

### ***Azriel POV - A Court of Silver Flames (Books-a-Million Exclusive Edition)***

The river house had finally fallen quiet after the raucous Winter Solstice party, the faelights dimming to cast little pools of gold amid the deep shadow of the longest night of the year.

Amren, Mor, and Varian had finally gone to bed, but Azriel found himself lingering downstairs.

He knew he should get some sleep. He'd need it come dawn, for the snowball battle up at the cabin. Cassian had mentioned no less than six times tonight that he had a *secret plan* regarding his so-called *impending* victory. Az had let his brother boast. Especially since Azriel had been planning his own victory for a year now.

Cassian wouldn't know what was coming for him. And Az fully planned on capitalizing on the fact that Nesta likely wouldn't let Cassian sleep much tonight.

Az snickered to himself, to the listening shadows around him.

*Sleep*, they seemed to whisper in his ear. *Sleep*.

*I wish I could*, he answered silently. But sleep so rarely found him these days.

Too many razor-sharp thoughts sliced him any time he grew still long enough for them to strike. Too many wants and needs left his skin overheated and pulling taut across his bones. So he slept only when his body gave out, and even then only for a few hours,

Azriel surveyed the empty family room, presents and ribbons littering the furniture. Cassian and Nesta hadn't reappeared downstairs, though that came as no surprise. He was elated for his brother and yet...

Azriel couldn't stop it. The envy in his chest. Of Cassian, and Rhys.

He knew he'd be swallowed by it if he went up to his bedroom, so he'd remained down here by the dying light of the fire.

But even the silence weighed too heavily, and though the shadows kept him company, as they always had, as they always would, he found himself leaving the room. Entering the foyer.

Soft steps padded from under the stair archway, and there she was.

The faelights gilded Elain's unbound hair, making her glow like the sun at dawn. She halted, her breath catching in her throat.

"I..." He watched her swallow. She clutched a small gift in her hands. "I was coming to leave this on your pile of presents. I forgot to give it to you earlier."

Lie. Well, the second part was a lie. He didn't need his shadows to read her tone, the slight tightening of her face. She'd waited until everyone was asleep before venturing back down, where she'd leave her gift amongst his other, opened presents, subtle and unnoticed.

Elain closed the distance, and her breathing quickened as she again paused, now a scant foot away. She extended the wrapped gift, her hand shaking. "Here."

Az tried not to look at his scarred fingers as they took the gift. She hadn't bought her mate a present. But she'd gotten Azriel one last year -- a headache powder he kept on his nightstand at the House of Wind. Not to use, but just to look at. Which he'd done every night he'd slept there. Or attempted to sleep there.

Azriel unwrapped the box, glancing at the card that merely said, *You might find these useful at the House these days*, and then opened the lid.

Two small, bean-shaped fabric blobs lay within. Elain murmured, "You put them in your ears, and they block any sound. With Nesta and Cassian living there with you..."

He chuckled, unable to suppress the impulse. "No wonder you didn't want me to open it in front of everyone."

Elain's mouth twitched into a smile. "Nesta wouldn't appreciate the joke."

He offered her a smile back. "I wasn't sure if I should give you your present."

He left the rest unspoken. Because her mate was here, sleeping a level up. Because her mate had been in the family room and Azriel had needed to stay by the door the whole time because he couldn't stand the sight of it, the scent of their mating bond, and needed to have the option of leaving if it became too much.

Elain's large brown eyes flickered, well aware of all that. Just as he knew she was well aware of why Azriel so rarely came to family dinners these days.

But tonight, here in the dark and quiet, with no one to see...He pulled the small velvet box from the shadows around him. Opened it for her.

Elain sucked in a soft breath that whispered over his skin. His shadows skittered back at the sound. They'd always been prone to vanish when she was around.

The golden necklace seemed ordinary -- its chain unremarkable, the amulet tiny enough that it could be dismissed as an everyday charm. It was a small, flat rose fashioned of stained glass, designed so that when held to the light, the true depth of the colors would become visible. A thing of secret, lovely beauty.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, lifting it from the box. The golden faelicht shone through the little glass facets, setting the charm glowing with hues of red and pink and white. Azriel let his shadows whisk away the box as she said softly, "Put it on me?"

His head went quiet. But he took the necklace, opening the clasp as she exposed her back, sweeping her hair up in one hand to bare her long, creamy neck.

He knew it was wrong, but there he was, sliding the necklace around her. Letting his scarred fingers touch her immaculate skin. Letting them brush the side of her throat, savoring the velvet-soft texture. Elain shivered, and he took a damn long time fastening the clasp.

Azriel's fingers lingered at her nape, atop the first knob of her spine. Slowly, Elain pivoted into his touch. Until his palm lay flat against her neck.

It had never gone this far. They'd exchanged looks, the occasional brush of their fingers, but never this. Never blatant, unrestricted touching.

Wrong -- it was so wrong.

He didn't care.

He needed to know what the skin of her neck tasted like. What those perfect lips tasted like. Her breasts. Her sex. He needed her coming on his tongue --

Azriel's cock strained behind his pants, aching so fiercely he could hardly think. He prayed she didn't peer down. Prayed she didn't understand the shift in his scent.

He had only allowed himself these thoughts in the dead of night. Had only allowed his hand to fist his cock and think about her then, when even his shadows had gone to sleep. How that beautiful face might appear as he entered her, what sounds she'd make.

Elain bit her lower lip, and it took every ounce of Azriel's restraint to keep from putting his own teeth there.

"I should go," Elain said, but made no move to leave.

"Yes," he said, his thumb sweeping in long strokes along the side of her throat.

Her arousal drifted up to him, and his eyes nearly rolled back in his head at the sweet scent. He'd beg on his knees for a chance to taste it. But Azriel just stroked her neck again.

Elain shuddered, drifting closer. So close one deep breath would brush her breasts against his chest. She looked up at him, her face so trusting and hopeful and open that he knew she had no idea that he had done unspeakable things that sullied his hands far beyond their scars.

Such terrible things that it was a sacrilege for his fingers to skin, tainting her with his presence.

But he could have this. This one moment, and maybe a taste, and that would be it.

"Yes" Elain breathed, like she read the decision. Just this taste in the dead of the longest night of the year, where only the Mother might witness them.

Azriel's hand slid up her neck, burying in her thick hair. Tilting her face the way he wanted it. Elain's mouth parted slightly, her eyes scanning his before fluttering shut.

Offer and permission.

He nearly groaned with relief and need as he lowered his head toward hers.

*Azriel.*

Rhys's voice thundered through him, halting him mere inches from Elain's sweet mouth.

*Azriel.*

Unrelenting command filled his name, and Azriel looked up.

Rhysand stood atop the staircase. Glowering down at them.

*My office. Now.*

Rhys vanished, and Azriel was left standing before Elain, who still awaited his kiss. His stomach twisted as he pulled his hand from her hair and stepped back. Forced himself to say, "This was a mistake."

She opened her eyes, hurt and confusion warring there before she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"You don't-- Don't apologize," he managed to say. "Never apologize. It's I who should..." He shook his head, unable to stand the bleakness he'd brought to her expression. "Goodnight."

Azriel winnowed into shadows before she could say anything, appearing at the doors to Rhys's study a heartbeat later. His shadows whispered in his ear that Elain had gone upstairs.

Rhys sat at his desk, fury a moonless night across his face. He asked softly, "Are you out of your mind?"

Azriel donned the frozen mask he'd perfected while in his father's dungeon. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rhys's power rippled through the room like a dark cloud. "I'm talking about *you*, about to kiss Elain, in the middle of a hall where *anyone could see you*," he snarled. "*Including her mate.*"

Azriel stiffened. Let his cold rage rise to the surface, the rage he only ever let

Rhysand see, because he knew his brother could match it. "What if the Cauldron was wrong?"

Rhysand blinked. "What of Mor, Az?"

Azriel ignored the question. "The Cauldron chose three sisters. Tell me how it's possible that my two brothers are with two of those sisters, yet the third was given to another." He had never before dared speak the words aloud.

Rhys's face drained of color. "You believe you *deserve* to be her mate?"

Azriel scowled. "I think Lucien will never be good enough for her, and she has no interest in him, anyway."

"So you'll what?" Rhys's voice was pure ice. "Seduce her away from him?"

Azriel said nothing. He hadn't gotten that far with his planning, certainly not beyond the fantasies he pleased himself to.

Rhys growled, "Allow me to make one thing very clear. You are to stay away from her."

"You can't order me to do that."

"Oh, I can, and I will. If Lucien finds out you're pursuing her, he has every right to defend their bond as he sees fit. Including invoking the Blood Duel."

"That's an Autumn Court tradition." The battle to the death was so brutal that it was only enacted in rare cases. Despite being an outsider, Azriel had wanted to invoke it when he'd found Mor all those years ago. Had been ready to challenge both Beron and Eris to Blood Duels and kill them both. Only Mor's right to claim their heads in vengeance had kept him from doing so.

"Lucien, as Beron's son, has the right to demand it of you."

"I'll defeat him with little effort." Pure arrogance laced every word, but it was true.

"I know." Rhys's eyes flickered. "And your doing so will rip apart any fragile peace and alliances we have, not only with the Autumn Court but also with the Spring Court *and* Jurian and Vassa." Rhys bared his teeth. "So you will leave Elain alone. If you need to fuck someone, go to a pleasure hall and pay for it, but *stay away* from her."

Azriel snarled softly.

"Snarl all you want." Rhys leaned back in his chair. "But if I see you panting after her again, I'll make you regret it."

Rhys had rarely threatened punishment or pulled rank. It stunned Azriel enough that it knocked him from his rage.

Rhys jerked his chin toward the door. "Get out"

Azriel tucked in his wings and left without another word, stalking through the house and onto the front lawn to sit in the frigid starlight. To let the frost in his veins match the air around him.

Until he felt nothing. Was again nothing at all.

Then he flew to the House of Wind, knowing that if he slept in the riverside manor, he'd do something he regretted. He'd been so vigilant about keeping away from Elain as much as possible, and had stayed up here to avoid her, and tonight...tonight had proved he'd been right to do so.

He aimed for the training pit, giving in to the need to work off the temptation, the rage and frustration and writhing need.

He found it already occupied. His shadows had not warned him.

It was too late to bank without appearing like he was running, Azriel landed in the ring a few feet from where Gwyn practiced in the chill night, her sword glimmering like ice in the moonlight.

She stopped mid-slice, whirling to face him. "I'm sorry. I knew you all were going to the river house, so I didn't think anyone would mind I came up here, and--"

"It's fine. I came to retrieve something I forgot." The lie was smooth and cool, as he knew his face was. His shadows peered over his wings at her.

The young priestess smiled--and Azriel thought it might have been directed at his curious shadows. But she just hooked her coppery-brown hair behind an arched ear. "I was trying to cut the ribbon." She pointed with her sword at the white ribbon, which seemed to glow silver.

"Aren't you cold?" His breath clouded in front of him.

Gwyn shrugged. "Once you get moving, you stop noticing it."

He nodded, silence falling. For a heartbeat, their gazes met. He blocked out the bloody memory that flashed, so at odds with the Gwyn he saw before him now.

Her head ducked, as if remembering it too. That he'd been the one who'd found her that day at Sangravah. "Happy Solstice," she said, as much a dismissal as it was a holiday blessing.

He snorted. "Are you kicking me out?"

Gwyn's teal eyes flashed with alarm. "No! I mean, I don't mind sharing the ring. I just...I know you like to be alone." Her mouth quirked to the side, crinkling the freckles on her nose. "Is that why you came up here?"

Sort of. "I forgot something," he reminded her.

"At two in the morning?"

Pure amusement glittered in her stare. Better than the pain and grief he'd spied a moment before. So he offered her a crooked smile. "I can't sleep without my favorite dagger."

"A comfort to every growing child."

Azriel's lips twitched. He refrained from mentioning that he did indeed sleep with a dagger. Many daggers. Including one under his pillow.

"How was the party?" Her breath curled in front of her mouth, and one of his shadows darted out to dance with it before twirling back to him. Like it heard some silent music.

"Fine," he said, and realized a heartbeat later that it wasn't a socially acceptable answer. "It was nice."

Not much better. So he asked, "Did you and the priestesses have a celebration?"

"Yes, though the service was the main highlight."

"I see."

She angled her head, hair shining like molten metal. "Do you sing?"

He blinked. It wasn't every day that people took him by surprise, but..."Why do you ask?"

"They call you shadowsinger. Is it because you sing?"

"I *am* a shadowsinger--it's not a title that someone just made."

She shrugged again, irreverently. Az narrowed his eyes, studying her. "Do you, though?" she pressed. "Sing?"

Azriel couldn't help his soft chuckle. "Yes."

She opened her mouth to ask more, but he didn't feel like explaining. Or demonstrating, since that was surely what she'd ask next. So Az jerked his chin to the sword dangling from her hand. "Try cutting the ribbon again."

"What--with you watching?"

He nodded.

She considered, and he wondered if she'd say no, but Gwyn blew out a breath,

steadied her feet and balance, and sliced. A beautiful, precise blow, but it didn't sever the ribbon.

"Again," he ordered, rubbing his hands against the cold, grateful for its bracing bite and the distraction of this impromptu lesson.

Gwyn sliced again, but the ribbon remained unyielding.

"You're turning the blade a fraction as it comes parallel to the ground," Azriel explained, drawing his Illyrian blade from down his back. "Watch." He slowly demonstrated, rotating his wrist where she did. "You see how you open up right here?" He corrected his position. "Keep your wrist like that. The blade is an extension of your arm."

Gwyn tried the movement as slowly as he had, and he watched her self-correct, fighting against the urge to open up her wrist and rotate the blade. She did it three times before she stopped falling into the bad habit. "I blame Cassian for this. He's too busy making eyes at Nesta to notice such mistakes these days."

Azriel laughed. "I'll give you that."

Gwyn smiled broadly. "Thank you."

Azriel dipped his head in a sketch of a bow, something restless settling in him. Even his shadows had calmed. As if content to lounge on his shoulders and watch.

But--sleep. He needed to at least attempt to get some.

"Happy Solstice," Azriel said before aiming for the archway into the House. "Don't stay out too much longer. You'll freeze."

Gwyn nodded her farewell, again facing the ribbon. A warrior sizing up an opponent, all traces of that charming irreverence gone.

Azriel entered the warmth of the stairwell, and as he descended, he could have sworn a faint, beautiful singing followed him. Could have sworn his shadows sang in answer.

He slept as well as could be expected, but when Azriel returned to the river house to gather his presents before dawn, he found Elain's necklace amid the pile. He pocketed it. Spent the rest of his day, even the blasted snowball fight, with every intention of returning it to the shop in the Palace of Thread and Jewels.

But when he returned from the cabin in the mountains, he didn't go to the market square.

Instead, he found himself at the library beneath the House of Wind, standing before Clotho as the clock chimed seven in the evening.

He slid the small box across her desk. "If you see Gwyn, would you give this to her?"



Clotho angled her hooded head, and her enchanted pen wrote on a piece of paper, *A Solstice gift from you?*

Azriel shrugged. "Don't tell her it came from me."

*Why?*

"Does she need to know? Just tell her it was a gift from Rhys."

*That would be a lie.*

He avoided the urge to cross his arms, not wanting to look intimidating. He blocked out the memory that flashed--of his mother cringing before his father, the male standing with crossed arms in such a way that made his displeasure known before he opened his hateful mouth.

"Look, I..." Az searched for the words, his voice becoming quiet. "If there's another priestess here who might appreciate it, give it to them. But I'm not taking that necklace with me when I leave."

He waited for Clotho's pen to finish writing. *Your eyes are sad, Shadowsinger.*

He offered her a grim smile. "I lost the snowball fight today."

Clotho was smart enough to see through his deflection. She wrote, *I'll give it to Gwyneth, Tell her a friend left it for her.*

He wouldn't go so far as to call Gwyn a friend, but... "Fine. Thank you."

Clotho's pen moved once more. *She deserves something as beautiful as this. I thank you for the joy it shall bring to her.*

Something sparked in Azriel's chest, but he only nodded his thanks and left. He could picture it, though, as he ascended the stairs back to the House proper. How Gwyn's teal eyes might light upon seeing the necklace. For whatever reason... he could see it.

But Azriel tucked away the thought, consciously erasing the slight smile it brought to his face. Buried the image down deep, where it glowed quietly.

A thing of secret, lovely beauty.