

Chapter 2: A Hunter's Burden

Chapter 2, the weight of the deer pressed against Feyre's aching shoulders as she made her way through the darkening woods, each step crunching against the frost-bitten earth. Though exhaustion clawed at her limbs, she pressed forward, her thoughts preoccupied with the waiting hunger of her family. The sky, once streaked with the faint hues of a dying sun, had surrendered to the deep indigo of twilight, and the looming silhouette of her home finally came into view—a small, weather-worn cottage standing in defiance against the relentless winter.

The dim candlelight flickering from its cracked windows stirred a fleeting sense of comfort in her chest, but she knew better than to let it linger. Inside, her sisters' voices carried through the thin walls, their words unconcerned with the brutal realities of their existence. Elain, ever the optimist, spoke in hushed tones of the flowers she would plant come spring, while Nesta, her voice edged with sharp cynicism, countered with remarks about how such foolish dreams held no place in their world.

Stepping through the door, Feyre was met with the familiar warmth of the hearth, though it did little to ease the cold seeping into her bones. She heaved the deer onto the wooden table, its lifeless form drawing gasps from Elain and a silent, appraising glance from Nesta. Their father, seated near the fireplace, barely looked up from the carving he was absentmindedly whittling—his once strong hands now worn and frail, a shadow of the man he used to be.

Without a word, Feyre began the laborious task of skinning and butchering the deer, her fingers deftly working through muscle and sinew. The rhythmic slice of her knife was the only sound that filled the room for a moment, save for the occasional crackle of burning wood. She had long stopped expecting gratitude for her efforts; after all, it was an unspoken truth that their survival rested solely on her shoulders.

As the scent of roasting venison filled the air, Feyre could feel the tension ease, if only for a moment. The meal was a rare indulgence, and even Nesta, with all her hardened pride, accepted her portion without a snide remark. They ate in near silence, save for Elain's occasional musings about their future—dreams of a life beyond their crumbling home, of suitors and opportunities that seemed almost laughable in their current state.

The conversation took a turn when Nesta, ever blunt, scoffed at Elain's hopeful outlook, calling it a fool's fantasy in a world that had already stolen too much from them. Feyre clenched her jaw, unwilling to engage in yet another argument that would lead nowhere. She had long since accepted that their circumstances would not change—not unless she found a way to alter them herself.

Her father, who had remained silent for most of the evening, finally spoke, reminiscing about the wealth and prosperity they once had. His words, though wistful, carried no real hope, only the dull ache of regret. Nesta's expression darkened, her patience wearing thin with his useless nostalgia.

Feyre, however, remained quiet, focused on the last few bites of her meal. She could not afford the luxury of reminiscing. The past was a foreign land she had long since abandoned, and the future was uncertain at best. All that mattered was the present—the next hunt, the next meal, the next day she would have to endure.

Once dinner was finished, Feyre retreated to the corner of the room, curling up beside the dwindling fire. The warmth of the flames was a fleeting comfort against the bitter chill creeping through the walls. Her fingers traced absent patterns on the floorboards as she listened to the sounds of her family settling in for the night.

The weight of her promise to her mother settled heavily on her chest. She had vowed to care for them, to keep them safe, no matter the cost. It was a duty that tethered her to this life, a chain forged from love and

obligation. Even as she dreamed of freedom, of something more than mere survival, she knew she could not abandon them—not yet.

The night stretched on, the wind howling softly beyond the walls, whispering of things unseen. Feyre closed her eyes, letting exhaustion claim her at last, knowing that come morning, she would rise again to face the same struggles. Because that was what she did. Because that was what she had to do.