

Chapter 14: Blight and Shadows

The forest around me pulsed with an unsettling stillness, as if it too listened, waiting, sensing the weight of the words that had just been spoken. *Chapter 14* was marked by the Suriel's warning, its voice echoing in my mind, each syllable laced with something darker than mere caution. Do not step beyond the manor's protection. Do not venture into the woods at night. There were dangers here that thrived in the absence of light, things far worse than the faeries I had feared in my childhood stories. The blight that plagued this land was not just a sickness—it was something far older, something that fed on magic itself, warping and consuming until nothing remained untouched.

It had come from beyond Prythian's borders, creeping in slow and insidious at first, almost unnoticed, before it began spreading with an unrelenting hunger. Even the High Lords, beings of immense power, could not yet name its source, nor could they hold it back completely. That knowledge alone sent a fresh wave of unease through me. If beings as formidable as Tamlin and his kind could not stop it, what chance did I—a single mortal girl—stand against it? The Suriel had offered no solutions, only a grim truth, one that left me feeling smaller than ever before in the vastness of this strange and treacherous world.

The creature's gaze lingered on me for only a moment longer before it turned, its dark robes shifting like liquid shadow as it disappeared into the depths of the trees. In the space of a breath, it was gone, vanishing as if it had never been there at all. But the forest felt different now—heavier, denser, alive with secrets and unseen dangers that whispered from the shifting leaves. I exhaled slowly, my grip tightening on the knife at my hip, as if that small, mortal weapon could offer any real protection from the forces I had just been warned about.

I forced my feet to move, retracing the path I had taken from the manor, each step weighed down by the knowledge I now carried. Tamlin was not just a lord—he was a High Lord, one of the most powerful beings in Prythian. That revelation alone reshaped everything I had thought I understood about him. The quiet strength, the flickers of magic I had glimpsed, the authority he commanded so effortlessly—it all made sense now. He was not just some noble of a single court, but a ruler, tasked with protecting lands far larger than I had ever imagined. And yet, even with all his power, he was struggling against a force beyond his comprehension.

I could not ignore the implications. The blight was not something confined to the faerie realm—it had the potential to stretch further, beyond their lands, beyond their magic. If it continued unchecked, it would not simply remain Prythian's problem. The human world was not immune to destruction, and if the faeries themselves could not contain this spreading darkness, then it was only a matter of time before it reached my home, my family. The realization sent a sharp chill through me, one that had nothing to do with the crisp night air.

Turning back now, leaving this world behind, was no longer an option. Fleeing would not protect me or the people I cared about. I had always imagined escape as the answer—returning to my father, to my sisters, leaving the dangers of Prythian behind. But what if leaving only ensured that the horrors I was trying to outrun would follow me back? What if, in turning away, I doomed not just myself, but everyone I had ever loved?

The thought pressed heavily against my chest, urging me forward. If I stayed—if I learned more, if I found a way to understand what was happening—perhaps there was still hope. Not just for my own survival, but for something greater. The thought of fighting alongside beings like Tamlin, creatures who had once been my sworn enemies, was almost laughable. Yet, deep down, I knew the truth: I was already part of this battle, whether I had chosen it or not.

The trees stretched long shadows across the ground as the last remnants of sunlight vanished from the horizon. But for the first time, I did not feel afraid of the approaching night. There was danger, yes—darkness with sharp teeth and hungry claws. But there was also knowledge. Power. The kind that came not from magic, but from understanding, from knowing when to act and when to listen.

I was not alone in this. Despite my fears, despite the uncertainties that still clouded my path, I had allies—even if I did not yet know how to trust them fully. Tamlin had protected me before. He had given me shelter, even when I had been nothing more than a trespasser in his world. And if nothing else, that was something.

The manor loomed ahead, its golden light casting a warm glow against the night, a beacon that reminded me of the fragile safety that still existed here. But I knew that safety would not last forever. The blight was coming, creeping closer with every passing moment. And if I wanted to have any hope of stopping it, I needed to be more than just a bystander.

With a final glance at the darkened forest behind me, I stepped into the light, heart steady, mind resolute. I did not yet know the role I would play in this unfolding war, but I was certain of one thing—I would not turn away.