

Chapter 41

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We were mostly silent during the flight and winnowing to Velaris. Amren was already waiting in the town house, her clothes rumpled, face unnervingly pale. I made a note to get her more blood immediately. But rather than gather in the dining or sitting room, Rhys strolled down the hall, hands in his pockets, past the kitchen, and out into the courtyard garden in the back.

The rest of us lingered in the foyer, staring after him—the silence radiating from him. Like the calm before a storm.

“It went well, I take it,” Amren said. Cassian gave her a look, and trailed after his friend.

The sun and arid day had warmed the garden, bits of green now poking their heads out here and there in the countless beds and pots. Rhys sat on the rim of the fountain, forearms braced on his knees, staring at the moss-flecked flagstone between his feet.

We all found our seats in the white-painted iron chairs throughout. If only humans could see them: faeries, sitting on iron. They’d throw away those ridiculous baubles and jewelry. Perhaps even Elain would receive an engagement ring that hadn’t been forged with hate and fear.

“If you’re out here to brood, Rhys,” Amren said from her perch on a little bench, “then just say so and let me go back to my work.”

Violet eyes lifted to hers. Cold, humorless. “The humans wish for proof of our good intentions. That we can be trusted.”

Amren’s attention cut to me. “Feyre was not enough?”

I tried not to let the words sting. No, I had not been enough; perhaps I’d even failed in my role as emissary—

“She is more than enough,” Rhys said with that deadly calm, and I wondered if I’d sent my own pathetic thoughts down the bond. I snapped my shield up once more. “They’re fools. Worse—frightened fools.” He studied the ground again, as if the dried moss and stone made up some pattern no one but him could see.

Cassian said, “We could ... depose them. Get newer, smarter queens on their thrones. Who might be willing to bargain.”

Rhys shook his head. “One, it’d take too long. We don’t have that time.” I thought of the past few wasted weeks, how hard Azriel had tried to get into those courts. If even his shadows and spies could not breach their inner workings, then I doubted an assassin would. The confirming shake of the head Azriel gave Cassian said as much. “Two,” Rhys continued, “who knows if that would somehow impact the magic of their half of the Book. It must be given freely. It’s possible the magic is strong enough to see our scheming.” He sucked on his teeth. “We are stuck with them.”

“We could try again,” Mor said. “Let me speak to them, let me go to their palace—”

“No,” Azriel said. Mor raised her brows, and a faint color stained Azriel’s tan face. But his features were set, his hazel eyes solid. “You’re not setting foot in that human realm.”

“I fought in the War, you will do well to remember—”

“No,” Azriel said again, refusing to break her stare. His shifting wings rasped against the back of his chair. “They would string you up and make an example of you.”

“They’d have to catch me first.”

“That palace is a death trap for our kind,” Azriel countered, his voice low and rough. “Built by Fae hands to protect the humans from us. You set foot inside it, Mor, and you won’t walk out again. Why do you think we’ve had such trouble getting a foothold in there?”

“If going into their territory isn’t an option,” I cut in before Mor could say whatever the temper limning her features hissed at her to retort and surely wound the shadowsinger more than she intended, “and deceit or any mental manipulation might make the magic wreck the Book ... What proof can be offered?”

Rhys lifted his head. “Who is—who is this Miryam? Who was she to Jurian, and who was that prince you spoke of—Drakon? Perhaps we ... perhaps they could be used as proof. If only to vouch for you.”

The heat died from Mor’s eyes as she shifted a foot against the moss and flagstone.

But Rhys interlocked his fingers in the space between his knees before he said, “Five hundred years ago, in the years leading up to the War, there was a Fae kingdom in the southern part of the continent. It was a realm of sand surrounding a lush river delta. The Black Land. There was no crueller place to be born a human—for no humans were born free. They were all of them slaves, forced to build great temples and palaces for the High Fae who ruled. There was no escape; no chance of having their freedom purchased. And the queen of the Black Land ... ” Memory stirred in his face.

“She made Amarantha seem as sweet as Elain,” Mor explained with soft venom.

“Miryam,” Rhys continued, “was a half-Fae female born of a human mother. And as her mother was a slave, as the conception was ... against her mother’s will, so, too, was Miryam born in shackles, and deemed human—denied any rights to her Fae heritage.”

“Tell the full story another time,” Amren cut in. “The gist of it, girl,” she said to me, “is that Miryam was given as a wedding gift by the queen to her betrothed, a foreign Fae prince named Drakon. He was horrified, and let Miryam escape. Fearing the queen’s wrath, she fled through the desert, across the sea, into more desert ... and was found by Jurian. She fell in with his rebel armies, became his lover, and was a healer amongst the warriors. Until a devastating battle found her tending to Jurian’s new Fae allies—including Prince Drakon. Turns out, Miryam had opened his eyes to the monster he planned to wed. He’d broken the engagement, allied his armies with the humans, and had been looking for the beautiful slave-girl for three years. Jurian had no idea that his new ally coveted his lover. He was too focused on winning the War, on destroying Amarantha in the North. As his obsession took over, he was blind to witnessing Miryam and Drakon falling in love behind his back.”

“It wasn’t behind his back,” Mor snapped. “Miryam ended it with Jurian before she ever laid a finger on Drakon.”

Amren shrugged. “Long story short, girl, when Jurian was slaughtered by Amarantha, and during the long centuries after, she told him what had happened to his lover. That she’d betrayed him for a Fae male. Everyone believed Miryam and Drakon perished while liberating her people from the Black Land at the end of the War—even Amarantha.”

“And they didn’t,” I said. Rhys and Mor nodded. “It was all a way to escape, wasn’t it? To start over somewhere else, with both their peoples?”

Another set of nods. “So why not show the queens that? You started to tell them—”

“Because,” Rhys cut in, “in addition to it not proving a thing about my character, which seemed to be their biggest gripe, it would be a grave betrayal of our friends. Their only wish was to remain hidden—to live in peace with their peoples. They fought and bled and suffered enough for it. I will not bring them into this conflict.”

“Drakon’s aerial army,” Cassian mused, “was as good as ours. We might need to call upon him by the end.”

Rhys merely shook his head. Conversation over. And perhaps he was right: revealing Drakon and Miryam’s peaceful existence explained nothing about his own intentions. About his own merits and character.

“So, what do we offer them instead?” I asked. “What do we show them?”

Rhys’s face was bleak. “We show them Velaris.”

“What?” Mor barked. But Amren shushed her.

“You can’t mean to bring them here,” I said.

“Of course not. The risks are too great, entertaining them for even a night would likely result in bloodshed.” Rhys said. “So I plan to merely show them.”

“They’ll dismiss it as mind tricks,” Azriel countered.

“No,” Rhys said, getting to his feet. “I mean to show them—playing by their own rules.”

Amren clicked her nails against each other. “What do you mean, High Lord?”

But Rhys only said to Mor, “Send word to your father. We’re going to pay him and my other court a visit.”

My blood iced over. The Court of Nightmares.

There was an orb, it turned out, that had belonged to Mor’s family for millennia: the Veritas. It was rife with the truth-magic she’d claimed to possess—that many in her bloodline also bore. And the Veritas was one of their most valued and guarded talismans.

Rhys wasted no time planning. We’d go to the Court of Nightmares within the Hewn City tomorrow afternoon, winnowing near the massive mountain it was built within, and then flying the rest of the way.

Mor, Cassian, and I were mere distractions to make Rhys’s sudden visit less suspicious—while Azriel stole the orb from Mor’s father’s chambers. The orb was known amongst the humans, had been wielded by them in the War, Rhys told me over a quiet dinner that night. The queens would know it. And would know it was absolute truth, not illusion or a trick, when we used it to show them—like peering into a living painting—that this city and its good people existed.

The others had suggested other places within his territory to prove he wasn’t some warmongering sadist, but none had the same impact as Velaris, Rhys claimed. For his people, for the world, he’d offer the queens this slice of truth.

After dinner, I wandered into the streets, and found myself eventually standing at the edge of the Rainbow, the night in full swing, patrons and artists and everyday citizens bustling from shop to shop, peering in the galleries, buying supplies.

Compared to the sparkling lights and bright colors of the little hill sloping down to the river ahead, the streets behind me were shadowed, sleeping.

I'd been here nearly two months and hadn't worked up the courage to walk through the artists' quarter.

But this place ... Rhys would risk this beautiful city, these lovely people, all for a shot at peace. Perhaps the guilt of leaving it protected while the rest of Prythian had suffered drove him; perhaps offering up Velaris on a silver platter was his own attempt to ease the weight. I rubbed at my chest, an ache building in there.

I took a step toward the quarter—and halted.

Maybe I should have asked Mor to come. But she'd left after dinner, pale-faced and jumpy, ignoring Cassian's attempt to speak with her. Azriel had taken to the clouds to contact his spies. He'd quietly promised the pacing Cassian to find Mor when he was done.

And Rhys ... He had enough going on. And he hadn't objected when I stated I was going for a walk. He hadn't even warned me to be careful. If it was trust, or absolute faith in the safety of his city, or just that he knew how badly I'd react if he tried to tell me not to go or warn me, I didn't know.

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts as I again stared down the main street of the Rainbow.

I'd felt flickers these past few weeks in that hole inside my chest—flickers of images, but nothing solid. Nothing roaring with life and demand. Not in the way it had that night, seeing him kneel on that bed, naked and tattooed and winged.

It'd be stupid to venture into the quarter, anyway, when it might very well be ruined in any upcoming conflict. It'd be stupid to fall in love with it, when it might be torn from me.

So, like a coward, I turned and went home.

Rhys was waiting in the foyer, leaning against the post of the stair banister. His face was grim.

I halted in the middle of the entry carpet. "What's wrong?"

His wings were nowhere to be seen, not even the shadow of them. "I'm debating asking you to stay tomorrow."

I crossed my arms. "I thought I was going." Don't lock me up in this house, don't shove me aside—

He ran a hand through his hair. "What I have to be tomorrow, who I have to become, is not ... it's not something I want you to see. How I will treat you, treat others ..."

"The mask of the High Lord," I said quietly.

"Yes." He took a seat on the bottom step of the stairs.

I remained in the center of the foyer as I asked carefully, "Why don't you want me to see that?"

"Because you've only started to look at me like I'm not a monster, and I can't stomach the idea of anything you see tomorrow, being beneath that mountain, putting you back into that place where I found you."

Beneath that mountain—underground. Yes, I'd forgotten that. Forgotten I'd see the court that Amarantha had modeled her own after, that I'd be trapped beneath the earth ...

But with Cassian, and Azriel, and Mor. With ... him.

I waited for the panic, the cold sweat. Neither came. “Let me help. In whatever way I can.”

Bleakness shaded the starlight in those eyes. “The role you will have to play is not a pleasant one.”

“I trust you.” I sat beside him on the stairs, close enough that the heat of his body warmed the chill night air clinging to my overcoat. “Why did Mor look so disturbed when she left?”

His throat bobbed. I could tell it was rage, and pain, that kept him from telling me outright—not mistrust. After a moment, he said, “I was there, in the Hewn City, the day her father declared she was to be sold in marriage to Eris, eldest son of the High Lord of the Autumn Court.” Lucien’s brother. “Eris had a reputation for cruelty, and Mor ... begged me not to let it happen. For all her power, all her wildness, she had no voice, no rights with those people. And my father didn’t particularly care if his cousins used their offspring as breeding stock.”

“What happened?” I breathed.

“I brought Mor to the Illyrian camp for a few days. And she saw Cassian, and decided she’d do the one thing that would ruin her value to these people. I didn’t know until after, and ... it was a mess. With Cassian, with her, with our families. And it’s another long story, but the short of it is that Eris refused to marry her. Said she’d been sullied by a bastard-born lesser faerie, and he’d now sooner fuck a sow. Her family ... they ... ” I’d never seen him at such a loss for words. Rhys cleared his throat. “When they were done, they dumped her on the Autumn Court border, with a note nailed to her body that said she was Eris’s problem.”

Nailed—nailed to her.

Rhys said with soft wrath, “Eris left her for dead in the middle of their woods. Azriel found her a day later. It was all I could do to keep him from going to either court and slaughtering them all.”

I thought of that merry face, the flippant laughter, the female that did not care who approved. Perhaps because she had seen the ugliest her kind had to offer. And had survived.

And I understood—why Rhys could not endure Nesta for more than a few moments, why he could not let go of that anger where her failings were concerned, even if I had.