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A COURT OF FROST AND STARLIGHT by Sarah J. Maas, Copyright © 2022. CHAPTER 1 Feyre The first snow of winter had begun whipping through Velaris an hour earlier. The ground had finally frozen solid last week, and by the time I'd finished devouring my breakfast of toast and
bacon, washed down with a heady cup of tea, the pale cobblestones were dusted with fine, white powder. I had no idea where Rhys was. He hadn't been in bed when I'd awoken, the mattress on his side already cold. Nothing unusual, as we were both busy to the point of exhaustion
these days. Seated at the long cherrywood dining table at the town house, I frowned at the whirling snow beyond the leaded glass windows. Once, I had dreaded that first snow, had lived in terror of long, brutal winters. But it had been a long, brutal winter that had brought me so de
ep into the woods that day nearly two years ago. A long, brutal winter that had made me desperate enough to kill a wolf, that had eventually led me here—to this life, this ... happiness. The snow fell, thick clumps plopping onto the dried grass of the tiny front lawn, crusting the spike s and arches of the decorative fence beyond it. Deep inside me, rising with every swirling flake, a sparkling, crisp power stirred. I was High Lady of the Night Court, yes, but also one blessed with the gifts of all the courts. It seemed Winter now wanted to play. Finally awake enough to be coherent, I lowered the shield of black adamant guarding my mind and cast a thought down the soul-bridge between me and Rhys. Where'd you fly off to so early? My question faded into blackness. A sure sign that Rhys was nowhere near Velaris. Likely not even within the both
ders of the Night Court. Also not unusual—he'd been visiting our war allies these months to solidify our relationships, build trade, and keep tabs on their post-wall intentions. When my own work allowed it, I often joined him. I scooped up my plate, draining my tea to the dregs, and
padded toward the kitchen. Playing with ice and snow could wait. Nuala was already preparing for lunch at the worktable, no sign of her twin, Cerridwen, but I waved her off as she made to take my dishes. "I can wash them," I said by way of greeting. Up to the elbows in making sor
e sort of meat pie, the half-wraith gave me a grateful smile and let me do it. A female of few words, though neither twin could be considered shy. Certainly not when they worked—spied—for both Rhys and Azriel. "It's still snowing," I observed rather pointlessly, peering out the kitcl en window at the garden beyond as I rinsed off the plate, fork, and cup. Elain had already readied the garden for winter, veiling the more delicate bushes and beds with burlap. "I wonder if it'll let up at all." Nuala laid the ornate lattice crust atop the pie and began pinching the edges
ogether, her shadowy fingers making quick, deft work of it. "It'll be nice to have a white Solstice." she said, voice lilting and yet hushed. Full of whispers and shadows "Some years, it can be fairly mild." Right. The Winter Solstice. In a week. I week I we still new enough to being High Lad y that I had no idea what my formal role was to be. If we'd have a High Priestess do some odious ceremony, as lanthe had done the year. Gods, nearly a year since Rhys had called in his bargain, desperate to get me away from the poison of the Spring Court, to save me from my despair. Had he been only a minute later, the Mother knew what would have happened. Where I'd now be. Snow swirled and eddied in the garden, catching in the brown fibers of the burlap covering the shrubs. My mate—who had worked so hard and so selflessly, all without hope that I would ever be with him. We had both fought for that love, bled for it. Rhys had died for it. I still saw that moment, in my sleeping and waking dreams. How his face had looked, how his chest had not risen, how the bond between us had shredded into ribbons. I still fe
t it, that hollowness in my chest where the bond had been, where he had been. Even now, with that bond again flowing between us like a river of star-flecked night, the echo of its vanishing lingered. Drew me from sleep; drew me from a conversation, a painting, a meal. Rhys knew e
xactly why there were nights when I would cling tighter to him, why there were moments in the bright, clear sunshine that I would grip his hand. He knew, because I knew why his eyes sometimes turned distant, why he occasionally just blinked at all of us as if not quite believing it a
nd rubbed his chest as if to ease an ache. Working had helped. Both of us. Keeping busy, keeping focused—I sometimes dreaded the quiet, idle days when all those thoughts snared me at last. When there was nothing but me and my mind, and that memory of Rhys lying dead on the
e rocky ground, the King of Hybern snapping my father's neck, all those Illyrians blasted out of the sky and falling to earth as ashes. Perhaps one day, even the work wouldn't be a battlement to keep the memories out. Mercifully, plenty of work remained for the foreseeable future.
ebuilding Velaris after the attacks from Hybern being only one of many monumental tasks. For other tasks required doing as well—both in Velaris and beyond it: in the Hewn City, in the vastness of the entire Night Court. And then there were the other courts
of Prythian. And the new, emerging world beyond. B
                                                          ut for now: Solstice. The longest night of the year. I turned from the window to Nuala, who was still fussing over the edges of her pie. "It's a special holiday here as well, right?" I asked casually. "Not just in Winter and Day." An
                                                            worktable to examine her pie. Skilled spy-trained by Azriel himself-and master cook. "We love it dearly. It's intimate, warm, lovely. Presents and music and fo
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  od, sometimes feasting under the starlight ..." The oppos
d Spring. "Oh, yes," Nuala said, stooping over the
                                                             n subjected to last year. But—presents. I had to buy presents for all of them. Not had to, but wanted to. Because all my friends, now my family, had fought and
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                d nearly died as well. I shut out the image th
te of the enormous, wild, days-long party I'd bee
                                                              er a wounded Cassian, the two of them prepared to die together against the King of Hybern. My father's corpse behind them. I rolled my neck. We could use
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  elebrate. It had become so rare for all of u
at tore through my mind: Nesta, leaning ov
s to be gathered for more than an hour or two
                                                                Nuala went on, "It's a time of rest, too. And a time to reflect on the darkness—how it lets the light shine." "Is there a ceremony?" The half-wraith shrugge
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        but none of us go. It's more for those who wish to
honor the light's rebirth, usually by spending th
                                                                e entire night sitting in absolute darkness." A ghost of a smirk. "It's not quite such a novelty for my sister and me. Or for the High Lord." I tried not to loo
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          k too rel
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         ieved that I wouldn't be dragged to a temple for ho
                                                                 on the little wooden rack beside the sink, I wished Nuala luck on lunch, and headed upstairs to dress. Cerridwen had already laid out clothes, but there
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          Il no sign of Nuala's twin as I donned the heavy c
urs as I nodded. Setting my c
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          was sti
                                                                  ngs, and fleece-lined boots before loosely braiding back my hair. A year ago, I'd been stuffed into fine gowns and jewels, made to parade in front of a
arcoal sweater, the tight
                                             black leggi
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         preenin
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            g court who'd gawked at me like a prized breed
ng mare. Here ... I smile
                                                                   ilver-and-sapphire band on my left hand. The ring I'd won for myself from the Weaver in the Wood. My smile faded a bit. I could see her, too. See Str
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        yga sta
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             nding before the King of Hybern, covered in the
                                                                    r head in his hands and snapped her neck. Then threw her to his beasts. I clenched my fingers into a fist, breathing in through my nose, out through
e blood of her prey, as
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        h my m
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       outh, until the lightness i
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     n my limbs faded, until
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     sk against one wall was o
he walls of the room st
                                                                    n me. Until I could survey the blend of personal objects in Rhys's room—our room. It was by no means a small bedroom, but it had lately started
                                  ed p
                                             re ssing o
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        to feel
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     .. tight. The rosewood de
                                                                    un dealings; my jewelry and clothes now had to be divided between here and my old bedroom. And then there were the weapons. Daggers and bl
overed in papers and b
                              ooks from bot
                                                h of our o
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        ades, q
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  uivers and bows. I scratched my head at the heavy, wick
                                                                  beside the desk without my noticing. I didn't even want to know. Though I had no doubt Cassian was somehow behind it. We could, of course, sto
ed-looking mace that R
                               hvs had so
                                                mehow dumped
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         re ever
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               g in the pocket between realms, but ... I frow
                                                 aning against the towering armoire. If we got snowed in, perhaps I'd use the day to organize things. Find room for everything. Especially that mace. It would be a across the city, one that I opted to not think about for too long. Lucien, at least, had taken up residence in an elegant apartment down by the river the due ien any questions about that visit—to Tamlin, Lucien hadn't explained the black eye and cut lip, either. He'd only asked Rhys and me if we k
ned at my own set of III
                            vrian blades, le
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          challe
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               nge, sinc e Elain still occupied a bedroom do
wn the hall. Nesta had chosen her own home
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            day a
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               returned from the battlefields
And the Spring Court. I h
                               adn't ask
                                               ed Luc
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            new of
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              e to stay in Velaris, since he did
                                                                          e town house, and did not wish to be isolated at the House of Wind. He hadn't mentioned Elain, or his proximity to her. Elain had not as
not wish to inconvenience u s further b
                                              y stayi
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                ked him
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 to st
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             ay, or to go. And whether she car
                                                               tainly hadn't let on. But Lucien had remained, and found ways to keep busy, often gone for days or weeks at a time. Yet even with Lucien and N Even more so if Mor, Cassian, and Azriel stayed over. And the House of Wind was too big, too formal, too far from the city proper. Nice for a ni
ed about the bruises on hi s fac
                                             she cer
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   esta sta
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           g in their own apartments, the tow
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          o, but ... I loved this house. It was
n house was a bit small the
                                           se days.
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       ght or tw
my home. The first I'd really
                                           had in the ways
                                                                  that counted. And it'd be nice to celebrate the Solstice here. With all of them, crowded as it might be. I scowled at the pile of papers I had to
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        sort throug
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         h: letters from other courts, priestes
                                                                  ms both human and faerie. I'd put them off for weeks now, and had finally set aside this morning to wade through them. High Lady of the N
ses angling for positions, an
                                        d king
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   ght Court, Defend er of the Rainbow and the ... Desk. I
norted, flicking my braid over
                                                                r. Perhaps my Solstice gift to myself would be to hire a personal secretary. Someone to read and answer those things, to sort out what was
                                         a sh
                                                                                                                                                                                                                           vital and what
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         be put aside. Because a little extra time to myself
                                                            et that Rhys never really cared to follow and see what could be moved around for the possibility of such a thing. For him and for me. I knew ou r coffers ran de
for Rhys ... I'd look through th
                                               urt buda
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               knew we could easily afford it and not make
                                        е со
                                                          mind the work. I loved the work, actually. This territory, its people—they were as much my heart as my mate. Until yesterday, nearly every wa
o much as a dent in our fortun
                                        e.b
                                               ut I didn't
                                                                                                                                                                                                                     king hour had
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                be
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                en packed with helping them. Until I'd been p
                                                                                      vake of the war, the people of Velaris had risen to the challenge of rebuilding and helping their own. Before I'd even
olitely, graciously, told to go h
                                        om
                                               e and enj oy the holid ay. In the
                                                                                                                                                                                                                     come up with
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                n idea of how to help them, multiple societies
                                                                                       red with a handful of them for tasks ranging from finding homes for those displaced by the destruction to visitin
s had been created to assist th
                                        e cit
                                                y. So l'd v
                                                                                                                                                                                                                     a families af
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 fected during the war to helping those with
out shelter or belongings ready
                                                                                          with new coats and supplies. All of it was vital; all of it was good, satisfying work. And yet ... there was mor
                                                                                                                                                                                                                     e. There w
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                as more that I could do to help. Personally.
                                                                                           asn't the only one eager to assist those who'd lost so much. With the holiday, a surge of fresh volunteer
just hadn't figured it out yet. It s
                                         eeme
                                                                                                                                                                                                                     s had arri
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               ved, cramming the public hall near the Palace
of Thread and Jewels, where so
                                                                                                     ties were headquartered. Your help has been crucial, Lady, one charity matron had said to m
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            been here nearly every day—you have worked y
                                                                                                                                                                                                                 e yesterday. You have
ourself to the bone. Take the w
                                            eek off. You've earned it. Celebrat
                                                                                                  th your mate. I'd tried to object, insisting that there were still more coats to hand out, more fire
                                                                                                                                                                                                               wood t
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   distributed, but the faerie h ad just motioned to the crowded public ha
                                                                                                                                                                                                                           o be
Il around us, filled to the brim
                                                                                               han we know what to do with. When I'd tried objecting again, she'd shooed me out the front doo
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        shut it behind me
                                              with volunteers. We have more help
                                                                                                                                                                                                             r. An
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   Point taken. The story had been the same
                                                 stopped by yesterday afternoon. Go
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       wer to m
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   y earlier inquiry about his whereabouts fin
at every other organization I'd
                                                                                                home and enjoy the holiday. So I had. At least, the first part. The enjoying bit, however ... Rhy
                                                                                                                                                                                                           s's a
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                ns
                                                                                                 dark, glittering power. I'm at Devlon's camp, it took you this long to respond? It was a long
ally flickered down the bond.
                                                                                                                                                                                                           dista
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                nce
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        to the Illy
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   rian Mountains, yes, but it shouldn't have
taken minutes to hear back.
                                                                                                   l huff of laughter. Cassian was ranting. He didn't take a breath. My poor Illyrian baby. We
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    on't we? Rhys's amusement rippled towa
                                                                                                                                                                                                          certa
                                                                                                                                                                                                                       inly do tor
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        ment you, d
rd me, caressing my innermo
                                                                                                   h night-veiled hands. But it halted, vanishing as quickly as it had come. Cassian's gettin
                                                                                                                                                                                                          g into
                                                                                                                                                                                                                        it with Dev
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          Ion. I'll chec
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    k in later. With a loving brush against my
senses, he was gone. I'd ge
                                                                                      t a full rep
                                                                                                    ort about it soon, but for now ... I smiled at the snow waltzing outside the windows. C
                                                                                                                                                                                                          HAPT
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             hysand It w
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     as barely nine in the morning, and Cassi
                                                                                                     n tried and failed to bleed through the clouds looming over the Illyrian Mountains, th
an was already pissed. The
                                                                                     ry winter su
                                                                                                                                                                                                          e wind
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      a boom across the gray peaks. Snow a
Iready lay inches deep over
                                                                                                       a vision of what would soon befall Velaris. It had been snowing when I departed
                                                                               the bustling camp
                                                                                                                                                                                                           at daw
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      n—perhaps there would be a good coat
ing already on the ground
                                                                                                       d. I hadn't had a chance to ask Feyre about it during our brief conversation down
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      nd minutes ago, but perhaps she would
                                                                              by the time I returne
                                                                                                                                                                                                             the bo
d go for a walk with me thr
                                                                              ough it. Let me show
                                                                                                             how the City of Starlight glistened under fresh snow. Indeed, my mate and
                                                                                                                                                                                                              city see
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       med a world away from the hive of act
vity in the Windhaven cam
                                                                             p, nest
                                                                                                           e, high mountain pass. Even the bracing wind that swept between the peaks
                                                                                                                                                                                                                 belying
                                                                                         led in a wi
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        the camp's very name by whipping u
                                                                                                          from going about their daily chores. For the warriors: training in the various
p dervishes of snow, didn
                                                          't d
                                                                                          Illyrians
                                                                                                                                                                                                          rings that opene
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        onto a sheer drop to the small valley
floor below, those not pre
                                                                                                           who hadn't made the cut: tending to various trades, whether merchants or
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        blers. And for the females: drudgery
                                                          out on p
                                                                              atrol. For the males
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           cob
They didn't see it as suc
                                                          f them did. B
                                                                                                           ks, whether old or young, remained the same: cooking, cleaning, child-r
                                                                              ut their required tas
                                                                                                                                                                                           earing, clo
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           akin
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         g, laundry ... There was honor in suc
                                                                                                                                                                                                                           thes-m
h tasks-pride and good
                                             work to be found in them. But not when every sin
                                                                                                            gle one of the females here was expected to do it. And if they shirked t
                                                                                                                                                                                           hose d
                                                                                                                                                                                                          uties, e ithe
                                                                                                                                                                                                                              r one
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           of th
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         e half-dozen camp-mothers or whate
                                                                                                             g as I'd known this place, for my mother's people. The world had bee
ver males controlled their
                                               lives would punish them. So it had been, as lon
                                                                                                                                                                                            n reb
                                                                                                                                                                                                        orn dur
                                                                                                                                                                                                                    ing th
                                                                                                                                                                                                                               e war
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         nths before, the wall blasted to noth
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            mo
                                                                                 y here, where
                                                                                                              change was slower than the melting glaciers scattered amongst the
                                                                                                                                                                                                                    s. Trad
ngness, and yet some thin
                                                as did not alte
                                                                   r. Especiall
                                                                                                                                                                                             se m
                                                                                                                                                                                                       ountain
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 itions
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             go
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        ng back thousands of years, left mos
                                                                                     y attentio
tly unchallenged. Until us.
                                                Until now. Dr
                                                                   awing m
                                                                                                                       from the bustling camp beyond the edge of the chalk-lined
                                                                                                                                                                                               train
                                                                                                                                                                                                      ing ring
                                                                                                                                                                                                                   s wher
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             tood
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         , I schooled my face into neutrality a
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 e we s
                                               nst Devlon. "Th e girls are b
s Cassian squared off again
                                                                                    usy with
                                                                                                               preparations for the Solstice," the camp-lord was saying, his arm
                                                                                                                                                                                                      ossed
                                                                                                                                                                                                                   over his
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   barre
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              I ch
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        est. "The wives need all the help the
                                                                                                                                                                                                s cr
can get, if all's to be ready
                                              n tim e. They can practice nex
                                                                                                                      d lost count of how many variations of this conversation w
                                                                                                                                                                                                      had du
                                                                                                                                                                                                                   ring the
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    decad
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               es C
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       assian had been pushing Devlon on
his. The wind whipped Cass
                                                                                                                                                                                                                       "The gi
                                                       s dark hair, but his face remaine
                                                                                                                  ard as granite as he said to the warrior who had begrudging
                                                                                                                                                                                                        ly trained us,
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   rls can
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               help
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        their mothers after training is done for
                                                                                                  f th
r the day. We'll cut practice
                                              dow
                                                          n to two hours. The rest o
                                                                                                                     e day will be enough to assist in the preparations."
                                                                                                                                                                                                                          on slid his hazel
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 eye
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       s to where I lingered a few feet away
Is it an order?" I held that ga
                                               ze.
                                                                And despite my
                                                                                                                      wn, my power, I tried not to fall back into the tremblin
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                en fi
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      ve centuries ago, that first day Devlor
                                                                                                                                  he sparring ring. "If Cassian says it's an
had towered over me and the
                                               n hu
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         er, t
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                hen
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      it is." It had occurred to me, during the
                                                                                                                                th Devion and the Illyrians, that I could si
years we'd been waging this
                                                sam
                                                                                                    e ba
                                                                                                                                                                                            mpl
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                y rip
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      into his mind, all their minds, and mak
                                                                                     lin
them agree. Yet there were s
                                                                                                     es I
                                                                                                                           could not, would not cross. And Cassian wo
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     er forgive me. Devlon grunted, his breat
                                                ome
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                nev
h a curl of steam. "An hour.
                                                Two
                                                                                    our
                                                                                                                            assian countered, wings flaring slightly a
                                                                                                                                                                                          s he
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               held
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     a hard line that I'd been called in this m
orning to help him maintain. It
                                               had
                                                                     to
                                                                                     be b
                                                                                                                              n, if my brother had asked me to com
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                y da
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    mn bad. Perhaps we needed a permanen
                                                                     s re
                                                                                      mem
                                                                                                         bered t
                                                                                                                                hings like consequences. But the
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                acte
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   d us all, and with the rebuilding, with the
                                                rian
human territories crawling out t
                                                                       eet
                                                                                                            with oth
                                                                                                                                 er Fae kingdoms looking towar
                                                                                                                                                                                   d a wal
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   and wondering what shit they could get
                                                 o<sub>m</sub>
                                                                                        us.
                                                                                                              station
                                                                                                                                      omeone out here. Not yet
                                                                                                                                                                                  Perha
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                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               sum
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  mer, if the climate elsewhere was calm end
                                                  eso
                                                                        urce
                                                                                         s to
                                                                                                                                                                                                       ps n
ugh. Devlon's cronies loitered in
                                                   the n
                                                                         eare
                                                                                           st spa
                                                                                                                rring ri
                                                                                                                                      ng, sizing up Cassian an
                                                                                                                                                                              d me, t
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              wa
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 y they had our entire lives. We'd slaughter
                                                                                                                                       that they still kept ba
d enough of them in the Blood Rit
                                                                          hose
                                                                                             centu
                                                                                                                  ries ago
                                                                                                                                                                           ck, but
                                                                                                                                                                                                                      ad b
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            een t
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 he Illyrians who had bled and fought this su
                                                                                                                                     e brunt of Hybern an
mmer. Who had suffered the most
                                                    losses
                                                                                              hey to
                                                                                                                     ok on th
                                                                                                                                                                        d the Ca
                                                                                                                                                                                                 uldron
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 of the warriors survived was a testament to
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           t any
their skill and Cassian's leadership
                                                    but wit
                                                                                                 Íllyrian
                                                                                                                                     d and idle up here, tha
                                                                                                                                                                      t loss w
                                                                                                                                                                                               as star
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         to sha
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               pe itself into something ugly. Dangerous. No
                                                                                                                                                                                                                    ting
e of us had forgotten that during Am
                                                    arantha's
                                                                               reign
                                                                                                    , a few
                                                                                                                           of the war-bands had gleefully b
                                                                                                                                                                                            her. An
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        ew non
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              e of the Illyrians had forgotten that we'd spen
                                                                                g dow
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              eeded. But later. Devlon pushed, crossing his
                                                   fall huntin
                                                                                                       n thos
                                                                                                                            e rogue groups. And ending them. Yes, a
                                                                                                                                                                                         presen
                                                                                                                                                                                                               ce her
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       e was n
muscled arms. "The boys need a nice
                                                                                                                                ured. Let the girls give one to them.
                                                   Solstice afte
                                                                                  r all th
                                                                                                          ey end
                                                                                                                                                                                       The b
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      certainly
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             knew what weapons to wield, both physical ar
                                                orning," Cassia
d verbal. "Two hours in the ring each m
                                                                                    n said
                                                                                                            with th
                                                                                                                                  at same hard tone that even I kn
                                                                                                                                                                                                           t to pu
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     sh unless
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            wanted a flat-out brawl. He didn't break Devlon's
                                                                                                                                                                                   ew no
      "The boys can help decorate, clean, and cook. They've g
                                                                                       ot two
                                                                                                               hands
                                                                                                                                       "Some do," Devlon said
                                                                                                                                                                                 "Som
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            one." I felt, more than saw, the wound strike de-
p in Cassian. It was the cost of leading my armies: each injury, d
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         around these warriors, seeing those missing limbs
                                                                                                                 car-h
                                                                                                                                     e took them all as his ow
                                                                                                                                                                              n pers
                                                                                                                                                                                                     onal fai
                                                                                                                                                                                                                               ark power that began to roil in my veins, seeking a path into the world, and
and brutal injuries still healing or that would never heal ...
                                                                                                ractic
                                                                                                                   e for n
                                                                                                                                     inety minutes," I sa
                                                                                                                                                                           oothin
                                                                                                                                                                                                  g the d
slid my chilled hands into my pockets. Cassian, wisely, pretended
                                                                                                                                                                                                                             pened his mouth, but I cut him off before he could shout something truly stu
                                                                                                  o look
                                                                                                                        outrag
                                                                                                                                ed, his wings spreading wi
                                                                                                                                                                         de. De
                                                                                                                                                                                              vlon o
    "An hour and a half every morning, then they do the housework, t
                                                                                                                          es pitching in whenever they can
                                                                                                     he mal
                                                                                                                                                                        alan
                                                                                                                                                                                           ced to
                                                                                                                                                                                                                            ward the permanent tents and small stone and wood houses scattered along
he wide pass and up into the tree-crusted peaks behind us. "Do not forge
                                                                                                                               great number of the females, Devion, a
                                                                                                                                                                                       Iso su
                                                                                                                                                                                                                          ffered losses. Perhaps not a hand, but their husbands and sons and brothers v
                                                                                                                                 gets to train." I jerked my chin at C
ere out on those battlefields. Everyone helps prepare for the holiday, and ever
                                                                                                                                                                                    assian
                                                                                                                                                                                                                       indicating for him to follow me to the house across the camp that we now kept as
                                                                                                                                  ken Feyre—the kitchen table b
our semi-permanent base of operations. There wasn't a surface inside where I had
                                                                                                                                                                                                                 my particular favorite, thanks to those raw initial days after we'd first mated, when I con
                                                                                                                                                                                 eing
ld barely stand to be near her and not be buried inside her. How long ago, how distant
                                                                                                                                                                                                             e ago. I needed a holiday. Snow and ice crunched under our boots as we aimed for the nar
                                                                                                                                   se days se emed. Another I
                                                                                                                                                                               ifetim
ow, two-level stone house by the tree line. Not a holiday to rest, not to visit anywhere, but j
                                                                                                                                                                             ndfu
                                                                                                                                                                                                         I of hours in the same bed as my mate. To get more than a few hours to sleep and bury myself
                                                                                                                  ust
                                                                                                                                   to spend more than a ha
                                                                                                                                                                                                   sh. Last week had been so stupidly busy and I'd been so desperate for the feel and taste of her that
n her. It seemed to be one or the other these days. Which was utterly unacceptable. And had tu
                                                                                                                   rned m
                                                                                                                                e about tw
                                                                                                                                                enty kinds of f
                                                                                                                                                                           ooli
d taken her during the flight down from the House of Wind to the town house. High above Vel
                                                                                                                  for all to see.
                                                                                                                                   if it we
                                                                                                                                                ren't for the clo
                                                                                                                                                                           akin
                                                                                                                                                                                               a I had thrown into place. It'd required some careful maneuvering, and I'd planned for months now on ac
ually making a moment of it, but with her against me like that, alone in the skies, all it had taken was one look into those
                                                                                                                                                                                          fastening her pants. A moment later, I'd been inside her, and had nearly sent us crashing into the rooftops lik
e an Illyrian whelp. Feyre had just laughed. I'd climaxed at the husky sound of it. It had not been my finest moment, and I
                                                                                                                                                           had no doubt I'd sink to lower levels before the Winter Solstice bought us a day's reprieve. I choked my rising desire until it was nothing b
ut a vague roaring in the back of my mind, and didn't speak until Cassian and I were nearly through the wooden front door.
                                                                                                                                                         "Anything else I should know about while I'm here?" I knocked the snow from my boots against the door frame and stepped into the house.
                                                                                                                                                    breath and shut the door behind him before tucking in his wings and leaning against it. "Dissension's brewing. With so many clans gathering fo
That kitchen table lay smack in the middle of the front room. I banished the image of Feyre bent over it. Cassian blew out a
                                                                                                                                                  mall downstairs warming swiftly. It was barely a whisper of magic, yet its release eased that near-constant strain of keeping all that I was, all that d
r the Solstice, it'll be a chance for them to spread it even more." A flicker of my power had a fire roaring in the hearth, the s
ark power, in check. I took up a spot against that damned table and crossed my arms. "We've dealt with this shit before. W
                                                                                                                                                  e'll deal with it again. Cass ian shook his head, the shoulder-length dark hair shining in the watery light leaking through the front windows. "It's
                                                                                                                                                   battle. I sent them, Rhys. A nd now it's not only the warrior-pricks who are grumbling, but also the females. They believe you and I marched them
not like it was before. Before, you, me, and Az—we were resented for what we are, who we are. But this time … we sent t
south as revenge for our own treatment as children; they think we specifically stationed some of the males on the front lines as payb
                                                                                                                                                                                  at all. "We have to handle this carefully, then. Find out where this poison comes from and put an end to it—peaceful
                                                                                                                                                   ack." Not good. Not good
  ' I clarified when he lifted his brows. "We can't kill our way out of this one." Cassian scratched at his jaw. "No, we can't." It wouldn't be like hunting down tho
                                                                                                                                                                                  se rogue war-bands who'd terrorized any in their path. Not at all. He surveyed the dim house, the fire crackling in the
hearth, where we'd seen my mother cook so many meals during our training. An old, familiar ache filled my chest. This entire house, every inch of it, was full o
                                                                                                                                                                                  f the past. "A lot of them are coming in for the Solstice," he went on. "I can stay here, keep an eye on things. Maybe want you ho ne for Solstice." "I don't mind—" "I want you home. In Velaris," I added when he opened his mouth to s
hand out presents to the children, some of the wives. Things that they really need but are too proud to ask for." It was a solid idea. But—"It can w
pew some Illyrian loyalist bullshit that he still believed, even after they had treated him like less than nothing his entire life. "We're spending Solstic
                                                                                                                                                                                   e together. All of us." Even it had to give them a direct order as High Lord to do it. Cassian angled his head. "Wha
                                                                                                                                                                                                ssue. Or anyone's concern but our own. "Wound a little tight, Rhys?" Of course he'd seen right through
s eating at you?" "Nothing." As far as things went, I had little to complain about. Taking my mate to bed on a regular basis wasn't exactly a pressing
it. I sighed, frowning at the ancient, soot-speckled ceiling. We'd celebrated the Solstice in this house, too. My mother always had gifts for Azriel and Ca
                                                                                                                                                                                               ssian. For the latter, the initial Solstice we'd shared here had been the first time he'd received any sort o
gift, Solstice or not. I could still see the tears Cassian had tried to hide as he'd opened his presents, and the tears in my mother's eyes as she watched
                                                                                                                                                                                           him. "I want to jump ahead to next week." "Sure that power of yours can't do it for you?" I leveled a dry look
at him. Cassian just gave me a cocky grin back. I never stopped being grateful for them—my friends, my family, wh
that to each other. Cassian had terrified me more times than I wanted to admit, one of them being mere months ag
                                                                                                                              o looked at that power of mine an
                                                                                                                                                                                      d did not balk, did not become scented with fear. Yes, I could scare the shit out of them sometimes, but we all did
                                                                                                                                                                                     matter of weeks, it had happened. I still saw him being hauled by Azriel off that battlefield, blood spilling down his
                                                                                                                                o. T wice. Twice, in the span of a
                                                                                                                                                                                     he'd let me into her mind to reveal what, exactly, had occurred between her sisters and the King of Hybern. Still sa
legs, into the mud, his wound a gaping maw that sliced down the center of his body. And I still saw him as Feyre h
                                                                                                                                                   n him—after s
w Cassian, broken and bleeding on the ground, begging Nesta to run. Cassian had not yet spoken of it. About
                                                                                                                                    wha
                                                                                                                                                   had occurre
                                                                                                                                                                       d in t
                                                                                                                                                                                     hose moments. About Nesta. Cassian and my mate's sister did not speak to each other at all. Nesta had successf
ully cloistered herself in some slummy apartment across the Sidra, refusing to interact with any of us save
                                                                                                                                                 w brief visits
                                                                                                                                                                   with Feyre
                                                                                                                                                                                      every month. I'd have to find a way to fix that, too. I saw how it ate away at Feyre. I still soothed her after she awa
ke, frantic, from nightmares about that day in Hybern when her sisters had been Made against their will. Nig
                                                                                                                                                                                      ssian was near death and Nesta was sprawled over him, shielding him from that killing blow, and Elain-Elain-
                                                                                                                                                res about the moment when Ca
                                                                                                                                                                                     now. We're all busy, all trying to hold everything together." Az, Cassian, and I had yet again postponed our annu
plan for the spring." "Sounds like a festive event." With my Court of Dreams, it always was. But I made myself as
ad taken up Azriel's dagger and killed the King of Hybern instead. I rubbed my brows between my th
                                                                                                                                                   mb and foretinger. "It's rough
al five days of hunting up at the cabin this fall. Put off for next year—again. "Come home for Solstice
                                                                                                                                             , and we can sit down and figure out a plan for the spring.
k, "Is Devlon one of the would-be rebels?" I prayed it wasn't trúe. I resented the male and his backward
                                                                                                                                                     , but he'd been fair with Cassian, Azriel, and me under his watch. Treated us to the same rights as full-blooded Illyrian warriors. Still did that for
all the bastard-born under his command. It was his absurd ideas about females that made me want to thr
                                                                                                                                                    ottle him. Mist him. But if he had to be replaced, the Mother knew who would take his position. Cassian shook his head. "I don't think so. Devlon
shuts down any talk like that. But it only makes them more secretive, which makes it harder to find out w
                                                                                                                                                      's spreading this bullshit around." I nodded, standing. I had a meeting in Cesere with the two priestesses who had survived Hybern's massaci
a year ago regarding how to handle pilgrims who wanted to come from outside our territory. Being late wouldn't
                                                                                                                                                         lend any favors to my arguments to delay such a thing until the spring. "Keep an eye on it for the next few days, then come home. I want yo
u there two nights before Solstice. And for the day after." A hint of a wicked grin. "I assume our Solstice-
                                                                                                                                                          y tradition will still be on, then. Despite you now being such a grown-up, mated male." I winked at him. "I'd hate for you Illyrian babies to m
                                                                                                                                                 nturies. I was almost at the door when Cassian said, "Is ..." He swallowed. I spared him the discomfort of trying to mask his interest. "Both sisters
ss me." Cassian chuckled. There were indeed some Solstice traditions that never grew tiresome, even after t
                                                                                                                                        he ce
will be at the house. Whether they want to or not." "Nesta will make things unpleasant if she decides she do
                                                                                                                                                                                                                 and she'll be pleasant. She owes Feyre that much." Cassian's eyes flickered. "How is
                                                                                                                             esn't
                                                                                                                                                 nt to be there." "She'll be there," I said, grinding my teeth
he?" I didn't bother to put any sort of spin on it. "Nesta is Nesta. She does what she wants, even if it kills h
                                                                                                                                               ister. I've offered her job after job, and she refuses them all 🤊 I sucked on my teeth. "Perhaps you can talk some sense into her over Solstice." Cassia
                                                                                                                             er s
                                                                                                                                         er. I don't care—just keep Feyre out of it. It's her day, too." Because this Solstice ... it was her birthday. Twenty-one years old. It hit me for a moment, how Cassian said roughly, "and it's bullshit. She loves you—in a way I've never seen anybody love anyone." "It's hard sometimes," I admitted, staring to ot like my parents, shoved together." Cassian's face turned uncharacteristically solemn, and he remained quiet for a mome
n's Siphons gleamed atop his hands. "It'd likely end in violence." It indeed would. "Then don't say a word
small that number was. My beautiful, strong, fierce mate, shackled to me— "I know what that look means, you bastar d," ward the snow-coated field outside the house, the training rings and dwellings beyond it, "to remember that she picked it. P
                                                                                                                                                                        h his hair, his crimson Siphon glinting in the light streaming through the window. "It's the legends, the lies, they spin us whe
nt before he said, "I get jealous sometimes. I'd never begrudge you for your happiness, but what you two have, Rhys …" He d
                                                                                                                                        ragged a hand throug
n we're children. About the glory and wonder of the mating bond. I thought it was all bullshit. Then you two came along.
                                                                                                                                                                                    enty-one, Cassian." "So? Your mother was eighteen to your father's nine hundred." "And she was miserable." "For
                                                                                                                                                            enty-o
                                                                                                                                                                       ne. Tw
yre is not your mother. And you are not your father." He looked me over. "Where is this coming from, anyway? Are things ... not good?"
                                                                                                                                                                                     ctually. "I get this feeling," I said, pacing a step, the ancient wood floorboards creaking beneath my boots, my po
                                                                                                                                                            he opp
                                                                                                                                                                      osite, a
wer a writhing, living thing prowling through my veins, "that it's all some sort of joke. Some sort of cosmic trick, and that no one—no one
                                                                                                                                                                                     be this happy and not pay for it." "You've already paid for it, Rhys. Both of you. And then some." I waved a hand
                                                                                                                                                                        an
"I just ..." I trailed off, unable to finish the words. Cassian stared at me for a long moment. Then he crossed the di
                                                                                                                                       ce between
                                                                                                                                                                                     gathering me in an embrace so tight I could barely breathe. "You made it. We made it. You both endured enough
hat no one would blame you if you danced off into the sunset like Miryam and Drakon and never bothered with an
                                                                                                                                        g else again. But you
                                                                                                                                                                            are bothering—you're both still working to make this peace last. Peace, Rhys. We have peace, and the true kind. Enjoy it
enjoy each other. You paid the debt before it was ever a debt." My throat tightened, and I gripped him hard around hi
                                                                                                                                                                           athers digging into my fingers. "What about you?" I asked, pulling away after a moment. "Are you … happy?" Shadows dar
                                                                                                                                     ngs, the scales of his le
                                                                                                                                                                                    ulled, woven together. Cassian jerked his chin toward the door, "Get going, you bastard. I'll see you in three days, se shadows still guttered in his eyes. "It's an honor, my lord." CHAPTER 3 Cassian Cassian wasn't entirely certain
kened his hazel eyes. "I'm getting there." A halfhearted answer. I'd have to work on that, too. Perhaps there
                                                                                                                                     threads to be p
I nodded, opening the door at last. But paused on the threshold. "Thanks, brother." Cassian's crooked grin
                                                                                                                                          s bright,
that he could deal with Devlon and his warriors without throttling them. At least, not for the next good hour or so. A
                                                                                                                                            nd sinc
                                                                                                                                                            e that
                                                                                                                                                                      would
                                                                                                                                                                                     do little to help quell the murmurings of discontent, Cassian waited until Rhys had winnowed out into the snow a
nd wind before vanishing himself. Not winnowing, though that would have been one hell of a weapon against enem
                                                                                                                                                                       hys do
                                                                                                                                                                                     it with devastating results. Az, too—in the strange way that Az could move through the world without technically w
                                                                                                                              ie s in b attle. He'd
                                                                                                                                                            seen R
innowing. He'd never asked. Azriel certainly had never explained. But Cassian didn't mind his own method of m
                                                                                                                                                                          rved him well enough in battle. Stepping out the front door of the ancient wooden house so that Devlon and the other pricks
                                                                                                                            oving : flying. It certainly had se
in the sparring rings would see him, Cassian made a good show of stretching. First his arms, honed and still ac
                                                                                                                                                                          rian faces. Then his wings, wider and broader than theirs. They'd always resented that, perhaps more than anything else. H
                                                                                                                                       to pummel in a few Illy
e flared them until the strain along the powerful muscles and sinews was a pleasurable burn, his wings casting long shad
                                                                                                                                     ows across the snow. And
                                                                                                                                                                       with a mighty flap, he shot into the gray skies. The wind was a roar around him, the temperature cold enough that his eyes wat
ered. Bracing—freeing. He flapped higher, then banked left, aiming for the peaks behind the camp pass. No need to do a warning sweep over Devlon and the sparring rings. Ignoring them, projecting the message that they weren't important enough to even be considered threats we
e far better ways of pissing them off. Rhys had taught him that. Long ago. Catching an updraft that sent him soaring over the nearest peaks and
                                                                                                                                                             then into the endless, snow-coated labyrinth of mountains that made up their homeland, Cassian breathed in deep. His flying leathers a
nd gloves kept him warm enough, but his wings, exposed to the chill wind ... The cold was sharp as a knife. He could shield himself w
                                                                                                                                                            s Siphons, had done it in the past. But today, this morning, he wanted that biting cold. Especially with what he was about to do. Where he
e was going. He would have known the path blindfolded, simply by listening to the wind through the mountains, inhaling the smell of th
                                                                                                                                                            e pine-crusted peaks below, the barren rock fields. It was rare for him to make the trek. He usually only did it when his temper was likely
to get the better of him, and he had enough lingering control to know he needed to head out for a few hours. Today was no exception. In
                                                                                                                                                             the distance, small, dark shapes shot through the sky. Warriors on patrol. Or perhaps armed escorts leading families to their Solstice re
unions. Most High Fae believed the Illyrians were the greatest menace in these mountains. They didn't realize that far worse things prow
                                                                                                                                                                led between the peaks. Some of them hunting on the winds, some crawling out from deep caverns in the rock itself. Feyre had braved
facing some of those things in the pine forests of the Steppes. To save Rhys. Cassian wondered if his brother had ever told her what
                                                                                                                                                                  dwelled in these mountains. Most had been slain by the Illyrians, or sent fleeing to those Steppes. But the most curning of them, the
                                                                                                                                                          he chill that skittered down his spine as Cassian surveyed the empty, quiet mountains below and wondered what slept beneath the snow. Ramiel. The sacred mountain. The heart of not only Illyria, but the entirety of the Night Court. None were permitted on its barren, rocky slo
e most ancient ... they had found ways to hide. To emerge on moonless nights to feed. Even five centuries of training couldn't stop
He cut northward, casting the thought from his mind. On the horizon, a familiar shape took form, growing larger with each flap of his wings.
pes—save for the Illyrians, and only once a year at that. During the Blood Rite. Cassian soared toward it, unable to resist Ramiel's ancient su
                                                                                                                                                         mmons. Different—the mountain was so different from the barren, terrible presence of the lone peak in the center of Prythian. Ramiel had a
ways felt alive, somehow. Awake and watchful. He'd only set foot on it once, on that final day of the Rite. When he and battered, had scaled its side to reach the onyx monolith at its summit. He could still feel the crumbling rock beneath his boots, hear the
rasp of his breathing as he half hauled Rhys up the slopes, Azriel providing cover behind. As one, the three of that brutal week. The uncontested winners. The Rite hadn't changed in the centuries since. Early eacl
spring, it still went on, hundreds of warrior-novices deposited across the mountains and forests surrounding the peak, the territory off-limits during the rest of the year to prevent any of the novices from scouting ahead for the best routes and traps to lay. There were varying qualif
ers throughout the year to prove a novice's readiness, each slightly different depending on the camp. But the rules competed with wings bound, no Siphons—a spell restraining all magic—and no supplies beyond the clothes on your back. The goal
make it to the summit of that mountain by the end of that week and touch the stone. The obstacles: the distance, the natural traps, and each other. Old feuds played out; new ones were born. Scores were settled. A week of pointless bloodshed, Az insisted. Rhys often agreed, though
h he often also agreed with Cassian's point: the Blood Rite offered an escape valve for dangerous tensions within the Illyrians were strong, proud, fearless. But peacemakers, they were not. Perhaps he'd get luc
ky. Perhaps the Rite this spring would ease some of the malcontent. Hell, he'd offer to participate himself, if it meant quieting the grumbling. They'd barely survived this war. They didn't need another one. Not with so many unknowns gathering outside their borders. Ramiel rose hig
her still, a shard of stone piercing the gray sky. Beautiful and lonely. Eternal and ageless. No wonder that first ruler of the Night Court had made this his insignia. Along with the three stars that only appeared for a brief window each year, framing the uppermost peak of Ramiel like a
crown. It was during that window when the Rite occurred. Which had come first: the insignia or the Rite, Cassian didn't know. Had never really cared to find out. The conifer forests and ravines that dotted the landscape flowing to Ramiel's foot gleamed under fresh snow. Empty and
clean. No sign of the bloodshed that would occur come the start of spring. The mountain neared, mighty and endless, so wide that he might as well have been a mayfly in the wind. Cassian soared toward Ramiel's southern face, rising high enough to catch a glimpse of the shining l
lack stone jutting from its top. Who had put that stone atop the peak, he didn't know, either. Legend said it had existed before the Illyrians migrated from the Myrmidons, before humans had even walked the earth. Even with the fresh snow crusting Ra
miel, none had touched the pillar of stone. A thrill, icy and yet not unwelcome, flooded his veins. It was rare for anyone in the Blood Rite to make it to the monolith. Since he and his brothers had done it five centuries ago, Cassian could recall only a dozen or so who'd not only reac
ed the mountain, but also survived the climb. After a week of fighting, of running, of having to find and make your own weapons and food, that climb was worse than every horror before it. It was the true test of will, of courage. To climb when you had nothing left; to climb when you
body begged you to stop ... It was when the breaking usually occurred. But when he'd felt that ancient force sing into his blood in the heartbeat before it had whisked him back to the safety of Devlon's camp ... It had been worth it. To feel that
With a solemn bow of his head toward Ramiel and the living stone atop it, Cassian caught another familiar peak. One that no one but him and his brothers bothered to come to. What he'd so badly n
eeded to see, to feel, today. Once, it had been as busy a camp as Devion's. Once. Before a bastard had been born in a freezing, lone tent on the outskirts of the village. Before they'd thrown a young, unwed mother out into the snow only days after giving birth, her babe in her arms
And then taken that babe mere years later, tossing him into the mud at Devlon's camp. Cassian landed on the flat stretch of mountain pass, the snowdrifts higher than at Windhaven. Hiding any trace of the village that had stood here. Only cinders and debris remained anyway. He'd
made sure of it. When those who had been responsible for her suffering and torment had been dealt with, no one had wanted to remain here a moment longer. Not with the shattered bone and blood coating every surface, staining every field and training ring. So they'd migrated, so
me blending into other camps, others making their own lives elsewhere. None had ever come back. Centuries later, he didn't regret it. Standing in the snow and wind, surveying the emptiness where he'd been born, Cassian didn't regret it for a heartbeat. His mother had suffered eve
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