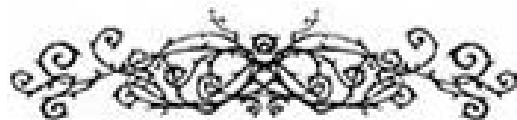


Wings and Embers

A Court of Thorns and Roses ~ Book 2.5

by

Sarah J. Maas



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For Cassian, the brash, handsome Illyrian general of Rhysand's armies, dealing with the opposite sex has always been easy - and enjoyable. But when he's dispatched to the human realm to send a message for his High Lord, Cassian finds himself again pitted against Feyre's sharp-tongued, steel-willed older sister Nesta. Honestly, Cassian has been aching for another round against the beautiful Nesta since their first, tense meeting weeks ago, though he certainly hasn't admitted that to anyone - least of all himself.

And Cassian certainly hasn't admitted that he may have finally met someone not so easily seduced by his quick grin and unfaltering arrogance.

Read on for an exclusive look at what happened at that second, private meeting - and why the High Lord's general refused to divulge any of the details of it when he later returned to the Night Court.

It wasn't that he was looking for a fight, Cassian told himself as he circled above the sprawling estate for the fifth time, despite the unseasonable, early spring chill so brutal it could steal the breath from even the most battle-scarred Illyrian warrior. Rhys *had* asked him to deliver his latest letter to the human queens, since Az was otherwise occupied trying to infiltrate whatever nasty defenses they held around their palace, and Mor didn't want to set foot in the mortal realm unless necessary. Amren, naturally, was out of the question - simply because she was Amren and it'd be like sending a plains-cat into a pen of lambs. So that left him.

Well, Feyre, too, but she and Rhys were ... busy.

And, fine - maybe he'd agreed to come a bit *too* quickly, but ... Cassian surveyed the estate, the muddy, thawing grounds, the distant village, and looming, budding forest. He'd left their first encounter here not entirely sure where he'd stood, or who'd had the upper hand. And, Mother damn him, in the past few weeks, he'd found himself turning over every word and look he'd exchanged with her, over and over.

None of it had been pleasant, every syllable from her mouth barbed and vicious, and ... Cassian huffed a breath, hot tendrils ripping in the wind. He couldn't tell what was worse: that he'd thought so much about it, or that he'd run here so damn fast. And was now ... dawdling.

The thought sent him into a swift, near-reckless dive for the green-roofed estate, his magic's cloaking rendering him little more than a fell wind and a hollow boom of wings. The horses in the nearby stables thrashed and nickered at his approach, but their keepers scanned their immediate surroundings, found nothing of alarm, and resumed their work.

Cassian tried not to think about how easy it was - how that lack of awareness, that lack of instinct, would likely cost them their lives should the wall be shattered. Should someone like him turn his estate into a personal hunting ground.

He'd seen it happen in the last war - not that many humans had been wealthy enough to own property. But he'd witnessed what had been left of entire slave camps when one of the Fae decided to have some fun. The thought was enough for him to clench his teeth and hone his focus on the front door before him.

They'd sent word yesterday about precisely when to expect him. So when he knocked on the front door, it was a matter of a heartbeat before it was yanked open.

The sharp movement told him which sister had been waiting.

Yet with his magic cloaking him, Nesta Archeron and her unnervingly perfect face saw nothing but thinning patches of snow on the muddy lawn and the sloping drive cutting through it, the cobblestones gleaming with streams of melting ice. She casually opened the door for him to pass, and called to the insufferably nosy housekeeper that no one was at the door and the sound had only been the wind.

Right, because emptying the house of all the servants so often would raise more suspicions than was safe. Especially with the other sister engaged to a Fae-hunting prick.

The housekeeper scuttled into the immaculate foyer to confirm for herself that no one was there, but Nesta merely informed her that she was going upstairs and not to disturb her for an hour. The woman opened her mouth to object, but Nesta, with rather impressive flatness, repeated her order and began her ascent up the grand, carpeted staircase.

The housekeeper's eyes thinned to slits as the young mistress strode away - and Cassian kept his steps quiet as death as he eased around the aging woman, then up the stairs as well.

He was focusing hard enough on keeping silent, on keeping his wings tucked in tight so they didn't rustle anything, that he barely took in the heavy, pale purple gown, simpler than others he'd seen Nesta in, tight enough in the bodice to show off her slim waist, the

fitted sleeves displaying her slender arms. A thinner build than Feyre and Elain - discounting the generous breasts that he glimpsed as Nesta reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

Not that he looked at them. Much.

For all the world, Nesta was merely trudging to her room, perhaps a bit grumpy and groggy. But as soon as she entered the spacious bedroom, bedecked in velvets and silks of varying shades of blue and silver, and shut the oak door a moment later, the heavy, slow posture vanished.

Along with his cloaking.

A blink was her only tell of discomfort or surprise - and he may or may not have let his wings spread a bit wider as she looked him over.

"You're ten minutes late," she only said, moving toward the far end of the room, where a fire crackled against early spring's chill. Where the sound of the flames might cover their voices. Clever girl.

"I do have other duties, you know," he said with equal quiet, flashing a grin.

Like circling the house because he was compiling a list of choice insults to throw her way, responses to an invented argument. Like a complete fool.

"Here I was," Nesta said, a pillar of ice and steel beside the hearth, "thinking I heard you flapping around for ten minutes. It must have been a pigeon stuck in one of the chimneys."

Cassian just stared at her. She stared at him.

His temper rose with dizzying speed at the words, the absurd perfection of her. A blade given form - that's what she was.

He smiled, slow and vicious, precisely in the way he'd learned made her see red. A smile that he knew instantly unsheathed those lovely claws of hers. "Hello, Nesta. Nice to see you."

No reaction, no shift in her scent at the mile that usually made his enemies start running. Nothing, save for the delicate flare of her nostrils. "How's my sister?"

Healing, he almost said. Trying to outrun the fact that she's falling in love with Rhys, and pointedly ignoring the fact that he's been in

love with her for a damn long time. That all signs point to them being mates, but I'm not stupid enough to say it to either of them.

So he merely said, "Busy."

A flicker of her throat. "So busy she cannot deign to visit, it seems."

"Feyre's got enough on her plate - with the situation with Hybern and outside of it."

The fire drew out the golden sheen in Nesta's hair as she angled her head. A predator sizing up a worthy opponent. "And what is your role in all of it?"

Cassian braced his feet apart on the floor. "I command Rhys's armies."

Her blue-grey eyes flicked over him in a sweep that might have cut off a lesser male's balls. "All of them?"

"The important ones."

A snort, and she looked toward the fire. As sure a dismissal and belittling as he'd ever encountered.

Cassian stiffened. "And what, exactly, do *you* do that's of importance?"

Her head snapped up. Oh, that had hit the mark.

"Why should I bother defending myself," Nesta said with lethal cold, "to a male who is so puffed up on his own sense of importance there's barely enough space in the room for his enormous head?"

It was his turn to blink.

The he was stalking toward her, his long stride eating up the ornate carpet between them. She did not recoil, did not yield one step back. Only lifted her chin to meet his stare as he towered over her, spreading his wings slightly, and said through his teeth, "Do you have news from the queens?"

Her brows flattened. "Leader of the High Lord's armies, and yet the brute remains. You cannot cow me with words, so you seek to intimidate me through your hulking size."

"*Hulking---*"

"You need me far more than I need you. So I'd suggest you merely agree, tuck in those bat wings, and ask nicely."

He did no such thing.

But he did take a step closer, bracing a hand on the mantel, and leaned in close enough to breathe in that scent of hers.

It hit him in the gut so hard he could barely focus, and it took five centuries of training to make himself meet her eyes rather than let his own roll back into his head, to keep himself poised there instead of burying his face in the crook between her neck and shoulder, to keep from moving closer, from ...*touching*.

No blush stained her cheek as he held the distance between them, hardly more than a hand's span between their faces.

She was young - twenty-two, twenty-three at most. But had she been with a man? He shouldn't have cared, or wondered, and it made no difference to him, but ... normally, he could tell. She ... Cassian couldn't read her at all. So he moved his head closer, his dark hair sliding over his brow, and purred, "There are other ways I could play nice, Nesta Archeron."



The Fae male - Cassian - was dangerous.

Of course, he was dangerous in the expected ways: tall, muscled, skilled in weaponry and war. Then there were those enormous wings, and the little fact that he was a deadly Fae warrior who served at the feet of the most powerful High Lord in history. A High Lord her sister was now entangled with - falling in love with if she'd read it right. The High Lord already loved her wildly, that much was clear.

But Cassian was dangerous for another reason entirely. Not the handsome face, but those hazel eyes... They had a way of assessing everything and everyone.

Standing flush against the mantel, the snapping fire was blazingly hot against her left side as Cassian towered over her, close enough to share air. Nesta counted her breaths. Held that gaze, willing him not to see too far, too deep. Better to keep him distracted with the barbed words, the utter dismissal.

Or - this. The offer he'd thrown her way, the test.

No doubt to find another weakness. Was there a way past her defenses in *that* regard?

Play nice. A small smile curved her lips.

"If I wanted a male pawing at me," Nesta said, refusing to let her chin lower, "I'd sooner ask one of the hounds."

That insufferable smile remained. And Cassian went right for the throat as he said "Have you ever *been* with a male, Nesta?"

To lie or tell the truth - where did the advantage lie? So she merely said, "Have *you*?"

Cassian snorted, the breath of it caressing her lips. "I asked first, sweetheart." He angled his head, that night-dark hair sliding over his brow like silk. "Unless you prefer females?"

It was by no means an insult if she did, but there was taunt enough in it that she placed a brazen hand on his chest. Sculpted muscle lay beneath the tight fighting leathers, the warmth of him leaking into her palm. Fire - he reminded her of the fire made flesh. She pushed gently on his chest, her hand somehow seeming smaller against the broadness of his torso.

Trained killer - predator by birth and training.

Arrogant by nature.

Cassian only straightened as she dared step closer, forced to do so merely because if he hadn't, her mouth and his would have found themselves with no distance between them at all. "Who and what I prefer is none of your concern," she said. "Nor is -"

"You haven't answered my first question. Or are all these other questions a diversion?"

"What's it to you?"

"More questions." A cocky grin.

And that easily, she found it - the answer she knew would claw at him.

Nesta brushed her body against his, barely more than a whisper of a touch, but it still made him stiffen. She crooned, "No, I haven't." The truth. Her hand dug into the leather-covered chest. "Why should I have bothered? By the time I came of age, I was surrounded by low-born brutes and bastards. I'd rather use my own hand than sully myself with theirs."

Any amusement faded. She could have sworn she heard the arrow of her words strike their target. She'd picked up enough about his upbringing. So she'd told him the truth - and wrapped it in a bundle of blades designed to slice him if he thought too long on it.

No, she had not been with any male, Fae or human. Tomas had wanted to, and she... some part of her had known no future lay with him. Knew about his hateful father, and that he did nothing to prevent the man from beating his mother. She had barely let Tomas kiss her, and that day when she had ended it, he'd...

She swallowed, shutting out the memory of what he'd said and done. The sound of her tearing dress. No - it hadn't gone that far, but... The blind terror in those moments he'd tried, before she'd screamed and clawed her way free. And never told anyone.

Something must have shown on her face, in her scent.

Because his annoyance vanished - no, it shifted. Into something else, something... Rage.

That's what stilled Cassian's face.

Pure, burning rage.

It robbed her of breath, of any sort of sense that she might indeed have the upper hand as he ground out, "Who."

She hated Tomas, hated him enough that she sometimes hoped he'd get run over by a cart, but she wouldn't wish on anyone the sort of death Cassian's eyes promised.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, and made to withdraw her hand.

He gripped it, faster than she could detect, and pinned it there.

His heart was beating at a gallop now - a thunderous, mighty gallop.

Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous, this male.

If only for the fact that he made her feel so out of control. That she had no idea what he'd do - what *she'd* do - if he found her vulnerable for even a moment.

"Did someone hurt you," he said, his voice so guttural she could barely understand it.

The wrath, the utter stillness with which he stood - this was how he was when he was close to killing. *Wanted* to kill.

His hand pressed into hers, calluses scraping.

She hadn't answered him. "Would it change anything if someone had? Would it make you see me differently, treat me differently?"

"It'd make me hunt them down and shatter every bone in their body."

A shiver went down her spine - not at the fear of him, but at the truth in the promise. The sincerity.

"You don't know me," she said. "Why bother?"

Cassian snarled, inching closer, his hand gripped hers - then paused. As if the question sunk in. As if reality sunk in. He blinked. "I'd do it for anyone."

She knew he meant it - and that he would.

Perhaps that was what unnerved her, made her want to slice at him. The utter sincerity. That he honored his promises, and did not make them lightly. That he saw and spoke the truth, and when he'd seen her that first day, he'd weighed her... actions when they'd lived in that cottage.

Her cowardice, selfishness. The rage that had consumed her, so that she wanted them all to starve, just to see if their useless father would bother to save them. And then little Feyre had stepped in, and Nesta had hated her for it, too - that Feyre had done the unthinkable and kept them alive.

She didn't know what to do with it, that rage. It still burned and hunted her, still made her want to rip and roar and rend the world into pieces. She felt it all - too keenly, too sharply. Hated and cared and loved and dreaded, more than other people, she sometimes thought. Could sift between them all in a matter of moments, like she was trying on different sets of clothes, and no one could tell or care.

Except him. He could see it, feel it.

That first afternoon, he'd looked at her - not at the face and the body that human men marked, but *her*- and he had seen it all. She'd wanted to hurt him for it before he could reveal those things to everyone else, find a way to *break* him so he couldn't -

The hand pushing her own against his chest gentled. Cassian's thumb stroked the back of her palm, the pad of it rough with

calluses.

A log shifted in the fire, snapping as embers exploded, flaring light into the room.

She'd been staring at him. He blinked, mouth parting slightly.

Cassian leaned toward her, and Nesta found herself tipping her head back, exposing her neck, granting him utter access as he graced his nose against her throat.



Mother and Cauldron damn him both.

This woman.

Nesta.

Cassian couldn't bring himself to step back from the line that was so clearly drawn between them. One moment, he'd wanted to throttle her, then he'd read that terror on her face regarding her own past and he'd gone so murderously calm he'd scared even himself, then... then it had all stopped, the eye of the storm with them in it, and there she was.

And in those blue-grey eyes, he could see the thoughts swirling in her as if they were smoke under glass. The cunning mind at work behind that face - the one he hadn't been able to get out of his head these weeks.

So he'd just... moved.

And then Nesta had tipped up her chin, allowing him access to her throat.

Every instinct in his body came roaring to the surface, so violent he had to choke them with a brutal grip or else he'd find himself on his knees, begging her for a touch, for *anything*.

But he leaned in, and grazed the tip of his nose along the side of her neck.

Soft - her skin was so soft; so fragile. He could scent the mortal blood rushing just beneath. Cassian breathed in the smell of her into his lungs, stirring his cock as it latched onto some intrinsic part of him and sank its talons deep.

Nesta Nesta Nesta

Her eyes drifted closed, and a small, breathless sound came out of her as Cassian brushed his lips over where his nose had touched.

His knees nearly buckled as her slender hand dug into his fighting leathers. He tried not to think of what that hand would feel like on other parts of him. Gripping him; stroking him.

More more more, his body sang.

He angled his head and kissed another spot, closer to her jaw.

Her frantic heartbeat was like a hummingbird's wings, though her body remained tight and loose in all the right places, a flush spreading across those gorgeous breasts of hers. Big enough to fill his hands, to nuzzle until she was begging him -

Her pulse hammered right beneath his mouth. His tongue brushed it.

It was that touch that had her jolting back.

Nesta slammed into the wood paneling hard enough that he reached for her. But she was wide-eyed, livid, as she put a hand to her throat.

Cassian beat her to the venom about to blast from that throat and said, "Wound a bit tight these days, Nesta?"

She lowered her hand and hissed, "Is it some faerie magic of yours, to do such things?"

He barked a laugh. "No. Though I'm flattered you think so."

Nesta glowered, but let out a low, considering chuckle. "Well," she said, sliding past him and pacing for the window with smooth, calculated steps. "If that's what a bastard-born Fae warrior can do, no wonder my sister has become so entangled with the High Lords."

Bitch.

Bitch for insult to him and to Feyre. "Did it bother you more that you wanted it, or that it was a bastard-born nobody who made you feel such things, Nesta?"

"It's been a long winter. Beggars can't be picky, I suppose." Wall after wall after wall snapped up, her posture going stiffer, and -

What did he care? What *did* he care? He had enough shit to deal with. Throwing in a mortal who would have a few more decades

before things between them became awkward was... foolish. And then there would be the matter of explaining it to everyone.

To Mor. His blood chilled.

He wasn't stupid. He knew she and Azriel were... whatever they were. Knew Azriel had been in love with Mor from the moment she'd strutted into the Illyrian war-camp five centuries ago. And Cassian had been jealous - of Mor's shy glances at Azriel in those first few weeks, and the fact that his dearest friend and brother... was looking at someone else. That she'd appeared, and then Azriel had changed. Only slightly, but Cassian had known his friend did not belong solely to him and Rhys anymore.

So when Mor had asked him to bed her... He'd done it. A jealous, stupid prick, he'd done it, and regretted it at that very first thrust, when he'd felt her maidenhead yield to him, and realized the enormity of what she'd done.

But then she'd walked away, and Azriel hadn't made a move, and... Mor was still there between them. Somewhere between friend and lover. Dear to him as family, but... Cassian had hated himself for that look on Azriel's face afterward.

And then for what had happened to Mor at her family's hands.

He'd had lovers, some for a night and some for months, and Mor had never cared, but...

This woman standing before him like a pillar of steel and flame...Cassian didn't want to tell Mor about her. About how he'd touched her neck.

Cassian managed to say, "Since you were happy for a distraction, I'll assume the queens haven't been in touch and be on my way." Before she managed to completely castrate him. He flicked his fingers, Rhys's letter appearing between them. He chucked it onto a low-lying nearby table. "Mail that to the queens as soon as you can."

Nesta glanced between the letter and him, her shoulders squaring. "Tell my sister and that new High Lord of hers to send someone else next time."

Cassian bared his teeth in a feral grin. "Tell your *other* sister we'd rather deal with her."

"Elain stays out of this. The less association with your kind, the better."

"Why are you letting her marry that bigoted prick?" The question snapped out of him.

"He has good reasons to hate your kind. As do we all."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"I thought you were leaving."

"You have a damned opinion on everyone else in the world. Why not tell Elain she's marrying a monster?"

"Perhaps all you males are monsters."

If she'd been harmed by one, he didn't blame her for that feeling at all. But his words were still sharp as he said, "She deserves better than someone like that."

"Indeed she does." Flat and cold.

He pushed, simply because he damn well couldn't stop himself, "And what do *you* deserve?"

A slow smile, indeed a plains-cat readying for the kill. Then, "Certainly more than a bastard-born nobody."

Bitch. But he drawled, "What a fine partner you are, Nesta. Remind me to bring a book on military strategy the next time. Maybe you'll stand a chance then."

A cold, flat look.

"It's easier, isn't it," Cassian breathed, crossing the distance again, not caring who saw them standing in the bay window. "To wield the words and the coldness as armor to keep everyone from seeing where and who you failed and how you did not care until it was too late."

Only hatred gleamed in her eyes, no hint of that slumbering lust that had addled his senses.

"Well, I see it, Nesta Archeron. And all I see is a bored and spoiled girl -"

She moved with impressive swiftness for a human, but still too slow to prevent him from blocking her.

Cassian gripped her raised knee, a mere inch from his balls, and squeezed tight enough to make her hiss.

"Cheap shot," he said with a half smile. "Come play with me, Nesta, and I'll teach you far more interesting ways to bring a male to his knees."

She tried to wrench herself free, but he didn't let go. She swayed back, and he caught her by the waist, hauling her closer to keep her from falling through the window. He snickered at the skirts around him. "What are you hiding beneath all this, anyway?"

Nesta steadied herself enough to wrench her knees out of his grip. "Get out of my house."

Cassian simply grinned at her.

She surged for him.

He thought she'd strangle him, which was precisely why he gripped her wrists, but -

Her hands, cool and steady, landed on either side of his face. Tugged his head down.

Cassian's breathing turned jagged as her eyes flicked to his mouth, as her body came flush with his, those breasts so soft against him. *Stupid, stupid, stupid* -

He didn't care. Didn't give a shit as she rose up on her toes, her mouth nearing his -

Pain exploded between his legs, knocking the breath from his chest as that gods-damned knee of hers indeed found its mark.

Cassian staggered back, swearing viciously. She snorted, looking down at him as he fell on his ass into an armchair, clutching his stomach, trying to reorder his brain -

"You're all the same," she said, imperious as the night and cold as the dawn. "Perhaps being an immortal makes you predictable."

"*You*," he gasped out.

A low laugh broke from those lips, which he'd been fully prepared to taste, to *devour* -

"No, the queens did not send word," Nesta said, drifting toward the door. "I haven't heard from them at all."

Cassian willed his legs to move, but the pain lingered, immobilizing his knees.

"I'll mail the letter tomorrow morning." Nesta pause with her hand on the knob and looked over a shoulder. "You know nothing about

who I am, and what I've done, and what I want. And while we're on the subject... Send someone else next time. If I see you on my doorstep I'll scream loud enough for the servants to come running."

He gaped at her, the pain ebbing enough that he could stagger upright.

But Nesta was gone, slipping down the hall, where some servant called out to her and she murmured a response.

A minute later, he left. Not by the front door, but by squeezing through her gods-damned bedroom window like a thief in the night. He launched himself into the sky before anyone could wonder at the rustle and boom of wings.

Cassian did not circle over the house. But he could feel Nesta's attention as he soared for the wall. Even shielded from sight, he could feel those blue-grey eyes on him.

The feeling chased him all the way back to Velaris.