ACOTAR

EXTRA CHAPTERS

SARAH J. MASS

Wings and Embers

A Court of Thorns and Roses ~ Book 2.5

by

Sarah J. Maas



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For Cassian, the brash, handsome Illyrian general of Rhysand's armies, dealing with the opposite sex has always been easy - and enjoyable. But when he's dispatched to the human realm to send a message for his High Lord, Cassian finds himself again pitted against Feyre's sharp-tongued, steel-willed older sister Nesta. Honestly, Cassian has been aching for another round against the beautiful Nesta since their first, tense meeting weeks ago, though he certainly hasn't admitted that to anyone - least of all himself.

And Cassian certainly hasn't admitted that he may have finally met someone not so easily seduced by his quick grin and unfaltering arrogance.

Read on for an exclusive look at what happened at that second, private meeting - and why the High Lord's general refused to divulge any of the details of it when he later returned to the Night Court.

It wasn't that he was looking for a fight, Cassian told himself as he circled above the sprawling estate for the fifth time, despite the unseasonable, early spring chill so brutal it could steal the breath from even the most battle-scarred Illyrian warrior. Rhys *had* asked him to deliver his latest letter to the human queens, since Az was otherwise occupied trying to infiltrate whatever nasty defenses they held around their palace, and Mor didn't want to set foot in the mortal realm unless necessary. Amren, naturally, was out of the question - simply because she was Amren and it'd be like sending a plains-cat into a pen of lambs. So that left him.

Well, Feyre, too, but she and Rhys were ... busy.

And, fine - maybe he'd agreed to come a bit *too* quickly, but ... Cassian surveyed the estate, the muddy, thawing grounds, the distant village, and looming, budding forest. He'd left their first encounter here not entirely sure where he'd stood, or who'd had the upper hand. And, Mother damn him, in the past few weeks, he'd found himself turning over every word and look he'd exchanged with her, over and over.

None of it had been pleasant, every syllable from her mouth barbed and vicious, and ... Cassian huffed a breath, hot tendrils ripping in the wind. He couldn't tell what was worse: that he'd thought so much about it, or that he'd run here so damn fast. And was now ... dawdling.

The thought sent him into a swift, near-reckless dive for the green-roofed estate, his magic's cloaking rendering him little more than a fell wind and a hollow boom of wings. The horses in the nearby stables thrashed and nickered at his approach, but their keepers scanned their immediate surroundings, found nothing of alarm, and resumed their work.

Cassian tried not to think about how easy it was - how that lack of awareness, that lack of instinct, would likely cost them their lives should the wall be shattered. Should someone like him turn his estate into a personal hunting ground.

He'd seen it happen in the last war - not that many humans had been wealthy

enough to own property. But he'd witnessed what had been left of entire slave camps when one of the Fae decided to have some fun. The thought was enough for him to clench his teeth and hone his focus on the front door before him.

They'd sent word yesterday about precisely when to expect him. So when he knocked on the front door, it was a matter of a heartbeat before it was yanked open.

The sharp movement told him which sister had been waiting.

Yet with his magic cloaking him, Nesta Archeron and her unnervingly perfect face saw nothing but thinning patches of snow on the muddy lawn and the sloping drive cutting through it, the cobblestones gleaming with streams of melting ice. She casually opened the door for him to pass, and called to the insufferably nosy housekeeper that no one was at the door and the sound had only been the wind.

Right, because emptying the house of all the servants so often would raise more suspicions than was safe. Especially with the other sister engaged to a Fae-hunting prick.

The housekeeper scuttled into the immaculate foyer to confirm for herself that no one was there, but Nesta merely informed her that she was going upstairs and not to disturb her for an hour. The woman opened her mouth to object, but Nesta, with rather impressive flatness, repeated her order and began her ascent up the grand, carpeted staircase.

The housekeeper's eyes thinned to slits as the young mistress strode away - and Cassian kept his steps quiet as death as he eased around the aging woman, then up the stairs as well.

He was focusing hard enough on keeping silent, on keeping his wings tucked in tight so they didn't rustle anything, that he barely took in the heavy, pale purple gown, simpler than others he'd seen Nesta in, tight enough in the bodice to show off her slim waist, the fitted sleeves displaying her slender arms. A thinner build than Feyre and Elain - discounting the generous breasts that he glimpsed as Nesta reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

Not that he looked at them. Much.

For all the world, Nesta was merely trudging to her room, perhaps a bit grumpy and groggy. But as soon as she entered the spacious bedroom, bedecked in velvets and silks of varying shades of blue and silver, and shut the oak door a moment later, the heavy, slow posture vanished.

Along with his cloaking.

A blink was her only tell of discomfort or surprise - and he may or may not have let his wings spread a bit wider as she looked him over.

"You're ten minutes late," she only said, moving toward the far end of the

room, where a fire crackled against early spring's chill. Where the sound of the flames might cover their voices. Clever girl.

"I do have other duties, you know," he said with equal quiet, flashing a grin.

Like circling the house because he was compiling a list of choice insults to throw her way, responses to an invented argument. Like a complete fool.

"Here I was," Nesta said, a pillar of ice and steel beside the hearth, "thinking I heard you flapping around for ten minutes. It must have been a pigeon stuck in one of the chimneys."

Cassian just stared at her. She stared at him.

His temper rose with dizzying speed at the words, the absurd perfection of her. A blade given form - that's what she was.

He smiled, slow and vicious, precisely in the way he'd learned made her see red. A smile that he knew instantly unsheathed those lovely claws of hers. "Hello, Nesta. Nice to see you."

No reaction, no shift in her scent at the mile that usually made his enemies start running. Nothing, save for the delicate flare of her nostrils. "How's my sister?"

*Healing,*he almost said. *Trying to outrun the fact that she's falling in love with Rhys, and pointedly ignoring the fact that he's been in love with her for a damn long time. That all signs point to them being mates, but I'm not stupid enough to say it to either of them.*

So he merely said, "Busy."

A flicker of her throat. "So busy she cannot deign to visit, it seems."

"Feyre's got enough on her plate - with the situation with Hybern and outside of it."

The fire drew out the golden sheen in Nesta's hair as she angled her head. A predator sizing up a worthy opponent. "And what is your role in all of it?"

Cassian braced his feet apart on the floor. "I command Rhys's armies."

Her blue-grey eyes flicked over him in a sweep that might have cut off a lesser male's balls. "All of them?"

"The important ones."

A snort, and she looked toward the fire. As sure a dismissal and belittling as he'd ever encountered.

Cassian stiffened. "And what, exactly, do *you*do that's of importance?"

Her head snapped up. Oh, that had hit the mark.

"Why should I bother defending myself," Nesta said with lethal cold, "to a male who is so puffed up on his own sense of importance there's barely enough space in the room for his enormous head?"

It was his turn to blink.

The he was stalking toward her, his long stride eating up the ornate carpet between them. She did not recoil, did not yield one step back. Only lifted her chin to meet his stare as he towered over her, spreading his wings slightly, and said through his teeth, "Do you have news from the queens?"

Her brows flattened. "Leader of the High Lord's armies, and yet the brute remains. You cannot cow me with words, so you seek to intimidate me through your hulking size."

"*Hulking*---"

"You need me far more than I need you. So I'd suggest you merely agree, tuck in those bat wings, and ask nicely."

He did no such thing.

But he did take a step closer, bracing a hand on the mantel, and leaned in close enough to breathe in that scent of hers.

It hit him in the gut so hard he could barely focus, and it took five centuries of training to make himself meet her eyes rather than let his own roll back into his head, to keep himself poised there instead of burying his face in the crook between her neck and shoulder, to keep from moving closer, from ...*touching*.

No blush stained her cheek as he held the distance between them, hardly more than a hand's span between their faces.

She was young - twenty-two, twenty-three at most. But had she been with a man? He shouldn't have cared, or wondered, and it made no difference to him, but ... normally, he could tell. She ... Cassian couldn't read her at all. So he moved his head closer, his dark hair sliding over his brow, and purred, "There are other ways I could play nice, Nesta Archeron."



The Fae male - Cassian - was dangerous.

Of course, he was dangerous in the expected ways: tall, muscled, skilled in weaponry and war. Then there were those enormous wings, and the little fact that he was a deadly Fae warrior who served at the feet of the most powerful High Lord in history. A High Lord her sister was now entangled with - falling in love with if she'd read it right. The High Lord already loved her wildly, that much was clear.

But Cassian was dangerous for another reason entirely. Not the handsome face, but those hazel eyes... They had a way of assessing everything and everyone.

Standing flush against the mantel, the snapping fire was blazingly hot against her left side as Cassian towered over her, close enough to share air. Nesta

counted her breaths. Held that gaze, willing him not to see too far, too deep. Better to keep him distracted with the barbed words, the utter dismissal.

Or - this. The offer he'd thrown her way, the test.

No doubt to find another weakness. Was there a way past her defenses in *that*regard?

Play nice. A small smile curved her lips.

"If I wanted a male pawing at me," Nesta said, refusing to let her chin lower, "I'd sooner ask one of the hounds."

That insufferable smile remained. And Cassian went right for the throat as he said "Have you ever *been*with a male, Nesta?"

To lie or tell the truth - where did the advantage lie? So she merely said, "Have *you?*"

Cassian snorted, the breath of it caressing her lips. "I asked first, sweetheart." He angled his head, that night-dark hair sliding over his brow like silk. "Unless you prefer females?"

It was by no means an insult if she did, but there was taunt enough in it that she placed a brazen hand on his chest. Sculpted muscle lay beneath the tight fighting leathers, the warmth of him leaking into her palm. Fire - he reminded her of the fire made flesh. She pushed gently on his chest, her hand somehow seeming smaller against the broadness of his torso.

Trained killer - predator by birth and training.

Arrogant by nature.

Cassian only straightened as she dared step closer, forced to do so merely because if he hadn't, her mouth and his would have found themselves with no distance between them at all. "Who and what I prefer is none of your concern," she said. "Nor is -"

"You haven't answered my first question. Or are all these other questions a diversion?"

"What's it to you?"

"More questions." A cocky grin.

And that easily, she found it - the answer she knew would claw at him.

Nesta brushed her body against his, barely more than a whisper of a touch, but it still made him stiffen. She crooned, "No, I haven't." The truth. Her hand dug into the leather-covered chest. "Why should I have bothered? By the time I came of age, I was surrounded by low-born brutes and bastards. I'd rather use my own hand than sully myself with theirs."

Any amusement faded. She could have sworn she heard the arrow of her words strike their target. She'd picked up enough about his upbringing. So she'd told him the truth - and wrapped it in a bundle of blades designed to slice him if

he thought too long on it.

No, she had not been with any male, Fae or human. Tomas had wanted to, and she... some part of her had known no future lay with him. Knew about his hateful father, and that he did nothing to prevent the man from beating his mother. She had barely let Tomas kiss her, and that day when she had ended it, he'd...

She swallowed, shutting out the memory of what he'd said and done. The sound of her tearing dress. No - it hadn't gone that far, but... The blind terror in those moments he'd tried, before she'd screamed and clawed her way free. And never told anyone.

Something must have shown on her face, in her scent.

Because his annoyance vanished - no, it shifted. Into something else, something... Rage.

That's what stilled Cassian's face.

Pure, burning rage.

It robbed her of breath, of any sort of sense that she might indeed have the upper hand as he ground out, "Who."

She hated Tomas, hated him enough that she sometimes hoped he'd get run over by a cart, but she wouldn't wish on anyone the sort of death Cassian's eyes promised.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, and made to withdraw her hand.

He gripped it, faster than she could detect, and pinned it there.

His heart was beating at a gallop now - a thunderous, mighty gallop.

Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, this male.

If only for the fact that he made her feel so out of control. That she had no idea what he'd do - what *she'd*do - if he found her vulnerable for even a moment.

"Did someone hurt you," he said, his voice so guttural she could barely understand it.

The wrath, the utter stillness with which he stood - this was how he was when he was close to killing. *Wanted*to kill.

His hand pressed into hers, calluses scraping.

She hadn't answered him. "Would it change anything if someone had? Would it make you see me differently, treat me differently?"

"It'd make me hunt them down and shatter every bone in their body."

A shiver went down her spine - not at the fear of him, but at the truth in the promise. The sincerity.

"You don't know me," she said. "Why bother?"

Cassian snarled, inching closer, his hand gripped hers - then paused. As if the

question sunk in. As if reality sunk in. He blinked. "I'd do it for anyone."

She knew he meant it - and that he would.

Perhaps that was what unnerved her, made her want to slice at him. The utter sincerity. That he honored his promises, and did not make them lightly. That he saw and spoke the truth, and when he'd seen her that first day, he'd weighed her... actions when they'd lived in that cottage.

Her cowardice, selfishness. The rage that had consumed her, so that she wanted them all to starve, just to see if their useless father would bother to save them. And then little Feyre had stepped in, and Nesta had hated her for it, too - that Feyre had done the unthinkable and kept them alive.

She didn't know what to do with it, that rage. It still burned and hunted her, still made her want to rip and roar and rend the world into pieces. She felt it all - too keenly, too sharply. Hated and cared and loved and dreaded, more than other people, she sometimes thought. Could sift between them all in a matter of moments, like she was trying on different sets of clothes, and no one could tell or care.

Except him. He could see it, feel it.

That first afternoon, he'd looked at her - not at the face and the body that human men marked, but *her*- and he had seen it all. She'd wanted to hurt him for it before he could reveal those things to everyone else, find a way to *break*him so he couldn't -

The hand pushing her own against his chest gentled. Cassian's thumb stroked the back of her palm, the pad of it rough with calluses.

A log shifted in the fire, snapping as embers exploded, flaring light into the room.

She'd been staring at him. He blinked, mouth parting slightly.

Cassian leaned toward her, and Nesta found herself tipping her head back, exposing her neck, granting him utter access as he graced his nose against her throat.



Mother and Cauldron damn him both.

This woman.

Nesta.

Cassian couldn't bring himself to step back from the line that was so clearly drawn between them. One moment, he'd wanted to throttle her, then he'd read that terror on her face regarding her own past and he'd gone so murderously calm he'd scared even himself, then... then it had all stopped, the eye of the storm with

them in it, and there she was.

And in those blue-grey eyes, he could see the thoughts swirling in her as if they were smoke under glass. The cunning mind at work behind that face - the one he hadn't been able to get out of his head these weeks.

So he'd just... moved.

And then Nesta had tipped up her chin, allowing him access to her throat.

Every instinct in his body came roaring to the surface, so violent he had to choke them with a brutal grip or else he'd find himself on his knees, begging her for a touch, for *anything*.

But he leaned in, and grazed the tip of his nose along the side of her neck.

Soft - her skin was so soft; so fragile. He could scent the mortal blood rushing just beneath. Cassian breathed in the smell of her into his lungs, stirring his cock as it latched onto some intrinsic part of him and sank its talons deep.

Nesta Nesta Nesta

Her eyes drifted closed, and a small, breathless sound came out of her as Cassian brushed his lips over where his nose had touched.

His knees nearly buckled as her slender hand dug into his fighting leathers. He tried not to think of what that hand would feel like on other parts of him. Gripping him; stroking him.

More more more, his body sang.

He angled his head and kissed another spot, closer to her jaw.

Her frantic heartbeat was like a hummingbird's wings, though her body remained tight and loose in all the right places, a flush spreading across those gorgeous breasts of hers. Big enough to fill his hands, to nuzzle until she was begging him -

Her pulse hammered right beneath his mouth. His tongue brushed it.

It was that touch that had her jolting back.

Nesta slammed into the wood paneling hard enough that he reached for her. But she was wide-eyed, livid, as she put a hand to her throat.

Cassian beat her to the venom about to blast from that throat and said, "Wound a bit tight these days, Nesta?"

She lowered her hand and hissed, "Is it some faerie magic of yours, to do such things?"

He barked a laugh. "No. Though I'm flattered you think so."

Nesta glowered, but let out a low, considering chuckle. "Well," she said, sliding past him and pacing for the window with smooth, calculated steps. "If that's what a bastard-born Fae warrior can do, no wonder my sister has become so entangled with the High Lords."

Bitch.

*Bitch*for insult to him and to Feyre. "Did it bother you more that you wanted it, or that it was a bastard-born nobody who made you feel such things, Nesta?"

"It's been a long winter. Beggars can't be picky, I suppose." Wall after wall after wall snapped up, her posture going stiffer, and -

What did he care? What *did* he care? He had enough shit to deal with. Throwing in a mortal who would have a few more decades before things between them became awkward was... foolish. And then there would be the matter of explaining it to everyone.

To Mor. His blood chilled.

He wasn't stupid. He knew she and Azriel were... whatever they were. Knew Azriel had been in love with Mor from the moment she'd strutted into the Illyrian war-camp five centuries ago. And Cassian had been jealous - of Mor's shy glances at Azriel in those first few weeks, and the fact that his dearest friend and brother... was looking at someone else. That she'd appeared, and then Azriel had changed. Only slightly, but Cassian had known his friend did not belong solely to him and Rhys anymore.

So when Mor had asked him to bed her... He'd done it. A jealous, stupid prick, he'd done it, and regretted it at that very first thrust, when he'd felt her maidenhead yield to him, and realized the enormity of what she'd done.

But then she'd walked away, and Azriel hadn't made a move, and... Mor was still there between them. Somewhere between friend and lover. Dear to him as family, but... Cassian had hated himself for that look on Azriel's face afterward.

And then for what had happened to Mor at her family's hands.

He'd had lovers, some for a night and some for months, and Mor had never cared, but...

This woman standing before him like a pillar of steel and flame...Cassian didn't want to tell Mor about her. About how he'd touched her neck.

Cassian managed to say, "Since you were happy for a distraction, I'll assume the queens haven't been in touch and be on my way." Before she managed to completely castrate him. He flicked his fingers, Rhys's letter appearing between them. He chucked it onto a low-lying nearby table. "Mail that to the queens as soon as you can."

Nesta glanced between the letter and him, her shoulders squaring. "Tell my sister and that new High Lord of hers to send someone else next time."

Cassian bared his teeth in a feral grin. "Tell your *other* sister we'd rather deal with her."

"Elain stays out of this. The less association with your kind, the better."

"Why are you letting her marry that bigoted prick?" The question snapped out of him.

"He has good reasons to hate your kind. As do we all."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"I thought you were leaving."

"You have a damned opinion on everyone else in the world. Why not tell Elain she's marrying a monster?"

"Perhaps all you males are monsters."

If she'd been harmed by one, he didn't blame her for that feeling at all. But his words were still sharp as he said, "She deserves better than someone like that."

"Indeed she does." Flat and cold.

He pushed, simply because he damn well couldn't stop himself, "And what do *you* deserve?"

A slow smile, indeed a plains-cat readying for the kill. Then, "Certainly more than a bastard-born nobody."

Bitch. But he drawled, "What a fine partner you are, Nesta. Remind me to bring a book on military strategy the next time. Maybe you'll stand a chance then."

A cold, flat look.

"It's easier, isn't it," Cassian breathed, crossing the distance again, not caring who saw them standing in the bay window. "To wield the words and the coldness as armor to keep everyone from seeing where and who you failed and how you did not care until it was too late."

Only hatred gleamed in her eyes, no hint of that slumbering lust that had addled his senses.

"Well, I see it, Nesta Archeron. And all I see is a bored and spoiled girl -"

She moved with impressive swiftness for a human, but still too slow to prevent him from blocking her.

Cassian gripped her raised knee, a mere inch from his balls, and squeezed tight enough to make her hiss.

"Cheap shot," he said with a half smile. "Come play with me, Nesta, and I'll teach you far more interesting ways to bring a male to his knees."

She tried to wrench herself free, but he didn't let go. She swayed back, and he caught her by the waist, hauling her closer to keep her from falling through the window. He snickered at the skirts around him. "What are you hiding beneath all this, anyway?"

Nesta steadied herself enough to wrench her knees out of his grip. "Get out of my house."

Cassian simply grinned at her.

She surged for him.

He thought she'd strangle him, which was precisely why he gripped her

wrists, but -

Her hands, cool and steady, landed on either side of his face. Tugged his head down.

Cassians breathing turned jagged as her eyes flicked to his mouth, as her body came flush with his, those breasts so soft against him. *Stupid, stupid, stupid* -

He didn't care. Didn't give a shit as she rose up on her toes, her mouth nearing his -

Pain exploded between his legs, knocking the breath from his chest as that gods-damned knee of hers indeed found its mark.

Cassian staggered back, swearing viciously. She snorted, looking down at him as he fell on his ass into an armchair, clutching his stomach, trying to reorder his brain -

"You're all the same," she said, imperious as the night and cold as the dawn. "Perhaps being an immortal makes you predictable."

"*You*," he gasped out.

A low laugh broke from those lips, which he'd been fully prepared to taste, to *devour* -

"No, the queens did not send word," Nesta said, drifting toward the door. "I haven't heard from them at all."

Cassian willed his legs to move, but the pain lingered, immobilizing his knees.

"I'll mail the letter tomorrow morning." Nesta pause with her hand on the knob and looked over a shoulder. "You know nothing about who I am, and what I've done, and what I want. And while we're on the subject... Send someone else next time. If I see you on my doorstep I'll scream loud enough for the servants to come running."

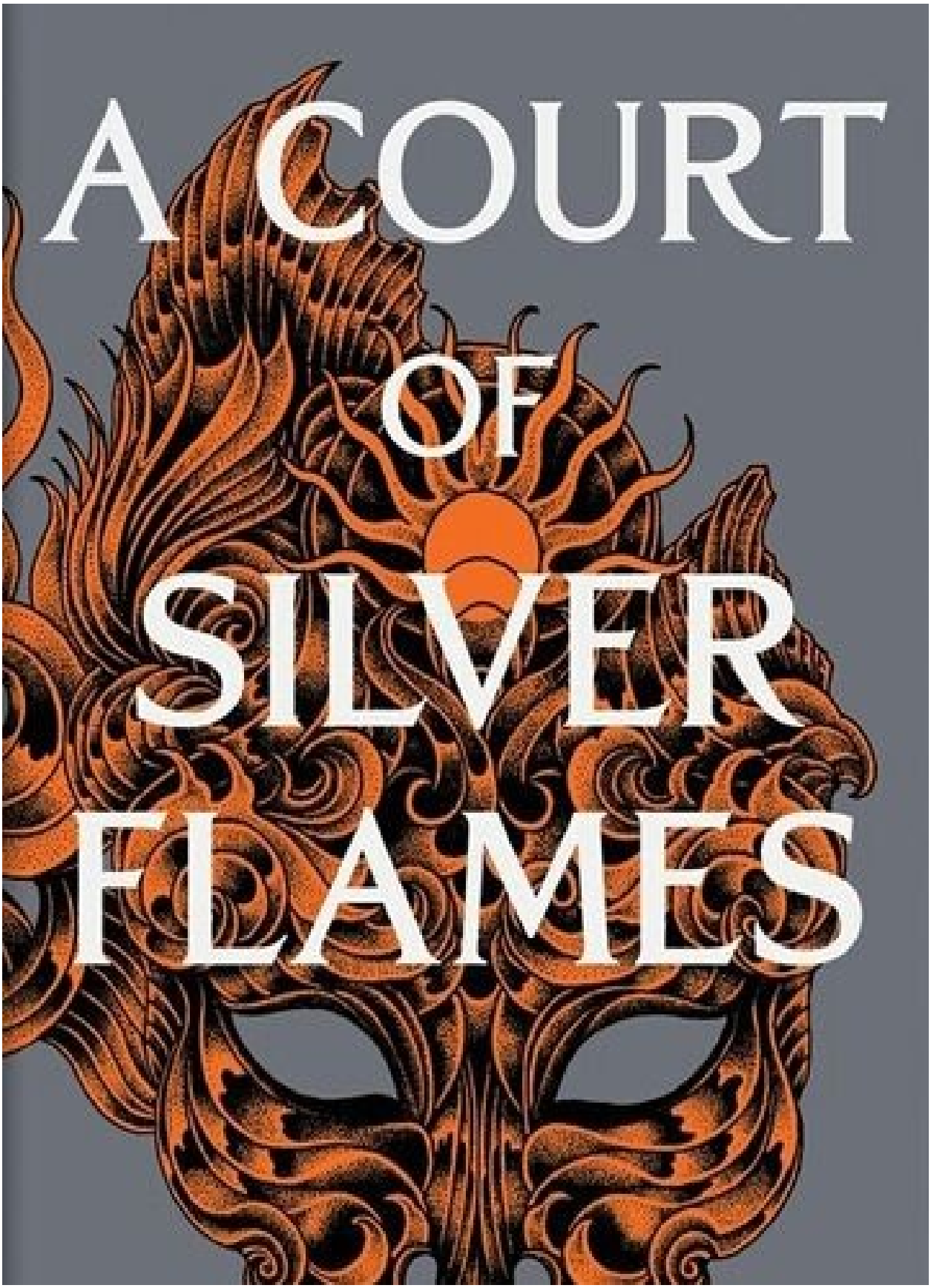
He gaped at her, the pain ebbing enough that he could stagger upright.

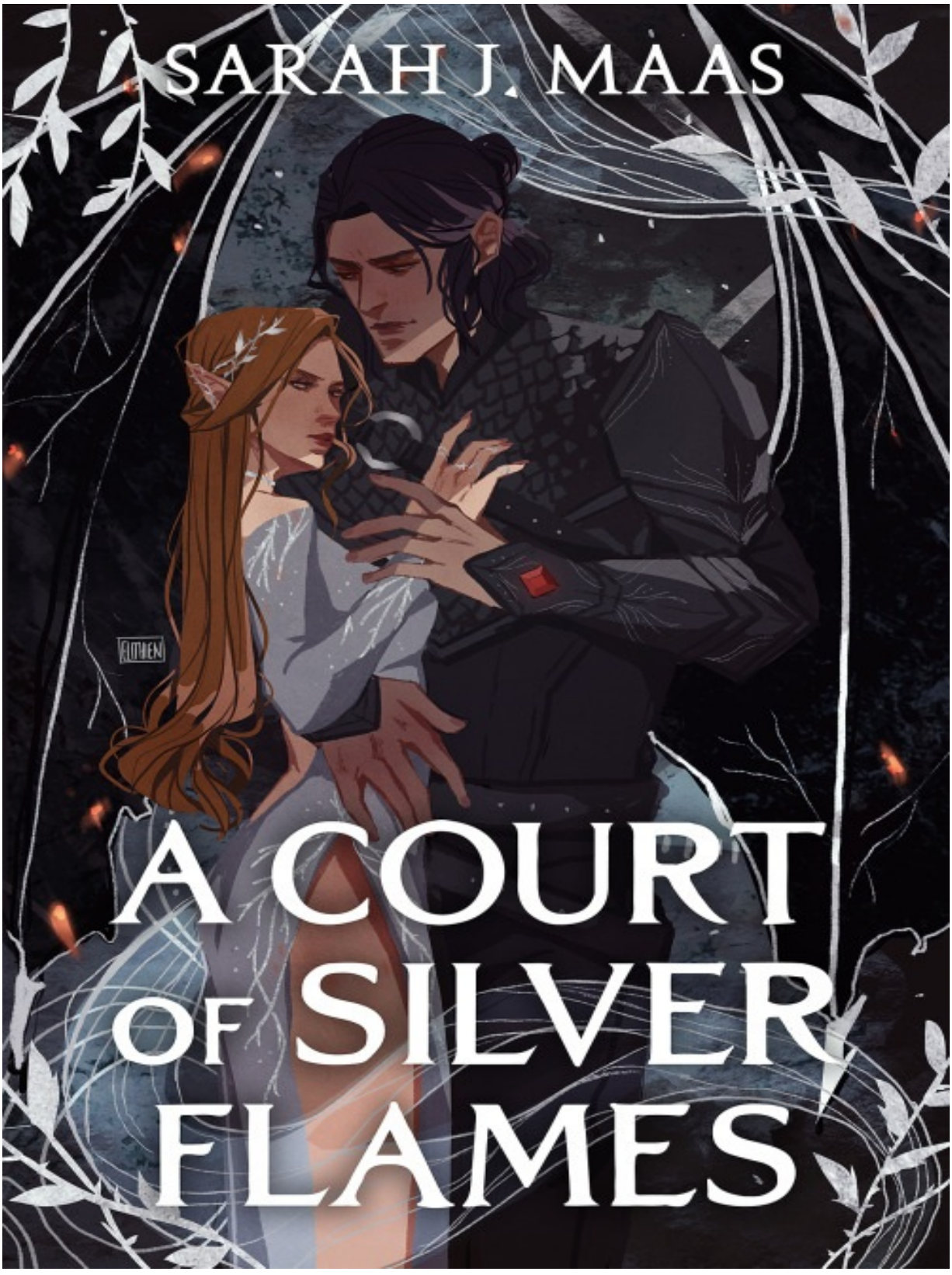
But Nesta was gone, slipping down the hall, where some servant called out to her and she murmured a response.

A minute later, he left. Not by the front door, but by squeezing through her gods-damned bedroom window like a thief in the night. He launched himself into the sky before anyone could wonder at the rustle and boom of wings.

Cassian did not circle over the house. But he could feel Nesta's attention as he soared for the wall. Even shielded from sight, he could feel those blue-grey eyes on him.

The feeling chased him all the way back to Velaris.


A COURT
OF
SILVER
FLAMES


SARAH J. MAAS
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Bonus
Chapters

Feyre

"Well, that went better than I thought," Rhys admitted after everyone had departed, leaning his head back against the arm of the study's large couch. Nesta and Cassian has returned to the House of Wind, where my sister has promised to find some way to begin looking for the Dread Trove. My mate added wryly, "Despite that disaster with Elain and Nesta."

I'd returned from talking to my sister about the baby—the *boy*—to find Rhys lounging on the couch, an arm flung over his eyes, apparently needing a moment of peace after enduring Cassian and Azriel's exuberant elation.

I plopped onto the sofa beside Rhys, lifting his muscular legs to wiggle beneath them, "Elain showed some teeth," I observed. "I wasn't expecting that." Or what she's said about her lingering trauma. I'd meant what I'd discussed with Nesta—how many times had I focused solely on *my* terror during Elain's suffering?

Rhys watched me through half-lidded eyes, the portrait of idle grace. But he said carefully, "How do you feel about it?"

I shrugged, leaning my head back against the cushions. "Guilty. She directed all of it at Nesta, but I deserve it too."

Elain and I had grown closer since the war with Hybern had ended. True, I might never go out drinking with her the way I did with Mor, and sometimes Amren, but . . . well, with a baby coming. I couldn't drink, anyway. And while I might never run to Elain first with problems or advice, we had a peaceful, amicable understanding. I found her be a pleasant companion.

I wondered if she'd resent that judgement. I certainly would.

Rhys asked, "Have you ever seen Elain act like that before?"

"No." I chewed on my bottom lip. Rhys's gaze tracked the movement. "I mean, she's been brave when she had to be, but she's never been confrontational."

"Maybe she was never given the chance to be that way."

I whipped my head toward him. "You think I stifle her?"

Rhys held up his hands. "Not you alone." He surveyed the study as he

thought. “But I wonder if everyone has spent so long assuming Elain is sweet and innocent that she felt she had to be that way or else she’d disappoint you all.” He sighed toward the ceiling. “With time and safety, perhaps we’ll see a different side of her emerge.”

“That sounds dangerously close to what Nesta said about Elain finally becoming interesting.”

“Sometimes Nesta isn’t wrong.”

I glowered at Rhys. “You think Elain is boring?”

“I think she’s kind, and I’ll take kindness over nastiness any day. But I also think we haven’t yet seen all she has to offer.” A corner of his mouth tugged upward. “Don’t forget that gardening often results in something pretty, but it involves getting one’s hand dirty along the way.”

“And torn up by thorns,” I mused, recalling a morning this past summer when Elain has come into the house, her right palm bleeding from several gashes thanks to a stubborn rosebush that had pierced her gloves. The thorns had broken off in her skin, leaving sharp splinters that I’d had to pull free.

I didn’t dare mention that if she had been wearing the enchanted gloves Lucien had gotten her last Solstice, nothing would have pierced them at all.

I sighed, absently rubbing my still-flat stomach. “Let’s focus on helping one sister before we start on the other.”

“Agreed,” Rhys drawled.

I pinned him with a look. “Did you really need to give Nesta that death glare earlier?”

He sat up, the soul of innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Feyre darling.” He leaned in, and the air shimmered briefly as the shield around me dropped away. His lips brushed over my cheek. “I’d never do such a thing. You must be thinking of your other mate.”

“Yes, the cruel, overprotective, half-insane one.” I smiled as he kissed my jaw, then my neck. My toes curled.

“Cruel?” Rhys purred the word against my skin. “You wound me.” I let him lay me down on the cushions, savoring the weight of him as he braced himself on his elbows. “You look happy,” he said, his smile soft and tender in a way so few beyond Velaris ever saw.

“I am happy.” I said. “I’m happy that our family can share in our joy.” Regardless of how difficult my relationship had become with Nesta, it had lightened something in my chest when she congratulated us.

“If you thing I’m overprotective,” Rhys said, his dark hair sliding over his

face, “then just wait until Mor comes home from Vallahan. You’ll never leave the house without an escort.”

“I thought Azriel and Cassian would be the ones to worry about.”

“Oh, they’ll be bad. But Mor will probably add a second shield to you *and* check in six times a day to make sure you’re eating and sleeping enough.”

I groaned. “Mother spare me.”

“Hmmm,” Rhys said, his eyes near-dazzling as he fiddled with the end of my braid.

For a long minute, we smiled at each other. I drank in every elegant plane of his face, every ember of warmth and happiness that radiated from him. “Cassian said you’ve been moody. Why?”

I believed Cassian, but Rhys hadn’t been moody around me at all. Whenever my mate had looked at me lately, only pure love had gleamed in his eyes.

I’d never forget the moment we’d learned I was carrying our child, that beautiful boy that the Bone Carver had once shown me. I’d been sitting at an easel in the gallery late at night, painting a nightmare I’d had the day before.

The children had gone home, and I’d been the only one there—which is unusual these days—and I was left with some rare extra energy after the lessons. The things the children painted often left me in tears, though I was always careful to hide it. But despite the upswell of complicated emotions this daily work had sparked in me, it had proved gratifying in a way I’d never anticipated. In a way all of my considerable magic had never made me feel.

And the only thing to do with those feeling was to paint them out.

The nightmare had left me off-balance the entire day, lingering in my mind like some sort of bruise. I’d been back Under the Mountain, once more facing my second trial, those jagged spikes descending to impale me if I did not pick the correct lever in time. I’d somehow become illiterate again, unable to decipher the markings on the wall, forced to pick my salvation or doom at random. Rhys had saved me then—but in the dream, he hadn’t been there.

Only Amarantha had been present, the King of Hybern a shadow behind her, and somehow no one knew where I was, that I’d been dragged back here because she’d learned I’d somehow cheated my way out the first time, and I’d never escape, never escape, never escape—

That was the last thought I’d had before forcing myself awake—damp with sweat, my heart thundering in my chest. Rhys had stirred, tucking me into his side, his wing sweeping over us both, and although I’d cuddled into his

warmth and strength, true sleep hadn't found me again.

So I'd waited until the children had left the studio for the day before hauling over a blank canvas and my palette. I made myself a steaming-hot cup of peppermint and licorice root tea, and picked up my brush.

I'd been painting out that nightmare for nearly two hours, my back to the door, when Rhys entered. He remained utterly silent. It wasn't the contented silence he sometimes fell into while he observed me painting. It was pure, shocked silence.

I'd twisted to look at him just in time to see him crash to his knees.

And then he'd been weeping, and laughing, and all I could make out in his ecstatic babbling was one word: *baby*. I'd leaped off the stool. I was weeping too by the time I launched into his arms, knocking us both to the ground, and he'd put a hand to my stomach in wonder.

Something had altered my scent since I'd bid him farewell that morning, perhaps even since I'd said farewell to the children. Life had taken root within me at last.

We'd lain together on the floor, our laughter and our tears mingling, and only when we'd calmed had I kissed him. Our clothes had vanished after that, and I'd ridden him on the floor of the studio, letting the light within me shine brightly enough to cast shadows through the room. He'd begun crying again as he watched me move, silent tears streaming through the star-kissed night pouring off him, and when I'd leaned in to lick them away, he'd climaxed so hard it sent me spiraling to my own peak.

And now, just as he had after that time in the studio, his fingers began tracing idle circles over my stomach, up to my breasts, already heavy and aching in a way that had nothing to do with the desire building between my legs. It had been one of the first signs, beyond the vomiting that lately had been nearly around-the-clock: my breasts swelled, and *hurt*.

Rhys circled one of my nipples, and it hardened beneath his touch. He watched it pebble through my shirt, like a cat watching a mouse.

"Rhys," I said when my question remained unanswered. "Why did Cassian say you've been moody?"

He closed his mouth around my breast, teeth grazing me through my shirt. "No reason."

"Liar." I tugged on his hair, forcing his head up. "Tell me."

He shook off my grip and nuzzled his face into the side of my neck, lowering his body just enough that he showed me precisely how this was going

to end. I couldn't stop my hips from rising to meet him. Another early sign: I'd been ravenously hungry. Not only for food.

There had been nights when I'd barely waited for Rhys to enter the bedroom before I'd ripped his clothes off, before I'd dropped to my knees and taken his cock deep in my mouth, or asked him to fuck me against the wall. There where entire days when I'd found myself needing him inside me so badly that I'd used my daemati gifts to ask him to meet me at the town house during lunch, since it was closer to the studio than our new home.

This lovely, perfect home that we'd built—with a nursery that, Cauldron willing, would be occupied sometime late this spring.

Rhys had matched my relentless hunger with his own. Sometimes we went slow, savoring every inch of each other, the embodiment of making love. Other times—usually—it was pure, rough fucking. Just this morning, I'd been so swarmed with need that we'd barely gotten through a private breakfast in our room before I climbed into his lap and rode him until we were both senseless with pleasure.

I'd asked Madja about it yesterday—whether it was . . . normal to want him *this* much.

Yes, she'd answered, eyes sparkling. *Many expectations mother do not talk about it, but it has to do with your body's altering essence. I can't tell you why that is, but it is normal. Enjoy every moment of it.*

Rhys said against my neck, "I've been moody because I'm not getting any sleep." He licked up the side of my throat, and hid hand drifted into my pants. I didn't stop it, not when his fingers found the slickness waiting for him. He let out a pleased growl. "See?"

I knew he was hedging, and I let it slide. I'd learned that Rhys would tell me what was bothering him when he was good and ready. Maybe Cassian has been misinterpreting it—maybe it had been directed toward my sister.

I knew that was unlikely.

But as Rhys slid his fingers inside me, setting a wickedly lazy rhythm, I let it drop. It had always been part of our friendship: to give each other the space to decide when we were ready to talk.

And then there was our final bargain, inked on us since we'd defeated Hybern . . . I kissed him deeply, tongue tangling with his. We wouldn't spend a moment in this world without each other. I could only pray that our child would find such love one day.

Rhys brought me to the edge of climaxing, and then his hands and my

clothes were gone. He unbuckled his pants with taunting slowness, watching my face as he pulled his considerable length free. He watched my face the entire time he slid into me in a single, mighty thrust, seemed to savor each of my moans and breathless pleas as he moved deep inside me.

As if he were memorizing it—all of it.

When we were both panting, Rhys's face still buried on my neck. My fingers idly tangling in his sweat-damp shirt, I said, "It feels real now that the others know."

Rhys knew what I meant. "There's one person left to tell."

I smiled, tugging his hair to get him look at me. Rhys obeyed, staring down into my face. "You want to break the news to Mor or can I?" He's known her the longest, but I considered her my dearest friend. A sister, perhaps more so than my own.

"I think we should let *him* tell her," Rhys said, nodding down to my belly.

I arched a brow. "How?"

He smiled wryly. The next time Mor's home, we'll drop the shield around you. See how long it takes her to scent you. And him."

I smiled back, "I like that." I already wished I had some way of capturing Mor's face in that moment. I brushed my hand through Rhys's silken hair. "Do you have any names in mind?"

Rhys grinned. "Oh, yes."

"I don't trust that grin for one moment."

"Why?" He pulled out of me, and with a wave of his magic, we were both cleaned. I stifled the rising hunger in me at the sight of him tucking himself back into his pants. "I'd never name him anything ridiculous."

"I don't believe you." I tapped his nose. "Your family name—"

"Let's not talk about my family name," he said, nipping at my fingertips.

I laughed. "Fine."

But his eyes dimmed. "What about naming him for your father?"

My heart strained. "You'd be all right with that?"

"Of course I would."

I had to swallow my tightness in my throat as I sat up, facing him fully. "Perhaps for a secondary name, but . . . no. I want our son to have a name of his own."

Our son. The words were foreign, yet lovely on my tongue.

Rhys nodded, face softening as if the words moved him as well.

I could already see the father he'd become—see him laughing as he

tossed our child skyward, see him slumbering with the boy on this very couch, books left open in their laps. Our son would never, not for a moment, doubt that he was loved and cherished, And Rhys would go to the ends of the world to protect him.

I smiled at the daydreams, hands already aching to paint them.

Rhys let out a hum of contemplation. “What about Nyx?”

I blinked. “Nyx?”

Rhys pointed to one of the walls of books in the study. A leather-bound tome floated toward his open fingers. He wordlessly flipped to a page and then passed it to me.

I scanned the text inside. “An ancient night goddess?”

“From around the time of the Trove, actually,” Rhys said. “She’s mostly been forgotten now, But I like the sound of her name. Why not use it for a boy?”

“Nyx,” I mused again, the name echoing in the silent study. I brushed my tattooed fingers over my stomach. Rhys’s hand came over mine, and we both smiled at the little life forming within my body.

“Nyx,” I said one last time, and could have sworn a flutter of night-kissed power rose in answer.

Rhys sucked in a sharp breath, as if he’d also felt that kernel of power.

Together, we gazed at our linked hands, my stomach beneath them.

Together, we gazed at our son, and I offered my silent thanks to the Mother for the beautiful future that bloomed before us.

Azriel

The river house had finally fallen quiet after the raucous Winter Solstice party, the faelights dimming to cast little pools of gold amid the deep shadow of the longest night of the year.

Amren, Mor, and Varian had finally gone to bed, but Azriel found himself lingering downstairs.

He knew he should get some sleep. He'd need it come dawn, for the snowball battle up at the cabin. Cassian had mentioned no less than six times tonight that he had *a secret plan* regarding his so-called *impending victory*. Az had let his brother boast. Especially since Azriel had been planning his own victory for a year now.

Cassian wouldn't know what was coming for him. And Az fully planned on capitalizing on the fact that Nesta likely wouldn't let Cassian sleep much tonight.

Az snickered to himself, to the listening shadows around him.

Sleep, they seemed to whisper in his ear. *Sleep*.

I wish I could, he answered silently. But sleep so rarely found him these days.

Too many razor-sharp thoughts sliced him any time he grew still long enough for them to strike. Too many wants and needs left his skin overheated and pulling taut across his bones. So he slept only when his body gave out, and

even then only for a few hours.

Azriel surveyed the empty family room, presents and ribbons littering the furniture. Cassian and Nesta hadn't reappeared downstairs, though that came as no surprise. He was elated for his brother, and yet . . .

Azriel couldn't stop it. The envy in his chest. Of Cassian, and Rhys.

He knew he's be swallowed by it if he went up to his bedroom, so he'd remained down here by the dying light of the fire.

But even the silence weighed too heavily, and though the shadows kept him company, as they always had, as they always would, he found himself leaving the room. Entering the foyer.

Soft steps padded from under the stairs archway, and there she was.

The faelights gilded Elain's unbound hair, making her glow like the sun at dawn. She halted, her breath catching in her throat.

"I . . ." He watched her swallow. She clutched a small gift in her hands. "I was coming to leave this on your pile of presents. I forgot to give it to you earlier."

Lie. Well, the second part was a lie. He didn't need his shadows to read her tone, the slight tightening of her face. She'd waited until everyone was asleep before venturing back down, where she'd leave his gift amongst his other, opened presents, subtle and unnoticed.

Elain closed the distance, and her breathing quickened as she again paused, now a scant foot away. She extended the wrapped gift, her hand shaking. "Here."

Az tried not to look at his scarred fingers as they took the gift. She hadn't bought her mate a present. But she'd gotten Azriel one last year—a headache powder he kept on his nightstand at the House of Wind. Not to use, but just to look at. Which he'd done every night he'd sleep there. Or attempted to sleep there.

Azriel unwrapped the box, glancing at the card that merely said, *You might find these useful at the House these days*, and then opened the lid.

Two small, bean-shaped fabric blobs lay within. Elain murmured, "You put them in your ears, and they block any sound. With Nesta and Cassian living there with you . . ."

He chuckled, unable to suppress the impulse. "No wonder you didn't want me to open it in front of everyone."

Elain's mouth twitched into a smile. "Nesta wouldn't appreciate the joke."

He offered her a smile back. "I wasn't sure if I should give you your

present.

He left the rest unspoken. Because her mate was here, sleeping a level up. Because her mate had been in the family room and Azriel had needed to stay by the door the whole time because he couldn't stand the sight of it, the scent of their mating bond, and needed to have the option of leaving if it became too much.

Elain's large brown eyes flickered, well aware of all that. Just as he knew she was well aware of why Azriel so rarely came to family dinners these days.

But tonight, here in the dark and quiet, with no one to see . . . He pulled the small velvet box from the shadows around him. Opened it for her.

Elain sucked in a soft breath that whispered over his skin. His shadows skittered back at the sound. They'd always prone to vanish when she was around.

The golden necklace seemed ordinary—it's chain unremarkable, the amulet tiny enough that it could be dismissed as an everyday charm. It was a small, flat rose fashioned of stained glass, designed so that when held to the light, the true depth of the colors would become visible. A thing of secret, lovely beauty.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, lifting it from the box. The golden faelight shone through the little glass facets, setting the charm glowing with hues of red and pink and white. Azriel let his shadows whisk away the box as she said softly, "Put it on me?"

His head went quiet. But he took the necklace, opening the clasp as she exposed her back, sweeping her hair up in one hand to bare her long, creamy neck.

He knew it was wrong, but there he was, sliding the necklace around her. Letting his scarred fingers touch her immaculate skin. Letting them brush the side of her throat, savoring the velvet-soft texture. Elain shivered, and he took a damn long time fastening the clasp.

Azriel's fingers lingered at her nape, atop the first knob of her spine. Slowly, Elain pivoted at his touch. Until his palm lay flat against her neck.

It had never gone this far. They'd exchanged looks, the occasional brush of their fingers, but never this. Never blatant, unrestricted touching.

Wrong—it was so wrong.

He didn't care.

He needed to know what the skin of her neck tasted like. What those perfect lips tasted like. Her breasts. Her sex. He needed her coming on his

tongue—

Azriel's cock strained behind his pants, aching so fiercely he could hardly think. He prayed she didn't peer down. Prayed she didn't understand the shift in his scent.

He had only allowed these thoughts in the dead of the night. Had only allowed his hand to fist his cock and think about her then, when even his shadows had gone to sleep. How that beautiful face might appear as he entered her, what sounds she'd make.

Elain bit her lower lip, and it took every ounce of Azriel's restraint to keep from putting his own teeth there.

"I should go," Elain said, but made no move to leave.

"Yes," he said, his thumb sweeping in long strokes along the side of her throat.

Her arousal drifted up to him, and his eyes nearly rolled back in his head at the sweet scent. He'd beg on his knees for a chance to taste it. But Azriel just stroked her neck again.

Elain shuddered, drifting closer. So close one deep breath would brush her breasts against his chest. She looked up at him, her face so trusting and hopeful and open that he knew she had no idea that he had done unspeakable things that sullied his hands far beyond their scars.

Such terrible things that it was a sacrilege for his fingers to touch her skin, tainting her with his presence.

But he could have this. This one moment, and maybe a taste, and that would be it.

"Yes," Elain breathed, like she read the decision. Just this taste in the dead of the longest night of the year, where only the Mother might witness them.

Azriel's hand slid up her neck, burying in her thick hair. Tilting her face the way he wanted it. Elain's mouth parted slightly, her eyes scanning his before fluttering shut.

Offer and permission.

He nearly groaned with relief and need as he lowered his head toward hers.

Azriel.

Rhys's voice thundered through him, halting him mere inches from Elain's sweet mouth.

Azriel.

Unrelenting command filled his name, and Azriel looked up.

Rhysand stood atop the staircase. Glowering down at them.

My office. Now.

Rhys vanished, and Azriel was left standing before Elain, who still awaited his kiss. His stomach twisted as he pulled his hand from her hair and stepped back. Forced himself to say, “This was a mistake.”

She opened her eyes, hurt and confusion warring there before she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t—Don’t apologize,” he managed to say. “Never apologize. It’s I who should . . .” He shook his head, unable to stand the bleakness he’d brought to her expression. “Goodnight.”

Azriel winnowed into shadows before she could say anything, appearing at the doors to Rhys’s study a heartbeat later. His shadows whispered in his ear that Elain had gone upstairs.

Rhys sat at his desk, fury a moonless night across his face. He asked softly, “Are you out of your mind?”

Azriel donned the frozen mask he’d perfected while in his father’s dungeon. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rhys’s power rippled through the room like a dark cloud. “I’m talking about *you*, about to kiss Elain, in the middle of a hall where *anyone could see you*,” he snarled. “*Including her mate*.”

Azriel stiffened. Let his cold rage rise to the surface, the rage he only ever let Rhysand see, because he knew his brother could match it. “What if the Cauldron was wrong?”

Rhysand blinked. “What of Mor, Az?”

Azriel ignored the question. “The Cauldron chose three sisters. Tell me how it’s possible that my two brothers are with two of those sisters, yet the third was given to another.” He had never before dared speak the words aloud.

Rhys’s face drained of color. “You believe you *deserve* to be her mate?”

Azriel scowled. “I think Lucien will never be good enough for her, and she has no interest in him, anyway.”

“So you’ll what?” Rhys’s voice was pure ice. “Seduce her away from him?”

Azriel said nothing. He hadn’t gotten that far with his planning, certainly not beyond the fantasies he pleasured himself to.

Rhys growled, “Allow me to make one thing very clear. You are to stay away from her.”

“You can’t order me to do that.”

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

“That’s an Autumn Court tradition.” The battle to the death was so brutal that it was only enacted on rare cases. Despite being an outsider, Azriel had wanted to invoke it when he’d found Mor all those years ago. Had been ready to challenge both Beron and Eris to Blood Duels and kill them both. Only Mor’s right to claim their heads in vengeance had kept him from doing so.

“Lucien, as Beron’s son, had the right to demand it of you.”

“I’ll defeat him with little effort.” Pure arrogance laced every word, but it was true.

“I know.” Rhys’s eyes flickered. “And your doing so will rip apart any fragile peace and alliance we have, not only with the Autumn Court, but also with the Spring Court *and* Jurian and Vassa.” Rhys bared his teeth. “So you will leave Elain alone. If you need to fuck someone, go to a pleasure hall and pay for it, but *stay away* from her.”

Azriel snarled softly.

“Snarl all you want.” Rhys leaned back in his chair. “But if I see you panting after her again, I’ll make you regret it.”

Rhys had rarely threatened punishment or pulled rank. It stunned Azriel enough that it knocked him from his rage.

Rhys jerked his chin toward the door. “Get out.”

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

Until he felt nothing. Was again nothing at all.

Then he flew to the House of Wind, knowing that if he slept in the riverside manor, he’d do something he regretted. He’d been so vigilant about keeping away from Elain as much as possible, and had stayed up here to avoid her, and tonight . . . tonight had proved he’d been right to do so.

He aimed for the training pit, giving in to the need to work off the temptation, the rage and frustration and writhing need.

He found it already occupied. His shadows had not warned him.

It was too late to bank without appearing like he was running. Azriel landed in the ring a few feet from where Gwyn practiced in the chill night, her sword glimmering like ice in the moonlight.

She stopped mid-slice, whirling to face him. “I’m sorry. I knew you all

were going to the river house, so I didn't think anyone would mind if I came up here, and—"

"It's fine. I came to retrieve something I forgot." The lie was smooth and cool, as he knew his face was. His shadows peered over his wings at her.

The young priestess smiled—and Azriel thought it might have been directed at his curious shadows. But she just hooked her coopery-brown hair behind an arched ear. "I was trying to cut the ribbon." She pointed with her sword at the white ribbon, which seemed to glow silver.

"Aren't you cold?" His breath clouded in front of him.

Gwyn shrugged. "Once you get moving, you stop noticing it."

He nodded, silence falling. For a heartbeat, their gazes met. He blocked out the bloody memory that flashed, so at odds with the Gwyn he saw before him now.

Her head ducked, as if remembering it too. That he'd been the one who'd found her that day at Sangravah. "Happy Solstice," she said, as much a dismissal as it was a holiday blessing.

He snorted. "Are you kicking me out?"

Gwyn's teal eyes flashed with alarm. "No! I mean, I don't mind sharing the ring. I just . . . I know you like to be alone." Her mouth quirked to the side, crinkling the freckles on her nose. "Is that why you came up here?"

Sort of. "I forgot something," he reminded her.

"At two in the morning?"

Pure amusement glittered in her stare. Better than the pain and grief he'd spied a moment before. So he offered a crooked smile. "I can't sleep without my favorite dagger."

"A comfort of every growing child."

Azriel's lips twitched. He refrained from mentioning that he indeed sleep with a dagger. Many daggers. Including one under his pillow.

"How was the party?" Her breath curled in front of her mouth, and one of his shadows darted out to dance with it before twirling back to him. Like it heard some silent music.

"Fine," he said, and realized a heartbeat later that it wasn't a socially acceptable answer. "It was nice."

Not much better. So he asked "Did you and the priestesses have a celebration?"

"Yes, though the service was the main highlight."

"I see."

She angled her head, hair shining like molten metal. “Do you sing?”

He blinked. It wasn’t every day that people took him by surprise, but . . . “Why do you ask?”

“They call you shadowsinger. Is it because you sing?”

“I *am* a shadowsinger—it’s not a title that someone just made up.”

She shrugged again, irreverently. Az narrowed his eyes, studying her. “Do you, though?” she pressed. “Sing?”

Azriel couldn’t help his soft chuckle. “Yes.”

She opened her mouth to ask more, but he didn’t feel like explaining. Or demonstrating, since that was surely what she’d ask next. So Az jerked his chin to the sword dangling from her hand. “Try cutting the ribbon again.”

“What—with you watching?”

He nodded.

She considered, and he wondered if she’d say no, but Gwyn blew out a breath, steadied her feet and balance, and sliced. A beautiful, precise blow, but it didn’t sever the ribbon.

“Again,” he ordered, rubbing his hands against the cold, grateful for its bracing bite and the distraction of this impromptu lesson.

Gwyn sliced again, but the ribbon remained unyielding.

“You’re turning the blade a fraction as it comes parallel to the ground,” Azriel explained, drawing his Illyrian blade from down his back. “Watch.” He slowly demonstrated, rotating his wrist where she did. “You see how you open up right here?” He corrected his position. “Keep your wrist like that. The blade is an extension of your arm.”

Gwyn tried the movement as slowly as he had, and he watched her self-correct, fighting against the urge to open up her wrist and rotate the blade. She did it three times before she stopped falling into the bad habit. “I blame Cassian for this. He’s too busy making eyes at Nesta to notice such mistakes these days.”

Azriel laughed. “I’ll give you that.”

Gwyn smiled broadly. “Thank you.”

Azriel dipped his head in a sketch of a bow, something restless settling in him. Even his shadows had calmed. As if content to lounge on his shoulders and watch.

But—sleep. He needed at least attempt to get some.

“Happy Solstice,” Azriel said before aiming for the archway into the House. “Don’t stay out too much longer. You’ll freeze.”

Gwyn nodded her farewell, again facing the ribbon. A warrior sizing up her opponent, all traces of that charming irreverence gone.

Azriel entered the warmth of the stairwell, and as he descended, he could have sworn a faint, beautiful singing followed him. Could have sworn his shadows sang in answer.

He slept as well as could be expected, but when Azriel returned to the river house to gather his presents before dawn, he found Elain's necklace amid the pile. He pocketed it. Spent the rest of his day, even the blasted snowball fight, with every intention of returning it to the shop in the Palace of Thread and Jewels.

But when he returned from the cabin in the mountains, he didn't go to the market square.

Instead, he found himself at the library beneath the House of Wind, standing before Clotho as the clock chimed seven in the evening.

He slid the small box across her desk. "If you see Gwyn, would you give this to her?"

Clotho angled her hooded head, and her enchanted pen wrote on a piece of paper, *A solstice gift from you?*

Azriel shrugged. "Don't tell her it came from me."

Why?

"Does she need to know? Just tell her it was a gift from Rhys."

That would be a lie.

He avoided the urge to cross his arms, not wanting to look intimidating. He blocked out the memory that flashed—of his mother cringing before his father, the male standing with crossed arms in such a way that made his displeasure known before he opened his hateful mouth.

"Look, I . . ." Az searched for the words, his voice becoming quiet. "If there's another priestess here who might appreciate it, give it to them. But I'm not taking that necklace with me when I leave."

He waited for Clotho's pen to finish writing. *Your eyes are sad, Shadowsinger.*

He offered her a grim smile. "I lost the snowball fight today."

Clotho was smart enough to see through his deflection. She wrote, *I'll give it to Gwyneth. Tell her a friend left it for her.*

He wouldn't go so far as to call Gwyn a friend, but . . . "Fine. Thank you."

Clotho's pen moved once more. *She deserves something as beautiful as*

this. I thank you for the joy it shall bring to her.

Something sparked in Azriel's chest, but he only nodded his thanks and left. He could picture it, though, as he ascended the stairs back to the House proper. How Gwyn's teal eyes might light upon seeing the necklace. For whatever reason . . . he could see it.

But Azriel tucked away the thought, consciously erasing the slight smile it brought to his face. Buried the image down deep, where it glowed quietly.

A thing of secret, lovely beauty.