

A COURT  
OF  
SILVER  
FLAMES

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOMSBURY

A COURT  
OF  
SILVER  
FLAMES



*For every Nesta out there—  
climb the mountain*

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

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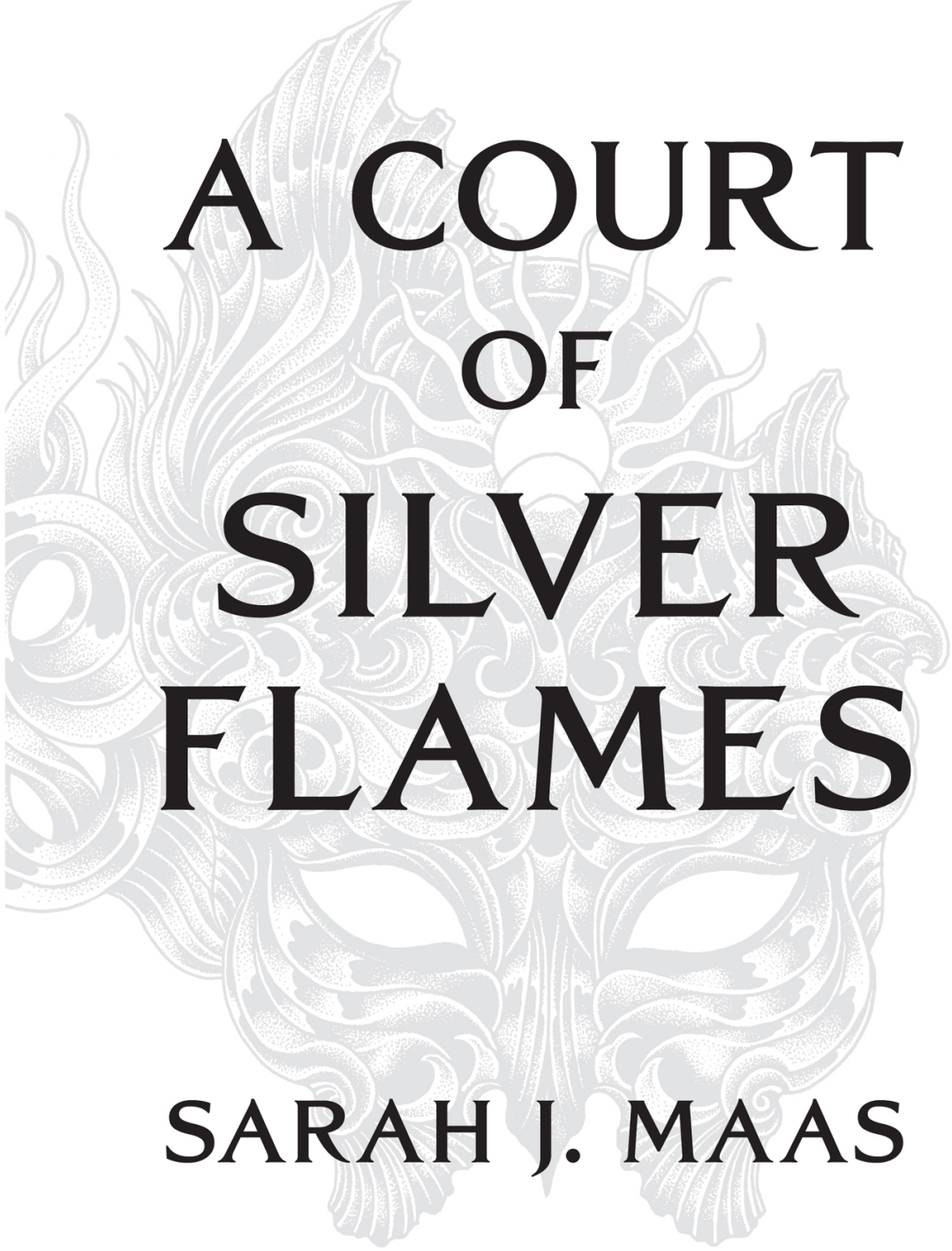


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# CONTENTS

## Part One: Novice

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three



## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Part Two: Blade

Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven  
Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-One  
Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three  
Chapter Thirty-Four  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six  
Chapter Thirty-Seven  
Chapter Thirty-Eight  
Chapter Thirty-Nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-One  
Chapter Forty-Two  
Chapter Forty-Three  
Chapter Forty-Four  
Chapter Forty-Five  
Chapter Forty-Six  
Chapter Forty-Seven  
Chapter Forty-Eight  
Chapter Forty-Nine  
Chapter Fifty

### Part Three: Valkyrie

Chapter Fifty-One  
Chapter Fifty-Two  
Chapter Fifty-Three

Chapter Fifty-Four  
Chapter Fifty-Five  
Chapter Fifty-Six  
Chapter Fifty-Seven  
Chapter Fifty-Eight  
Chapter Fifty-Nine  
Chapter Sixty  
Chapter Sixty-One  
Chapter Sixty-Two  
Chapter Sixty-Three

Part Four: Ataraxia

Chapter Sixty-Four  
Chapter Sixty-Five  
Chapter Sixty-Six  
Chapter Sixty-Seven  
Chapter Sixty-Eight  
Chapter Sixty-Nine  
Chapter Seventy  
Chapter Seventy-One  
Chapter Seventy-Two  
Chapter Seventy-Three  
Chapter Seventy-Four  
Chapter Seventy-Five  
Chapter Seventy-Six  
Chapter Seventy-Seven  
Chapter Seventy-Eight  
Chapter Seventy-Nine  
Chapter Eighty

Acknowledgments



The black water nipping at her thrashing heels was freezing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And to her.

The icy water bit into the soles of her feet.

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

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

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

And Nesta Archeron pointed. One finger—at the King of Hybern.

A death-promise. A target marked.

Hands shoved her into the water's waiting claws.

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

*In the beginning*

*And in the end*

*There was Darkness*

*And nothing more*

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

Immortality was not a serene youth.

It was fire.

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

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

They would pay. All of them.

Starting with this Cauldron.

Starting *now*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART ONE  
NOVICE

## CHAPTER

# 1

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

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

Balking.

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

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



He knew for a fact that Feyre had offered Nesta a room there—and had been rejected.

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

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

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

*Coward. Grow some damned balls.*

Cassian knocked once. Twice.

Silence.

Cassian almost sighed his relief aloud. Thank the fucking Mother—

Clipped, precise footsteps sounded from the other side of the door. Each more pissed off than the last.

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

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

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

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

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

She looked like hell.

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

When had he last seen her? The end-of-summer party on that barge in the Sidra last month? She hadn't looked this bad. Though he supposed

a night trying to drown oneself in wine and liquor never left anyone looking particularly good the next morning. Especially at—

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

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

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

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

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

She made to shut the door on his hand.

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

“Feyre wants you at the house.”

“Which one?” Nesta said, frowning at the foot he’d wedged in the door. “She has five.”

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

“The new one.”

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

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

*Move.*

*Hello, Nes.*

*Move.*

*Gladly.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He waited for the explosion as she did the math.

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

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

On any other female, those magnificent breasts might have been enough cause for him to begin courting her the moment he met her. But from the instant he'd met Nesta, the cold fire in her eyes had been a temptation of a different sort.

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

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

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

Cassian added, “Kick out the sorry bastard, get washed, and I’ll bring you some tea.”

Her brows rose a fraction of an inch.

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

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

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

“Don’t bother. I’ll be there on time.”

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

Her face tightened. “Go perch on a chimney.”

He sketched a bow, not daring to take his eyes off her. She’d emerged from the Cauldron with ... gifts. Considerable gifts—dark ones. But no one had seen nor felt any sign of them since that last battle with Hybern, since Amren had shattered the Cauldron and Feyre and Rhys had managed to heal it. Elain, too, had revealed no indication of her seer’s abilities since then.

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

She slammed the door in his face.

Then locked each of those four locks.

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

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



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

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

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

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

Nesta tugged off his shirt, leaving nothing but bare skin in its wake. His eyes widened, but the scent of his fear remained—not fear of her, but of the male he'd heard at the front door. As he remembered who her sister was. Who her sister's mate was. Who her sister's friends were. As if any of that meant something.

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

could still feel it streaming through her blood, coiled tight around her bones.

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

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

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

Sometimes.

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

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

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

It took five minutes for the water to actually heat enough to start filling the tub. There had been some days in the past year when she hadn’t even bothered to take the time. Some days when she’d climbed into the icy water, not feeling its bite but that of the Cauldron’s dark depths as it devoured her whole. As it ripped away her humanity, her mortality, and made her into *this*.

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

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

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

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

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

A grand, stupid waste.

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

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

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

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

She could have saved him.

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

Some days, the sheer dread and panic locked Nesta's body up so thoroughly that nothing could get her to breathe. Nothing could stop the awful power from beginning to rise, rise, rise in her. Nothing beyond the music at those taverns, the card games with strangers, the endless bottles

of wine, and the sex that made her feel nothing—but offered a moment of release amid the roaring inside her.

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

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

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

She didn't want them. They were pity offerings, thin attempts to get her to be a part of Feyre's life, to be gainfully employed. But the High Lord had never liked her. Their conversations were coldly civil at best.

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

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

The knock on the door rattled the entire apartment.

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



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

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

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

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

She didn't blame his admirers. She'd experienced the pleasure and sheer terror of watching him on those battlefields. Still woke with sweat coating her at the memories: how she couldn't breathe while she'd witnessed him fight, enemies swarming him; how it had felt when the Cauldron's power had surged and she'd known it was going to strike where their army was strongest—him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sniffed once. Loudly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

Nesta's gut twisted as she set each lock.

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

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

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

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

But if some new threat had arisen ...

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



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

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

Cassian headed to the left—toward the formal rooms for business, Feyre had informed Nesta during that first and only tour two months

ago. Nesta had been half-drunk at the time, and had hated every second of it, each perfect room.

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

Rhys had bought Feyre a palace.

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

And somehow, Nesta thought as she silently followed an unnaturally quiet Cassian down the hall toward one of the studies whose doors were cracked open, Feyre and Rhys *had* managed to make this place seem cozy, welcoming. A behemoth of a building, but still a home. Even the formal furniture seemed designed for comfort and lounging, for long conversations over hearty food. Every piece of art had been picked by Feyre herself, or painted by her, many of them portraits and depictions of *them*—her friends, her ... new family.

There were none of Nesta, naturally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So much had changed between her and the female.

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

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

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

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

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

“You look atrocious,” Amren said.

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

Like Nesta, Amren did not possess court-specific magic related to the High Fae. It didn’t make her influence in this court any less mighty.

Nesta's own High Fae powers had never materialized—she had only what she'd taken from the Cauldron, rather than letting it deign to gift her with power, as it had with Elain. She had no idea what she'd ripped from the Cauldron while it had stolen her humanity from her—but she knew they were things she did not and would never wish to understand, to master. The very thought had her stomach churning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*Sit down*,” Rhys snarled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rhys again crossed his arms, but said nothing.

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

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

Where the hell was Elain?

"I'll take the blame," Feyre went on, "for allowing things to get this far, and this bad. After the war with Hybern, with everything else that

was going on, it ... You ... I should have been there to help you, but I wasn't, and I am ready to admit that this is partially my fault."

"That *what* is your fault?" Nesta hissed.

"You," Cassian said. "This bullshit behavior."

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

"Look," Cassian went on, holding up his hands, "it's not some moral failing, but—"

"I understand how you're feeling," Feyre cut in.

"You know *nothing* about how I'm feeling."

Feyre plowed ahead. "It's time for some changes. Starting now."

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

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

"Oh?" The word was a dagger thrown between them.

Rhys tensed at the sneer, but still said nothing.

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

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

Feyre looked to Cassian.

For once, Cassian wasn't grinning. "You're coming with me," he said. "To train."