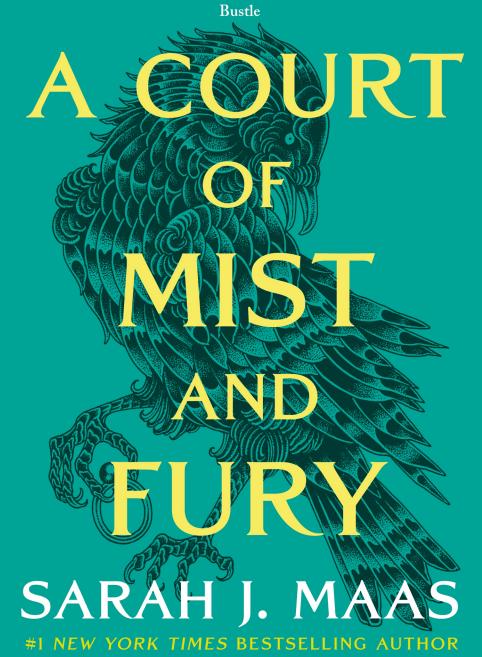
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A COURT OF MIST AND FURY

SARAH J. MAAS

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
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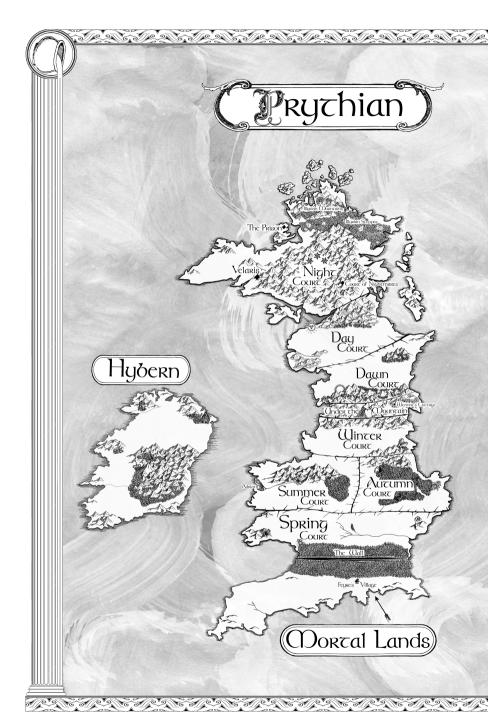
For Josh and Annie— my own Court of Dreams

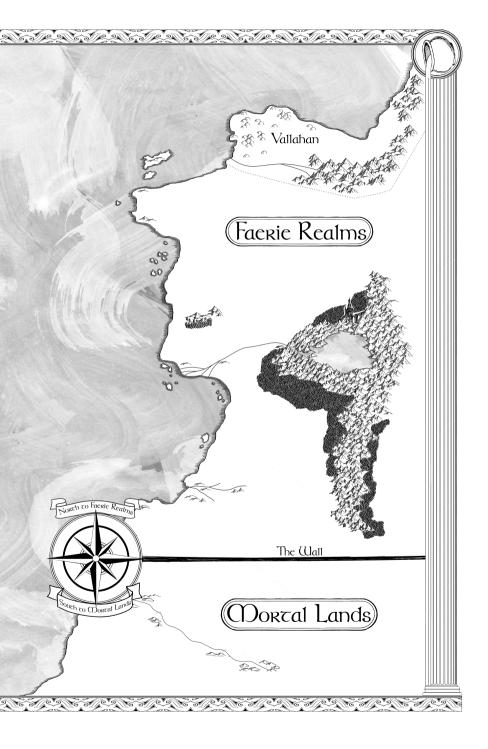
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Maybe I'd always been broken and dark inside.

Maybe someone who'd been born whole and good would have put down the ash dagger and embraced death rather than what lay before me.

There was blood everywhere.

It was an effort to keep a grip on the dagger as my blood-soaked hand trembled. As I fractured bit by bit while the sprawled corpse of the High Fae youth cooled on the marble floor.

I couldn't let go of the blade, couldn't move from my place before him.

"Good," Amarantha purred from her throne. "Again."

There was another ash dagger waiting, and another Fae kneeling. Female.

I knew the words she'd say. The prayer she'd recite.

I knew I'd slaughter her, as I'd slaughtered the youth before me.

To free them all, to free Tamlin, I would do it.

I was the butcher of innocents, and the savior of a land.

"Whenever you're ready, lovely Feyre," Amarantha drawled, her deep red hair as bright as the blood on my hands. On the marble.

Murderer. Butcher. Monster. Liar. Deceiver.

I didn't know who I meant. The lines between me and the queen had long since blurred.

My fingers loosened on the dagger, and it clattered to the ground, splattering the spreading pool of blood. Flecks splashed onto my worn boots—remnants of a mortal life so far behind me it might as well have been one of my fever-dreams these few last months.

I faced the female waiting for death, that hood sagging over her head, her lithe body steady. Braced for the end I was to give her, the sacrifice she was to become.

I reached for the second ash dagger atop a black velvet pillow, its hilt icy in my warm, damp hand. The guards yanked off her hood.

I knew the face that stared up at me.

Knew the blue-gray eyes, the brown-gold hair, the full mouth and sharp cheekbones. Knew the ears that had now become delicately arched, the limbs that had been streamlined, limned with power, any human imperfections smoothed into a subtle immortal glow.

Knew the hollowness, the despair, the corruption that leaked from that face.

My hands didn't tremble as I angled the dagger.

As I gripped the fine-boned shoulder, and gazed into that hated face—my face.

And plunged the ash dagger into my awaiting heart.

THE HOUSE OF BEASTS

CHAPTER 1

I vomited into the toilet, hugging the cool sides, trying to contain the sounds of my retching.

Moonlight leaked into the massive marble bathing room, providing the only illumination as I was quietly, thoroughly sick.

Tamlin hadn't stirred as I'd jolted awake. And when I hadn't been able to tell the darkness of my chamber from the endless night of Amarantha's dungeons, when the cold sweat coating me felt like the blood of those faeries, I'd hurtled for the bathing room.

I'd been here for fifteen minutes now, waiting for the retching to subside, for the lingering tremors to spread apart and fade, like ripples in a pool.

Panting, I braced myself over the bowl, counting each breath.

Only a nightmare. One of many, asleep and waking, that haunted me these days.

It had been three months since Under the Mountain. Three months of adjusting to my immortal body, to a world struggling to piece itself together after Amarantha had fractured it apart.

I focused on my breathing—in through my nose, out through my mouth. Over and over.

When it seemed like I was done heaving, I eased from the toilet—but didn't go far. Just to the adjacent wall, near the cracked window, where I could see the night sky, where the breeze could caress my sticky face. I leaned my head against the wall, flattening my hands against the chill marble floor. Real.

This was real. I had survived; I'd made it out.

Unless it was a dream—just a fever-dream in Amarantha's dungeons, and I'd awaken back in that cell, and—

I curled my knees to my chest. Real. Real.

I mouthed the words.

I kept mouthing them until I could loosen my grip on my legs and lift my head. Pain splintered through my hands—

I'd somehow curled them into fists so tight my nails were close to puncturing my skin.

Immortal strength—more a curse than a gift. I'd dented and folded every piece of silverware I'd touched for three days upon returning here, had tripped over my longer, faster legs so often that Alis had removed any irreplaceable valuables from my rooms (she'd been particularly grumpy about me knocking over a table with an eight-hundred-year-old vase), and had shattered not one, not two, but *five* glass doors merely by accidentally closing them too hard.

Sighing through my nose, I unfolded my fingers.

My right hand was plain, smooth. Perfectly Fae.

I tilted my left hand over, the whorls of dark ink coating my fingers, my wrist, my forearm all the way to the elbow, soaking up the darkness of the room. The eye etched into the center of my palm seemed to watch me, calm and cunning as a cat, its slitted pupil wider than it'd been earlier that day. As if it adjusted to the light, as any ordinary eye would.

I scowled at it.

At whoever might be watching through that tattoo.

I hadn't heard from Rhys in the three months I'd been here. Not a whisper. I hadn't dared ask Tamlin, or Lucien, or anyone—lest it'd

somehow summon the High Lord of the Night Court, somehow remind him of the fool's bargain I'd struck Under the Mountain: one week with him every month in exchange for his saving me from the brink of death.

But even if Rhys had miraculously forgotten, I never could. Nor could Tamlin, Lucien, or anyone else. Not with the tattoo.

Even if Rhys, at the end . . . even if he hadn't been exactly an enemy.

To Tamlin, yes. To every other court out there, yes. So few went over the borders of the Night Court and lived to tell. No one really knew what *existed* in the northernmost part of Prythian.

Mountains and darkness and stars and death.

But I hadn't felt like Rhysand's enemy the last time I'd spoken to him, in the hours after Amarantha's defeat. I'd told no one about that meeting, what he'd said to me, what I'd confessed to him.

Be glad of your human heart, Feyre. Pity those who don't feel anything at all.

I squeezed my fingers into a fist, blocking out that eye, the tattoo. I uncoiled to my feet, and flushed the toilet before padding to the sink to rinse out my mouth, then wash my face.

I wished I felt nothing.

I wished my human heart had been changed with the rest of me, made into immortal marble. Instead of the shredded bit of blackness that it now was, leaking its ichor into me.

Tamlin remained asleep as I crept back into my darkened bedroom, his naked body sprawled across the mattress. For a moment, I just admired the powerful muscles of his back, so lovingly traced by the moonlight, his golden hair, mussed with sleep and the fingers I'd run through it while we made love earlier.

For him, I had done this—for him, I'd gladly wrecked myself and my immortal soul.

And now I had eternity to live with it.

I continued to the bed, each step heavier, harder. The sheets were now cool and dry, and I slipped in, curling my back to him, wrapping my arms around myself. His breathing was deep—even. But with my Fae ears . . . sometimes I wondered if I heard his breath catch, only for a heartbeat. I never had the nerve to ask if he was awake.

He never woke when the nightmares dragged me from sleep; never woke when I vomited my guts up night after night. If he knew or heard, he said nothing about it.

I knew similar dreams chased him from his slumber as often as I fled from mine. The first time it had happened, I'd awoken—tried to speak to him. But he'd shaken off my touch, his skin clammy, and had shifted into that beast of fur and claws and horns and fangs. He'd spent the rest of the night sprawled across the foot of the bed, monitoring the door, the wall of windows.

He'd since spent many nights like that.

Curled in the bed, I pulled the blanket higher, craving its warmth against the chill night. It had become our unspoken agreement—not to let Amarantha win by acknowledging that she still tormented us in our dreams and waking hours.

It was easier to not have to explain, anyway. To not have to tell him that though I'd freed him, saved his people and all of Prythian from Amarantha . . . I'd broken myself apart.

And I didn't think even eternity would be long enough to fix me.

CHAPTER 2

"I want to go."

"No."

I crossed my arms, tucking my tattooed hand under my right bicep, and spread my feet slightly further apart on the dirt floor of the stables. "It's been three months. Nothing's happened, and the village isn't even five miles—"

"No." The midmorning sun streaming through the stable doors burnished Tamlin's golden hair as he finished buckling the bandolier of daggers across his chest. His face—ruggedly handsome, exactly as I'd dreamed it during those long months he'd worn a mask—was set, his lips a thin line.

Behind him, already atop his dapple-gray horse, along with three other Fae lord-sentries, Lucien silently shook his head in warning, his metal eye narrowing. *Don't push him*, he seemed to say.

But as Tamlin strode toward where his black stallion had already been saddled, I gritted my teeth and stormed after him. "The village needs all the help it can get."

"And we're still hunting down Amarantha's beasts," he said,

mounting his horse in one fluid motion. Sometimes, I wondered if the horses were just to maintain an appearance of civility—of normalcy. To pretend that he couldn't run faster than them, didn't live with one foot in the forest. His green eyes were like chips of ice as the stallion started into a walk. "I don't have the sentries to spare to escort you."

I lunged for the bridle. "I don't need an escort." My grip tightened on the leather as I tugged the horse to a stop, and the golden ring on my finger—along with the square-cut emerald glittering atop it—flashed in the sun.

It had been two months since Tamlin had proposed—two months of enduring presentations about flowers and clothes and seating arrangements and food. I'd had a small reprieve a week ago, thanks to the Winter Solstice, though I'd traded contemplating lace and silk for selecting evergreen wreaths and garlands. But at least it had been a break.

Three days of feasting and drinking and exchanging small presents, culminating in a long, rather odious ceremony atop the foothills on the longest night to escort us from one year to another as the sun died and was born anew. Or something like that. Celebrating a winter holiday in a place that was permanently entrenched in spring hadn't done much to improve my general lack of festive cheer.

I hadn't particularly listened to the explanations of its origins—and the Fae themselves debated whether it had emerged from the Winter Court or Day Court. Both now claimed it as their holiest holiday. All I really knew was that I'd had to endure two ceremonies: one at sunset to begin that endless night of presents and dancing and drinking in honor of the old sun's death; and one at the following dawn, bleary-eyed and feet aching, to welcome the sun's rebirth.

It was bad enough that I'd been required to stand before the gathered courtiers and lesser faeries while Tamlin made his many toasts and salutes. Mentioning that my birthday had also fallen on that longest night of the year was a fact I'd conveniently forgotten to tell anyone. I'd received enough presents, anyway—and would no doubt

receive many, many more on my wedding day. I had little use for so many *things*.

Now, only two weeks stood between me and the ceremony. If I didn't get out of the manor, if I didn't have a day to do *something* other than spend Tamlin's money and be groveled to—

"Please. The recovery efforts are so slow. I could hunt for the villagers, get them food—"

"It's not safe," Tamlin said, again nudging his stallion into a walk. The horse's coat shone like a dark mirror, even in the shade of the stables. "Especially not for you."

He'd said that every time we had this argument; every time I begged him to let me go to the nearby village of High Fae to help rebuild what Amarantha had burned years ago.

I followed him into the bright, cloudless day beyond the stables, the grasses coating the nearby foothills undulating in the soft breeze. "People want to come back, they want a place to *live*—"

"Those same people see you as a blessing—a marker of stability. If something happened to you . . . " He cut himself off as he halted his horse at the edge of the dirt path that would take him toward the eastern woods, Lucien now waiting a few yards down it. "There's no point in rebuilding anything if Amarantha's creatures tear through the lands and destroy it again."

"The wards are up—"

"Some slipped in before the wards were repaired. Lucien hunted down five naga yesterday."

I whipped my head toward Lucien, who winced. He hadn't told me that at dinner last night. He'd *lied* when I'd asked him why he was limping. My stomach turned over—not just at the lie, but...naga. Sometimes I dreamed of their blood showering me as I killed them, of their leering serpentine faces while they tried to fillet me in the woods.

Tamlin said softly, "I can't do what I need to if I'm worrying about whether you're safe."

"Of course I'll be safe." As a High Fae, with my strength and speed, I'd stand a good chance of getting away if something happened.

"Please—please just do this for me," Tamlin said, stroking his stallion's thick neck as the beast nickered with impatience. The others had already moved their horses into easy canters, the first of them nearly within the shade of the woods. Tamlin jerked his chin toward the alabaster estate looming behind me. "I'm sure there are things to help with around the house. Or you could paint. Try out that new set I gave you for Winter Solstice."

There was nothing but wedding planning waiting for me in the house, since Alis refused to let me lift a finger to do anything. Not because of who I was to Tamlin, what I was about to become to Tamlin, but . . . because of what I'd done for her, for her boys, for Prythian. All the servants were the same; some still cried with gratitude when they passed me in the halls. And as for painting . . .

"Fine," I breathed. I made myself look him in the eye, made myself smile. "Be careful," I said, and meant it. The thought of him going out there, hunting the monsters that had once served Amarantha . . .

"I love you," Tamlin said quietly.

I nodded, murmuring it back as he trotted to where Lucien still waited, the emissary now frowning slightly. I didn't watch them go.

I took my time retreating through the hedges of the gardens, the spring birds chirping merrily, gravel crunching under my flimsy shoes.

I hated the bright dresses that had become my daily uniform, but didn't have the heart to tell Tamlin—not when he'd bought so many, not when he looked so happy to see me wear them. Not when his words weren't far from the truth. The day I put on my pants and tunics, the day I strapped weapons to myself like fine jewelry, it would send a message far and clear across the lands. So I wore the gowns, and let Alis arrange my hair—if only so it would buy these people a measure of peace and comfort.

At least Tamlin didn't object to the dagger I kept at my side, hanging

from a jeweled belt. Lucien had gifted both to me—the dagger during the months before Amarantha, the belt in the weeks after her downfall, when I'd carried the dagger, along with many others, everywhere I went. You might as well look good if you're going to arm yourself to the teeth, he'd said.

But even if stability reigned for a hundred years, I doubted I'd ever awaken one morning and not put on the knife.

A hundred years.

I had that—I had centuries ahead of me. Centuries with Tamlin, centuries in this beautiful, quiet place. Perhaps I'd sort myself out sometime along the way. Perhaps not.

I paused before the stairs leading up into the rose-and-ivy-covered house, and peeked toward the right—toward the formal rose garden and the windows just beyond it.

I'd only set foot in that room—my old painting studio—once, when I'd first returned.

And all those paintings, all the supplies, all that blank canvas waiting for me to pour out stories and feelings and dreams . . . I'd hated it.

I'd walked out moments later and hadn't returned since.

I'd stopped cataloging color and feeling and texture, stopped noticing it. I could barely look at the paintings hanging inside the manor.

A sweet, female voice trilled my name from inside the open doors of the manor, and the tightness in my shoulders eased a bit.

Ianthe. The High Priestess, as well as a High Fae noble and child-hood friend of Tamlin's, who had taken it upon herself to help plan the wedding festivities.

And who had taken it upon herself to worship me and Tamlin as if we were newly minted gods, blessed and chosen by the Cauldron itself.

But I didn't complain—not when Ianthe knew everyone in the court and outside of it. She'd linger by my side at events and dinners, feeding me details about those in attendance, and was the main reason why I'd survived the merry whirlwind of Winter Solstice. She'd been the one presiding over the various ceremonies, after all—and I'd been more than happy to let her choose what manner of wreaths and garlands should adorn the manor and grounds, what silverware complemented each meal.

Beyond that . . . while Tamlin was the one who paid for my everyday clothes, it was Ianthe's eye that selected them. She was the heart of her people, ordained by the Hand of the Goddess to lead them from despair and darkness.

I was in no position to doubt. She hadn't led me astray yet—and I'd learned to dread the days when she was busy at her own temple on the grounds, overseeing pilgrims and her acolytes. Today, though—yes, spending time with Ianthe was better than the alternative.

I bunched the gauzy skirts of my dawn-pink gown in a hand and ascended the marble steps into the house.

Next time, I promised myself. Next time, I'd convince Tamlin to let me go to the village.

"Oh, we can't let *her* sit next to him. They'd rip each other to shreds, and then we'd have blood ruining the table linens." Beneath her pale, blue-gray hood, Ianthe furrowed her brow, crinkling the tattoo of the various stages of a moon's cycle stamped across it. She scribbled out the name she'd dashed onto one of the seating charts moments before.

The day had turned warm, the room a bit stuffy even with the breeze through the open windows. And yet the heavy hooded robe remained on.

All the High Priestesses wore the billowing, artfully twisted and layered robes—though they certainly were far from matronly. Ianthe's slim waist was on display with a fine belt of sky-blue, limpid stones, each perfectly oval and held in shining silver. And atop her hood sat a matching circlet—a delicate band of silver, with a large stone at its center. A panel of cloth had been folded up beneath the circlet, a built-in swath meant to

be pulled over the brow and eyes when she needed to pray, beseech the Cauldron and Mother, or just think.

Ianthe had shown me once what the panel looked like when down: only her nose and full, sensuous mouth visible. The Voice of the Cauldron. I'd found the image unsettling—that merely covering the upper part of her face had somehow turned the bright, cunning female into an effigy, into something Other. Mercifully, she kept it folded back most of the time. Occasionally, she even took the hood off entirely to let the sun play in her long, gently curling golden hair.

Ianthe's silver rings gleamed atop her manicured fingers as she wrote another name down. "It's like a game," she said, sighing through her pert nose. "All these pieces, vying for power or dominance, willing to shed blood, if need be. It must be a strange adjustment for you."

Such elegance and wealth—yet the savagery remained. The High Fae weren't the tittering nobility of the mortal world. No, if they feuded, it *would* end with someone being ripped to bloody ribbons. Literally.

Once, I'd trembled to share breathing space with them.

I flexed my fingers, stretching and contorting the tattoos etched into my skin.

Now I could fight alongside them, against them. Not that I'd tried.

I was too watched—too monitored and judged. Why should the bride of the High Lord learn to fight if peace had returned? That had been Ianthe's reasoning when I'd made the mistake of mentioning it at dinner. Tamlin, to his credit, had seen both sides: I'd learn to protect myself . . . but the rumors would spread.

"Humans aren't much better," I told her at last. And because Ianthe was about the only one of my new companions who didn't look particularly stunned or frightened by me, I tried to make conversation and said, "My sister Nesta would likely fit right in."

Ianthe cocked her head, the sunlight setting the blue stone atop her hood glimmering. "Will your mortal kin be joining us?"

"No." I hadn't thought to invite them—hadn't wanted to expose them to Prythian. Or to what I'd become.

She tapped a long, slender finger on the table. "But they live so close to the wall, don't they? If it was important for you to have them here, Tamlin and I could ensure their safe journey." In the hours we'd spent together, I'd told her about the village, and the house my sisters now lived in, about Isaac Hale and Tomas Mandray. I hadn't been able to mention Clare Beddor—or what had happened to her family.

"For all that she'd hold her own," I said, fighting past the memory of that human girl, and what had been done to her, "my sister Nesta detests your kind."

"Our kind," Ianthe corrected quietly. "We've discussed this." I just nodded.

But she went on, "We are old, and cunning, and enjoy using words like blades and claws. Every word from your mouth, every turn of phrase, will be judged—and possibly used against you." As if to soften the warning, she added, "Be on your guard, Lady."

Lady. A nonsense name. No one knew what to call me. I wasn't born High Fae.

I'd been Made—resurrected and given this new body by the seven High Lords of Prythian. I wasn't Tamlin's mate, as far as I knew. There was no mating bond between us—yet.

Honestly... Honestly, Ianthe, with her bright gold hair, those teal eyes, elegant features, and supple body, looked more like Tamlin's mate. His equal. A union with Tamlin—a High Lord and a High Priestess—would send a clear message of strength to any possible threats to our lands. And secure the power Ianthe was no doubt keen on building for herself.

Among the High Fae, the priestesses oversaw their ceremonies and rituals, recorded their histories and legends, and advised their lords and ladies in matters great and trivial. I hadn't witnessed any magic from

her, but when I'd asked Lucien, he'd frowned and said their magic was drawn from their ceremonies, and could be utterly lethal should they choose it. I'd watched her on the Winter Solstice for any signs of it, marking the way she'd positioned herself so that the rising sun filled her uplifted arms, but there had been no ripple or thrum of power. From her, or the earth beneath us.

I didn't know what I'd really expected from Ianthe—one of the twelve High Priestesses who together governed their sisters across every territory in Prythian. Ancient, celibate, and quiet had been the extent of my expectations, thanks to those whispered mortal legends, when Tamlin had announced that an old friend was soon to occupy and renovate the crumbling temple complex on our lands. But Ianthe had breezed into our house the next morning and those expectations had immediately been trampled. Especially the celibate part.

Priestesses could marry, bear children, and dally as they would. It would dishonor the Cauldron's gift of fertility to lock up their instincts, their inherent female magic in bearing life, Ianthe had once told me.

So while the seven High Lords ruled Prythian from thrones, the twelve High Priestesses reigned from the altars, their children as powerful and respected as any lord's offspring. And Ianthe, the youngest High Priestess in three centuries, remained unmarried, childless, and keen to *enjoy the finest males the land has to offer*.

I often wondered what it was like to be that free and so settled within yourself.

When I didn't respond to her gentle reprimand, she said, "Have you given any thought to what color roses? White? Pink? Yellow? Red—"

"Not red."

I hated that color. More than anything. Amarantha's hair, all that blood, the welts on Clare Beddor's broken body, spiked to the walls of Under the Mountain—

"Russet could be pretty, with all the green . . . But maybe that's too Autumn Court." Again, that finger tapped on the table.

"Whatever color you want." If I were being blunt with myself, I'd admit that Ianthe had become a crutch. But she seemed willing to do it—caring when I couldn't bring myself to.

Yet Ianthe's brows lifted slightly.

Despite being a High Priestess, she and her family had escaped the horrors of Under the Mountain by running. Her father, one of Tamlin's strongest allies amongst the Spring Court and a captain in his forces, had sensed trouble coming and packed off Ianthe, her mother, and two younger sisters to Vallahan, one of the countless faerie territories across the ocean. For fifty years, they'd lived in the foreign court, biding their time while their people were butchered and enslaved.

She hadn't once mentioned it. I knew better than to ask.

"Every element of this wedding sends a message to not only Prythian, but the world beyond," she said. I stifled a sigh. I knew—she'd told me this before. "I know you are not fond of the dress—"

Understatement. I hated the monstrosity of tulle she'd selected. Tamlin had, too—though he'd laughed himself hoarse when I showed him in the privacy of my room. But he'd promised me that though the dress was absurd, the priestess knew what she was doing. I'd wanted to push back about it, hating that though he agreed with me, he had sided with her, but . . . it took more energy than it was worth.

Ianthe went on, "But it makes the right statement. I've spent time amongst enough courts to know how they operate. Trust me in this."

"I do trust you," I said, and waved a hand toward the papers before us. "You know how to do these things. I don't."

Silver tinkled at Ianthe's wrists, so like the bracelets the Children of the Blessed wore on the other side of the wall. I sometimes wondered if those foolish humans had stolen the idea from the High Priestesses of Prythian—if it had been a priestess like Ianthe who had spread such nonsense among humans.

"It's an important moment for me as well," Ianthe said carefully,

adjusting the circlet atop her hood. Teal eyes met mine. "You and I are so alike—young, untested amongst these . . . wolves. I am grateful to you, and to Tamlin, to allow me to preside over the ceremony, to be invited to work with this court, be a part of this court. The other High Priestesses do not particularly care for me, nor I for them, but . . . " She shook her head, the hood swaying with her. "Together," she murmured, "the three of us make a formidable unit. Four, if you count Lucien." She snorted. "Not that he particularly wants anything to do with me."

A leading statement.

She often found ways to bring him up, to corner him at events, to touch his elbow or shoulder. He ignored it all. Last week, I'd finally asked him if she'd set her sights on him, and Lucien had merely given me a look, snarling softly, before stalking off. I took that as a yes.

But a match with Lucien would be nearly as beneficial as one with Tamlin: the right hand of a High Lord *and* another High Lord's son... Any offspring would be powerful, coveted.

"You know it's . . . hard for him, where females are involved," I said neutrally.

"He has been with many females since the death of his lover."

"Perhaps it's different with you—perhaps it'd mean something he's not ready for." I shrugged, searching for the right words. "Perhaps he stays away because of it."

She considered, and I prayed she bought my half lie. Ianthe was ambitious, clever, beautiful, and bold—but I did not think Lucien forgave her, or would ever forgive her, for fleeing during Amarantha's reign. Sometimes I honestly wondered if my friend might rip her throat out for it.

I anthe nodded at last. "Are you at least excited for the wedding?"

I fiddled with my emerald ring. "It'll be the happiest day of my life."

The day Tamlin had asked me to marry him, I'd certainly felt that way. I'd wept with joy as I told him yes, yes, a thousand times yes, and made love to him in the field of wildflowers where he'd brought me for the occasion.

Ianthe nodded. "The union is Cauldron-blessed. Your survival of the horrors Under the Mountain only proves it."

I caught her glance then—toward my left hand, the tattoos.

It was an effort not to tuck my hand beneath the table.

The tattoo on her brow was of midnight-blue ink—but somehow still fit, still accented the feminine dresses, the bright silver jewelry. Unlike the elegant brutality of mine.

"We could get you gloves," she offered casually.

And that would send another message—perhaps to the person I so desperately hoped had forgotten I existed.

"I'll consider it," I said with a bland smile.

It was all I could do to keep from bolting before the hour was up and Ianthe floated to her own personal prayer room—a gift from Tamlin upon her return—to offer midday thanks to the Cauldron for our land's liberation, my triumph, and Tamlin's ensured dominance over this land.

I sometimes debated asking her to pray for me as well.

To pray that I'd one day learn to love the dresses, and the parties, and my role as a blushing, pretty bride.

+

I was already in bed when Tamlin entered my room, silent as a stag through a wood. I lifted my head, going for the dagger I kept on the nightstand, but relaxed at the broad shoulders, at the hallway candlelight gilding his tan skin and veiling his face in shadow.

"You're awake?" he murmured. I could hear the frown in his voice. He'd been in his study since dinner, sorting through the pile of paperwork Lucien had dumped on his desk.

"I couldn't sleep," I said, watching his muscles shift as he moved to the bathing room to wash up. I'd been trying to sleep for an hour now—but each time I closed my eyes, my body locked up, the walls of the room pushed in. I'd gone so far as to throw open the windows, but . . . It was going to be a long night.

I lay back on the pillows, listening to the steady, efficient sounds of him preparing for bed. He kept his own quarters, deeming it vital for me to have my own space.

But he slept in here every night. I'd yet to visit his bed, though I wondered if our wedding night would change that. I prayed I wouldn't thrash awake and vomit on the sheets when I didn't recognize where I was, when I didn't know if the darkness was permanent.

Maybe that was why he hadn't pushed the issue yet.

He emerged from the bathing room, slinging off his tunic and shirt, and I propped myself on my elbows to watch as he paused at the edge of the bed.

My attention went right to the strong, clever fingers that unfastened his pants.

Tamlin let out a low snarl of approval, and I bit my bottom lip as he removed his pants, along with his undergarments, revealing the proud, thick length of him. My mouth went dry, and I dragged my gaze up his muscled torso, over the panes of his chest, and then—

"Come here," he growled, so roughly the words were barely discernable.

I pushed back the blankets, revealing my already naked body, and he hissed.

His features turned ravenous while I crawled across the bed and rose up on my knees. I took his face in my hands, the golden skin framed on either side by fingers of ivory and of swirling black, and kissed him.

He held my gaze through the kiss, even as I pushed myself closer, biting back a small noise when he brushed against my stomach.

His callused hands grazed my hips, my waist, then held me there as he lowered his head, seizing the kiss. A brush of his tongue against the seam of my lips had me opening fully for him, and he swept in, claiming me, branding me.

I moaned then, tilting my head back to give him better access. His

hands clamped on my waist, then moved—one going to cup my rear, the other sliding between us.

This—this moment, when it was him and me and nothing between our bodies . . .

His tongue scraped the roof of my mouth as he dragged a finger down the center of me, and I gasped, my back arching. "Feyre," he said against my lips, my name like a prayer more devout than any Ianthe had offered up to the Cauldron on that dark solstice morning.

His tongue swept my mouth again, in time to the finger that he slipped inside of me. My hips undulated, demanding more, craving the fullness of him, and his growl reverberated in my chest as he added another finger.

I moved on him. Lightning lashed through my veins, and my focus narrowed to his fingers, his mouth, his body on mine. His palm pushed against the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs, and I groaned his name as I shattered.

My head thrown back, I gulped down night-cool air, and then I was being lowered to the bed, gently, delicately, lovingly.

He stretched out above me, his head lowering to my breast, and all it took was one press of his teeth against my nipple before I was clawing at his back, before I hooked my legs around him and he settled between them. This—I needed *this*.

He paused, arms trembling as he held himself over me.

"Please," I gasped out.

He just brushed his lips against my jaw, my neck, my mouth.

"Tamlin," I begged. He palmed my breast, his thumb flicking over my nipple. I cried out, and he buried himself in me with a mighty stroke.

For a moment, I was nothing, no one.

Then we were fused, two hearts beating as one, and I promised myself it always would be that way as he pulled out a few inches, the muscles of his back flexing beneath my hands, and then slammed back into me. Again and again. I broke and broke against him as he moved, as he murmured my name and told me he loved me. And when that lightning once more filled my veins, my head, when I gasped out his name, his own release found him. I gripped him through each shuddering wave, savoring the weight of him, the feel of his skin, his strength.

For a while, only the rasp of our breathing filled the room.

I frowned as he withdrew at last—but he didn't go far. He stretched out on his side, head propped on a fist, and traced idle circles on my stomach, along my breasts.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he murmured.

"It's fine," I breathed. "I understand."

Not a lie, but not quite true.

His fingers grazed lower, circling my belly button. "You are—you're everything to me," he said thickly. "I need . . . I need you to be all right. To know they can't get to you—can't hurt you anymore."

"I know." Those fingers drifted lower. I swallowed hard and said again, "I know." I brushed his hair back from his face. "But what about you? Who gets to keep you safe?"

His mouth tightened. With his powers returned, he didn't need anyone to protect him, shield him. I could almost see invisible hackles raising—not at me, but at the thought of what he'd been mere months ago: prone to Amarantha's whims, his power barely a trickle compared to the cascade now coursing through him. He took a steadying breath, and leaned to kiss my heart, right between my breasts. It was answer enough.

"Soon," he murmured, and those fingers traveled back to my waist. I almost groaned. "Soon you'll be my wife, and it'll be fine. We'll leave all this behind us."

I arched my back, urging his hand lower, and he chuckled roughly. I didn't quite hear myself speak as I focused on the fingers that obeyed my silent command. "What will everyone call me, then?" He grazed my belly button as he leaned down, sucking the tip of my breast into his mouth.

"Hmm?" he said, and the rumble against my nipple made me writhe.

"Is everyone just going to call me 'Tamlin's wife'? Do I get a . . . title?"

He lifted his head long enough to look at me. "Do you want a title?" Before I could answer, he nipped at my breast, then licked over the small hurt—licked as his fingers at last dipped between my legs. He stroked lazy, taunting circles. "No," I gasped out. "But I don't want people . . . " Cauldron boil me, his damned *fingers*— "I don't know if I can handle them calling me High Lady."

His fingers slid into me again, and he growled in approval at the wetness between my thighs, both from me and him. "They won't," he said against my skin, positioning himself over me again and sliding down my body, trailing kisses as he went. "There is no such thing as a High Lady."

He gripped my thighs to spread my legs wide, lowering his mouth, and—

"What do you mean, there's no such thing as a High Lady?"

The heat, his touch—all of it stopped.

He looked up from between my legs, and I almost climaxed at the sight of it. But what he said, what he'd implied . . . He kissed the inside of my thigh. "High Lords only take wives. Consorts. There has never been a High Lady."

"But Lucien's mother—"

"She's Lady of the Autumn Court. Not High Lady. Just as you will be Lady of the Spring Court. They will address you as they address her. They will respect you as they respect her." He lowered his gaze back to what was inches away from his mouth.

"So Lucien's-"

"I don't want to hear another male's name on your lips right now," he growled, and lowered his mouth to me.

At the first stroke of his tongue, I stopped arguing.

CHAPTER 3

 Γ amlin's guilt must have hit him hard, because although he was gone the next day, Lucien was waiting with an offer to inspect the progress on the nearby village.

I hadn't visited in well over a month—I couldn't remember the last time I'd even left the grounds. A few of the villagers had been invited to our Winter Solstice celebrations, but I'd barely managed to do more than greet them, thanks to the size of the crowd.

The horses were already saddled outside the front doors of the stables, and I counted the sentries by the distant gates (four), on either side of the house (two at each corner), and the ones now by the garden through which I'd just exited (two). Though none spoke, their eyes pressed on me.

Lucien made to mount his dapple-gray mare but I cut off his path. "A tumble off your damned horse?" I hissed, shoving his shoulder.

Lucien actually staggered back, the mare nickering in alarm, and I blinked at my outstretched hand. I didn't let myself contemplate what the guards made of it. Before he could say anything, I demanded, "Why did you lie about the naga?"

Lucien crossed his arms, his metal eye narrowing, and shook the red hair from his face

I had to look away for a moment.

Amarantha's hair had been darker—and her face a creamy white, not at all like the sun-kissed gold of Lucien's skin.

I studied the stables behind him instead. At least it was big, open, the stable hands now off in another wing. I usually had little issue with being inside, which was mostly whenever I was bored enough to visit the horses housed within. Plenty of space to move, to escape. The walls didn't feel too . . . permanent.

Not like the kitchens, which were too low, the walls too thick, the windows not big enough to climb through. Not like the study, with not enough natural light or easy exits. I had a long list in my head of what places I could and couldn't endure at the manor, ranked by precisely how much they made my body lock up and sweat.

"I didn't *lie*," Lucien said tightly. "I technically *did* fall off my horse." He patted his mount's flank. "After one of them tackled me off her."

Such a faerie way of thinking, of lying. "Why?"

Lucien clamped his mouth shut.

"Why?"

He just twisted back to the patient mare. But I caught the expression on his face—the . . . pity in his eye.

I blurted, "Can we walk instead?"

He slowly turned. "It's three miles."

"And you could run that in a few minutes. I'd like to see if I can keep up."

His metal eye whirred, and I knew what he'd say before he opened his mouth.

"Never mind," I said, heading for my white mare, a sweet-tempered beast, if not a bit lazy and spoiled. Lucien didn't try to convince me otherwise, and kept quiet as we rode from the estate and onto the forest road. Spring, as always, was in full bloom, the breeze laden with lilac, the brush flanking the path rustling with life. No hint of the Bogge, of the naga, of any of the creatures who had once cast such stillness over the wood.

I said to him at last, "I don't want your damn pity."

"It's not pity. Tamlin said I shouldn't tell you—" He winced a bit.

"I'm not made of glass. If the naga attacked you, I deserve to know—"

"Tamlin is my High Lord. He gives an order, I follow it."

"You didn't have that mentality when you worked around his commands to send me to see the Suriel." And I'd nearly died.

"I was desperate then. We all were. But now—now we need order, Feyre. We need rules, and rankings, and *order*, if we're going to stand a chance of rebuilding. So what he says goes. I am the *first* one the others look to—I set the example. Don't ask me to risk the stability of this court by pushing back. Not right now. He's giving you as much free rein as he can."

I forced a steady breath to fill my too-tight lungs. "For all that you refuse to interact with Ianthe, you certainly sound a great deal like her."

He hissed, "You have *no idea* how hard it is for him to even let you off the estate grounds. He's under more pressure than you realize."

"I know exactly how much pressure he endures. And I didn't realize I'd become a prisoner."

"You're not—" He clenched his jaw. "That's not how it is and you know it."

"He didn't have any trouble letting me hunt and wander on my own when I was a mere human. When the borders were far less safe."

"He didn't care for you the way he does now. And after what happened Under the Mountain..." The words clanged in my head, along my too-tense muscles. "He's terrified. *Terrified* of seeing you in his enemies' hands. And they know it, too—they know all they have to do to own him would be to get ahold of you."

"You think I don't know that? But does he honestly expect me to

spend the rest of my life in that manor, overseeing servants and wearing pretty clothes?"

Lucien watched the ever-young forest. "Isn't that what all human women wish for? A handsome faerie lord to wed and shower them with riches for the rest of their lives?"

I gripped the reins of my horse hard enough that she tossed her head. "Good to know you're still a prick, Lucien."

His metal eye narrowed. "Tamlin is a High Lord. You will be his wife. There are traditions and expectations you must uphold. We must uphold, in order to present a solid front that is healed from Amarantha and willing to destroy any foes who try to take what is ours again." Ianthe had given me almost the same speech yesterday. "The Tithe is happening soon," he continued, shaking his head, "the first he's called in since . . . her curse." His cringe was barely perceptible. "He gave our people three months to get their affairs in order, and he wanted to wait until the new year had started, but next month, he will demand the Tithe. Ianthe told him it's time—that the people are ready."

He waited, and I wanted to spit at him, because he knew—he *knew* that I didn't know what it was, and wanted me to admit to it. "Tell me," I said flatly.

"Twice a year, usually around the Summer and Winter Solstices, each member of the Spring Court, whether they're High Fae or lesser faerie, must pay a Tithe, dependent on their income and status. It's how we keep the estate running, how we pay for things like sentries and food and servants. In exchange, Tamlin protects them, rules them, helps them when he can. It's a give or take. This year, he pushed the Tithe back by a month—just to grant them that extra time to gather funds, to celebrate. But soon, emissaries from every group, village, or clan will be arriving to pay their Tithes. As Tamlin's wife, you will be expected to sit with him. And if they can't pay . . . You will be expected to sit there while he metes out judgment. It can get ugly. I'll be keeping

track of who does and doesn't show up, who doesn't pay. And afterward, if they fail to pay their Tithe within the three days' grace he will officially offer them, he'll be expected to hunt them down. The High Priestesses themselves—Ianthe—grant him sacred hunting rights for this."

Horrible—brutal. I wanted to say it, but the look Lucien was giving me . . . I'd had enough of people judging me.

"So give him time, Feyre," Lucien said. "Let's get through the wedding, then the Tithe next month, and then . . . then we can see about the rest."

"I've given him time," I said. "I can't stay cooped up in the house forever."

"He knows that—he doesn't say it, but he knows it. Trust me. You will forgive him if his family's own slaughter keeps him from being so...liberal with your safety. He's lost those he cares for too many times. We all have."

Every word was like fuel added to the simmering pit in my gut. "I don't want to marry a High Lord. I just want to marry *him*."

"One doesn't exist without the other. He is what he is. He will always, *always* seek to protect you, whether you like it or not. Talk to him about it—really talk to him, Feyre. You'll figure it out." Our gazes met. A muscle feathered in Lucien's jaw. "Don't ask me to pick."

"But you're deliberately not telling me things."

"He is my High Lord. His word is *law*. We have this one chance, Feyre, to rebuild and make the world as it should be. I will not begin that new world by breaking his trust. Even if you . . ."

"Even if I what?"

His face paled, and he stroked a hand down the mare's cobwebcolored mane. "I was forced to watch as my father butchered the female I loved. My brothers *forced me* to watch."

My heart tightened for him—for the pain that haunted him.

"There was no magic spell, no miracle to bring her back. There

were no gathered High Lords to resurrect her. I watched, and she died, and I will *never* forget that moment when I *heard* her heart stop beating."

My eyes burned.

"Tamlin got what I didn't," Lucien said softly, his breathing ragged. "We all heard your neck break. But you got to come back. And I doubt that he will ever forget that sound, either. And he will do everything in his power to protect you from that danger again, even if it means keeping secrets, even if it means sticking to rules you don't like. In this, he will not bend. So don't ask him to—not yet."

I had no words in my head, my heart. Giving Tamlin time, letting him adjust . . . It was the least I could do.

The clamor of construction overtook the chittering of forest birds long before we set foot in the village: hammers on nails, people barking orders, livestock braying.

We cleared the woods to find a village halfway toward being built: pretty little buildings of stone and wood, makeshift structures over the supplies and livestock . . . The only things that seemed absolutely finished were the large well in the center of the town and what looked to be a tavern.

Sometimes, the normalcy of Prythian, the utter similarities between it and the mortal lands, still surprised me. I might as well have been in my own village back home. A much nicer, newer village, but the layout, the focal points . . . All the same.

And I felt like just as much an outsider when Lucien and I rode into the heart of the chaos and everyone paused their laboring or selling or milling about to look at us.

At me.

Like a ripple of silence, the sounds of activity died in even the farthest reaches of the village.

"Feyre Cursebreaker," someone whispered.

Well, that was a new name.

I was grateful for the long sleeves of my riding habit, and the matching gloves I'd tugged on before we'd entered the village border.

Lucien pulled up his mare to a High Fae male who looked like he was in charge of building a house bordering the well fountain. "We came to see if any help was needed," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Our services are yours for the day."

The male blanched. "Gratitude, my lord, but none is needed." His eyes gobbled me up, widening. "The debt is paid."

The sweat on my palms felt thicker, warmer. My mare stomped a hoof on the ruddy dirt street.

"Please," Lucien said, bowing his head gracefully. "The effort to rebuild is our burden to share. It would be our honor."

The male shook his head. "The debt is paid."

And so it went at every place we stopped in the village: Lucien dismounting, asking to help, and polite, reverent rejections.

Within twenty minutes, we were already riding back into the shadows and rustle of the woods.

"Did he let you take me today," I said hoarsely, "so that I'd stop asking to help rebuild?"

"No. I decided to take you myself. For that exact reason. They don't want or need your help. Your presence is a distraction and a reminder of what they went through."

I flinched. "They weren't Under the Mountain, though. I recognized none of them."

Lucien shuddered. "No. Amarantha had... camps for them. The nobles and favored faeries were allowed to dwell Under the Mountain. But if the people of a court weren't working to bring in goods and food, they were locked in camps in a network of tunnels beneath the Mountain. Thousands of them, crammed into chambers and tunnels with no light, no air. For fifty years."

"No one ever said—"

"It was forbidden to speak of it. Some of them went mad, started preying on the others when Amarantha forgot to order her guards to feed them. Some formed bands that prowled the camps and did—" He rubbed his brows with a thumb and forefinger. "They did horrible things. Right now, they're trying to remember what it is to be normal—how to *live*."

Bile burned my throat. But this wedding . . . yes, perhaps it would be the start of that healing.

Still, a blanket seemed to smother my senses, drowning out sound, taste, feeling.

"I know you wanted to help," Lucien offered. "I'm sorry." So was I.

The vastness of my now-unending existence yawned open before me. I let it swallow me whole.

CHAPTER

4

A few days before the wedding ceremony, guests began arriving, and I was grateful that I'd never be High Lady, never be Tamlin's equal in responsibility and power.

A small, forgotten part of me roared and screamed at that, but . . .

Dinner after dinner, luncheons and picnics and hunts.

I was introduced and passed around, and my face hurt from the smile I kept plastered there day and night. I began looking forward to the wedding just knowing that once it was over, I wouldn't have to be pleasant or talk to anyone or *do* anything for a week. A month. A year.

Tamlin endured it all—in that quiet, near-feral way of his—and told me again and again that the parties were a way to introduce me to his court, to give his people something to celebrate. He assured me that he hated the gatherings as much as I did, and that Lucien was the only one who really enjoyed himself, but . . . I caught Tamlin grinning sometimes. And truthfully, he deserved it, had earned it. And these people deserved it, too.

So I weathered it, clinging to Ianthe when Tamlin wasn't at my side,

or, if they were together, letting the two of them lead conversations while I counted down the hours until everyone would leave.

"You should head to bed," Ianthe said, both of us watching the assembled revelers packing the great hall. I'd spotted her by the open doors thirty minutes ago, and was grateful for the excuse to leave the gaggle of Tamlin's friends I'd been stuck talking to. Or *not* talking to. Either they outright stared at me, or they tried so damn hard to come up with common topics. Hunting, mostly. Conversation usually stalled after three minutes.

"I've another hour before I need to sleep," I said. Ianthe was in her usual pale robe, hood up and that circlet of silver with its blue stone atop it.

High Fae males eyed her as they meandered past where we stood by the wood-paneled wall near the main doors, either from awe or lust or perhaps both, their gazes occasionally snagging on me. I knew the wide eyes had nothing to do with my bright green gown or pretty face (fairly bland compared to Ianthe's). I tried to ignore them.

"Are you ready for tomorrow? Is there anything I can do for you?" Ianthe sipped from her glass of sparkling wine. The gown I wore tonight was a gift from her, actually—Spring Court green, she'd called it. Alis had merely lingered while I dressed, unnervingly silent, letting Ianthe claim her usual duties.

"I'm fine." I'd already contemplated how pathetic it would be if I asked her to permanently stay after the wedding. If I revealed that I dreaded her leaving me to this court, these people, until Nynsar—a minor spring holiday to celebrate the end of seeding the fields and to pass out the first flower clippings of the season. Months and months from now. Even having her live at her own temple felt too removed.

Two males that had circled past twice already finally worked up the courage to approach us—her.

I leaned against the wall, the wood digging into my back, as they flanked Ianthe. Handsome, in the way that most of them were handsome, armed with weapons that marked them as two of the High Fae who guarded Tamlin's lands. Perhaps they even worked under Ianthe's father. "Priestess," one said, bowing deep.

By now, I'd become accustomed to people kissing her silver rings and beseeching her for prayers for themselves, their families, or their lovers. Ianthe received it all without that beautiful face shifting in the slightest.

"Bron," she said to the one on her left, brown-haired and tall. "And Hart," she said to the one on her right, black-haired and built a bit more powerfully than his friend. She gave a coy, pretty tilt of her lips that I'd learned meant she was now on the hunt for nighttime companionship. "I haven't seen you two troublemakers in a while."

They parried with flirtatious comments, until the two males began glancing my way.

"Oh," Ianthe said, hood shifting as she turned. "Allow me to introduce Lady Feyre." She lowered her eyes, angling her head in a deep nod. "Savior of Prythian."

"We know," Hart said quietly, bowing with his friend at the waist. "We were Under the Mountain with you."

I managed to incline my head a bit as they straightened. "Congratulations on tomorrow," Bron said, grinning. "A fitting end, eh?"

A fitting end would have been me in a grave, burning in hell.

"The Cauldron," Ianthe said, "has blessed all of us with such a union." The males murmured their agreement, bowing their heads again. I ignored it.

"I have to say," Bron went on, "that trial—with the Middengard Wyrm? Brilliant. One of the most brilliant things I ever saw."

It was an effort not to push myself wholly flat against the wall, not to think about the reek of that mud, the gnashing of those flesh-shredding teeth bearing down upon me. "Thank you."

"Oh, it sounded terrible," Ianthe said, stepping closer as she noted I

was no longer wearing that bland smile. She put a hand on my arm. "Such bravery is awe-inspiring."

I was grateful, so pathetically grateful, for the steadying touch. For the squeeze. I knew then that she'd inspire hordes of young Fae females to join her order—not for worshipping their Mother and Cauldron, but to learn how she *lived*, how she could shine so brightly and love herself, move from male to male as if they were dishes at a banquet.

"We missed the hunt the other day," Hart said casually, "so we haven't had a chance to see your talents up close, but I think the High Lord will be stationing us near the estate next month—it'd be an honor to ride with you."

Tamlin wouldn't allow me out with them in a thousand years. And I had no desire to tell them that I had no interest in ever using a bow and arrow again, or hunting anything at all. The hunt I'd been dragged on two days ago had almost been too much. Even with everyone watching me, I hadn't drawn an arrow.

They were still waiting for a reply, so I said, "The honor would be mine."

"Does my father have you two on duty tomorrow, or will you be attending the ceremony?" Ianthe said, putting a distracting hand on Bron's arm. Precisely why I sought her out at events.

Bron answered her, but Hart's eyes lingered on me—on my crossed arms. On my tattooed fingers. He said, "Have you heard from the High Lord at all?"

Ianthe stiffened, and Bron immediately cut his gaze toward my inked flesh.

"No," I said, holding Hart's gaze.

"He's probably running scared now that Tamlin's got his powers back."

"Then you don't know Rhysand very well at all."

Hart blinked, and even Ianthe kept silent. It was probably the most assertive thing I'd said to anyone during these parties.

"Well, we'll take care of him if need be," Hart said, shifting on his feet as I continued to hold his gaze, not bothering to soften my expression.

Ianthe said to him, to me, "The High Priestesses are taking care of it. We will not allow our savior to be treated so ill."

I schooled my face into neutrality. Was *that* why Tamlin had initially sought out Ianthe? To make an alliance? My chest tightened a bit. I turned to her. "I'm going up. Tell Tamlin I'll see him tomorrow."

Tomorrow, because tonight, Ianthe had told me, we'd spend apart. As dictated by their long-held traditions.

Ianthe kissed my cheek, her hood shielding me from the room for a heartbeat. "I'm at your disposal, Lady. Send word if you need anything."

I wouldn't, but I nodded.

As I slipped from the room, I peered toward the front—where Tamlin and Lucien were surrounded by a circle of High Fae males and females. Perhaps not as refined as some of the others, but . . . They had the look of people who had been together a long time, fought at each other's sides. Tamlin's friends. He'd introduced me to them, and I'd immediately forgotten their names. I hadn't tried to learn them again.

Tamlin tipped his head back and laughed, the others howling with him.

I left before he could spot me, easing through the crowded halls until I was in the dim, empty upstairs of the residential wing.

Alone in my bedroom, I realized I couldn't remember the last time I'd truly laughed.

The ceiling pushed down, the large, blunt spikes so hot I could see the heat rippling off them even from where I was chained to the floor. Chained, because I was illiterate and couldn't read the riddle written on the wall, and Amarantha was glad to let me be impaled.

Closer and closer. There was no one coming to save me from this horrible death

It'd hurt. It'd hurt and be slow, and I'd cry—I might even cry for my mother, who had never cared for me, anyway. I might beg her to save me—

+

My limbs flailed as I shot upright in bed, yanking against invisible chains.

I would have lurched for the bathing room had my legs and arms not shook so badly, had I been able to breathe, breathe, breathe—

I scanned the bedroom, shuddering. Real—this was real. The horrors, those were nightmares. I was out; I was alive; I was safe.

A night breeze floated through the open windows, ruffling my hair, drying the cold sweat on me. The dark sky beckoned, the stars so dim and small, like speckles of frost.

Bron had sounded as if watching my encounter with the Middengard Wyrm was a sporting match. As if I hadn't been one mistake away from being devoured whole and my bones spat out.

Savior and jester, apparently.

I stumbled to the open window, and pushed it wider, clearing my view of the star-flecked darkness.

I rested my head against the wall, savoring the cool stones.

In a few hours, I'd be married. I'd have my happy ending, whether I deserved it or not. But this land, these people—they would have their happy ending, too. The first few steps toward healing. Toward peace. And then things would be fine.

Then I'd be fine.

H

I really, truly hated my wedding gown.

It was a monstrosity of tulle and chiffon and gossamer, so unlike the loose gowns I usually wore: the bodice fitted, the neckline curved to

plump my breasts, and the skirts . . . The skirts were a sparkling tent, practically floating in the balmy spring air.

No wonder Tamlin had laughed. Even Alis, as she'd dressed me, had hummed to herself, but said nothing. Most likely because Ianthe had personally selected the gown to complement whatever tale she'd weave today—the legend she'd proclaim to the world.

I might have dealt with it all if it weren't for the puffy capped sleeves, so big I could almost see them glinting from the periphery of my vision. My hair had been curled, half up, half down, entwined with pearls and jewels and the Cauldron knew what, and it had taken all my self-control to keep from cringing at the mirror before descending the sweeping stairs into the main hall. My dress hissed and swished with each step.

Beyond the shut patio doors where I paused, the garden had been bedecked in ribbons and lanterns in shades of cream, blush, and sky blue. Three hundred chairs were assembled in the largest courtyard, each seat occupied by Tamlin's court. I'd make my way down the main aisle, enduring their stares, before I reached the dais at the other end—where Tamlin would be waiting.

Then Ianthe would sanction and bless our union right before sundown, as a representative of *all* twelve High Priestesses. She'd hinted that they'd pushed to be present—but through whatever cunning, she'd managed to keep the other eleven away. Either to claim the attention for herself, or to spare me from being hounded by the pack of them. I couldn't tell. Perhaps both.

My mouth went paper-dry as Alis fluffed out the sparkling train of my gown in the shadow of the garden doors. Silk and gossamer rustled and sighed, and I gripped the pale bouquet in my gloved hands, nearly snapping the stems.

Elbow-length silk gloves—to hide the markings. Ianthe had delivered them herself this morning in a velvet-lined box.

"Don't be nervous," Alis clucked, her tree-bark skin rich and flushed in the honey-gold evening light.

"I'm not," I rasped.

"You're fidgeting like my youngest nephew during a haircut." She finished fussing over my dress, shooing away some servants who'd come to spy on me before the ceremony. I pretended I didn't see them, or the glittering, sunset-gilded crowd seated in the courtyard ahead, and toyed with some invisible fleck of dust on my skirts.

"You look beautiful," Alis said quietly. I was fairly certain her thoughts on the dress were the same as my own, but I believed her.

"Thank you."

"And you sound like you're going to your funeral."

I plastered a grin on my face. Alis rolled her eyes. But she nudged me toward the doors as they opened on some immortal wind, lilting music streaming in. "It'll be over faster than you can blink," she promised, and gently pushed me into the last of the sunlight.

Three hundred people rose to their feet and pivoted toward me.

Not since my last trial had so many gathered to watch me, judge me. All in finery so similar to what they'd worn Under the Mountain. Their faces blurred, melded.

Alis coughed from the shadows of the house, and I remembered to start walking, to look toward the dais—

At Tamlin.

The breath knocked from me, and it was an effort to keep going down the stairs, to keep my knees from buckling. He was resplendent in a tunic of green and gold, a crown of burnished laurel leaves gleaming on his head. He'd loosened the grip on his glamour, letting that immortal light and beauty shine through—for me.

My vision narrowed on him, on my High Lord, his wide eyes glistening as I stepped onto the soft grass, white rose petals scattered down it—

And red ones.

Like drops of blood amongst the white, red petals had been sprayed across the path ahead.

I forced my gaze up, to Tamlin, his shoulders back, head high.

So unaware of the true extent of how broken and dark I was inside. How unfit I was to be clothed in white when my hands were so filthy.

Everyone else was thinking it. They had to be.

Every step was too fast, propelling me toward the dais and Tamlin. And toward Ianthe, clothed in dark blue robes tonight, beaming beneath that hood and silver crown.

As if I were good—as if I hadn't murdered two of their kind.

I was a murderer and a liar.

A cluster of red petals loomed ahead—just like that Fae youth's blood had pooled at my feet.

Ten steps from the dais, at the edge of that splatter of red, I slowed. Then stopped.

Everyone was watching, exactly as they had when I'd nearly died, spectators to my torment.

Tamlin extended a broad hand, brows narrowing slightly. My heart beat so fast, too fast.

I was going to vomit.

Right over those rose petals; right over the grass and ribbons trailing into the aisle from the chairs flanking it.

And between my skin and bones, something thrummed and pounded, rising and pushing, lashing through my blood—

So many eyes, too many eyes, pressed on me, witnesses to every crime I'd committed, every humiliation—

I don't know why I'd even bothered to wear gloves, why I'd let Ianthe convince me.

The fading sun was too hot, the garden too hedged in. As inescapable as the vow I was about to make, binding me to him forever, shackling him to my broken and weary soul. The thing inside me was roiling now, my body shaking with the building force of it as it hunted for a way out—

Forever—I would never get better, never get free of myself, of that dungeon where I'd spent three months—

"Feyre," Tamlin said, his hand steady as he continued to reach for mine. The sun sank past the lip of the western garden wall; shadows pooled, chilling the air.

If I turned away, they'd start talking, but I couldn't make the last few steps, couldn't, couldn't, couldn't—

I was going to fall apart, right there, right then—and they'd see precisely how ruined I was.

Help me, help me, help me, I begged someone, anyone. Begged Lucien, standing in the front row, his metal eye fixed on me. Begged Ianthe, face serene and patient and lovely within that hood. Save me—please, save me. Get me out. End this.

Tamlin took a step toward me—concern shading those eyes.

I retreated a step. No.

Tamlin's mouth tightened. The crowd murmured. Silk streamers laden with globes of gold faelight twinkled into life above and around us.

Ianthe said smoothly, "Come, Bride, and be joined with your true love. Come, Bride, and let good triumph at last."

Good. I was not good. I was *nothing*, and my soul, my eternal soul, was damned—

I tried to get my traitorous lungs to draw air so I could voice the word. *No—no*.

But I didn't have to say it.

Thunder cracked behind me, as if two boulders had been hurled against each other.

People screamed, falling back, a few vanishing outright as darkness erupted.

I whirled, and through the night drifting away like smoke on a wind, I found Rhysand straightening the lapels of his black jacket.

"Hello, Feyre darling," he purred.

CHAPTER 5

 ${
m I}$ shouldn't have been surprised. Not when Rhysand liked to make a spectacle of everything. And found pissing off Tamlin to be an art form.

But there he was.

Rhysand, High Lord of the Night Court, now stood beside me, darkness leaking from him like ink in water.

He angled his head, his blue-black hair shifting with the movement. Those violet eyes sparkled in the golden faelight as they fixed on Tamlin, as he held up a hand to where Tamlin and Lucien and their sentries had their swords half-drawn, sizing up how to get me out of the way, how to bring him down—

But at the lift of that hand, they froze.

Ianthe, however, was backing away slowly, face drained of color.

"What a pretty little wedding," Rhysand said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as those many swords remained in their sheaths. The remaining crowd was pressing back, some climbing over seats to get away.

Rhys looked me over slowly, and clicked his tongue at my silk gloves. Whatever had been building beneath my skin went still and cold. "Get the hell out," growled Tamlin, stalking toward us. Claws ripped from his knuckles.

Rhys clicked his tongue again. "Oh, I don't think so. Not when I need to call in my bargain with Feyre darling."

My stomach hollowed out. No-no, not now.

"You try to break the bargain, and you know what will happen," Rhys went on, chuckling a bit at the crowd still falling over themselves to get away from him. He jerked his chin toward me. "I gave you three months of freedom. You could at least look happy to see me."

I was shaking too badly to say anything. Rhys's eyes flickered with distaste

The expression was gone when he faced Tamlin again. "I'll be taking her now."

"Don't you dare," Tamlin snarled. Behind him, the dais was empty; Ianthe had vanished entirely. Along with most of those in attendance.

"Was I interrupting? I thought it was over." Rhys gave me a smile dripping with venom. He knew—through that bond, through whatever magic was between us, he'd known I was about to say no. "At least, Feyre seemed to think so."

Tamlin snarled, "Let us finish the ceremony—"

"Your High Priestess," Rhys said, "seems to think it's over, too."

Tamlin stiffened as he looked over a shoulder to find the altar empty. When he faced us again, the claws had eased halfway back into his hands. "Rhysand—"

"I'm in no mood to bargain," Rhys said, "even though I could work it to my advantage, I'm sure." I jolted at the caress of his hand on my elbow. "Let's go."

I didn't move.

"Tamlin," I breathed.

Tamlin took a single step toward me, his golden face turning sallow, but remained focused on Rhys. "Name your price."

"Don't bother," Rhys crooned, linking elbows with me. Every spot of contact was abhorrent, unbearable.

He'd take me back to the Night Court, the place Amarantha had supposedly modeled Under the Mountain after, full of depravity and torture and death—

"Tamlin, please."

"Such dramatics," Rhysand said, tugging me closer.

But Tamlin didn't move—and those claws were wholly replaced by smooth skin. He fixed his gaze on Rhys, his lips pulling back in a snarl. "If you hurt her—"

"I know, I know," Rhysand drawled. "I'll return her in a week."

No—no, Tamlin couldn't be making those kinds of threats, not when they meant he was letting me go. Even Lucien was gaping at Tamlin, his face white with fury and shock.

Rhys released my elbow only to slip a hand around my waist, pressing me into his side as he whispered in my ear, "Hold on."

Then darkness roared, a wind tearing me this way and that, the ground falling away beneath me, the world gone around me. Only Rhys remained, and I hated him as I clung to him, I hated him with my entire heart—

Then the darkness vanished.

I smelled jasmine first—then saw stars. A sea of stars flickering beyond glowing pillars of moonstone that framed the sweeping view of endless snowcapped mountains.

"Welcome to the Night Court," was all Rhys said.

H

It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen.

Whatever building we were in had been perched atop one of the gray-stoned mountains. The hall around us was open to the elements, no windows to be found, just towering pillars and gossamer curtains, swaying in that jasmine-scented breeze.

It must be some magic, to keep the air warm in the dead of winter. Not to mention the altitude, or the snow coating the mountains, mighty winds sending veils of it drifting off the peaks like wandering mist.

Little seating, dining, and work areas dotted the hall, sectioned off with those curtains or lush plants or thick rugs scattered over the moonstone floor. A few balls of light bobbed on the breeze, along with colored-glass lanterns dangling from the arches of the ceiling.

Not a scream, not a shout, not a plea to be heard.

Behind me, a wall of white marble arose, broken occasionally by open doorways leading into dim stairwells. The rest of the Night Court had to be through there. No wonder I couldn't hear anyone screaming, if they were all inside.

"This is my private residence," Rhys said casually. His skin was darker than I'd remembered—golden now, rather than pale.

Pale, from being locked Under the Mountain for fifty years. I scanned him, searching for any sign of the massive, membranous wings—the ones he'd admitted he loved flying with. But there was none. Just the male, smirking at me.

And that too-familiar expression—"How dare you—"

Rhys snorted. "I certainly missed *that* look on your face." He stalked closer, his movements feline, those violet eyes turning subdued—lethal. "You're welcome, you know."

"For what?"

Rhys paused less than a foot away, sliding his hands into his pockets. The night didn't seem to ripple from him here—and he appeared, despite his perfection, almost normal. "For saving you when asked."

I stiffened. "I didn't ask for anything."

His stare dipped to my left hand.

Rhys gave no warning as he gripped my arm, snarling softly, and tore off the glove. His touch was like a brand, and I flinched, yielding a step, but he held firm until he'd gotten both gloves off. "I heard you begging someone, *anyone*, to rescue you, to get you out. I heard you say *no*."

"I didn't say anything."

He turned my bare hand over, his hold tightening as he examined the eye he'd tattooed. He tapped the pupil. Once. Twice. "I heard it loud and clear."

I wrenched my hand away. "Take me back. *Now*. I didn't want to be stolen away."

He shrugged. "What better time to take you here? Maybe Tamlin didn't notice you were about to reject him in front of his entire court—maybe you can now simply blame it on me."

"You're a bastard. You made it clear enough that I had . . . reservations."

"Such gratitude, as always."

I struggled to get down a single, deep breath. "What do you want from me?"

"Want? I want you to say thank you, first of all. Then I want you to take off that hideous dress. You look . . . " His mouth cut a cruel line. "You look exactly like the doe-eyed damsel he and that simpering priestess want you to be."

"You don't know anything about me. Or us."

Rhys gave me a knowing smile. "Does Tamlin? Does he ever ask you why you hurl your guts up every night, or why you can't go into certain rooms or see certain colors?"

I froze. He might as well have stripped me naked. "Get the hell out of my head."

Tamlin had horrors of his own to endure, to face down.

"Likewise." He stalked a few steps away. "You think I enjoy being awoken every night by visions of you puking? You send everything right down that bond, and I don't appreciate having a front-row seat when I'm trying to sleep."

"Prick."

Another chuckle. But I wouldn't ask about what he meant—about the bond between us. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking

curious. "As for what else I want from you . . . " He gestured to the house behind us. "I'll tell you tomorrow at breakfast. For now, clean yourself up. Rest." That rage flickered in his eyes again at the dress, the hair. "Take the stairs on the right, one level down. Your room is the first door."

"Not a dungeon cell?" Perhaps it was foolish to reveal that fear, to suggest it to him.

But Rhys half turned, brows lifting. "You are not a prisoner, Feyre. You made a bargain, and I am calling it in. You will be my guest here, with the privileges of a member of my household. None of my subjects are going to touch you, hurt you, or so much as think ill of you here."

My tongue was dry and heavy as I said, "And where might those subjects be?"

"Some dwell here—in the mountain beneath us." He angled his head. "They're forbidden to set foot in this residence. They know they'd be signing their death warrant." His eyes met mine, stark and clear, as if he could sense the panic, the shadows creeping in. "Amarantha wasn't very creative," he said with quiet wrath. "My court beneath this mountain has long been feared, and she chose to replicate it by violating the space of Prythian's sacred mountain. So, yes: there's a court beneath this mountain—the court your Tamlin now expects me to be subjecting you to. I preside over it every now and then, but it mostly rules itself."

"When—when are you taking me there?" If I had to go underground, had to see those kinds of horrors again . . . I'd beg him—*beg* him not to take me. I didn't care how pathetic it made me. I'd lost any sort of qualms about what lines I'd cross to survive.

"I'm not." He rolled his shoulders. "This is my home, and the court beneath it is my \dots occupation, as you mortals call it. I do not like for the two to overlap very often."

My brows rose slightly. "'You mortals'?"

Starlight danced along the planes of his face. "Should I consider you something different?"

A challenge. I shoved away my irritation at the amusement again

tugging at the corners of his lips, and instead said, "And the other denizens of your court?" The Night Court territory was enormous—bigger than any other in Prythian. And all around us were those empty, snow-blasted mountains. No sign of towns, cities, or anything.

"Scattered throughout, dwelling as they wish. Just as *you* are now free to roam where you wish."

"I wish to roam home."

Rhys laughed, finally sauntering toward the other end of the hall, which ended in a veranda open to the stars. "I'm willing to accept your thanks at any time, you know," he called to me without looking back.

Red exploded in my vision, and I couldn't breathe fast enough, couldn't *think* above the roar in my head. One heartbeat, I was staring after him—the next, I had my shoe in a hand.

I hurled it at him with all my strength.

All my considerable, immortal strength.

I barely saw my silk slipper as it flew through the air, fast as a shooting star, so fast that even a High Lord couldn't detect it as it neared—

And slammed into his head.

Rhys whirled, a hand rising to the back of his head, his eyes wide.

I already had the other shoe in my hand.

Rhys's lip pulled back from his teeth. "*I dare you*." Temper—he had to be in some mood today to let his temper show this much.

Good. That made two of us.

I flung my other shoe right at his head, as swift and hard as the first one.

His hand snatched up, grabbing the shoe mere inches from his face.

Rhys hissed and lowered the shoe, his eyes meeting mine as the silk dissolved to glittering black dust in his fist. His fingers unfurled, the last of the sparkling ashes blowing into oblivion, and he surveyed my hand, my body, my face.

"Interesting," he murmured, and continued on his way.

I debated tackling him and pummeling that face with my fists, but I wasn't stupid. I was in his home, on top of a mountain in the middle of absolutely nowhere, it seemed. No one would be coming to rescue me—no one was even here to witness my screaming.

So I turned toward the doorway he'd indicated, heading for the dim stairwell beyond.

I'd nearly reached it, not daring to breathe too loudly, when a bright, amused female voice said behind me—far away, from wherever Rhys had gone to at the opposite end of the hall, "So, *that* went well."

Rhys's answering snarl sent my footsteps hurrying.

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My room was . . . a dream.

After scouring it for any sign of danger, after learning every exit and entrance and hiding place, I paused in the center to contemplate where, exactly, I'd be staying for the next week.

Like the upstairs living area, its windows were open to the brutal world beyond—no glass, no shutters—and sheer amethyst curtains fluttered in that unnatural, soft breeze. The large bed was a creamy white-and-ivory concoction, with pillows and blankets and throws for days, made more inviting by the twin golden lamps beside it. An armoire and dressing table occupied a wall, framed by those glass-less windows. Across the room, a chamber with a porcelain sink and toilet lay behind an arched wooden door, but the bath . . .

The bath.

Occupying the other half of the bedroom, my bathtub was actually a pool, hanging right off the mountain itself. A pool for soaking or enjoying myself. Its far edge seemed to disappear into nothing, the water flowing silently off the side and into the night beyond. A narrow ledge on the adjacent wall was lined with fat, guttering candles whose glow gilded the dark, glassy surface and wafting tendrils of steam.

Open, airy, plush, and . . . calm.

This room was fit for an empress. With the marble floors, silks, velvets, and elegant details, only an empress could have afforded it. I tried not to think what Rhys's chamber was like, if this was how he treated his guests.

Guest-not prisoner.

Well . . . the room proved it.

I didn't bother barricading the door. Rhys could likely fly in if he felt like it. And I'd seen him shatter a faerie's mind without so much as blinking. I doubted a bit of wood would keep out that horrible power.

I again surveyed the room, my wedding gown hissing on the warm marble floors

I peered down at myself.

You look ridiculous.

Heat itched along my cheeks and neck.

It didn't excuse what he'd done. Even if he'd...saved me—I choked on the word—from having to refuse Tamlin. Having to explain.

Slowly, I tugged the pins and baubles from my curled hair, piling them onto the dressing table. The sight was enough for me to grit my teeth, and I swept them into an empty drawer instead, slamming it shut so hard the mirror above the table rattled. I rubbed at my scalp, aching from the weight of the curls and prodding pins. This afternoon, I'd imagined Tamlin pulling them each from my hair, a kiss for every pin, but now—

I swallowed against the burning in my throat.

Rhys was the least of my concerns. Tamlin had seen the hesitation, but had he understood that I was about to say no? Had Ianthe? I had to tell him. Had to explain that there couldn't be a wedding, not for a while yet. Maybe I'd wait until the mating bond snapped into place, until I knew for sure it couldn't be some mistake, that . . . that I was worthy of him.

Maybe wait until he, too, had faced the nightmares stalking him. Relaxed his grip on things a bit. On me. Even if I understood his need to protect, that fear of losing me . . . Perhaps I should explain everything when I returned.

But—so many people had seen it, seen me hesitate—

My lower lip trembled, and I began unbuttoning my gown, then tugged it off my shoulders.

I let it slide to the ground in a sigh of silk and tulle and beading, a deflated soufflé on the marble floor, and took a large step out of it. Even my undergarments were ridiculous: frothy scraps of lace, intended solely for Tamlin to admire—and then tear into ribbons.

I snatched up the gown, storming to the armoire and shoving it inside. Then I stripped off the undergarments and chucked them in as well.

My tattoo was stark against the pile of white silk and lace. My breath came faster and faster. I didn't realize I was weeping until I grabbed the first bit of fabric within the armoire I could find—a set of turquoise nightclothes—and shoved my feet into the ankle-length pants, then pulled the short-sleeved matching shirt over my head, the hem grazing the top of my navel. I didn't care that it had to be some Night Court fashion, didn't care that they were soft and warm.

I climbed into that big, fluffy bed, the sheets smooth and welcoming, and could barely draw a breath steady enough to blow out the lamps on either side.

But as soon as darkness enveloped the room, my sobs hit in full—great, gasping pants that shuddered through me, flowing out the open windows, and into the starry, snow-kissed night.

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Rhys hadn't been lying when he said I was to join him for breakfast.

My old handmaidens from Under the Mountain appeared at my door just past dawn, and I might not have recognized the pretty, dark-haired twins had they not acted like they knew me. I had never seen them as anything but shadows, their faces always concealed in impenetrable night. But here—or perhaps without Amarantha—they were fully corporeal.

Nuala and Cerridwen were their names, and I wondered if they'd ever told me. If I had been too far gone Under the Mountain to even care.

Their gentle knock hurled me awake—not that I'd slept much during the night. For a heartbeat, I wondered why my bed felt so much softer, why mountains flowed into the distance and not spring grasses and hills... and then it all poured back in. Along with a throbbing, relentless headache.

After the second, patient knock, followed by a muffled explanation through the door of who they were, I scrambled out of bed to let them in. And after a miserably awkward greeting, they informed me that breakfast would be served in thirty minutes, and I was to bathe and dress.

I didn't bother to ask if Rhys was behind that last order, or if it was their recommendation based on how grim I no doubt looked, but they laid out some clothes on the bed before leaving me to wash in private.

I was tempted to linger in the luxurious heat of the bathtub for the rest of the day, but a faint, endlessly amused *tug* cleaved through my headache. I knew that tug—had been called by it once before, in those hours after Amarantha's downfall.

I ducked to my neck in the water, scanning the clear winter sky, the fierce wind whipping the snow off those nearby peaks . . . No sign of him, no pound of beating wings. But the tug yanked again in my mind, my gut—a summoning. Like some servant's bell.

Cursing him soundly, I scrubbed myself down and dressed in the clothes they'd left.

And now, striding across the sunny upper level as I blindly followed the source of that insufferable tug, my magenta silk shoes near-silent on the moonstone floors, I wanted to shred the clothes off me, if only for the fact that they belonged to this place, to *him*.

My high-waisted peach pants were loose and billowing, gathered at the ankles with velvet cuffs of bright gold. The long sleeves of the matching top were made of gossamer, also gathered at the wrists, and the top itself hung just to my navel, revealing a sliver of skin as I walked.

Comfortable, easy to move in—to run. Feminine. Exotic. Thin enough that, unless Rhysand planned to torment me by casting me into the winter wasteland around us, I could assume I wasn't leaving the borders of whatever warming magic kept the palace so balmy.

At least the tattoo, visible through the sheer sleeve, wouldn't be out of place here. But—the clothes were still a part of this court.

And no doubt part of some game he intended to play with me.

At the very end of the upper level, a small glass table gleamed like quicksilver in the heart of a stone veranda, set with three chairs and laden with fruits, juices, pastries, and breakfast meats. And in one of those chairs . . . Though Rhys stared out at the sweeping view, the snowy mountains near-blinding in the sunlight, I knew he'd sensed my arrival from the moment I cleared the stairwell at the other side of the hall. Maybe since I'd awoken, if that tug was any indication.

I paused between the last two pillars, studying the High Lord lounging at the breakfast table and the view he surveyed.

"I'm not a dog to be summoned," I said by way of greeting.

Slowly, Rhys looked over his shoulder. Those violet eyes were vibrant in the light, and I curled my fingers into fists as they swept from my head to my toes and back up again. He frowned at whatever he found lacking. "I didn't want you to get lost," he said blandly.

My head throbbed, and I eyed the silver teapot steaming in the center of the table. A cup of tea . . . "I thought it'd always be dark here," I said, if only to not look quite as desperate for that life-giving tea so early in the morning.

"We're one of the three Solar Courts," he said, motioning for me to sit with a graceful twist of his wrist. "Our nights are far more beautiful, and our sunsets and dawns are exquisite, but we do adhere to the laws of nature."

I slid into the upholstered chair across from him. His tunic was