," he said. His eyes glimmered.

Nesta's chest tugged for a moment, though whether it was regret or frustration or triumph, she didn't know.

"Fine.”

Cassian simply sighed and tried to break Nesta and Azriel’s stalemate with a fresh round of sausage and eggs that went untouched.

Dawn had barely come and gone when it arrived.

A letter in an envelope bearing her name blinked into existence in the air above her hand. It startled her hard enough to make her yelp, which pulled a snort from Azriel who was still ignoring her and cleaning each panel of his leathers with a soft cloth before affixing them to his body. Nesta bit her tongue to kill the juvenile temptation to stick it out at him and tore it open.

Inside, on creamy parchment stamped with the Night Court’s official seal and folded around another letter, Rhysand had written:

*Cherished sister,*

Nesta scoffed. Even at the opposite end of his court, she could hear the sardonic bite to Rhysand’s voice in those words. They were scratched into the parchment, the ink bleeding through the backside, and she traced them with the sharp edge of her fingernail.

*The Autumn princeling awaits his answer. As I said when I shared his proposal with you, the choice is yours. Make it wisely.*

*Do try not to break his heart or start any wars. We still need him.*

*— R*

She did her best to contain another snort of derision; she didn’t know what her expectations were for a missive written by Rhys, but he had exceeded them, from the overfond address to the pompous, cold sign off of just his initial.

The enclosed letter from Eris had already been opened and read by someone, likely her busybody sister. It was penned on thick parchment with tasteful, gilded letterhead, if gilded letterhead could ever be considered so. A stark, minimal monogram at the top bore the entwined initials *EV* as the tinder for a stylized flame.

And a shadow so cold it burned Nesta's fingertips snatched them away.

The letters reappeared across the room a second later in Azriel’s scarred hands. He was so still and so cold as he read that he resembled one of the carved marble antiquities that had once crowded the Archeron estate for a month before moving into some museum or collector's trove when Nesta was a girl.

She remembered them still—beautiful men in vicious armor with vacant faces and empty eye sockets. She especially remembered the way Elain shrieked one night when she woke to fetch a glass of water and ran into the fierce, sculpted warrior guarding her door.

And like the sculptures, nothing of Azriel seemed to be warm, to be alive, as his dark eyes found her. Even his shadows were frozen like black ice on his wings.

*"What’s this?"* he asked with cool, deadly wrath.

# Chapter Twelve

“Why wasn’t I told about this?”

Old, familiar rage washed over Azriel’s bones, then crackled and clung to them, sinister as an unanticipated frost.

He tried to keep it there, keep it hidden. But the letter in his hand was touched with the faintest scent of woodsmoke and sun-warmed apples—a warm, welcoming scent. A tempting one. Just holding the parchment burned him, as if the familiar embossed blaze were enchanted to possess all the properties of a real flame.

He hated it.

Like it had a mind of its own, his power gathered under his skin in response to his hatred, pooling in his core and coating his tongue with the static spice of his own anger. It was channeled to his Siphons, and he fought to keep the blue light they emitted dimmed by a thick layer of frozen shadows.

The tendrils of darkness that weren’t clinging to him were woven into the strands of Nesta’s braid, wary and waiting, as if they expected the male who wrote the letter in Azriel’s hand to appear alongside it and try to take her. To drag her into the rotting forests of Autumn and—

He didn’t know if Nesta or Cassian answered him. His shadows were silent. He couldn’t hear anything above the roaring in his ears.

Nesta was staring at him, her crystal eyes wide. Cassian had emerged from the kitchen at the sound of her alarm and now stood behind the armchair where she sat, his own dark eyes focused and his wings twitching. He made no move to step in front of her, to shield her from Azriel, despite the careful hands he rested on her shoulders.

Azriel turned his back on them, pacing the floor so he wouldn’t have to look at the stricken expression Nesta was trying so hard to mask and the intent focus on Cassian's face.

His anger could be written off, assigned to his centuries-long loathing of the Autumn Court, but he could not let Cassian see the desperate, venomous jealousy clawing at his ribcage or the constrictive aching of his heart. Cass had witnessed too much yesterday as it was.

Worse, Azriel didn’t think he could bear it if Nesta—

If Nesta what? What would she do once she knew? Would she pity him or hate him for feeling this way? Would she cringe away from him, too? Would Azriel be damned to watch another female he loved put up her guard whenever she saw him enter a room, thinking his protectiveness was possessiveness, that his affection for her was untempered obsession?

It didn’t matter. He didn’t want them to know, so he wouldn’t let them see. He stopped his pacing in front of the hearth, and he read the letters again, disbelief warring with his anger.

“Why weren’t you told about what?” Cassian asked from behind him.

Nesta only cleared her throat, pointed and purposeful. Azriel could summon no more than two words, spoken softly into the tense air.

“Eris Vanserra.”

The shadows finally stirred as Cassian straightened. “Az, it’s not what you—”

“Cassian.” Nesta was so quiet. Fabric rustled, and the soft susurrus of skin on skin cut through the clamor in Azriel’s head.

Azriel was suddenly aware that his wings were open, spreading wider by the second, and he snapped them in tightly to his back.

This was his comeuppance. It had to be. This was what he had earned when he sprung the two-faced bastard and that ridiculous alliance on Mor during the war, for letting himself get run so ragged chasing down the human queens for Rhys that he didn’t have the time to take the lead with the Autumn Court all these months, for not intervening when Nesta was roped into an asinine seduction plot.

Hell, Rhys had given Eris a Made weapon, when the blackmail they already had on him should have been enough to cement the alliance. Why had Rhys done it? To nudge Eris onward in his plot to kill Beron Vanserra? Azriel could take care of Beron without breaking a sweat. He would relish in it, and not a single ounce of regret would be added to the sins that already weighed down his conscience. He might even enjoy it.

But icy realization trickled down Azriel’s spine. When he had first seen those weapons and felt the unholy power radiating off of them, he had known they would never tolerate separation for long. Not like Truth-Teller and its brethren.

Rhys had already given Eris Vanserra Nesta’s Made dagger.

And now, despite the hollow flattery in Rhys’s letter, he was going to give him *Nesta.*

*We still need him.*

For a brief moment, Azriel wanted to winnow back to Velaris and shove that gods-damned scrap of parchment down Rhys’s throat until he choked on it.

Rhys couldn’t do this to them. Not to Cassian. Not to Nesta—not to his mate’s sister.

Azriel started to doubt that Rhys had been paying any attention to anything other than Feyre these past months. Did he not know Nesta by now? The lengths to which she would go if she thought she might be of use? Evidently, he didn’t, and had learned nothing watching her hunt for the Trove—the way she threw herself into the scrying, the bog, the Prison. Gods, even the humiliation she heaped onto herself those long weeks pretending to train in the library, just to convince the priestesses join her in the mornings…

And now she was offering to scry again, to put herself on the line again, so they could quash yet another half-baked Illyrian uprising.

She would risk her life for a High Lord who didn’t even appreciate her.

Who would use her as a bargaining chip.

*As his whore,* thought the unforgiving part of Azriel’s mind.

He could already see it: Nesta, the next Lady of Autumn. Nameless. Powerless. Mother to a brood of children just as treacherous and slippery as Eris. She wouldn’t break—she was made of steel far stronger than whatever Eris might use to torment her—but she would withdraw, she would protect herself, until she was nothing more than a shell. The same specter of misery and despair she had been after the war. A wolf backed into a corner. Believing her own safety, her own happiness to be a worthy sacrifice.

But if Rhys thought that Cassian would let them take his mate without a fight, he wasn’t just ignorant; he was blind. Cassian wouldn’t allow Nesta to sacrifice herself like this. If Eris took her now, Azriel had no doubt that Cassian would call the Blood Duel that Rhys feared. Not just a duel—Azriel would bet his last copper that there would be nothing left of the Autumn Court when Cassian was finished.

When *they* were finished.

The pieces fell easily into place in Azriel’s mind. Prythian, Briallyn, Koschei… All of it could rot. He didn’t give a shit about bringing Autumn into line. Azriel would raze Autumn to the ground, carve the heart out of every Vanserra whelp who called the Forest House home himself, before he let anyone take Nesta.

Azriel smothered his fury before it could become a destructive force. He took one breath, and then another, and then another.

Behind him, Nesta and Cassian were still silent. Waiting. He anchored his racing thoughts to the synchronized beat of their hearts.

When he finally composed himself enough to turn back to them, Nesta’s face was blank. Cassian wouldn’t meet his eyes.

He tipped his head at them. *Well?*

Nesta lifted her chin and looked up at Cassian.

“I only read the first letter from Rhysand,” Nesta told him. When her gaze slid back to Azriel, it was cool, but soft. “It seemed to imply that Eris wrote to discuss his alliance with the Night Court...” Cassian’s jaw tightened, his knuckles going white. Nesta continued, undeterred, “as well as the proposal he made during the Solstice ball.”

As if he couldn’t help it, Cassian dipped his head, kissing the crown of her head. Like he was proving to himself that he could. Nesta reached up, absentmindedly clasping one of the hands braced on her shoulders with her own.

For a gesture so small, it grated against every one of Azriel’s fraught nerves.

“Why didn’t I know about this?” he pressed again, his throat raw. *Why wasn’t I trusted with this?*

Rhys had called Azriel’s judgment into question a dozen times since he returned from Under the Mountain. Each had been a small cut. Now, with Eris’s letter in his hand, Azriel realized too late that those inconsequential stings had grown into a gaping, mortal wound.

“You were busy when he asked,” Cassian said quickly. “Dancing with Nesta.”

Could it be that simple? Had he been so distracted? Azriel shoved down the sliced-up pain in his chest and cast his mind back.

The dance had been a simple one, allowing him to focus on the warmth and curve of Nesta’s waist under one palm, her hand clasped fearlessly in his disfigured palm. He’d kept his gaze steady on her, the unruffled Spymaster dancing with one of the princesses of the Night Court, while his shadows focused on the crowd. That had been on Feyre’s directive: monitor the Darkbringers and known dissenters while the High Lord and Lady handled the diplomacy and kept Eris’s attention off of his exiled little brother’s mate.

All the while, Nesta had been dazzling, delighted, lit from within with new life. Azriel started to add flourish after flourish to their dance eventually to test her ability to adapt, marveling at her skill and the joy in her eyes. And as he led Cassian’s mate around the floor on the order of Rhys’s mate, idly cataloging the shadows’ whispering, Azriel had yearned for a mate of his own.

But why hadn’t he been told afterward?

He’d assumed Rhys or Feyre would inform him of anything of importance after the ball. He thought he would be their primary contact with Autumn again when the chaos with the queens and Koschei came to its inevitable, messy end. They would have to admit that Cassian’s temper was poorly suited for negotiating with a snake like Eris, and Azriel would step in once more.

Meanwhile, Azriel had organized their meetings during the war with Eris, had bloodied his hands ensuring no one heard a single whisper of their alliance, had kept wave after wave of the wayward, bespelled Autumn soldiers that Eris couldn’t seem to stop misplacing in his dungeons. He was their Spymaster.

He was their Spymaster, for fuck’s sake. The loss of Nesta’s trove in exchange for a marriage alliance between a Night Court royal and Autumn’s heir… He should have been told.

But now he held the proof in his hands that they hadn’t told him everything.

And neither had Cassian or Nesta.

A month. They had kept this from him for a month.

The ice clinging to his bones was replaced by heavy, immovable lead.

Azriel was tired. So, so tired, in a way that didn't have anything to do with his sleepless night.

“Eris offered him anything,” Nesta said, breaking the heavy silence.

The shadows in the room darkened. He could barely breathe.

“What?”

“To marry me.” Azriel restrained a flinch. Nesta was too quiet, too calm. “Eris offered Rhys anything short of his firstborn child to take me as his wife. Autumn’s armies. The dagger. Anything, just to marry me and get a clear shot at the throne with my power to back him.”

Azriel’s lungs emptied.

It was so much worse than he had anticipated.

Anything.

If those had been the terms, spoken on Night Court soil… A deal like that would be damning for Eris, but doubly tempting for Rhys.

It wouldn’t matter who rebelled in Illyria. How many fought and who Rhys executed. If they could simply take Eris’s armies to fight their wars and keep Autumn trapped under their thumb, Rhys would do it as long as Nesta agreed.

Azriel couldn’t let her.

“Nesta—”

One look from her silenced him. “Let me speak.”

He took a deep, painful breath, but nodded.

“Eris discovered how Cassian…” Her words seemed to stick in her throat. A tentative shadow curled around it, and another around Azriel’s wrist began to tap out the gentle beat of her pulse. “He discovered how Cassian felt about me when we met with him in Spring to discuss transferring the two Autumn Court soldiers from the Bog of Oorid back to his custody. When Tamlin came across us, I lost my temper. I threatened him and showed Eris just how much power I stole from the Cauldron in the process. Then at the ball, after he danced with me…”

Nesta exhaled slowly.

“He wanted revenge, Feyre said. For the way Mor sabotaged her betrothal by using Cassian.”

A familiar flash of shame colored Cassian’s expression, and he averted his eyes.

*By using Cassian.*

Such a simple turn of phrase, but Nesta was entirely oblivious to the way Azriel’s entire world seemed to tilt, unbalancing him. How centuries of awkwardness and envy took on a nauseating new light.

*Used.*

Cassian grimaced, and Azriel’s heart lurched.

Between them, Nesta’s shoulders slumped, and her mask cracked. Bit by bit, breath by breath, all of the usual grace she held herself with disappeared, the confidence she had built these last months whisked away by whatever she was going to say next.

“It would be nothing less than I deserve, Azriel. I was always supposed to marry well, to secure my sisters’ future. I was raised for it. I failed them as a human, and I failed everyone during the war, but this—” Nesta’s breathing hitched, but she swallowed, squaring her shoulders. The hand that wasn’t holding Cassian’s clutched at her side. “I could do this. Eris may be a viper, but so am I. We would be a good match.”

Just as Azriel predicted, then.

And to his increasing horror, Nesta’s lashes grew wet with tears. A bit of darkness flitted in front of his face, and suddenly he was aware that his were, too.

Azriel lifted the letter. He already had it memorized.

“Don’t tell me you considered this, Nesta.” His voice was thick.

When he looked to Cassian, desperate for support, Cassian’s mouth was pursed in a tight line, his wings trembling as he stared down at Nesta with profound sadness etched across every line of his face.

He still would not meet Azriel’s gaze.

No. No, there was no way that Cass would let this happen.

She was Cassian’s *mate.*

Cassian took a deep breath.

No.

“Does he know?” The soft snarl was torn from Azriel before he could think better of it. He pointed at Cassian, furious. “Does Eris know what you’ve done with him?”

Nesta reared back. *“What?”*

“Azriel,” Cassian growled.

“She needs to know before she makes this choice, Cassian.” Azriel rolled his shoulders, banishing the tension from them, from his wings. He turned back to Nesta. “He will kill you when he learns that you aren’t a maiden on your wedding night. Torture you, if he learns you were with a lesser faerie bastard. With two.”

He never should have touched her. If this was her plan, her future, had he played a part in leading her to that fate?

“Gods, Nesta, if Eris doesn’t kill you, then Beron or one of his brothers will. Do you think it will be an easy death? They will destroy you for sullying their line, Nesta, piece by piece.”

Nesta’s jaw dropped, her full lips parting. Cassian shifted his grip on her, holding her closer, his Siphons bright. His mouth was in such a tight line that it was clear he was swallowing back his own tirade.

And Azriel’s words died in his throat. Sickening guilt rose up in his gullet.

In three long strides, he crossed the room and knelt before them, dropping the letters carelessly among the piles of weapons. Gently, he untangled Nesta’s arms, freeing the hand holding her ribs as if to keep herself from falling apart and cradling it between his own.

Cassian was motionless, alert, but Azriel paid him no mind. His eyes were locked on Nesta’s fingers in his.

He lifted them to his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured against them. He wasn’t sure which offense he was apologizing for: his fury or the touch of his lips to her pristine skin. A kiss that would damn her if anyone knew. Perhaps both.

Such unspeakable acts sullied his own hands, the taint hidden beneath the mottled skin of his scars. Only Cassian had ever seemed to understand that it wasn’t the scars he was ashamed of. Why waste shame on the torment that had been wreaked upon him as a defenseless child locked in a cage? No, it the torment he wreaked upon others that drove him to hide his bloodsoaked hands.

And, to some extent, Azriel knew that Nesta understood just as well. Her fingers had once been drenched in the aftermath of calm, calculated revenge; she had once been faced with a male she hated to the very core of her being, already as good as dead, and multiplied the suffering and the humiliation in his final moments tenfold. The hand Azriel clasped now had held down a king, had curled in his hair to keep him steady while she sawed through sinew and flesh and bone.

Azriel had returned to the clearing after the sisters finished mourning their father to retrieve the head and destroy the body—there would be no resurrections for the King of Hybern. He had branded and mounted the head on a pike outside of the High Lord’s war tent, as Night Court custom dictated, and admired the neatness of the cut, Nesta’s commitment to her death-promise, the rage written in every stroke, even as he mulled over the effect such violence might have on the consciences of two untested young females.

And having seen that, having seen the aftermath of what Nesta had done to the kelpie, it didn’t matter what Eris Vanserra did to his father. What weapon he used or how bloody he made it. He was no match for Lady Death, and—Azriel laced his fingers with Nesta’s and pressed another hard kiss to the back of her palm, unable to resist, committing the way her pulse stuttered and Cassian sighed to memory—he would never understand Nesta Archeron.

The pull in his chest was torture now, threatening to undo him. If the thought of letting her go wasn’t so unbearable, he might offer her Truth-Teller. She could use the blade to pry open his chest; to die would be a blessing if it meant she could conceal herself from danger, from overreaching High Lords and Autumn princelings, among the mess of razor-wire around his heart.

A thread of burning, golden agony tied itself to his ribcage.

“Nesta, you have to understand—”

Cassian’s wings rustled, a low sound pulled from his throat. Nesta pressed the fingers Azriel held against his lips.

*Be quiet.*

Azriel shook his head. At any other time, with any other person, he would be able to silence himself. To listen, as he always did. But now…

He was not above begging. He would not see another female he loved thrown to those dogs. His answering murmur was muffled, broken.

“Just listen. Please.”

It shouldn’t matter. He was nothing to her, just a friend. Just a bed partner, an occasional lover, a means of exploring her curiosity and sating Cassian’s appetites.

But all those years with Cassian didn’t feel like nothing, nor had just two nights with Nesta.

And all he could see was Nesta with iron nails driven through her stomach, left to die in a bed of loam and rotting leaves. Cassian, a vengeful shell of himself, his mate gone.

The world went dim as the cool mist of his shadows embraced him. Everything went silent as he sank into them.

“I will teach you to scry,” he offered desperately. He had known from the moment they descended into silence earlier that Nesta would get her way, that he would find every book he could on scrying and teach her how to do it safely. He doubted he could truly say no to any Archeron, but to Nesta? “Don’t marry him, and I will teach you.”

“Az…”

“Or marry him.” Azriel dared to hold her hand tighter, to clasp it to his chest, over his heart. He could only imagine what it looked like, a pathetic shadow trying to bargain with Death herself. He couldn’t stop himself, though. He had been silent too long, and he thought he might die if another moment passed without baring this truth to her. “Marry him, and I will follow you there. I’ll train you there.”

He looked to Cassian, who stared back at him with wide, wild eyes. *I’ll protect her there.*

Nesta made a troubled sound. “I’m not going to—”

“I still owe you those cherries,” Azriel said insensibly, his mind racing again. It mattered, didn’t it, that she hadn’t gotten her cherries? Cerridwen was supposed to pick them up from his informant in Summer tomorrow, a female who ran a market stall beside the High Lord’s palace in Adriata…

“Azriel.” A large hand reached out, threading into his hair, anchoring him. The band of a Siphon caught on the strands. Azriel couldn’t look at Cassian as the thread in his chest pulled. “She is not going to marry him.”

And the shadows whispered in a perfect mimicry of Cassian’s voice, *No one else. Ever.*

Relief warred with pain as Azriel’s heart turned to ice, and he swallowed to hold back a moan. Nesta’s hand tightened around his own.

"I’m going to refuse him,” Nesta said, as if she knew he needed to hear it from her. Her tone was firm and decisive. “I’m staying here.”

Azriel loosed a shuddering breath and bowed his head over her lap. He would live in Illyria forever if it meant staying with her. He would crowd into what remained of that tiny slum on the outskirts of Velaris with her and Cassian. He would follow her up and down all ten thousand of those fucking stairs in the House of Wind every day. And, if she changed her mind, he would follow her to Autumn and live in her shadow for the rest of his days, if he must.

Azriel would follow them anywhere if they would have him.

*No one else. Ever.* Was that the vow Nesta and Cassian had made to one another on Solstice night? The secret the shadows had tried to share with him the next morning?

It didn’t matter. They were his. His friends, his…

“Why didn’t I know about this?” Azriel asked a third time. A final time.

To his own ears, his voice was softer, calmer, but he felt the air in the room shift as Cassian went alert. His hand was still tangled in Azriel’s hair, tense.

The shadows watched for him as the arm Cassian had banded around Nesta’s collarbone tightened, clutching the slim hand that held his other until he was as thoroughly entwined in her grip as Azriel was.

Until it would take just one twist of his body to tear Nesta away from Azriel. The thought made Azriel’s hackles rise.

“You know why,” Cassian said.

“I can deal with the Autumn Court—”

“It’s not them, Az.”

Azriel cleared his throat. “If this is about Mor, I don’t… She isn’t…”

Nesta’s brow furrowed.

Cassian, though firm, was compassionate. “Az.”

The hand in his hair pulled again, and Azriel looked up at him.

“Why do you think Rhys wouldn’t tell you that Eris proposed to Nesta?”

The golden thread warmed and pulled. It was a deliberate tug, not aching with longing, not originating from Azriel’s own desires, but from something else. From someone else.

And Azriel knew.

Nesta’s thoughts were reeling, her heart thundering, icy shock sluicing through her veins from the sight of Azriel begging on his knees when Azriel stilled. He froze, staring up at Cassian, and then his rough hand tightened around hers. The Siphon on the back of his palm glowed, his undershirt soft against Nesta’s knuckles.

He looked between them, his face carefully blank, and a soft noise issued from his throat.

And then he pushed himself up onto his knees, curling his free arm around her waist. His head bent toward hers, his nose grazing her cheek.

She watched the confusion, the angst, melt from his expression. Now something wild shone in his patinated-copper eyes, something fierce and altogether different. The thread of music she and Cassian shared between their souls sang sweetly, loudly.

His eyes flickered upward, to Cassian, and he smiled so brilliantly that it punched the breath right out of Nesta’s lungs.

She had only a second to gather herself then, to push down her confusion at the sudden change and take a shared breath with Azriel before his mouth descended on hers.

Azriel’s kiss was devastatingly gentle, nothing like the battle of teeth and tongues when he kissed Cassian. His lips slanted across hers, testing the softness of her. He held her there for a long moment, savoring her, groaning low in his throat as his hand flexed at her waist. He moved slowly, and when he traced the seam of her lips with his tongue, he was just as patient, just as deliberate, even though Nesta opened for him at the first sign that he wanted more.

And then, Azriel wasn’t just kissing her. He drank from her like he might never get enough, tongues twining, his need apparent in the way he held her. Cassian’s arm tightened around her as the tether glowed warm and golden like it had the night of Winter Solstice. Like a freshly forged band of metal.

Azriel sank his teeth into her bottom lip, groaning again when she moaned and held his hand tighter, but he broke away first. He looked at her, just looked at her, while she caught her breath, looking back. Cassian freed his hand from Azriel’s dark hair and used it to tilt her chin up; he tasted her lips next while Azriel watched them, while Nesta watched Azriel.

Azriel smiled again.

“You’re—”

“Az.”

Azriel inhaled sharply at the sound of Cassian’s voice, and then glanced up at him. He stared at Cassian with the same raw, open wildness in his eyes, as if the sight of him was something new and shocking.

Cassian must have done something Nesta couldn’t see, and then Azriel’s expression was wiped away, his usual blankness returning to his face. His arm squeezed Nesta’s waist and then he stood.

He crossed the room and retrieved the forgotten letters from a small mountain of swords. With a tight-lipped grimace, as if he just now realized she hadn’t yet read the letter Eris sent, the crumpled parchment was carried to her by a shadow. He pulled Truth-Teller and its harness out of another, checking the honed edge of the dagger.

He seethed once more as she read the invitation for another meeting with Eris in the Spring clearing, his Siphons casting the room in frostbitten light. As if he, too, were remembering what Eris had written. When she looked up, wrath—cold, familiar Death that sang to that bottomless well inside of her—was written onto every line of his body like it had never left.

"You are not going into that fucking forest."

Azriel was quiet, lethal, and edged with razor-sharp fury that sent a shiver down her spine.

A pleasurable one.

Azriel glanced at her, his eyes darker than before behind his veil of shadows, as if he could already scent the first warm drips of desire gathering in her middle.

“Where shall we meet him, then?” Nesta asked. She passed the letter to Cassian and lifted her chin, crossing her arms over her chest. Over the heart pounding with heated exhilaration.

Cassian’s amusement tugged at the tether, and Nesta’s feigned temper sparked with real irritation. She let go of the hand he’d kept on her shoulder, brushed him off, and stood to meet Azriel in the middle of the room.

"He will present himself at the Hewn City or not at all," a poisonous whisper shivered out of the darkness that slipped across the room and loomed over her. “As he should have the last time.”

“And are you going to arrange that?” Nesta asked. “With your schedule?”

“Yes. If he wants to meet with us to ask for your hand again, he will do so on our terms. Besides…” Vicious humor lurked in Azriel’s tone. Truth-Teller’s blade hummed as it was sheathed. “He won’t leave empty handed. I have a gift for him.”

Cassian shifted to stand beside Nesta, the bulk of him familiar and welcome. "I assume you’re going to inform Rhys of this change of plans.”

“Yes.” Azriel’s shoulders seemed to tense. The cool shadow around Nesta’s neck flitted upward, tickling her cheek. “And I’ll arrange afternoons off with Clotho, too. We will need all the time we can spare to prepare if you are going to scry again.”

Nesta blinked.

“You’re really going to teach me?”

Azriel sighed from the darkness. “I was always going to teach you, Nes.”

Then the shadows bent toward her, and he kissed her again, hard and possessive. Claiming and quick. He whispered, *“The Hewn City, tomorrow afternoon,”* against her lips and stepped back before she had a chance to wind her arms around him the way she wanted to.

Cassian stepped in front of Azriel’s dark mass before he could disappear entirely, his massive hands cupping either side of his face. Checking on him, assessing him, though for what, Nesta couldn’t tell. Azriel’s shadows cleared slightly as he stared back.

Cassian smiled at whatever he saw. Ran a thumb over Azriel’s bottom lip. “Don’t be too hard on Rhys.”

Azriel’s eyes shuttered again, and his mouth tightened into a fierce, serious line. He slipped out of Cassian’s hold, through the front door, and shot into the sky.

# Chapter Thirteen

Azriel didn’t return to the cabin, but he did send a note.

And, as befit the shadowsinger’s cryptic, ancient habits, it was infuriatingly vague.

*Too busy to return to Illyria,* it read in his spidery scrawl. *Will meet tomorrow as planned.*

Cassian would have been tempted to write back and call bullshit if he didn’t feel the strain of anxiety and awed disbelief echoing across the bond all day long. He had nearly plummeted out of the sky during an afternoon sweep of the Blood Rite grounds when he realized who those pangs of emotion were coming from.

He had left Nesta asleep in bed, her eyes bleary and tired once the cabin quieted and the adrenaline from their sleepless night seeped out of her.

It was Azriel. That dark, familiar thread; it had to be Az.

Mating bond or not, Cassian had not been prepared to feel Azriel’s emotions as if they were his own. He still had a hard time discerning how Azriel felt, even after centuries of fighting and fucking and living beside him. It only stood to reason that he would still struggle in spite of the mating bond. Somehow, sometime between learning of the bond and the bond snapping for Azriel, Cassian had convinced himself that a bridge to Azriel’s soul would be just as well guarded as Az was. Perhaps it would even be slick with ice, just to make the crossing treacherous.

The thread binding him to Azriel may have been dark, the soul on the other side steady and solid, but the emotions…

Those had been a revelation.

Cassian had always been proud to say that, of everyone in the world, he was the one who knew Azriel best.

It was a badge of honor, in a strange way. Azriel let *Cassian* get under his skin, gave *Cassian* glimpses of the dreams that drove him, yielded to *Cassian* on the extremely rare occasion he admitted to needing help. Azriel joked with *Cassian*, poked and prodded and teased and laughed with him.

But seeing how wild Azriel had become at the thought of losing Nesta, how *broken…* Cassian knew the black wrath Azriel cloaked himself in first all too well, but the heartbreak etched into the furrow of his brow had been a painful novelty. The desperate supplication, bowing before Nesta and pledging himself to her, had sliced into Cassian with all the brutality of a sword to the gut.

Then, the bond had snapped, and relief and joy and fear had barreled into Cassian with a force that no one might ever suspect from the placid shadowsinger. Not even Cassian.

So if Az needed space to settle into the bond, Cassian could give it to him. He needed some, too.

And hell, Az had probably shut himself up in the House of Wind for some peace and quiet while he devised some heinous plan for Eris, anyway. Something like shattering a femur or dislocating his hips or excising his kneecaps entirely, so the ginger bastard couldn’t even kneel to propose.

Cassian wasn’t entirely opposed to entertaining whatever twisted plan Azriel thought up. Nesta had thought herself low enough to sacrifice herself to a miserable lifetime as Eris’s bride, and then that damned proposal had reared its hideous head a month later to send Azriel to his knees. Both of his mates—Eris’s greedy scheming had harmed both of his mates in just over a month. That wasn’t something Cassian was willing to forgive.

At the very least, there had been no killing calm or frostbitten rage from Az’s end of the bond yet. Either Rhys wasn’t home*—*unlikely, given how close Feyre’s due date was*—*or Azriel hadn’t trusted himself enough to go to the river house yet.

So the day passed, and Cassian and Azriel tugged back and forth on the bond every so often. Over dinner, it devolved into a contest to see who could pull the hardest, like they were boys playing tug-of-war again. The bout lasted until Nesta began to rub her own chest, frowning, and Cassian sent a dose of caution down the bond to Azriel.

Azriel pushed back a gentle wave of something so soft that Cassian’s heart clenched.

He played with the new bond all night, but he relished in the time with he spent alone with Nesta, too. It was the final night that it would be just *Cassian and Nesta, Nesta and Cassian.* Azriel would join them in the Hewn City tomorrow, and that would be that.

Nothing would actually change, but their neat little pairs—the prickly couple, the brothers-in-arms, the quiet allies—would be woven into a trio, indelibly linked by the bridges between their souls.

It wasn’t a bad thing. Far from it. If Cassian were being honest with himself, it was a change that had been creeping up on them for months. Nevertheless, it was one that might upset the delicate balance that he and Nes had worked so hard to establish.

So he passed a quiet night with her, trying his best not to think about the trove of weapons in the sitting room or her planned attempt at scrying or Eris fucking Vanserra. Nesta wasn’t inclined to talk anyway; whenever she did try to speak, whatever she said morphed into jaw-cracking yawn damn near every time. So Cassian simply held tight to the bonds in his chest and fed one of his mates a warm meal while they listened to the Symphonia together.

Later, he draped his body over hers in their bed, his head pillowed on her breasts. Her heart drummed steadily against his ear, drowning out the final bars of a Starfall waltz. It was then, with her eyes closed and her breathing steady, that he couldn’t resist.

“He kissed you.”

Cassian tipped his head up and freed a hand from beneath her waist to trace the dark skin under one eye. Her lashes tickled the tip of his finger.

Nesta let out a breath that let him know she was still awake.

“He did.”

“Did you like it?”

Cassian had. Kissing had always been a line in the sand for Azriel; he had never, not once, kissed one of Cassian’s lovers when he joined them in bed.

But the bond had snapped, and Azriel’s anguished eyes had brightened, and he had kissed Nesta.

Nesta’s eyelids fluttered open, and she looked at him with her own pretty eyes. There was something in the depths of them, something that pulled sleepily at their bond, but she merely hummed and dipped her chin. “I did.”

“Good.” Cassian lifted off of her, rocking up on his hands and knees to kiss her again. He could almost imagine he still tasted Az on her, the way he had when he’d claimed her lips immediately after their first kiss, incapable of resisting.

Time was short, he knew. It was obvious that Nesta hadn’t felt the bond fall into place, and he had stopped Azriel from revealing it in the heat of the moment. But, like the Made weapons, like Feyre’s pregnancy, he couldn’t keep it a secret. It wouldn’t be right to keep it a secret, if it ever had. Not now that two of them knew. Not now that hiding it would no longer be about protecting Nesta and Azriel’s fragile hearts, but protecting themselves from Nesta.

From her disgust.

From rejection

From Nesta, who made a sweet, contented sound and lifted her head from her pillow to chase his lips.

The absence of their third throbbed like a phantom limb, so he kissed her and kissed her and kissed her again until she fell asleep and he ached just a little less.

In the morning, he bundled her into his arms and flew them to the moonstone palace, where Azriel was waiting for them.

# Chapter Fourteen

Cassian dropped onto one of the wide, open balconies of the palace above the Hewn City with enough force to shake the mountain and make Nesta’s teeth rattle in her skull.

“I’m beginning to think you’re showing off,” she told him, pushing out of his arms and onto the moonstone floor on unsteady feet. She brushed a hand over her snow-dusted cloak. “Tell me, do you bats really have wingspan measuring contests up in those mountains? Or are you in some eternal competition over who has the healthiest joints once you reach,” she cast a concerned glance somewhere between his hips and his knees and lowered her voice to a whisper, “a *certain age?”*

Cassian let out a good-natured huff. His broad hand curved into the space between her shoulder blades.

“I’d like to see you do better,” he said, leading her through a set of billowing curtains and into the palace proper. Warm, welcoming magic enveloped her, and a stiffness she hadn’t realized she was carrying in her spine relaxed. Cassian’s hand drifted lazily up and down her back, easing it further. “Come on, we can head to Velaris and see if Feyre can magic up some wings for you so—”

“My knees are in perfect shape,” Nesta sniffed. She’d seen some of her sister’s dreadful attempts at flying, and she didn’t need to try it for herself. “I don’t feel the need to go around proving it to everyone, unlike some.”

“I certainly hope not.”

Nesta tore her eyes from the colored lanterns hanging high above her heads—she would have thought them garish anywhere else, but somehow, in this strange, magical palace, they were a thing of beauty.

She watched him, cataloging the suddenly tense muscle in his jaw, the darkness in his eyes. The way his lips twitched when he caught her looking and the roguish wink he shot at her in return.

She snorted. “You have a filthy mind.”

“You like it,” he said, all brash, swaggering confidence. His hand migrated from her back to well below her waist.

“On occasion,” Nesta agreed mildly. Her breath caught when he tightened his hold on her ass, using his grip to guide her into the circle of his arms. Chest-to-chest, they were so close she could feel his heartbeat as if it were her own.

“Come on, Nes,” he goaded. His head dipped, his windswept curls tickling her cheek. Hot kisses landed on the hinge of her jaw, the column of her throat. “Remember the last time we were here? Let’s go for another ride. The ginger prick won’t be here before nightfall.”

“We’re supposed to meet Azriel before that,” Nesta reminded him, pressing one useless hand to his chest, though she couldn’t muster the strength to shove. His mouth migrated to the corner of hers, and she was helpless against the onslaught, the fingers of her free hand tangling mindlessly in the ends of his dark hair.

“Good,” Cassian groaned. Nesta felt the vibration of it all the way down to her toes. “Az missed out last time we did this. We can have a redo.”

“Cass,” she breathed, ignoring the shiver that rippled down her spine in response to the rasped *Say my name like that again, sweetheart* against her neck. “Cut it out. I mean it.”

Cassian paused, his half-lidded eyes locked on hers.

A laugh as dark as a moonless night cut through the thick air.

“Please, don’t stop on my account.”

Nesta’s pounding heart leapt to her throat.

Azriel’s voice was a cool caress that settled into the very marrow of her bones, a sweet, lingering touch. As she glanced around Cassian, seeking out its source, she watched saw the small line of consternation between his brows melt away, and…

There he was.

The darkness at the edge of her vision that she’d assumed was desire, the sort of tunnel-vision that made her hyperaware every inch of her body and her partner’s with painstaking detail until the rest of the world faded away… It didn’t come back into focus when her attention landed on it. No, it wasn’t the needy, unfocused haze of lust at all; it was the same dark specter she’d seen in the cabin two nights ago.

Azriel, sheltered in the shadows he commanded.

He had cloaked himself in shadows again, but the unhinged male that had knelt at her feet just a day earlier was gone. His posture was relaxed, one ankle crossed over another, and his wings splayed out comfortably against the wall behind him. It was the stance of a male so utterly at ease that nothing would faze him. So self-assured that nothing could touch him.

Looking at him now, Nesta couldn’t help but remember the feral gleam in his eye when he’d bit out what Autumn would do to her when they found out she had lain with Cassian. With both of them. He’d bared his teeth at her, his face wild, his shadows roiling…

But the hard whip-crack of his voice had been desperate.

So painfully desperate.

Her heart softened. She couldn’t blame him. The gods knew she had a far sharper tongue.

And now, with too many feet of open air between them, she felt the pull of him like a magnet.

“Have you been watching this entire time?” she asked through strangled vocal cords. She tried to say something witty, something biting, and all that came out was, “I thought we were meeting you in the city.”

Amber eyes glowed through the darkness, and the shadows parted, revealing the silhouette of their master as he shrugged a casual shoulder. “You’re late again. I came to see what the hold up was.”

Cassian chuckled, low and pleased, and the anticipation in that low rumble of sound skittered along Nesta’s bones.

“Liar,” Cassian said. “You just got here.”

“And if I did?”

Nesta watched Azriel’s focus shift from her to Cassian. Something in his eyes burning hotter, higher. The shade retreated further, just enough for Nesta to see the lines of Az’s face as he raised a brow. A loaded look that she couldn’t discern passed between them.

Cassian’s arm tightened around Nesta’s waist. The proof of his interest was a hard line against her stomach. “Will *you* take me up on my offer?”

Dark temptation stole across Azriel’s face for a fraction of a second, and then his eyes cut away. He pushed off the wall.

“As delightful as I find desecrating Rhys’s palaces with you two, we have a full schedule.”

Az tipped his head to her. Nesta pushed out a breath, and the full weight of what she’d agreed to when she’d decided to take him up on his offer to explore her powers, when she’d agreed to meet Eris here with Cassian *and* Azriel in tow, hit her harder with every long, confident stride he took in their direction.

Cassian’s grip on her slackened. A small tinge of disappointment—and maybe some apprehension—tugged at Nesta’s ribs.

“So formal,” she teased Az, testing the playfulness, a pitiful attempt at distraction, on her tongue.

Azriel let it roll off of him like water off his back.

“How is Rhys, by the way?” Cassian asked next, the scar bisecting his brow pulling as it lifted.

Nesta could have kissed him for it, her partner in crime.

She *would* kiss him for it.

“He’ll live.” Azriel’s words were a degree too cool. The hands he held out to them were stiff in a way that made Nesta suspect that they were itching to curl into fists, that a silent *for now* went unspoken. “Shall we?”

“Don’t rush us, Az.” She unclasped her cloak, running her fingers through the cloud of soft fur trim around the collar. Cassian held out an arm behind her, amusement glittering in his eyes when they met hers as she let it fall off her shoulders. The dress she wore beneath it was nothing special, just one of her Illyrian gowns in sturdy crimson wool, but Azriel’s focus drifted from her face to her body.

Good. She really, really did not want to run headlong into this shitstorm of a day. Not just yet.

“I know Cass likes it hard and fast, but I thought you would want to take your time.”

Cassian’s amusement turned into a roll of his eyes, and a strong hand pinched her side, and Azriel’s eyes narrowed, flitting back to her face.

Although he devoured her with that look, he said, simply and tightly, “I don’t trust Vanserra to arrive on schedule.”

*Sadist,* Nesta thought. He wouldn’t be deterred, not like this.

An inky lock of hair fell over Azriel’s forehead. He nodded at the expanse of open windows that bordered the palatial room and the far-reaching mountain range beyond. When Nesta lifted up a hand to push it back, his eyes slid shut.

He sighed silently. “And this isn’t the most secure location. We’ll talk elsewhere.”

The hand he’d held out for Nesta caught her by the wrist. Cassian grumbled, but took the other.

Azriel’s steady feet led them into the darkness with ease, drawing them along. Cool vines of it climbed Nesta’s skirts, her bodice, and a single, ticklish strand curled around her throat. In an instant, her skin was too hot and too cold, her dress too tight.

“And Nesta?” Azriel murmured. His warm breath curved around the shell of her ear, leaving a wildfire in its wake.

Nesta blindly craned her neck toward him. Sharp teeth nipped at her earlobe.

*“It will never be quick with you,”* he hissed, humor in his voice and strong fingers flexing around her wrist.

And with that sentiment ringing in her ears and roaring through her body, the shadowsinger pulled them into the dark.

Nesta had never stopped to consider the living quarters tucked into the horrid mountain that housed the Court of Nightmares.

She had passed through the Hewn City several times, of course. She had eyed the streets and shops and apartments carved from the black stone lining the city’s main thoroughfare with all of the polite disdain as she could muster on her way to the official Night Court functions hosted in the chambers of its cold, dark heart. She hadn’t spared them much thought; her quarry hid in vaults and ballrooms, not in the subterranean villas of the High Fae she had no interest in getting to know.

Even Feyre had admitted, just before donning her own cruel mask and descending into the city proper, that Nesta needed little instruction on hateful courtly games before sending her into the pit of vipers she called her court.

No, Nesta Archeron had cut her teeth on more venomous snakes below the wall. Mortals, rich and arrogant or poor and resentful, made crueler and more urgent with their loathsome dealings by their short lifespans. As if they needed to fit every bit of hate they could into seventy short years.

Each time Nesta had entered the strange underground metropolis, she had been occupied by thoughts of wars and cauldrons and vitriolic books and seduction plots, anyway. Each time, she had simply sneered at the city, at how obviously it was crafted of magic, and had wondered how easily it might crumble beneath its own weight if it were as dull and barren as the mortal realm where she’d come up. If it would survive the coming chaos or if it would be trampled like the human villages she had once humiliated herself to protect.

And now those villages were rubble, the Hewn City still stood, and Azriel had deposited them at the end of a long, claustrophobic alleyway.

He lifted a shadowed finger to his lips.

*Quiet.*

The walls pressed in tighter here, the black stone hewed more roughly. Every breath filled her lungs with the same stale air that haunted the mausoleum where her mother was laid to rest, and the same beasts that decorated the walls and pillars of Rhysand’s throne room stared out at them. The pockets of darkness in their gaping jaws and hungry eyes were unnaturally black, unnerving. The dim faelights that bobbed in the air above their heads did little to illuminate those voids.

But Nesta got the sense that they were exactly why Azriel seemed so at home here, shrouded as he was beside her.

He loosened his hold on her as he led them to the single door at the end of the alley, gentle fingers drifting away from her wrist. They stopped in front of a simple slab of shining obsidian. Azriel pressed that scarred palm to its center, a web of shadows clinging to his fingertips. They writhed, and then the slab swung open quickly, silently, to reveal more blackness beyond it.

Azriel stepped through, and then Cassian’s gentle hand on her back ushered Nesta into the endless dark.

Magic—wards, she realized—pulled at her skin, her eyelashes, her fingernails, as if mapping every goosebump and hair that stood on end before it let her pass.

Just when she thought the darkness had swallowed her, golden light bloomed, not quite warm and not quite welcoming, but a far cry from the foreboding drop into an airless, soundless pit she had anticipated.

She blinked at a delicate table carved of dark, gleaming wood that had appeared in front of her. A bowl of fat, ripe apples lay at its center.

The door slid shut with a soft *snick* behind the three of them. Beside her, Cassian shuddered, his wings rustling as if he could dislodge the unpleasantness sinking beneath his skin. “Never gets any more pleasant, does it?”

“You get used to it,” Azriel said with a mild shrug.

Nesta lifted a brow. On one side of the table, a tapestry—entirely free of moth-bitten holes and dust she might have expected to find in the dank depths of a mountain—lined the wall. Wraiths with skin crafted from silvery threads peered out of still, opaque waters at a curious youth. Further along, the water roiled, and seven hideous heads branched out of a single long neck, each one hungrily focused on an oblivious wraith.

In the corner closest to the door, safe on the dry, dead riverbank and woven into the scene smaller than the rest, a black-haired female who might have been beautiful if she possessed a face knelt beneath a barren tree with a drop spindle dangling from her hands. The thread she was spinning was nothing more than cobalt light shining out from the fabric.

Nesta watched herself reach out a hand to trace it, to test it…

Cassian snatched it out of the air.

“I wouldn’t.”

She fell back into her body with a violent start, gasping.

Cassian jerked his head at the bas-relief carving that dominated the wall across from the tapestry. “Wouldn’t go near that one, either.”

Nesta looked at it—and quickly looked away.

There was no danger of her touching *that.* The carved stone bore the likenesses of countless High Fae, their preternaturally beautiful faces etched with something between agony and ecstasy. They writhed in an indistinct tangle of limbs, and dread beasts like the ones on the walls outside prowled throughout, tongues lolling, teeth polished to a black gleam.

It was just stone, she told herself, but it was unsettling in the same way the Bog of Oorid was, radiating a dangerous sense of foreboding.

“But that one…” Cassian’s finger cut into her line of sight, pointing at a tightly closed door beside the relief. The tether between them warmed in a way that Nesta had come to recognize—a way that warmed *her*. The door was made of the same obsidian as the one behind them, and Azriel stood beside it, his arms crossed. *“That’s* the beast you want to poke, sweetheart.”

Azriel’s mouth tightened, his nostrils flaring briefly. “Are you finished?”

“Sure.” Cassian tossed Nesta’s cloak onto the little table, rattling the bowl of apples, and grinned.

Nesta looked around the room again—around Azriel’s apartments in the official seat of the Night Court’s power, she realized, catching sight of a pair of boots lined up neatly beside the door they had come through.

She glanced between the tapestry and the relief one more time with a shudder.

This place was full of horrible magic, but overall, it gave her the too-familiar sense of refined, vacant wealth she had once known as a girl.

Refined, vacant wealth that had been amassed through unspeakably sinister dealings, at least.

Azriel scoffed at Cassian, but gestured toward an open archway across from the door, the mirror image of the closed door beside him.

Beyond it, a sitting room appointed in dark wood and leather was arranged atop an ancient rug, the walls lined with shelves bearing precariously arranged stacks of books that looked like they might burst from their confines at a moment’s notice. A battered piano was shoved up against the only empty stretch of wall in the room.

“We’ll test my theory about your powers first,” Azriel told Nesta, who shifted on her feet, and then nodded to Cassian, “while you meet with Mor about Illyria.” His gnarled fingers twitched again. “I have shadows watching for our… *guest.* Nesta and I will rejoin you then.”

Cassian made a sound of agreement and led Nesta through the arch, like he knew her reluctant feet wouldn’t cooperate on their own. She shoved down the guilt beating hard beneath her breast.

She wouldn’t be useless again.

She wouldn’t fail again without even trying.

As they stepped into the sitting room, Azriel followed, pulling a stack of books out of a shadow and leaving them on a small secretary tucked between a pair of sofas. She scanned the gilt titles on their spines and glanced away. Each and every one was about scrying.

And then a second pair of hands were on her waist. Nesta nearly gasped as she was spun smoothly out of Cassian’s arms and into Azriel’s.

“I thought I said I was taking over here,” Azriel shot over his shoulder as a swaying step danced her attention away from the books.

Cassian snorted, an unusually affectionate *“bastard,”* trailing in their wake.

Azriel’s face was as placid as ever, and he didn’t respond to the insult as he twirled Nesta—*twirled her*—in a ghost of the dance they had shared a month ago. All thoughts of the books on the secretary eddied out of her head, and Nesta bit her lip to silence a ridiculous giggle that threatened to break free as he spun her back into the circle of his arms.

His eyes were soft, as if he’d heard it anyway. Something behind her breastbone twinged with affection. The remainder of the strange tension between them slipped away as he swayed with her again and again, until all Nesta could feel were his arms and the ghost of his lips on hers.

All day, she had relived the kiss and the sight of him rising up on his knees to take it. It haunted her that couldn’t shake the dangerous, greedy thing she was beginning to feel for Azriel. She and Cassian had both been subdued after he’d stormed out of the cabin, both stunned into a lingering silence that turned the rest of the day into a quiet, contemplative affair. When Nesta had finally slept, it had been uneasy. She’d woken easily when Cassian returned from scanning the Blood Rite grounds again, noting that Cassian had seemed…

Well, despite everything, some edge in Cassian seemed to have softened, eased, though Nesta couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

That bubble had popped when Azriel’s note materialized in the kitchen—just a few scrawled sentences to inform them that he wouldn’t return until they met in the Hewn City. Nesta and Cassian’s usual routine had resumed, then. Cassian had made dinner, and Nesta had picked up her book, and they had passed a comfortable night together.

But Azriel’s absence had been a gnawing, unexamined ache.

Now, Nesta breathed in the cedar and shadow scent of him—the scent she hadn’t realized she’d quite missed as much as she had—as Azriel circled with her once, twice. Her back hit the wall beside the piano, and the impulse to giggle warmed into something else entirely.

He watched her for a long moment. The expression on his handsome face was utterly, painfully neutral. Unshadowed. His head tilted, and then his eyes cleared, as if he were discovering the answer to some unspoken question.

He pressed closer to Nesta, pinning her between the long lines of his body and the wall. His wings flared, blocking out her view of the rest of the room. Of Cassian.

Her lungs were too small, too compressed by the force of him and the feeling lining her ribs to take in any air.

And then Azriel kissed her again.

Sweetly, softly, he kissed her.

His lips stroked hers, his breath fanned across her cheeks, and when he pulled back…

*“Nesta.”* He spoke her name with such relief and clarity that it hardly sounded like her own, soft and sybillant as it slipped through his teeth. He barely hit the T, didn't snap out that last syllable like Cassian might. Her name was a luxury on his tongue, a smooth sip of the rich hot chocolate he had made for her. He spoke her name like he meant to savor it.

As if he could read her mind, his lips drifted upward into a devastating smile. “How are you today?”

“Very well, thank you. And you?” The words were a rote, empty pleasantry that had been drilled into her head as a girl. Between the dancing and the kissing, her brain had ceased working.

There was something wound through the air between them, strung tight and unbreakable.

Azriel’s smile grew, and then his lips were on hers again. This kiss was no less gentle, but it was infinitely hungrier as he licked her open and tasted her. He pulled a moan from her when he swept his tongue over the edge of her teeth, as if checking to see how sharp her fangs were today, and chuckled quietly when she had to wind her arms around his shoulders just to keep herself upright.

Beyond the cover of Azriel’s wings, Cassian cleared his throat. “I’ll just go arrange things with Mor, then.”

“She’s waiting for you in the council chamber,” Azriel said, breaking away from her as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. As if it were totally normal for him to pin best friend’s lover to a wall and kiss her senseless in greeting. He peeled back a wing to look at Cassian. “I told her it’s about Illyria, but left the details for you to fill in.”

“Will do.” Cassian winked, a beaming grin on his own mouth.

Nesta started at the sight of it, breathing hard. She stared at the easy, careless set of Cassian’s shoulders, and the butterflies in her stomach plummeted to their deaths as noxious guilt rose in her throat.

*No one else. Ever.*

Cassian paused, his brow furrowing.

“Nes?” The tether tugged, and he looked back at her. “Are you sure you want to do this, sweetheart?”

On instinct, Nesta’s arms tightened around Azriel’s shoulders as possessive, petulant instinct flared.

And then she remembered.

This.

*Training.*

She felt like an idiot as her arms fell away from Azriel.

She would not be useless again. She would not be weak again. She would not fail them again.

*No one else. Ever.*

It pounded like a war drum through her skull. Cassian was watching her, his focus firm, but with Azriel’s hand on her waist, his thumb stroking her hip through her dress, it was hard to open her mouth.

She nodded.

She hated herself.

Her lover’s head twitched to the side, and he looked at her for a long moment.

“Alright,” he finally said, turning toward Az with a grin that was a bit too serious and a bit too hard to be anything but a warning. “Don’t ride her too hard.”

Azriel rolled his eyes, and a soft “Come here”that dripped from his tongue—another gentle order. His hand tangled in Cassian’s hair, and Nesta could do little more than breathe as Az pulled him into the intimate circle of his wings beside her.

The way Az slanted their lips together was quick. She might have even called it perfunctory if she wasn’t so close she could practically feel their hearts beating through their leathers and see the way they both closed their eyes, tilting their heads to find the perfect angle.

“Mm.” Az made a considering noise as they parted, licking his lips, then lowered his head to taste Nesta’s neck without sparing a second. He followed the line Cassian had blazed in the palace above them, nipping and biting. Cassian bent to steal a kiss from her lips.

He tasted like Azriel.

Nesta moaned, her knees going weak—

In the next second, Cassian was gone, striding through the door with a quick wink and a sly “Send a shadow if you need me” thrown over his shoulder.

Azriel was slower to part from Nesta. Her entire body was loose with pleasure when his rough fingertips followed his mouth, tracing the column of her neck. He pulled back with a series of dragging, sharp kisses that made her hiss.

“We’ll start at the piano,” he said at last, his voice thick as he drew away. He gestured the hand that didn’t scrub over his mouth at the bench beside Nesta and then turned on his heel, snapping the buttons at his waist that kept his leather jacket fastened around his wings.

Nesta looked at the bench and then back to Azriel, who shucked his jacket and threw it over the back of a small chair. He slipped his hand into one of the pockets that lined the front of it and withdrew a small box, dropping it into one of the many drawers on the secretary.

He shut the drawer, turned the small key to secure it, and pocketed it. His eyes met hers, entirely calm, and she lifted a brow.

“A small errand I ran in the city before winnowing here." He cleared his throat and nodded at the bench again. “Go on.”

Nesta wrinkled her nose at the bench. It might as well have been covered with spikes. Grandmama’s voice had never sounded so clear in her mind.

*She can’t even parrot back a basic scale at her tutor, the simple girl. Elisabeth, have you considered—*

“Nesta.”

Azriel’s shadows pressed closer, drifting from the tips of his wings to his shoulders. He gestured to the bench in front of the piano.

“Sit.”

Nesta didn’t dare tell him that she was dreadfully out of practice playing any instrument as she slid onto the bench. He would find that out soon enough. He didn’t say anything, though, waiting until she took a seat to lower himself to the other side of the bench.

He rested his hands on the cover over the keys. She couldn’t help but stare at those long fingers, at the twisted scar tissue shining beneath the faelights.

Clearly, the piano was well-loved, and the way he stretched his hands told her he played. Did it hurt him? Or was playing somehow pleasant, a relief not unlike the way it felt to fall into a slow, mindful series of stretches after a brutal workout left her muscles tight and sore?

Azriel took a breath, and then released it all at once. His mouth turned down, his dark eyes locked on the piano. When he spoke, he was quiet. Thoughtful.

Serious.

“This is just a test, but before we begin,” he said, slowly and evenly, his gaze flickering toward hers before looking away, “you must understand that they will try to tell you these powers are valuable.”

His voice was a low, grave thrum, so soft that Nesta had to lean in to hear him, even with her sharp fae senses.

“They will try to convince you that your potential is being wasted if you do not use them. When conflict comes, they will attempt to coerce you into using them as a weapon.” As if he’d found some inner resolve, his expression tightened, his wings tucked in, and his eyes pinned Nesta. “As they already have before."

Nesta scanned that look for any hint of deceit. *"They?"*

The lethal calm in Azriel’s limbs conveyed more than he verbalized. Nesta was distantly aware her own were beginning to shake. To shiver, caught in the heart of the storm of intensity that seemed to follow the shadowsinger as closely as his shadows.

Azriel nodded.

It was the closest anyone had come to condemning the way her powers had been used during the war. Inside her chest, something loosened.

"These powers are not where your value lies. You are not a weapon. If my suspicions are correct, then these powers are your companion. Your protector. They exist to comfort you and keep you safe, not to help you serve others.”

Frozen, ancient hurt stole over his face. His fists clenched over the keys, and he snarled, so softly it barely split the stale underground air, "I coaxed my shadows out of the darkness. You tore your fire from the Cauldron. They belong to *us."*

The tether was an icicle in her chest, so cold it seared into her as it cut through bone and tissue and blood.

Nesta lifted a hand to rub at it.

The feeling disappeared in an instant, and Azriel shifted on the bench, turning his attention back to the keys. The rage in his eyes faded to drawn, tired dullness.

"Do you understand?"

Nesta nodded, unwilling to break the strange spell that had come over him with words, but he waited.

And waited.

*“Nesta…”* He finally crooned in his dark, soft voice, coaxing, as playful as he could get with the shadows hanging so heavy beneath his eyes, his lips turning upward with a smile that wasn’t quite a smile.

She took a breath. “I understand.”

“Good.” Azriel lifted the cover over the keys. “Then let’s begin.”

Nesta huffed. “I can’t play—”

“You don’t have to.” Azriel’s fingertips ghosted across the keys, an intimate caress. “You had a reaction to the music when you went to hear the priestesses sing, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” She shivered as the memory washed over her.

That had been truly unsettling, truly terrifying. The music was soothing, ethereal, a balm to a wound she hadn’t known she possessed—until it lulled her into a trance that had been wild and entirely uncontrolled without Cassian there to ground her. Without stones and bones to hold in her hand.

Nothing but the music and her power had existed in that placid pool of sound. Nothing, except for the Harp that had heard the music and called to her from its cell in the Prison.

“Then we know music had some effect. We need to find out how.” Az nodded once, sharply. Decisively. “When I became a shadowsinger, the shadows came all at once, talked to me all at once, and I thought I was going mad. I would have gone mad. Until…”

Azriel depressed one key, and a note so beautifully clear that it had to be magic sang out from the belly of the piano. He echoed it, humming the note.

His shadows stilled like soldiers awaiting an order.

“The servant who brought me my meals thought I had, since the only way I could silence the shadows was by making noise myself. That was when everyone else discovered what I had become, and it wasn’t long before I was left in Windhaven to train. More than a few of the other novices took issue with my incessant humming,” he said it so simply, so coolly, but Nesta could imagine how trainees in that barren, hateful camp solved their problems with those smaller and weaker than themselves.

But a little smile broke over Azriel’s lips—a true smile. “That’s how I met Cassian, actually. He challenged me to a fight and took my boots for being such an annoying little shit after just a few hours.”

Nesta coughed, the sound somewhere between shock and laughter.

“Rhys’s mother made him return them. With an apology.” Azriel’s smile grew, and his fingers tripped over a few more keys, shadows flowing like smoke from his hands. “Shadowsingers are so rare and so secretive that no one knew how to train one, especially not an overstimulated boy who couldn’t fly and could barely speak to explain what was happening to him. Most of us go mad before we reach maturity, but those who survive…” He played a chord that made the shadows dance. “The High Lord arrived in the camp a day after I did with this piano and ordered that I was to be housed and tutored alongside his son.”

Azriel began to work his way through a scale, the sounds resonant, rich, filling the small sitting room until they echoed off the walls. It was simple, but it made the waltzes and overtures on the Symphonia seem frail in comparison.

“Feel anything, Nes?” Azriel tilted his head at her.

Nesta grimaced back.

“Feel your body. Think about how your feet feel in your shoes. Your legs on the bench. Your hands in your lap.” He was calm, still playing, barely paying attention to her.

She was tense, shaky, as if her power might hear the note that it wanted and come barrelling out of her like those shadows. And without Cassian to catch her if she fell into it, she felt unmoored, set adrift…

Azriel’s leg pressed against hers, touching her front hip to knee.

“I’m here.”

Nesta’s breath left her in a sick gust, and she curled her fingers around Azriel’s thigh. Warm. He was warm and firm and unmoving. “You’re here.”

“Close your eyes,” he said, his lips barely moving, his voice soft as a song, as if he didn’t dare interrupt the note that was still ringing out. “Just listen. It’s just an experiment. It might work. It might not.”

Nesta did as he instructed, but her heart was pounding, her pulse hard in her throat.

So she started Mind-Stilling.

She did as Azriel said. Her feet tapped against the floor, impatient and nervous; she gathered that feeling and set it aside. The bench was hard beneath her, as if she were preparing to spring up and run; she anchored herself more firmly, grasping his leg, and relaxed her muscles. The hand left in her lap was twisting her skirts between her fingers; she set it palm up, waiting, expectant.

She breathed. Deeply.

In. Out.

In.

Out.

It all faded. The male beside her was warm and firm and unmoving. Thoughts crashed against her, but she was a rock, and she did not yield as they made impact and then flowed away.

A note swept through the air, gentle as a kiss against her skin.

And once again, deep in her gut, her soul, something writhed and twined around itself, seeking a way out, seeking a way into the world… And Nesta didn’t shove it down. Didn’t run, didn’t lock it away in a vault, didn’t vow to destroy it if it dared destroy her.

“Keep going. I won’t let it overwhelm you.”

The room went cold as her power stirred, but for the first time, it felt like something Nesta could command. Something that was wholly hers. Not a great, feral beast blinking its eyes at her, not some devouring thing deep inside a cave she refused to explore, but a well of strength, just as tangible as the muscle that let her heft the swords Cassian placed in her hand.

“Good,” the voice was a ribbon of darkness flowing alongside the music, a part of it. Through the song in her mind and the answering crackle of flames in the palm she held upturned in her lap. “Breathe, Nesta. Breathe and listen.”

# Chapter Fifteen

By the time Azriel played Nesta through a slow, simple warm-up, his hands ached, the stiff joints and tendons stretched past the point of comfort.

Too long. It had been too long since he last played.

But Nesta was calm. Her expression was soft for once, her power a steady flicker in the palm of her upturned hand, and he was loath to interrupt her.

To interrupt this opportunity to marvel at her.

Because she was *magnificent.*

As he marveled, Azriel’s breath clouded, his shadows stilling. The grave pall of Death had fallen over the study the moment Nesta’s silver fire sparked to life, primal and perilous. It crept closer with every measure, inch by inch, as if that flame were a beacon shining through the Veil. As if Nesta could summon that ageless, ancient force with it—Death itself no more than a loyal footsoldier eager to please His commander.

A warning chill skittered down Azriel’s spine, rustling his wings and raising the short hairs at the nape of his neck. It numbed his aching fingers, relief and warning all at once.

He didn’t need to test the theory lurking in the back of his mind to know that one wrong note would be his death knell.

But Nesta was calm, so he played on, selecting each key with the precision he saved for drawing back a bowstring and lining up a shot.

Unholy inner light flared behind her clenched-shut eyelids. It silvered the planes of her face, glimmering whenever she teetered on the edge of losing control—when her brow wrinkled in frustration or her lashes kissed her cheeks as she concentrated harder. Just a small, cold bit of light, but it skimmed her elegant features and danced in time with his shadows to the notes he played.

He watched that light. Watched *her.* Watched the cold flame grow in her palm and felt a phantom breeze stir the stale air, seeping into the marrow of his bones and the blackened foundations of his soul.

The sight of those flames licking at her fingers awoke an instinctual fear in him, the sort he had long since mastered beside campfires and the pyres that marked the bitter end of battle. But here, with her…

Azriel counted his breaths and murmured soft reminders to himself. To Nesta.

*Gentle.*

*Breathe.*

*Listen.*

The flame crackled, and he walked his hands down the keys to the notes that seemed to resonate most with it, playing them again and again until he and Nesta both found their balance. Until the wildfire of her power was little more than an ember, a shifting bead of mercury held in her palm.

All that lethal, breathtaking power.

Her free hand dug into his thigh, anchoring her to this plane.

His Nesta.

His mate.

His miracle.

His chest wasn’t large enough to contain the full force of what he was feeling. Fuck, he wasn’t entirely sure *what* he was feeling. It was something like soul-deep relief, disbelieving awe, and love. Love so deep and acute it felt like a damn blade through his heart. Words he couldn’t bring himself to say yet tied his tongue in knots, and Azriel was grateful to have an excuse to stay silent, cycling through scale after scale and song after song.

When he was certain she wouldn’t lose control—and once the last of the scared stiffness in her spine eased—he returned his attention to his hands on the keys, venturing away from simple melodies to plunk out a syrupy-sweet waltz. The sort of easy tune a dancer might use while stretching before a lesson. The sort Nesta might be familiar with.

The flames spat and hissed. Frost crackled up the wall, and Nesta’s nails bit into his leathers.

The cold force in his soul reached creeping tendrils toward Azriel’s heart, squeezing the breath out of his lungs—

He pressed his leg into her palm to ground her, sweeping instead into a ponderous, contemplative nocturne.

And Nesta’s power calmed. The flame in her palm wavered and shrunk, and Azriel’s shadows stretched with relief in the silver light it let off as he sucked in a silent, deep breath.

He played the nocturne twice, giving Nesta a moment to rebalance herself. To find her equilibrium as she teetered over the vast abyss of power that any fae with a pulse could sense within her.

“One more,” he told Nesta quietly after his own heartbeat steadied. He marked the delicate wavering of her fire in response to his voice—marked it, and let it warm his battered heart. “And then we need to begin our cool down.”

Nesta nodded slightly, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks. Her posture tightened, her mouth pursing; like Azriel, she knew and dreaded what awaited them on the other side of this lesson.

Azriel’s spine turned to steel at the mere thought of it. He’d gotten little done the previous day—a missive sent to Mor, a summons to Vanserra, and a short trip to the library beneath the House of Wind before he collapsed in his bed as the morning bled into the afternoon.

From the moment he had read Rhys’s letter to Nesta, his rushing mind had been as unstoppable as a whitewater rapid, roaring through him from head to heart. And his heart… It had been a wild, unchained beast scrabbling at the bars of his ribs, drowning under the onslaught. He had been a fool to let the feeling take hold in the cabin, but he had let himself feel all of it then, driven to distraction as he reached again and again for Cassian and Nesta across the bridges between their souls.

It was that pair of bonds that had kept him flying any deeper into Velaris. From seeking out his High Lord and giving into the fury that stiffened his limbs whenever he remembered those damned letters.

Rhys had known all along. He had known, and that thought made the blood curdle in Az’s veins. Rhys had known what Nesta was to him when he trotted her out in front of Eris Vanserra, and now that murderous ginger bastard was panting after *Azriel’s* mate, a beast no better than his own prize smokehounds.

And Rhys had known—or suspected, at least—when he caught Azriel on the verge of declaring himself to his mate’s little sister. When he found Azriel on the very precipice of ruining everything that was now just within reach with Nesta and Cassian.

Rhys had known, and he had revealed nothing.

The words they’d snarled at one another the night of the Winter Solstice echoed in Azriel’s head, the cruelest of taunts.

*You believe* she *should be your mate?*

*Who else?*

A new thread of slick, sickening mortification wove its way through Azriel at the memory of that night. When he remembered the centuries that had come before.

How long had Rhys known?

Candor wasn’t in Rhysand’s nature, a fact that Azriel knew all too well as his spymaster and secret keeper, but learning what his brother had known—the answer to the question Azriel had been asking since he was a boy, the information even his shrewdest shadows couldn’t uncover—and hadn’t revealed scorched Azriel from the inside out.

Burn it all to hell, how long had *Cassian* known?

For five hundred years, Azriel had pined after Mor while he bedded Cassian, not once suspecting what his body and soul had always understood on some base level. Cassian had even found their mate, but Azriel had been fool enough to ignore the stirrings within him to pursue her *sister*.

Really, it wouldn’t surprise him one bit if he found Ataraxia embedded in his throat someday soon.

He’d watched the sun reach its zenith through his window as he bathed in that humiliation, drifting off to an uneasy sleep. Even though he hadn’t gotten any rest since he’d left Cassian and Nesta in bed the previous morning, he slept fitfully and woke with a start when his shadows began whispering lazily amongst themselves, as languid as a dozen fat cats in the long beams of light cast into his room by the setting sun.

And then one of the bonds had tugged in his chest, alerting Azriel to what had woken him.

It was such a foreign, alarming feeling that he’d shot upward, flaring his wings and scanning his bedroom as if he might find someone there, yanking at a rope tied around his middle. It had felt so real, so close, so damned *tangible* that he hadn’t shaken off the cobwebs of sleep before getting to his feet and stalking the halls of the House, seeking out the source of the pull even as his shadows informed him that he was alone. He made it all the way up to the training rings.

All he found was the dismantled Blood Rite Qualifier course shoved to one side and a row of training dummies bathed in hazy sunshine. They were silent observers to the dumb way Azriel put a hand to his chest and slumped into one of the half-dozen minuscule rattan chairs that the House had provided for the priestesses.

Then the bond pulled again, harder than before, as if trying to drag Az’s ass right back out of his seat.

Cassian, then.

Azriel tracked that tugging in his chest, his heart, his *soul* . His hand had risen, clutching the ribs where he felt it manifesting most strongly, and there, golden and bright and flickering with promise…

Two threads. Two bridges. Two unbreakable links in a divine chain that had soldered themselves to the core of his being that morning, the sort of magic that transcended the physical and wrote itself into the very heart of the universe.

Indelible.

Unstoppable.

Azriel pulled the cord binding his soul to Cassian’s back with as much force as he could muster and couldn’t contain the rare, unrestrained laughter that burst out of him when Cassian yanked back.

Awe crept in, and he felt for the second bond, cradling it to his heart with every fiber of himself. It was dormant, quiet but content, as if Nesta was sleeping on the other side. He didn’t dare do more than stroke it, just a single light graze of his soul against hers, just to assure himself that she was there.

He didn’t know how it was possible. How a High Fae female could have two mates. How the Cauldron could subject her to an Illyrian bond.

He didn’t care.

As long as she was theirs, he didn’t care.

Another stunned laugh scraped out of him then.

Azriel had leaned back against the chair, ignoring the way the high back crushed his wings, and thought, with uncharacteristic giddiness, *What the hell do I do now?*

Dual bonds were so quintessentially Illyrian that he had written the possibility of one off centuries ago. Why should he, the bastard-born shadowsinger who haunted the nightmares of younglings throughout the Steppes, be given the opportunity to stain *two* mates with his bond?

When he was a small child, he had briefly allowed himself the comfort of the dream shared by so many Illyrians. The hope. Even locked away, he heard whispers of matings and triads—mostly from the maids who chattered amongst themselves when they brought him his meals and supervised the hour he had every day to bathe and stretch his wings outside the cell. Deep in his heart, Azriel had harbored the fantastical, juvenile dream that perhaps one day, two strong, brave warriors might descend on his sire’s keep, Siphons flaring, and spirit him away.

But after a certain age, after his half-brothers had done their worst and the truth of his birth had been revealed and the hopelessness had well and truly set in that he would never leave the endless dark and silence of his cell…

Once the shadows had flocked to a young boy to provide what little cooling comfort they had to offer for his melted flesh…

Azriel never dared to imagine a dual bond again.

*Never.*

Not with the two unbeatable warriors he imagined as a child. Not with Mor and Cassian, in the midst of all those lost centuries of heartrending longing. And certainly not with Cassian and Nesta, not even after they invited him to their bed and ensnared his heart with their games.

And certainly never with an outcome as happy as this.

What right did he have, when his own mother—

Azriel shut down that thought with a force that rattled him.

Were it anything else from that rough land and its rough people—and were he bound to anyone else like this— Azriel might have even curled his lip at the bonds.

But like his wings, like the boundless joy of flying, he couldn’t find it within himself to loathe this part of his birthright any longer. He couldn’t muster the nerve to resent the Cauldron-blessed gift of two lifelines.

Two mates, both of whom he already loved so dearly.

His fingers tripped across the keys as the song slowed, and he pressed his leg against Nesta’s once more to remind her of his presence.

“We’re going to stop now. Imagine preparing for bed,” he murmured to her, watching the fire in her palm die with the music. “You’re blowing out a candle before laying down to sleep. Its purpose has been served today, and tomorrow evening, when you need it, you will light it again.”

Nesta’s brow furrowed. But her fingers closed around her palm as Azriel lifted his hands from the keys, and with another quiet, forceful breath, she extinguished the flame entirely.

Azriel was still watching when she blinked open her eyes, monitoring her for any lingering hint of a spark. But her palm was empty and unscathed, her eyes were clear and blue, and some small measure of warmth was returning to his underground suite, so he watched instead as her lips parted.

She looked almost surprised, and Azriel couldn’t blame her. Previous attempts to use her power had required Cassian to all but shake her loose of her power’s grip.

“How do you feel?”

Her gaze flicked to his, wide and clear and utterly, beautifully unguarded.

He wondered then if Nesta could sense the way the air seemed too thick between them. If she could feel the fundamental sense of rightness that Azriel felt by just existing in this precious moment with her, the way gravity shifted beneath his feet and seemed to pull him toward her instead. If she could see that he was the same as he had always been, and yet he was being remade, reforged by the fire living within her.

“That was…” Nesta’s voice was hushed, as if she didn’t want to disturb the silence strung between them.

Azriel nodded. Even without the bond guiding him, he knew exactly what she was feeling: the sense of control, of peace, of finally having the current of magic slow enough to keep one’s head above the water.

“It was a start,” he told her. He played the note that had made her silver flame bend toward it. A spark lit her eyes, and a corner of his mouth tugged upward. “Now we know what your fire likes to hear, and we can refine it into something you’ll be able to access at any time, without fear.”

Her brow furrowed. “You were right. About the music.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Azriel knocked his knee against hers, unable to resist the temptation to bend toward her. “I’m usually right. It’s why Cassian finds it so entertaining to try betting against me.”

Nesta scoffed, but nodded. Then her attention fell on his hand, still resting above the final note he had played. Azriel mourned the loss of her touch when the fingers still clutching his thigh unclenched, rising up to meet his, and poked his finger out of the way so she could depress the key herself.

She tried to hum a matching note, but she wasn’t very good. Azriel wasn’t quick enough to fully smother his smile, and her eyes narrowed at him.

He shrugged, and she rolled those pretty eyes.

“I should have brought the Symphonia,” she said with a regretful sigh. “I haven’t seen a piano in the House. We could have recorded this.”

“Hm.” Azriel considered it. Rolled over the risks in his mind, and decided the benefits of not having to crawl into the festering pit of the Hewn City every time they wanted to train outweighed them. Without the help of Rhys and his pocket dimensions, Azriel doubted he and Cassian could haul a piano up to the House or the cabin without raising suspicions, and he would rather sheathe Truth-Teller in his gut before he told Rhys—and therefore Amren—that he was training Nesta to access her power. It was something they didn’t need to know. Not yet. “It’s in your bag, isn’t it? In the cabin?”

Nesta shook her head. He savored the play of the faelights on the plait coiled atop her head, as if the very world around her could not resist crowning her with gold.

“I left it in the reading room. It’s on—“

But Azriel remembered, and he twisted his wrist, dispatching a bit of shadow to collect it. In the next moment, it returned from the second shelf to the right of the window seat Nesta had claimed as her own in Cassian’s cabin, and a smooth, silver weight dropped into his palm.

Nesta’s eyebrows shot up.

Azriel shrugged, setting the Symphonia on the lid of the piano. “It’s not a bad plan.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m usually right,” Nesta mocked, her chin rising with the same haughty grace that drove Cassian wild.

Azriel pressed his lips together and glanced sidelong at her. Nesta smiled back, all conniving charm and teeth. He huffed through his nose, his chest aching with enamored amusement, and wondered if she knew she couldn’t muster an innocent expression to save her life.

Her smile grew, and he snorted again, shaking his head.

“Before I do this,” he told her sternly, cutting into that fond moment, “you have to swear to me you will only practice when Cassian or I can be there to pull you out. This little exercise only skimmed the surface of your power, and you already know what happens when you tunnel deeper into it.”

Nesta’s eyes sharpened, slicing away as she undoubtedly remembered her first perilous attempts at scrying, just as he intended. In the deepest parts of Azriel, pride burned for his mate. She engraved every perceived failure on the walls of her heart, but still Nesta had harnessed her terrifying power beautifully.

Azriel’s shadows wreathed his knuckles in a fine mist, cooling the hands that suddenly itched to bury themselves in her hair and kiss her until she was gasping with pleasure.

Nesta hummed, trailing her fingertips over the battered mahogany of the piano bench. “We might not have time to wait with the Blood Rite so close.”

“I don’t give a damn about the Blood Rite.” Azriel fixed his attention on her and waited until her eyes met his again. “We’ll take our time learning how to work with your power, and if you’re ready to attempt a scrying in time for the Rite, then you’re ready. If not, we’ll find another way.”

Her mouth tightened. “And you think you can find one in time?”

“We will have no other choice but to find one.” He felt Nesta’s scrutiny digging into him as if it were the tip of a dagger biting into his skin. With calm, unyielding menace coloring his words, he bit out, “If not, we’ll make one.”

“Or you’ll just leave the novices to slaughter one another and figure out who was behind it in the bloody aftermath.” Her jest was bitter, lacking any levity.

Azriel set his hands over the keys again, and the air around his wings whispered as he shrugged—not a confirmation or a denial. “Or that.”

On a good day, Azriel barely restrained himself from burning Illyria to the ground. But if protecting a few hundred Illyrian whelps’ rights to slaughter one another barehanded threatened Nesta’s safety, he might level Ramiel with the force of his wrath and leave those hateful beasts to suffocate beneath the rubble himself.

His ears rang with the sound of steel sliding out of a scabbard.

“Place your palm on the Symphonia. Set your intention to record this,” he instructed coolly.

“Do I want to know how you know how to work one of these?” Nesta asked archly, accepting the abrupt change in subject with a wry glance. “Cassian said they were rare.”

“Not unless you want another lesson in how to conduct an interrogation.”

“No, then,” she decided, her mouth twisting.

Azriel lifted a shoulder for her benefit. “If that’s your call.”

Her hand covered the Symphonia, and Azriel positioned his hands over the keys, waiting. Gentle light spilled through the gaps between Nesta’s fingers, and a resonant hum filled the air. Her soft gasp followed, soothing the agitation pounding at Azriel’s temples.

“Careful, Nes,” he murmured when a familiar unholy chill bit at his exposed fingertips. “Just listen. Be present in this moment with me. Your power can rest.”

Awareness stretched in the stale air between them. He waited, ever patient, as she grounded herself—feet on the ground, legs on the bench, hands on her legs.

On her nod, Azriel drifted back into the nocturne, letting muscle memory guide his hands over the keys.

Without her power to focus on, every bit of Nesta’s attention was fastened on him. He felt her eyes on the side of his face like a caress, lingering and then drifting downward, grazing his arms, his wrists, his fingers.

He did his best to ignore it, to ignore the low burn of desire that her undivided attention ignited in him, a spark to kindling. He focused only on finishing the piece, playing as smoothly as he could when every inch of his body was stiff with restraint, and placed his own palm over the Symphonia once the final note had sighed into silence.

And then he turned to face her.

Her eyes were gentle, her teeth buried in her plush lip. It was almost enough to shake Azriel. To soften the hard look he gave her.

He didn’t allow it.

“You will not practice unless Cassian or I can monitor you,” he told her as he placed the cool silver oval into her palm, the stern reiteration of his earlier condition more order than warning.

Nesta rolled her eyes—and he clasped her hand over the Symphonia, leveling the cool, unblinking look that had broken so many of the Night Court’s prisoners at her. She met that look, unfazed, a single brow arched.

“Swear it.”

“I’m not a fool, Azriel,” she snapped.

Her voice was clipped, but the tips of her finger stroked the side of his palm. The pad of her thumb played across his sore knuckles. Reassurance in a touch.

Did she know that small, grazing touch threatened to unravel him? That the feeling of her hand in his might very well be his undoing?

Azriel watched her for another long moment, and she watched him back.

Then her lips quirked, amused, and she drew away her hand, examining the Symphonia as if she expected to find the notes of his song engraved into its surface. “Thank you.”

“You’re right.” Azriel shook his head, his fingers left cold and sore in her absence. He took a moment to stretch them, to subtly shake off the phantom of her touch, as he lowered the fallboard over the keys. “You’re no fool. You’re a terror.”

Silver-blue eyes slid back to him. “I hope that’s a compliment.”

“Unfortunately,” he said wryly, offering her a glimpse of long-suffering fondness in the lift of his brows and the sigh he heaved.

Her small grin widened.

He stood quickly, before it could stun him into a stupor, and held out his hand to help her off the bench, greedy for more already. Nesta slipped the Symphonia into one of the deep pockets hidden beneath her skirts and took it, rising with the grace of a queen.

And in her wake, he couldn’t resist.

“Cassian is right, you know.”

Nesta shot him a puzzled look.

He tipped his head, willing his face not to heat. “About the way he speaks of your gifts. I have never..."

Words failed him, drying up in his throat. Unbidden, his hand rose, and he pretended to tuck a nonexistent strand of hair back into her braid just for an excuse to touch her. To feel the silk of her hair beneath his ruined hands. To let the simple action of caring for her say what he couldn't.

The lightest swath of pink bled across Nesta’s face, a small, almost shy smile pulling at the corners of her lips. Her eyes dropped to the collar of his tunic, her shoulders rising and falling with a steadying breath.

“I thought you didn’t need to resort to poetry, Az.” She sounded almost chagrined—equally mortified by her own reaction to him.

A fresh shock of embarrassment hit him low in the gut, and Azriel didn’t have time to appreciate her blush as he sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Cassian told you about that, did he?”

“He told me about a lot of things.” A come-hither glance up through her lashes tempted Azriel for a heartbeat, and then she turned away. “As you well know.”

Azriel didn’t miss the way her eyes locked on the carved stone of his bedroom door through the archway leading out of the study, nor did he miss the thread of appreciation and the phantom heat of her desire still reverberating down the bond. She lifted a slender hand as the sentiment wended through him, rubbing at her chest.

“You didn’t tell me earlier,” he reminded her. “How you felt once our exercise ended.”

She peered at him over her shoulder, took a breath, and then glanced away.

"Does it always feel like that?" she asked softly.

The thread between his soul and Nesta’s warmed, and Azriel’s heart turned over in his chest, tumbling for the floor. “What?”

“Power.” His heart stilled, and the breath he was holding ached in his lungs. “Your shadows. My… fire. Does it always feel like…”

A groove appeared between Nesta’s pale brows, and, perhaps unknowingly, she sent another wave of emotion down the bond. This time, it was warm as a woolen cloak draped around her shoulders and the embrace of the male who put it there, as soft as a morning spent dozing in the arms of someone safe and kind to her. Azriel luxuriated in the feeling until her shoulders rose toward her ears.

When she spoke again, her voice was quieter, smaller. Troubled. “Like a friend.”

His arms ached with the effort to keep them at his sides, so he clasped his hands behind his back instead. He’d taken so many liberties already this morning, and, with his outburst the previous day still weighing on his mind, he didn’t dare overstep again now that they were alone together.

So he strangled the annoyed helplessness that rose up, reminding himself that she hadn’t yet acknowledged her bond with Cassian. That she might very well feel the same way about mating bonds that Elain did—given the things she snarled at Lucien Vanserra whenever he came courting, the way she always spoke about Feyre and Rhysand’s bond with a curl of distaste to her words.

He had no clue how she might react if he suddenly began treating her as more than a friend, more than a casual lover.

Yet.

Azriel didn’t know what game Rhys was playing, but he knew Cassian. Cassian, who never operated without a strategy, who always had a dozen plans in his back pocket in case the first went awry. Nesta always left Cassian unbalanced, his world turned on its head, but Azriel had to believe there was some web he was spinning. Some way to ease Nesta into this foreign and utterly faerie bond without sending her running down a flight of ten thousand stairs.

Soon, hopefully.

Because as much as strategy was Cassian’s trade, secrets were Azriel’s. And, already, he knew he would sing like a goddamn canary if Nesta kept giving him that pained, vulnerable look.

He nodded toward the shadows trailing in her wake, clinging to the hem of her skirt like a besotted child.

“Yes.”

Nesta hummed pensively, nodded once, and that was that.

“You have a lot of books,” she said next, turning toward the shelves that lined much of the room.

“I’ve had a lot of time to read a lot of books,” he countered, falling into step beside her. “Most I keep in the House’s library, but these…”

He eyed a blackened tome on a nearby shelf. Its leathery binding had been supple when he’d acquired it from a pict who’d traded in human chattel before the war. It was crafted from layer upon layer of thin, stretched membrane, and the crude cuts and thick stitching called to mind battlefield triage rather than skilled bookbinding. Azriel was more than content to linger on the memory of the pict’s blood spilling over his hands once he’d secured that book for Rhys’s father.

He told Nesta, his mouth tight with distaste, “These are my more unsavory volumes.”

Nesta followed his gaze, and Azriel wondered at the sick pang he felt across the bond when she grimaced.

“I see.”

The air between them seemed to crackle, and Azriel mastered the urge to shift his wings as Nesta surveyed the study again, her expression tight. Her eyes flicked over the secretary, lingering for a heartbeat on the drawer, and Azriel did not move, did not allow his pulse to stutter, did not so much as fucking *blink* until they slid away to trace the fraying edge of the rug he had owned for three hundred years.

He’d sensed her attention on him earlier, when he shucked his jacket and remembered that damned box tucked in his breast pocket. He hadn’t wanted to risk carrying it any further into the day ahead—to tempt fate with his dreadful decisions. Not when he had a fragile kernel of hope coming to life in his chest, nestled between his mating bonds.

It was a feeling he didn't dare to examine closely, even now, even standing beside Nesta. If he did, he feared it might shatter entirely and leave him in shards beneath her feet.

A shadow curled around his ear and whispered its secret.

He lifted his jacket off the chair beside him and turned to Nesta. “Eris is leaving the Forest House.”

He slung on the jacket and let his shadows deal with the buckles beneath his wing joints, offering her an arm.

Nesta eyed it. Him.

So Azriel chucked her under the chin just to see her bristle. Just to reignite the fire within her in time to return to Cassian’s side.

Anything. He would do anything to ward off that horrible, dead-eyed look she had given him when she told him she *deserved* to be married to that Autumn piece of shit.

“If we delay any longer, we might walk into a bloodbath,” he warned, extending his arm further.

Nesta slid her hand into the crook of his elbow with a disbelieving glare—as if she hardly believed that *he* wouldn’t be the cause of whatever bloodbath she might witness today.

“Just say the word,” he offered easily, readily, letting his free hand fall to Truth-Teller’s hilt.

“Don’t tempt me,” she muttered, squeezing his arm. He thought he saw a small, amused twitch hiding in the corner of her mouth. “It would only piss off Rhysand.”

Azriel smiled grimly. “All the better, then.”