A Dark Thing Like Me

by aeriie

Summary

Set directly after the preview in ACOFAS when Nesta is told she’ll be going to the Illyrian Mountains (because we all know she won’t be going without a fuss)
“Take me back beyond the wall.”

It’s not a request that slips past my lips, but a demand. If my sister and her insufferable High Lord husband want to see me gone, then I’ll go. But on my own terms.

“No,” My eyes narrow at my sisters response. Feyres’ mind is just as stubborn as mine, and it’s made up.

“I’m not going anywhere with that oversized bat,” I seethe through my teeth. “Much less some warmongering camp in the goddamnmiddle of nowhere.”

“Nesta, you flatter me,” Cassian drawls from the armchair beside me, though Feyre gives him a look.

Don’t provoke her.

I could almost snort in amusement, but my face remains impassive. As it must. Feyre gives me a cold stare. How easy it must be for her to turn me out of her city. Out of sight, out of mind. I suppose that’s the real reason she has no paintings of me in her palace. That way it’s easier to forget about her black sheep of a sister.

Well, I will not be sent away at her convenience. And I will not be forgotten.

There is one other who might be willing to help, though it’s a long shot.

“Amren.”

I turn instead to the small woman, recently made Fae, who once upon a time I reluctantly called my friend. She gives me a hard stare, her silver eyes unmoving. Her trademark, really. Nothing is ever soft with Amren.

“If you want to go back to that shithole, girl, you get there yourself.”

“Fine.”

My patience isn’t just worn thin, it’s on the edge of shattering altogether. These people make me sick. Living in their hidden city, with their jewels and art and finery. A family in all but blood.

Well, I am Feyres’ blood. And if that’s not enough for her, then good riddance. What do I have to keep me here?

You know what…

A small voice stirs in the back of my mind, but I ignore it. A lumbering babysitter is the only part he’s trying to play. Well, he can go to hell with the rest of them.

“Nesta,” Feyre starts, but I’m already on my feet, striding purposefully towards the entrance hall to exit
“Let her go,” Rhysands voice catches up to me as I leave, and it grates on my already electrified nerves. *The most powerful High Lord in history.* It’s bad enough he could scent my fear of his power. I’m sure he knows a lost cause when he sees one.

“Nesta!”

My sister Elain, the one I could never walk away from, bounds down the path of the river house to meet me at the gates. She’s glowing. Her golden skin tanned from spending the Summer in the gardens, and her eyes clearer then I’d seen them in a long time.

As much as it pains me to admit it, seeing her like this makes something warm the ice inside me. I don’t blame her for wanting to move on from the war. For wanting to heal from the hell we were put through.

And I certainly wouldn’t want her to hold back from that. Not on my account.

“Where will you go?” It’s not a question of if I’ll stay. She knows my mind is made up.

“I’ll find somewhere remote. Somewhere I won’t be bothered by human or Fae.”

Her amber eyes are filled with so much sadness that I almost falter. “How will you live?”

“I have money I can take with me. Enough to last through the winter, if used sparingly.” She gives me a look to say she doesn’t understand. She doesn’t understand why I would leave this beautiful place, and these people, and her.

But what she doesn’t understand, most of all, is this is no place for a dark thing like me.

“We’ve lived in worse before,” Is all I can say in an attempt to smooth over her concerns. The last thing I need is for Elain trying to convince me not to leave. It would have worked, in the past. But now…

She doesn’t say it, but I know what she’s thinking. We had Feyre then. We had her hunting. I let myself depend on her then, as I am now. I won’t do it again.

“What do you trust him?”

She doesn’t have to look back over her shoulder to know who I mean. Her silent protector. The Shadowsinger. Even now I can see him, half-bathed in shadows, which I know he means for me to. If he didn’t, he’d be invisible to any eye, even ones as sharp as mine.

Her face warms as she thinks about it. A blush on her cheeks, the same color as her beautiful dress. “With my life.”

“Good. Stay close to him.”

He’s perhaps the only one of them that I would trust completely to keep her safe. I’ve seen the way he looks at her, and that is enough.

“I can’t protect you anymore, little sister,” I say, turning away. She stops me with a hand on my elbow, so gentle. *Always gentle.*
“No. But I can protect you.”

Her face is tight when I look at her. It’s a rare thing to see Elain so grim, and I have to admit that it unnerves me.

“No, they’ll kill you if they find out what you are. The only thing that awaits you beyond the wall is fire and dust,” She has a strange look on her face. As if she’s seeing the very thing she speaks right in front of her eyes.

I know she sees things. I know I should be scared. But the only thing I can think about is leaving this wretched place. I care about little else.

When I speak, my voice comes out stronger than I feel. “Better then this hell of stardust and sunflowers.”

I turn before I can second guess myself. My declaration of returning beyond the wall had been out of impulse, it’s true. But in a sad way, the human world is the only place I’ve ever felt like I belong. I might have a Fae body. A false body. But my heart is, and always has been… human.

I make it all the way to my small apartment when I scent him. I knew he’d come, of course. I hadn’t even bothered locking the door, anticipating his arrival.

I shove a few things into a pack. A change of clothes, the extra money I’ve kept hidden under the mattress, a small dagger I keep on me at all times. I have no items of sentimental value, having either gambled away or sold the precious few that I did have.

When Cassian enters the apartment this time, he doesn’t knock, and I know that the pleasantries are over.

“No.”

I should’ve known he’d be difficult to get this by. The stubborn son of a bitch always has to make his mark, and his opinion, known.

“This is the last time I’m going to say it.” I hiss at him through gritted teeth, my voice dark and my eyes fierce. “Get the hell out of my way.”

His wings flex behind him as he steps into the room, though I keep my footing. He’s less then an inch from me when he flares his enormous wings wide.

“Make me.”

If he’s trying to intimidate me, it sure as hell isn’t working. In fact, it’s only serving to piss me off
more than I already am. A dangerous thing.

I drop my pack, standing my ground and staring him down through smoldering eyes. He doesn’t budge, though I never expected the lumbering moron to do so anyway. He only smiles at me, slow and tempting, begging me to play.

When I strike, I almost think he expected it. The dagger glances off the armor on his arm, and it’s half a second before he has me pinned against the wall, his knee nudged between my legs and his large hands on either side of my head.

I know he’s the Commander of the Night Courts armies, but really… this is just ridiculous.

His siphons flicker blood-red, and I know how much raw power he’s holding back. I’ve seen it before. And I haven’t looked in a mirror for a while, but I can feel the weakness of my body. Skinny, gaunt, malnourished. I must look like a pretty sorry sight. Though none of the males I’ve brought back here have complained.

If they did I wouldn’t have cared anyway. The opinions of others don’t matter to me now, except…

“I wouldn’t try that again if I were you,” He grins, his sly hazel eyes flickering between my eyes and my lips.

“Or what?” My breath is heavy, but I’m standing my ground as best I can.

“Or you’ll end up in a much more compromising position then this.”

I don’t say anything. All I can do is glare at him darkly, my eyes burning into him with every dark and hateful thought I can muster.

To his credit, he looks unphased.

“Should’ve stuck with the training, Nes.”

“Don’t call me that.” I bite back, and his lips quirk.

A dirty wine glass cracks on the filthy counter, and then shatters completely. Cassian throws a glance at it, before narrowing his hazel eyes at me in question.

It’s harder to keep my powers bound around him. Easier to keep the leash tight when I’m alone, and cold, and unfeeling.

“If you truly want to leave, then go,” Cassian says, easing his grip on me and taking a step back. “But not to the human lands. Find somewhere safe in this territory, and I swear you won’t be bothered by anyone, not even me.”

I’m as still as steel and stone, glancing over him like a predator sizing up its prey, deciding how I’m going to let this conversation proceed.

“If that will give you peace, Nesta, then I’ll see it done.”

He steps towards me. Slowly this time. Softer.
“But if somehow, you still feel the same for me, then come to the mountains. You might fit in there better then you expect. And I need someone with a sharp mind to accompany me.”

“No,” I hiss at him, short and sharp. I’ve picked up my pack and made it to the doorway, now thankfully empty, before he speaks again, his voice rough.

“Aren’t you tired of fighting, Nesta? Don’t you want to be happy?”

I know I shouldn’t rise to the bait, but I can’t help it. I’m sure he knows that too.

“Happy?“ I snort, turning to face him head on. "And what do you suppose would make me so? You?"

His nostrils flare, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. I know how he feels about me. It’s so blindingly obvious that it’s almost insulting.

"Why did you do it, huh? If you hate me so much… “ His voice is so low that I barely hear it, but it breaks something in me.

It breaks apart some memory that I’ve kept buried and hidden inside myself all these long months. The smell of blood and death. A promise made on a battlefield. A kiss goodbye.

“I don’t hate you!” My voice cracks. The first hint of emotion I’ve shown in months, and his eyes widen.

“Then come with me,” His hand is under my chin, so gentle, despite his size. I’m tempted to step away from him, to remove myself from his touch.

I don’t know what it means that I don’t.

"Come with me, Nesta,” He pleads, his hazel eyes fierce. “I can’t promise you that everything will be okay tomorrow, or the day after that or even this century. But we’ll get there. I promise you that much.”

How could he possibly understand would it would take to make me even some semblance of okay. How much weight does his promise hold now?

There’s a power in my veins. Dark and unyielding. I still don’t understand it. Though I haven’t been trying to, content with pushing it back into its dark corner. I took too much from the Cauldron, but it in turn parted first with the darkest, most wicked parts of itself. They fused with my very nature like they were one and the same, both begging to be unleashed.

I’m so tired of fighting. Against that power. Against my sister, and her mate, and everyone in that fucking Inner Circle of theirs.

And against Cassian, most of all.

I remember it now. His body broken and bloodied. How he fought for me, so fiercely on the battlefield. It’s true that he’s the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever met, but it’s possible… that he knows more about what I’m going through then I give him credit for.

Is it too much, to let myself hope? Was my heart really in my plan to return to the human realm, or
has it been somewhere else entirely, all along.

The way he’s looking at me, so fervently, makes me second guess everything.

“Let’s go. Right now,” He says, his thumb moving over my bottom lip. “You don’t even have to say goodbye.”

If I say it, he’ll let me go. But how much will it cost him? How much of his heart will he shut away to ensure that not only the world, but he himself leaves me in peace.

And it suddenly occurs to me how easy it would be, to go with him. Part of me kicks and screams, convincing myself that it’s impossible. Wanting to drown myself in this ocean of despair, sinking down to depths that no one can reach.

But I know… I know how easy it would be to just give in, to let him soothe my bruised and battered soul. This other part of me… it craves it so fiercely that I can barely stand it.

He reaches a hand out to me, and my heart is decided, even if my mind is not. I will follow him anywhere, it says. My fingers meet his, and a chill runs through my arms, the skin on my shoulders burning for just an instant before the feeling swiftly fades. I pull back my coat to find black ink swirling over my shoulders, decorating my skin like armor, mirroring the patterns of his own tattoos.

I know what it is. His promise. I’ve seen this kind of magic before, between my sister and her mate. I blink at the Illyrian patterns, silently marveling how the dark ink contrasts against my skin, grown too pale in these last months.

And then I look at Cassian. Blue-grey eyes lost in hazel.

“What does it mean?”

“That you’re not alone.”
Chapter 2

I scowl at the sword laying at my feet with a look akin to disgust. One week I've been in this gods forsaken place. Stuck on the side of a bloody mountain with the cold and the wind drilling their icy teeth into my skin and flesh. My teeth are chattering so violently my jaw is permanently stiff. My fingers are frozen, my lips red, and chapped.

Wintry winds whip past me, sending golden-brown hair flying into my face as I stare down the Illyrian brute in front of me. Cassian circles me like a predator; mouth set in a tight line, hazel eyes hard. He's different here, in the training camp. The General Commander of the Night Courts armies. I can't quite tell where his act ends and the real him begins.

"Pick it up," He scowls again, the words drawn out between his teeth. I ignore him, nudging my chin a little higher, despite the biting cold. I will not give in.

This has been my first week in months without a drink, and my body has paid the price. Head pounding, heart racing. Cassian had given me a week of grace to let my body recover, but no more. It's barely dawn and he's hurled me into this training ring.

"No," I answer back, voice as cold as steel. I don't want to be here, in this place, scolded and exiled. And I certainly don't want to make anything easy for him.

When we left Velaris to travel to the Illyrian Mountains, I hadn't counted on the cold. I'd spent so long trying to numb myself against the world around me. I had done such a good job of it, I didn't think I could feel anything anymore, but I feel this. A chill so devastating it settles in your bones, makes you weak and sluggish.

"I won't ask you again."

Cassian stops behind me, and I can feel his narrowed, hazel eyes on my body, even if I can't see them. The training leathers I've been forced to wear fit like a glove and I despise it, used to the simple flowing gowns I'd been wearing in Velaris. I don't miss the way the males look at me. How their eyes drag over me hungrily when they think I'm not looking. How they turn their heads and pretend I don't exist when they know I am.

They're both disgusted and intrigued by me, I think. Not that I care.

There are a few early risers gathered around the ring, eager to watch the Commander make quick work of the 'High Fae bitch'. They have no shame, uttering the words whether I'm listening or not. But what they don't know is how easily their insults roll off my back, as smooth as water. Spine straight, eyes cold.

I've been called worse.

"Nesta, if you don’t pick that goddamn sword up off the ground you’ll be on laundry duty for the next month," Cassian growls as he circles back in front of me, his patience thoroughly frayed.

I grit my teeth together, sizing up the only person in this goddamn place who gives some kind of shit about me. It’s been a week since we came to the camp. A week since I left the city of Velaris, no word to any one, and let Cassian bring me to this godsforsaken place.
So all I offer him is a dark stare as I move to pick up the long sword, the eyes of a dozen trained Illyrians judging my every move. The weight is a struggle for me, and the tip falls forward to the icy ground, followed by a few snickers and jibes.

"It’s too heavy," I bite out in answer to Cassian's raised eyebrows, ignoring the others. One of the spectators let out a low whistle as the Commander steps forward and takes the sword from my hands with ease, gesturing to a rack at the edge of the ring.

"Choose another weapon."

"I don’t need a weapon," I spit back, my patience worn thin as I cross my arms over my chest and look down my nose at him. I need a bloody drink, is what I don't dare to say out loud.

Cassian raises a dark eyebrow, taking a step towards me. And then another, a muscle feathering in his tight jaw. "You have power, I think. But you won’t use it."

"How do you know?" I hiss, forced to look up at him as he steps closer still. I wish there were more venom in my voice, so he'd know exactly how much I despise being here. But the brutal cold makes it hard to feel anything other than it's cruel sting.

"Because you don’t understand it. And you fight what you don’t understand."

His voice is soft, but his eyes hard, and something about them unnerves me so fiercely my misty breath sticks in my throat. I shiver, the mountain wind howling through my bones as if they were no more than hollow wood.

"You say that like you know me."

"I do know you."

His siphons flicker, blood-red and so bright against the backdrop of white and grey. He's always there. Always. I had lived in my own silence and solitude for so long, contemplating this world, this life that I don't want, and now I barely get a moment to myself.

And if i did have a moment, or many moments, what would I do? Fall down into darkness. Deeper and deeper, where no one can find me. Where the silence roars so loud it consumes every broken inch of my soul.

I both crave and detest it.

"Fine," I grit my teeth stubbornly, a little fire working its way through the ice in my blood. "I pick that."

Cassian snorts as his eyes fall upon the weapon I point to, and when I tilt my head sharply my eyes narrow on him further.

"What’s so funny?"

He crosses his arms over his chest, the leather and metal of his armor groaning as he does so and that infuriating, half-cocked grin on his lips.
"Nothing. By all means."

*I'll show him,* I think as I step past him and pick up the bow, eyes trailing over the scuffs in the thick wood, the tightness of the string.

"Seriously. Why are you laughing?" I snap at Cassian when I can't take it any longer, and he attempts to school his face into an expression of severity.

"I once heard Rhysand declare that if any female decided to master the bow, he'd oversee their lessons personally."

I drop the bow ungracefully and scowl at him, fueling his amusement all over again. Archery was always Feyre's thing, anyway.

Trailing my eyes of the weapon rack again, I look for something that isn't as horrid as all the rest. A couple of iron shields. Half a dozen swords, of various sizes. I stop in front of a pair of twin swords, sharp and sleek. Longer than a dagger, but smaller than that monstrosity he threw at my feet.

I inspect the first. It's simple. No filigree, no fancy designs like the ones I'd seen in Amren's apartment. I huff an amused breath at the thought of the small, ancient being and her treasure horde as I slip the second sword from the rack, just as plain as the first. I think I admire them more this way.

Settled on my choice, I turn back to the ring, but not before almost colliding with the mass of muscle who appears in from of me, flaring his wings to keep his balance.

"Nesta," Cassian's voice is surprisingly soft when he grips my forearm, the heat of his skin like a roaring hearth against the deathly cold of my own.

"If you want to leave this place, all you have to do is say so."

I pull my arm from his grip. *And go where?* I think to myself. My sister and her husband have banished me from their city, and as much as I hate to admit it, the last time I spoke to my other sister, Elain, had rattled me. She'd seen something, when I told her of my plan to return to mortal lands. *Fire and dust.*

I believe that she saw my death.

Ignoring him, I tilt my chin and take what I believe is an acceptable fighting stance, though when he steps towards me again I recoil, stopping only when his hazel eyes rake over me softly.

"Hold your right arm higher. You want to protect here," He places two fingers over my ribs, and I tremble under his touch. "And here."

His fingers move to my chest, just atop my heart, beating like a war drum. I wonder if he knows how hard it's pounding. If he can feel the effects his closeness has on me.

The curious flicker of his eyes over mine tells me he does.

These feelings seep under my skin, as unwanted as the cold, and as hard as I try to shove them away, they always, *always* come back. I can't let myself love him. *I won't.*
Everything I love turns to ash and dust.

Pushing the feeling deep down, I retake the stance, my too-thin arms held up like he showed me, and prepare to get myself beaten into oblivion.

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Cassian screams in his sleep. Sometimes it’s Azriel’s name. Rhysand’s, Mor’s.

Tonight it’s mine.

My eyes are blurry and unfocused as I blink at the ceiling, watching the snow that drifts outside the window cast strange shadows by the light of the moon.

I know the feeling all too well. To be woken by horrors we can’t control. To watch the ones we love snatched from our grasp over and over while we’re powerless and paralyzed.

The decision had come easily; to cut that weakness out of my life entirely. I surrounded myself with strangers, had distanced myself from the people who could possibly stir anything in me. Yet the nightmares still linger.

I’m startled by a bang, then the sound of the stairs creaking beneath his weight. Slipping from my room, I creep down the stairs. They don’t make a sound, and I know I’m still too skinny. Too weak.

A soft glow flickers up the walls from downstairs, and when I reach the landing I see him through the window.

Cassian stands on the door step, bathed in darkness, his eyes on the stars as his leathery, bat-like wings rustle behind him.

I watch him for a moment, contemplating making my presence known before thinking better of it. A chill sweeps through me, memories of promises and battlefields creeping into my thoughts like they always do whenever the world decides to grant me a small moment of peace.

I have no regrets in my life, but this. That we did not have time.

And now that we have the time... what are we choosing to do with it?

He shoots into the sky, his enormous wings beating as loud as thunder. And just like that, he’s gone, disappeared into the inky, black canvas of the night.

My body still aches from our spar earlier in the day, my bones brittle and my muscles screaming with every tiny movement. He had defeated me easily. Over and over and over, he pinned me down into the snow until my body was so spent he had to carry me back to this sad, little house we were staying in.

And then he ran me a bath, and made me hot tea and made sure I ate something other than a measly crust of bread. I had drawn the line when he tried to start a fire, snapping at him to stop fussing like a mother hen and let me look after myself.

I didn’t tell him the truth. That I couldn’t stand the crack and pop of the blazing wood. That the sound of bones breaking, snapping, still haunted the darkest parts of my mind.
Wrapping my arms around myself, I push open the door and step onto the snow outside, packed down hard like ice from the dozens of footsteps that have trampled it.

The scent of him lingers as new snow falls. Tiny flakes drifting down through the darkness and muffling the world around me. I close my eyes, tilting my head to the sky as I breath in the cold, mountain air and shiver under every snowflake that settles on my skin.

*I will follow him anywhere*, my heart says. Has *always* said.

But the sky is the one place I cannot go.

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