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OF
WINGS
AND
RUIN

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**A COURT
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AND
RUIN**

SARAH J. MAAS

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newsletters, including news about Sarah J. Maas.

*For Josh and Annie—
A gift. All of it.*

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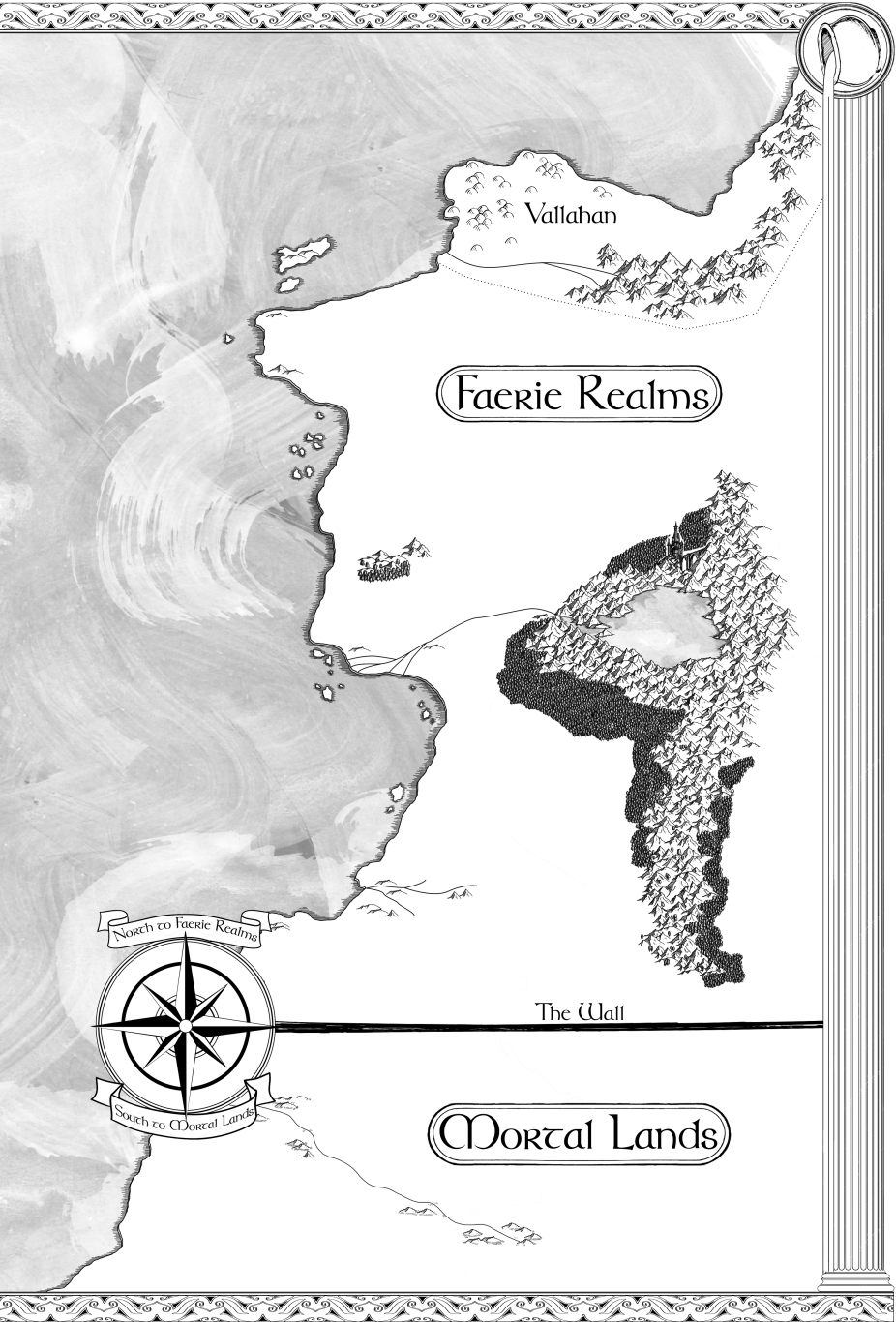
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Prythian

Hybern



Mortal Lands



Vallahan

Faerie Realms

The Wall

Mortal Lands



Rhysand
Two Years Before the Wall

The buzzing flies and screaming survivors had long since replaced the beating war-drums.

The killing field was now a tangled sprawl of corpses, human and faerie alike, interrupted only by broken wings jutting toward the gray sky or the occasional bulk of a felled horse.

With the heat, despite the heavy cloud cover, the smell would soon be unbearable. Flies already crawled along eyes gazing unblinkingly upward. They didn't differentiate between mortal and immortal flesh.

I picked my way across the once-grassy plain, marking the banners half-buried in mud and gore. It took most of my lingering strength to keep my wings from dragging over corpse and armor. My own power had been depleted well before the carnage had stopped.

I'd spent the final hours fighting as the mortals beside me had: with sword and fist and brute, unrelenting focus. We'd held the lines against Ravennia's legions—hour after hour, we'd held the lines, as I had been ordered to do by my father, as I knew I must do. To falter here would have been the killing blow to our already-sundering resistance.

The keep looming at my back was too valuable to be yielded to the

Loyalists. Not just for its location in the heart of the continent, but for the supplies it guarded. For the forges that smoldered day and night on its western side, toiling to stock our forces.

The smoke of those forges now blended with the pyres already being kindled behind me as I kept walking, scanning the faces of the dead. I made a note to dispatch any soldiers who could stomach it to claim weapons from either army. We needed them too desperately to bother with honor. Especially since the other side did not bother with it at all.

So still—the battlefield was so still, compared with the slaughter and chaos that had finally halted hours ago. The Loyalist army had retreated rather than surrender, leaving their dead for the crows.

I edged around a fallen bay gelding, the beautiful beast's eyes still wide with terror, flies crusting his bloodied flank. The rider was twisted beneath it, the man's head partially severed. Not from a sword blow. No, those brutal gashes were claws.

They wouldn't yield easily. The kingdoms and territories that wanted their human slaves would not lose this war unless they had no other choice. And even then . . . We'd learned the hard way, very early on, that they had no regard for the ancient rules and rites of battle. And for the Fae territories that fought beside mortal warriors . . . We were to be stomped out like vermin.

I waved away a fly that buzzed in my ear, my hand caked with blood both my own and foreign.

I'd always thought death would be some sort of peaceful homecoming—a sweet, sad lullaby to usher me into whatever waited afterward.

I crunched down with an armored boot on the flagpole of a Loyalist standard-bearer, smearing red mud across the tusked boar embroidered on its emerald flag.

I now wondered if the lullaby of death was not a lovely song, but the droning of flies. If flies and maggots were all Death's handmaidens.

The battlefield stretched toward the horizon in every direction save the keep at my back.

Three days, we had held them off; three days, we had fought and died here.

But we'd held the lines. Again and again, I'd rallied human and faerie, had refused to let the Loyalists break through, even when they'd hammered our vulnerable right flank with fresh troops on the second day.

I'd used my power until it was nothing but smoke in my veins, and then I'd used my Illyrian training until swinging my shield and sword was all I knew, all I could manage against the hordes.

A half-shredded Illyrian wing jutted from a cluster of High Fae corpses, as if it had taken all six of them to bring the warrior down. As if he'd taken them all out with him.

My heartbeat pounded through my battered body as I hauled away the piled corpses.

Reinforcements had arrived at dawn on the third and final day, sent by my father after my plea for aid. I had been too lost in battle-rage to note who they were beyond an Illyrian unit, especially when so many had been wielding Siphons.

But in the hours since they'd saved our asses and turned the tide of the battle, I had not spotted either of my brothers amongst the living. Did not know if Cassian or Azriel had even fought on the plain.

The latter was unlikely, as my father kept him close for spying, but Cassian . . . Cassian could have been reassigned. I wouldn't have put it past my father to shift Cassian to a unit most likely to be slaughtered. As this one had been, barely half limping off the battlefield earlier.

My aching, bloodied fingers dug into dented armor and clammy, stiff flesh as I heaved away the last of the High Fae corpses piled atop the fallen Illyrian soldier.

The dark hair, the golden-brown skin . . . The same as Cassian's.

But it was not Cassian's death-gray face that gaped at the sky.

My breath whooshed from me, my lungs still raw from roaring, my lips dry and chapped.

I needed water—badly. But nearby, another set of Illyrian wings poked up from the piled dead.

I stumbled and lurched toward it, letting my mind drift someplace dark and quiet while I righted the twisted neck to peer at the face beneath the simple helm.

Not him.

I picked my way through the corpses to another Illyrian.

Then another. And another.

Some I knew. Some I didn't. Still the killing field stretched onward under the sky.

Mile after mile. A kingdom of the rotting dead.

And still I looked.

PART ONE

PRINCESS OF CARRION

CHAPTER

1

Feyre

The painting was a lie.

A bright, pretty lie, bursting with pale pink blooms and fat beams of sunshine.

I'd begun it yesterday, an idle study of the rose garden lurking beyond the open windows of the studio. Through the tangle of thorns and satiny leaves, the brighter green of the hills rolled away into the distance.

Incessant, unrelenting spring.

If I'd painted this glimpse into the court the way my gut had urged me, it would have been flesh-shredding thorns, flowers that choked off the sunlight for any plants smaller than them, and rolling hills stained red.

But each brushstroke on the wide canvas was calculated; each dab and swirl of blending colors meant to portray not just idyllic spring, but a sunny disposition as well. Not too happy, but gladly, finally healing from horrors I carefully divulged.

I supposed that in the past weeks, I had crafted my demeanor as intricately as one of these paintings. I supposed that if I had also chosen

to show myself as I truly wished, I would have been adorned with flesh-shredding talons, and hands that choked the life out of those now in my company. I would have left the gilded halls stained red.

But not yet.

Not yet, I told myself with every brushstroke, with every move I'd made these weeks. Swift revenge helped no one and nothing but my own, roiling rage.

Even if every time I spoke to them, I heard Elain's sobbing as she was forced into the Cauldron. Even if every time I looked at them, I saw Nesta fling that finger at the King of Hybern in a death-promise. Even if every time I scented them, my nostrils were again full of the tang of Cassian's blood as it pooled on the dark stones of that bone-castle.

The paintbrush snapped between my fingers.

I'd cleaved it in two, the pale handle damaged beyond repair.

Cursing under my breath, I glanced to the windows, the doors. This place was too full of watching eyes to risk throwing it in the rubbish bin.

I cast my mind around me like a net, trawling for any others near enough to witness, to be spying. I found none.

I held my hands before me, one half of the brush in each palm.

For a moment, I let myself see past the glamour that concealed the tattoo on my right hand and forearm. The markings of my true heart. My true title.

High Lady of the Night Court.

Half a thought had the broken paintbrush going up in flames.

The fire did not burn me, even as it devoured wood and brush and paint.

When it was nothing but smoke and ash, I invited in a wind that swept them from my palms and out the open windows.

For good measure, I summoned a breeze from the garden to snake through the room, wiping away any lingering tendril of smoke, filling it with the musty, suffocating smell of roses.

Perhaps when my task here was done, I'd burn this manor to the ground, too. Starting with those roses.

Two approaching presences tapped against the back of my mind, and I snatched up another brush, dipping it in the closest swirl of paint, and lowered the invisible, dark snares I'd erected around this room to alert me of any visitors.

I was working on the way the sunlight illuminated the delicate veins in a rose petal, trying not to think of how I'd once seen it do the same to Illyrian wings, when the doors opened.

I made a good show of appearing lost in my work, hunching my shoulders a bit, angling my head. And made an even better show of slowly looking over my shoulder, as if the struggle to part myself from the painting was a true effort.

But the battle was the smile I forced to my mouth. To my eyes—the real tell of a smile's genuine nature. I'd practiced in the mirror. Over and over.

So my eyes easily crinkled as I gave a subdued yet happy smile to Tamlin.

To Lucien.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Tamlin said, scanning my face for any sign of the shadows I remembered to occasionally fall prey to, the ones I wielded to keep him at bay when the sun sank beyond those foothills. “But I thought you might want to get ready for the meeting.”

I made myself swallow. Lower the paintbrush. No more than the nervous, unsure girl I'd been long ago. “Is—you talked it over with Ianthe? She's truly coming?”

I hadn't seen her yet. The High Priestess who had betrayed my sisters to Hybern, betrayed *us* to Hybern.

And even if Rhysand's murky, swift reports through the mating bond had soothed some of my dread and terror . . . She was responsible for it. What had happened weeks ago.

It was Lucien who answered, studying my painting as if it held the proof I knew he was searching for. “Yes. She . . . had her reasons. She is willing to explain them to you.”

Perhaps along with her reasons for laying her hands on whatever

males she pleased, whether they wished her to or not. For doing it to Rhys, and Lucien.

I wondered what Lucien truly made of it. And the fact that the collateral in her friendship with Hybern had wound up being *his* mate. Elain.

We had not spoken of Elain save for once, the day after I'd returned.

Despite what Jurian implied regarding how my sisters will be treated by Rhysand, I had told him, despite what the Night Court is like, they won't hurt Elain or Nesta like that—not yet. Rhysand has more creative ways to harm them.

Lucien still seemed to doubt it.

But then again, I had also implied, in my own “gaps” of memory, that perhaps I had not received the same creativity or courtesy.

That they believed it so easily, that they thought Rhysand would ever force someone . . . I added the insult to the long, long list of things to repay them for.

I set down the brush and pulled off the paint-flecked smock, carefully laying it on the stool I'd been perched on for two hours now.

“I'll go change,” I murmured, flicking my loose braid over a shoulder.

Tamlin nodded, monitoring my every movement as I neared them. “The painting looks beautiful.”

“It's nowhere near done,” I said, dredging up that girl who had shunned praise and compliments, who had wanted to go unnoticed. “It's still a mess.”

Frankly, it was some of my best work, even if its soullessness was only apparent to me.

“I think we all are,” Tamlin offered with a tentative smile.

I reined in the urge to roll my eyes, and returned his smile, brushing my hand over his shoulder as I passed.

Lucien was waiting outside my new bedroom when I emerged ten minutes later.

It had taken me two days to stop going to the old one—to turn right at the top of the stairs and not left. But there was nothing in that old bedroom.

I'd looked into it once, the day after I returned.

Shattered furniture; shredded bedding; clothes strewn about as if he'd gone looking for me inside the armoire. No one, it seemed, had been allowed in to clean.

But it was the vines—the thorns—that had made it unlivable. My old bedroom had been overrun with them. They'd curved and slithered over the walls, entwined themselves amongst the debris. As if they'd crawled off the trellises beneath my windows, as if a hundred years had passed and not months.

That bedroom was now a tomb.

I gathered the soft pink skirts of my gauzy dress in a hand and shut the bedroom door behind me. Lucien remained leaning against the door across from mine.

His room.

I didn't doubt he'd ensured I now stayed across from him. Didn't doubt that the metal eye he possessed was always turned toward my own chambers, even while he slept.

"I'm surprised you're so calm, given your promises in Hybern," Lucien said by way of greeting.

The promise I'd made to kill the human queens, the King of Hybern, Jurian, and Ianthe for what they'd done to my sisters. To my friends.

"You yourself said Ianthe had her reasons. Furious as I might be, I can hear her out."

I had not told Lucien of what I knew regarding her true nature. It would mean explaining that Rhys had thrown her out of his own home, that Rhys had done it to defend himself and the members of his court, and it would raise too many questions, undermine too many carefully crafted lies that had kept him and his court—*my* court—safe.

Though I wondered if, after Velaris, it was even necessary. Our

enemies knew of the city, knew it was a place of good and peace. And had tried to destroy it at the first opportunity.

The guilt for the attack on Velaris after Rhys had revealed it to those human queens would haunt my mate for the rest of our immortal lives.

“She’s going to spin a story that you’ll want to hear,” Lucien warned.

I shrugged, heading down the carpeted, empty hall. “I can decide for myself. Though it sounds like you’ve already chosen not to believe her.”

He fell into step beside me. “She dragged two innocent women into this.”

“She was working to ensure Hybern’s alliance held strong.”

Lucien halted me with a hand around my elbow.

I allowed it because *not* allowing it, winnowing the way I’d done in the woods those months ago, or using an Illyrian defensive maneuver to knock him on his ass, would ruin my ruse. “You’re smarter than that.”

I studied the broad, tan hand wrapped around my elbow. Then I met one eye of russet and one of whirring gold.

Lucien breathed, “Where is he keeping her?”

I knew who he meant.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Rhysand has a hundred places where they could be, but I doubt he’d use any of them to hide Elain, knowing that I’m aware of them.”

“Tell me anyway. List all of them.”

“You’ll die the moment you set foot in his territory.”

“I survived well enough when I found you.”

“You couldn’t see that he had me in thrall. You let him take me back.”
Lie, lie, lie.

But the hurt and guilt I expected weren’t there. Lucien slowly released his grip. “I need to find her.”

“You don’t even know Elain. The mating bond is just a physical reaction overriding your good sense.”

“Is that what it did to you and Rhys?”

A quiet, dangerous question. But I made fear enter my eyes, let

myself drag up memories of the Weaver, the Carver, the Middengard Wyrms so that old terror drenched my scent. “I don’t want to talk about that,” I said, my voice a rasping wobble.

A clock chimed on the main level. I sent a silent prayer of thanks to the Mother and launched into a quick walk. “We’ll be late.”

Lucien only nodded. But I felt his gaze on my back, fixed right on my spine, as I headed downstairs. To see Ianthe.

And at last decide how I was going to shred her into pieces.



The High Priestess looked exactly as I remembered, both in those memories Rhys had shown me and in my own daydreamings of using the talons hidden beneath my nails to carve out her eyes, then her tongue, then open up her throat.

My rage had become a living thing inside my chest, an echoing heart-beat that soothed me to sleep and stirred me to waking. I quieted it as I stared at Ianthe across the formal dining table, Tamlin and Lucien flanking me.

She still wore the pale hood and silver circlet set with its limpid blue stone.

Like a Siphon—the jewel in its center reminded me of Azriel’s and Cassian’s Siphons. And I wondered if, like the Illyrian warriors’, the jewel somehow helped shape an unwieldy gift of magic into something more refined, deadlier. She had never removed it—but then again, I had never seen Ianthe summon any greater power than igniting a ball of faelicht in a room.

The High Priestess lowered her teal eyes to the dark wood table, the hood casting shadows on her perfect face. “I wish to begin by saying how truly sorry I am. I acted out of a desire to . . . to grant what I believed you perhaps yearned for but did not dare voice, while also keeping our allies in Hybern satisfied with our allegiance.”

Pretty, poisoned lies. But finding her true motive . . . I’d been waiting

these weeks for this meeting. Had spent these weeks pretending to convalesce, pretending to *heal* from the horrors I'd survived at Rhysand's hands.

"Why would I ever wish for my sisters to endure that?" My voice came out trembling, cold.

Ianthe lifted her head, scanning my unsure, if not a bit aloof, face. "So you could be with them forever. And if Lucien had discovered that Elain was his mate beforehand, it would have been . . . devastating to realize he'd only have a few decades."

The sound of Elain's name on her lips sent a snarl rumbling up my throat. But I leashed it, falling into that mask of pained quiet, the newest in my arsenal.

Lucien answered, "If you expect our gratitude, you'll be waiting a while, Ianthe."

Tamlin shot him a warning look—both at the words and the tone. Perhaps Lucien would kill Ianthe before I had the chance, just for the horror she'd put his mate through that day.

"No," Ianthe breathed, eyes wide, the perfect picture of remorse and guilt. "No, I don't expect gratitude in the least. Or forgiveness. But understanding . . . This is my home, too." She lifted a slender hand clad in silver rings and bracelets to encompass the room, the manor. "We have all had to make alliances we didn't believe we'd ever forge—perhaps unsavory ones, yes, but . . . Hybern's force is too great to stop. It now can only be weathered like any other storm." A glance toward Tamlin. "We have worked so hard to prepare ourselves for Hybern's inevitable arrival—all these months. I made a grave mistake, and I will always regret any pain I caused, but let us continue this good work together. Let us find a way to ensure our lands and people survive."

"At the cost of how many others?" Lucien demanded.

Again, that warning look from Tamlin. But Lucien ignored him.

"What I saw in Hybern," Lucien said, gripping the arms of his chair hard enough that the carved wood groaned. "Any promises he made of

peace and immunity . . .” He halted, as if remembering that Ianthe might very well feed this back to the king. He loosened his grip on the chair, his long fingers flexing before settling on the arms again. “We have to be careful.”

“We will be,” Tamlin promised. “But we’ve already agreed to certain conditions. Sacrifices. If we break apart now . . . even with Hybern as our ally, we have to present a solid front. Together.”

He still trusted her. Still thought that Ianthe had merely made a bad call. Had no idea what lurked beneath the beauty, the clothes, and the pious incantations.

But then again, that same blindness kept him from realizing what prowled beneath my skin as well. Ianthe bowed her head again. “I will endeavor to be worthy of my friends.”

Lucien seemed to be trying very, very hard not to roll his eyes.

But Tamlin said, “We’ll all try.”

That was his new favorite word: *try*.

I only swallowed, making sure he heard it, and nodded slowly, keeping my eyes on Ianthe. “Don’t ever do anything like that again.”

A fool’s command—one she’d expected me to make, from the quickness with which she nodded. Lucien leaned back in his seat, refusing to say anything else.

“Lucien is right, though,” I blurted, the portrait of concern. “What of the people in this court during this conflict?” I frowned at Tamlin. “They were brutalized by Amarantha—I’m not sure how well they will endure living beside Hybern. They have suffered enough.”

Tamlin’s jaw tightened. “Hybern has promised that our people shall remain untouched and undisturbed.” *Our* people. I nearly scowled—even as I nodded again in understanding. “It was a part of our . . . bargain.” When he’d sold out all of Prythian, sold out everything decent and good in himself, to *retrieve* me. “Our people will be safe when Hybern arrives. Though I’ve sent out word that families should . . . relocate to the eastern part of the territory. For the time being.”

Good. At least he'd considered those potential casualties—at least he cared that much about his people, understood what sorts of sick games Hybern liked to play and that he might swear one thing but mean another. If he was already moving those most at risk during this conflict out of the way . . . It made my work here all the easier. And east—a bit of information I tucked away. If east was safe, then the west . . . Hybern would indeed be coming from that direction. Arriving there.

Tamlin blew out a breath. “That brings me to the other reason behind this meeting.”

I braced myself, schooling my face into bland curiosity, as he declared, “The first delegation from Hybern arrives tomorrow.” Lucien's golden skin paled. Tamlin added, “Jurian will be here by noon.”

CHAPTER 2

I'd barely heard a whisper of Jurian these past weeks—hadn't seen the resurrected human commander since that night in Hybern.

Jurian had been reborn through the Cauldron using the hideous remnants of him that Amarantha had hoarded as trophies for five hundred years, his soul trapped and aware within his own magically preserved eye. He was mad—had gone mad long before the King of Hybern had resurrected him to lead the human queens down a path of ignorant submission.

Tamlin and Lucien had to know. Had to have seen that gleam in Jurian's eyes.

But . . . they also did not seem to entirely mind that the King of Hybern possessed the Cauldron—that it was capable of cleaving this world apart. Starting with the wall. The only thing standing between the gathering, lethal Fae armies and the vulnerable human lands below.

No, that threat certainly didn't seem to keep Lucien or Tamlin awake at night. Or from inviting these monsters into their home.

Tamlin had promised upon my return that I was to be included in the planning, in every meeting. And he was true to his word when he

explained that Jurian would arrive with two other commanders from Hybern, and I would be present for it. They indeed wished to survey the wall, to test for the perfect spot to rend it once the Cauldron had recovered its strength.

Turning my sisters into Fae, apparently, had drained it.

My smugness at the fact was short-lived.

My first task: learn where they planned to strike, and how long the Cauldron required to return to its full capacity. And then smuggle that information to Rhysand and the others.

I took extra care dressing the next day, after sleeping fitfully thanks to a dinner with a guilt-ridden Ianthe, who went to excessive lengths to kiss my ass and Lucien's. The priestess apparently wished to wait until the Hybern commanders were settled before making her appearance. She'd cooed about wanting to ensure they had the chance to get to know us before she intruded, but one look at Lucien told me that he and I, for once, agreed: she had likely planned some sort of grand entrance.

It made little difference to me—to my plans.

Plans that I sent down the mating bond the next morning, words and images tumbling along a night-filled corridor.

I did not dare risk using the bond too often. I had communicated with Rhysand only once since I'd arrived. Just once, in the hours after I'd walked into my old bedroom and spied the thorns that had conquered it.

It had been like shouting across a great distance, like speaking underwater. *I am safe and well*, I'd fired down the bond. *I'll tell you what I know soon*. I'd waited, letting the words travel into the dark. Then I'd asked, *Are they alive? Hurt?*

I didn't remember the bond between us being so hard to hear, even when I'd dwelled on this estate and he'd used it to see if I was still breathing, to make sure my despair hadn't swallowed me whole.

But Rhysand's response had come a minute later. *I love you. They are alive. They are healing.*

That was it. As if it was all that he could manage.

I had drifted back to my new chambers, locked the door, and enveloped the entire place in a wall of hard air to keep any scent from my silent tears escaping as I curled up in a corner of the bathing room.

I had once sat in such a position, watching the stars during the long, bleak hours of the night. Now I took in the cloudless blue sky beyond the open window, listened to the birds singing to one another, and wanted to roar.

I had not dared to ask for more details about Cassian and Azriel—or my sisters. In terror of knowing just how bad it had been—and what I'd do if their healing turned grim. What I'd bring down upon these people.

Healing. Alive and healing. I reminded myself of that every day.

Even when I still heard their screams, smelled their blood.

But I did not ask for more. Did not risk touching the bond beyond that first time.

I didn't know if someone could monitor such things—the silent messages between mates. Not when the mating bond could be scented, and I was playing such a dangerous game with it.

Everyone believed it had been severed, that Rhys's lingering scent was because he'd forced me, had planted that scent in me.

They believed that with time, with distance, his scent would fade. Weeks or months, likely.

And when it didn't fade, when it remained . . . That's when I'd have to strike, with or without the information I needed.

But out of the possibility that communicating down the bond kept its scent strong . . . I had to minimize how much I used it. Even if not talking to Rhys, not hearing that amusement and cunning . . . I would hear those things again, I promised myself over and over. See that wry smile.

And I was again thinking of how pained that face had been the last time I'd seen it, thinking of Rhys, covered in Azriel's and Cassian's blood, as Jurian and the two Hybern commanders winnowed into the gravel of the front drive the next day.

Jurian was in the same light leather armor, his brown hair whipping across his face in the blustery spring breeze. He spied us standing on the white marble steps into the house and his mouth curled in that crooked, smug smile.

I willed ice into my veins, the coldness from a court I had never set foot in. But I wielded its master's gift on myself, turning burning rage into frozen calm as Jurian swaggered toward us, a hand on the hilt of his sword.

But it was the two commanders—one male, one female—that had a sliver of true fear sliding into my heart.

High Fae in appearance, their skin the same ruddy hue and hair the identical inky black as their king. But it was their vacant, unfeeling faces that snagged the eye. A lack of emotion honed from millennia of cruelty.

Tamlin and Lucien had gone rigid by the time Jurian halted at the foot of the sweeping front stairs. The human commander smirked. "You're looking better than the last time I saw you."

I dragged my eyes to his. And said nothing.

Jurian snorted and gestured the two commanders forward. "May I present Their Highnesses, Prince Dagdan and Princess Brannagh, nephew and niece to the King of Hybern."

Twins—perhaps linked in power and mental bonds as well.

Tamlin seemed to remember that these were now his allies and marched down the stairs. Lucien followed.

He'd sold us out. Sold out Prythian—for me. To get me back.

Smoke curled in my mouth. I willed frost to fill it again.

Tamlin inclined his head to the prince and princess. "Welcome to my home. We have rooms prepared for all of you."

"My brother and I shall reside in one together," the princess said. Her voice was deceptively light—almost girlish. The utter lack of feeling, the utter authority was anything but.

I could practically feel the snide remark simmering in Lucien. But I stepped down the stairs and said, ever the lady of the house that these

people, that Tamlin, had once expected me to gladly embrace, “We can easily make adjustments.”

Lucien’s metal eye whirred and narrowed on me, but I kept my face impassive as I curtsied to them. To my enemy. Which of my friends would face them on the battlefield?

Would Cassian and Azriel have even healed enough to fight, let alone lift a sword? I did not allow myself to dwell on it—on how Cassian had screamed as his wings had been shredded.

Princess Brannagh surveyed me: the rose-colored dress, the hair that Alis had curled and braided over the top of my head in a coronet, the pale pink pearls at my ears.

A harmless, lovely package, perfect for a High Lord to mount whenever he wished.

Brannagh’s lip curled as she glanced at her brother. The prince deemed the same thing, judging by his answering sneer.

Tamlin snarled softly in warning. “If you’re done staring at her, perhaps we can move on to the business between us.”

Jurian let out a low chuckle and strode up the stairs without being given leave to do so. “They’re curious.” Lucien stiffened at the impudence of the gesture, the words. “It’s not every century that the contested possession of a female launches a war. Especially a female with such . . . talents.”

I only turned on a heel and stalked up the steps after him. “Perhaps if you’d bothered going to war over Miryam, she wouldn’t have left you for Prince Drakon.”

A ripple seemed to go through Jurian. Tamlin and Lucien tensed at my back, torn between monitoring our exchange and escorting the two Hybern royals into the house. Upon my own explanation that Azriel and his network of spies were well trained, we’d cleared any unnecessary servants, wary of spying ears and eyes. Only the most trusted among them remained.

Of course, I’d forgotten to mention that I knew Azriel had pulled his

spies weeks ago, the information not worth the cost of their lives. Or that it served *my* own purposes to have fewer people watching me.

Jurian halted at the top of the stairs, his face a mask of cruel death as I took the last steps to him. “Careful what you say, girl.”

I smiled, breezing past. “Or what? You’ll throw me in the Cauldron?”

I strode between the front doors, edging around the table in the heart of the entry hall, its towering vase of flowers arching to meet the crystal chandelier.

Right there—just a few feet away, I had crumpled into a ball of terror and despair all those months ago. Right there in the center of the foyer, Mor had picked me up and carried me out of this house and into freedom.

“Here’s the first rule of this visit,” I said to Jurian over my shoulder as I headed for the dining room, where lunch awaited. “Don’t threaten me in my own home.”

The posturing, I knew a moment later, had worked.

Not on Jurian, who glowered as he claimed a seat at the table.

But on Tamlin, who brushed a knuckle over my cheek as he passed by, unaware of how carefully I had chosen the words, how I had baited Jurian to serve up the opportunity on a platter.

That was my first step: make Tamlin believe, truly believe, that I loved him and this place, and everyone in it.

So that he would not suspect when I turned them on each other.



Prince Dagdan yielded to his twin’s every wish and order. As if he were the blade she wielded to slice through the world.

He poured her drinks, sniffing them first. He selected the finest cuts of meat from the platters and neatly arranged them on her plate. He always let her answer, and never so much as looked at her with doubt in his eyes.

One soul in two bodies. And from the way they glanced to each other in wordless exchanges, I wondered if they were perhaps . . . perhaps like me. *Daemati*.

My mental shields had been a wall of black adamant since arriving. But as we dined, beats of silence going on longer than conversation, I found myself checking them over and over.

“We will set out for the wall tomorrow,” Brannagh was saying to Tamlin. More of an order than a request. “Jurian will accompany us. We require the use of sentries who know where the holes in it are located.”

The thought of them so close to the human lands . . . But my sisters were not there. No, my sisters were somewhere in the vast territory of my own court, protected by my friends. Even if my father would return home from his business dealings on the continent in a matter of a month or two. I still had not figured out how I’d tell him.

“Lucien and I can escort you,” I offered.

Tamlin whipped his head to me. I waited for the refusal, the shutdown.

But it seemed the High Lord had indeed learned his lesson, was indeed willing to *try*, as he merely gestured to Lucien. “My emissary knows the wall as well as any sentry.”

You are letting them do this; you are rationally allowing them to bring down that wall and prey upon the humans on the other side. The words tangled and hissed in my mouth.

But I made myself give Tamlin a slow, if not slightly displeased, nod. He knew I’d never be happy about it—the girl he believed had been returned to him would always seek to protect her mortal homeland. Yet he thought I’d stomach it for him, for us. That Hybern wouldn’t feast on the humans once that wall came down. That we’d merely absorb them into our territory.

“We’ll leave after breakfast,” I told the princess. And I added to Tamlin, “With a few sentries as well.”

His shoulders loosened at that. I wondered if he’d heard how I’d defended Velaris. That I had protected the Rainbow against a legion of beasts like the Attor. That I had slaughtered the Attor, brutally, cruelly, for what it had done to me and mine.

Jurian surveyed Lucien with a warrior's frankness. "I always wondered who made that eye after she carved it out."

We did not speak of Amarantha here. We had never allowed her presence into this house. And it had stifled me for those months I'd lived here after Under the Mountain, killed me day by day to shove those fears and pain down deep.

For a heartbeat, I weighed who I had been with who I was now supposed to be. Slowly healing—emerging back into the girl Tamlin had fed and sheltered and loved before Amarantha had snapped my neck after three months of torture.

So I shifted in my seat. Studied the table.

Lucien merely leveled a hard look at Jurian as the two Hybern royals watched with impassive faces. "I have an old friend at the Dawn Court. She's skilled at tinkering—blending magic and machinery. Tamlin got her to craft it for me at great risk."

A hateful smile from Jurian. "Does your little mate have a rival?"

"My mate is none of your concern."

Jurian shrugged. "She shouldn't be any of yours, either, considering she's probably been fucked by half the Illyrian army by now."

I was fairly certain that only centuries of training kept Lucien from leaping over the table to rip out Jurian's throat.

But it was Tamlin's snarl that rattled the glasses. "You will behave as a proper guest, Jurian, or you will sleep in the stables like the other beasts."

Jurian merely sipped from his wine. "Why should I be punished for stating the truth? Neither of you were in the War, when my forces allied with the Illyrian brutes." A sidelong glance at the two Hybern royals. "I suppose you two had the delight of fighting against them."

"We kept the wings of their generals and lords as trophies," Dagdan said with a small smile.

It took every bit of concentration not to glance at Tamlin. Not to demand the whereabouts of the two sets of wings his father had kept as trophies after he'd butchered Rhysand's mother and sister.

Pinned in the study, Rhys had said.

But I hadn't spotted any trace when I'd gone hunting for them upon returning here, feigning exploration out of sheer boredom on a rainy day. The cellars had yielded nothing, either. No trunks or crates or locked rooms containing those wings.

The two bites of roasted lamb I'd forced down now rebelled against me. But at least any hint of disgust was a fair reaction to what the Hybern prince had claimed.

Jurian indeed smiled at me as he sliced his lamb into little pieces. "You know that we fought together, don't you? Me and your High Lord. Held the lines against the Loyalists, battled side by side until gore was up to our shins."

"He is not her High Lord," Tamlin said with unnerving softness.

Jurian only purred at me, "He must have told you where he hid Miryam and Drakon."

"They're dead," I said flatly.

"The Cauldron says otherwise."

Cold fear settled into my gut. He'd tried it already—to resurrect Miryam for himself. And had found that she was not amongst the deceased.

"I was told they were dead," I said again, trying to sound bored, impatient. I took a bite of my lamb, so bland compared to the wealth of spices in Velaris. "I'd think you'd have better things to do, Jurian, than obsess over the lover who jilted you."

His eyes gleamed, bright with five centuries of madness, as he skewered a morsel of meat with his fork. "They say you were fucking Rhysand before you ever jilted your own lover."

"That is *enough*," Tamlin growled.

But I felt it then. The tap against my mind. Saw their plan, clear and simple: rile us, distract us, while the two quiet royals slid into our minds.

Mine was shielded. But Lucien's—Tamlin's—

I reached out with my night-kissed power, casting it like a net. And

found two oily tendrils spearing for Lucien's and Tamlin's minds, as if they were indeed javelins thrown across the table.

I struck. Dagdan and Brannagh jolted back in their seats as if I'd landed a physical blow, while their powers slammed into a barrier of black adamant around Lucien's and Tamlin's minds.

They shot their dark eyes toward me. I held each of their gazes.

"What's wrong?" Tamlin asked, and I realized how quiet it had become.

I made a good show of furrowing my brow in confusion. "Nothing." I offered a sweet smile to the two royals. "Their Highnesses must be tired after such a long journey."

And for good measure, I lunged for their own minds, finding a wall of white bone.

They flinched as I dragged black talons down their mental shields, gouging deep.

The warning blow cost me, a low, pulsing headache forming around my temples. But I merely dug back into my food, ignoring Jurian's wink.

No one spoke for the rest of the meal.

CHAPTER 3

The spring woods fell silent as we rode between the budding trees, birds and small furred beasts having darted for cover long before we passed.

Not from me, or Lucien, or the three sentries trailing a respectful distance behind. But from Jurian and the two Hybern commanders who rode in the center of our party. As if they were as awful as the Bogge, as the naga.

We reached the wall without incident or Jurian trying to bait us into distraction. I'd been awake most of the night, casting my awareness through the manor, hunting for any sign that Dagdan and Brannagh were working their daemati influence on anyone else. Mercifully, the curse-breaking ability I'd inherited from Helion Spell-Cleaver, High Lord of the Day Court, had detected no tangles, no spells, save for the wards around the house itself, preventing anyone from winnowing in or out.

Tamlin had been tense at breakfast, but had not asked me to remain behind. I'd even gone so far as to test him by asking what was wrong—to which he'd only replied that he had a headache. Lucien had just

patted him on the shoulder and promised to look after me. I'd nearly laughed at the words.

But laughter was now far from my lips as the wall pulsed and throbbed, a heavy, hideous presence that loomed from half a mile away. Up close, though . . . Even our horses were skittish, tossing their heads and stomping their hooves on the mossy earth as we tied them to the low-hanging branches of blooming dogwoods.

"The gap in the wall is right up here," Lucien was saying, sounding about as thrilled as me to be in such company. Stomping over the fallen pink blossoms, Dagdan and Brannagh slid into step beside him, Jurian slithering off to survey the terrain, the sentries remaining with our mounts.

I followed Lucien and the royals, keeping a casual distance behind. I knew my elegant, fine clothes weren't fooling the prince and princess into forgetting that a fellow daemati now walked at their backs. But I'd still carefully selected the embroidered sapphire jacket and brown pants—adorned only with the jeweled knife and belt that Lucien had once gifted me. A lifetime ago.

"Who cleaved the wall here?" Brannagh asked, surveying the hole that we could not see—no, the wall itself was utterly invisible—but rather felt, as if the air had been sucked from one spot.

"We don't know," Lucien replied, the dappled sunlight glinting along the gold thread adorning his fawn-brown jacket as he crossed his arms. "Some of the holes just appeared over the centuries. This one is barely wide enough for one person to get through."

An exchanged glance between the twins. I came up behind them, studying the gap, the wall around it that made every instinct recoil at its . . . *wrongness*. "This is where I came through—that first time."

Lucien nodded, and the other two lifted their brows. But I took a step closer to Lucien, my arm nearly brushing his, letting him be a barrier between us. They'd been more careful at breakfast this morning about pushing against my mental shields. Yet now, letting them think I was

physically cowed by them . . . Brannagh studied how closely I stood to Lucien; how he shifted slightly to shield me, too.

A little, cold smile curled her lips. “How many holes are in the wall?”

“We’ve counted three along our entire border,” Lucien said tightly. “Plus one off the coast—about a mile away.”

I didn’t let my cool mask falter as he offered up the information.

But Brannagh shook her head, dark hair devouring the sunlight. “The sea entrances are of no use. We need to break it on the land.”

“The continent surely has spots, too.”

“Their queens have an even weaker grasp on their people than you do,” Dagdan said. I plucked up that gem of information, studied it.

“We’ll leave you to explore it, then,” I said, waving toward the hole. “When you’re done, we’ll ride to the next.”

“It’s two days from here,” Lucien countered.

“Then we’ll plan a trip for that excursion,” I said simply. Before Lucien could object, I asked, “And the third hole?”

Lucien tapped a foot against the mossy ground, but said, “Two days past that.”

I turned to the royals, arching a brow. “Can both of you winnow?”

Brannagh flushed, straightening. But it was Dagdan who admitted, “I can.” He must have carried both Brannagh and Jurian when they arrived. He added, “Only a few miles if I bear others.”

I merely nodded and headed toward a tangle of stooping dogwoods, Lucien following close behind. When there was nothing but ruffling pink blossoms and trickling sunlight through the thatch of branches, when the royals had busied themselves with the wall, out of sight and sound, I took up a perch on a smooth, bald rock.

Lucien sat against a nearby tree, folding one booted ankle over another. “Whatever you’re planning, it’ll land us knee-deep in shit.”

“I’m not planning anything.” I plucked up a fallen pink blossom and twirled it between my thumb and forefinger.

That golden eye narrowed, clicking softly.

“What do you even see with that thing?”

He didn’t answer.

I chucked the blossom onto the soft moss between us. “Don’t trust me? After all we’ve been through?”

He frowned at the discarded blossom, but still said nothing.

I busied myself by sorting through my pack until I found the canteen of water. “If you’d been alive for the War,” I asked him, taking a swig, “would you have fought on their side? Or fought for the humans?”

“I would have been a part of the human-Fae alliance.”

“Even if your father wasn’t?”

“Especially if my father wasn’t.”

But Beron had been part of that alliance, if I correctly recalled my lessons with Rhys all those months ago.

“And yet here you are, ready to march with Hybern.”

“I did it for you, too, you know.” Cold, hard words. “I went with him to get you back.”

“I never realized what a powerful motivator guilt can be.”

“That day you—went away,” he said, struggling to avoid that other word—*left*. “I beat Tamlin back to the manor—received the message when we were out on the border and raced here. But the only trace of you was that ring, melted between the stones of the parlor. I got rid of it a moment before Tam arrived home to see it.”

A probing, careful statement. Of the facts that pointed not toward abduction.

“They melted it off my finger,” I lied.

His throat bobbed, but he just shook his head, the sunlight leaking through the forest canopy setting the ember-red of his hair flickering.

We sat in silence for minutes. From the rustling and murmuring, the royals were finishing up, and I braced myself, calculating the words I’d need to wield without seeming suspicious.

I said quietly, “Thank you. For coming to Hybern to get me.”

He pulled at the moss beside him, jaw tight. “It was a trap. What I thought we were to do there . . . it did not turn out that way.”

It was an effort not to bare my teeth. But I walked to him, taking up a place at his side against the wide trunk of the tree. “This situation is terrible,” I said, and it was the truth.

A low snort.

I knocked my knee against his. “Don’t let Jurian bait you. He’s doing it to feel out any weaknesses between us.”

“I know.”

I turned my face to him, resting my knee against his in silent demand. “Why?” I asked. “*Why* does Hybern want to do this beyond some horrible desire for conquest? What drives him—his people? Hatred? Arrogance?”

Lucien finally looked at me, the intricate pieces and carvings on the metal eye much more dazzling up close. “Do you—”

Brannagh and Dagdan shoved through the bushes, frowning to find us sitting there.

But it was Jurian—right on their heels, as if he’d been divulging the details of his surveying—who smiled at the sight of us, knee to knee and nearly nose to nose.

“Careful, Lucien,” the warrior sneered. “You see what happens to males who touch the High Lord’s belongings.”

Lucien snarled, but I shot him a warning glare.

Point proven, I said silently.

And despite Jurian, despite the sneering royals, a corner of Lucien’s mouth tugged upward.



Ianthe was waiting at the stables when we returned.

She’d made her grand arrival at the end of breakfast hours before, breezing into the dining room when the sun was shining in shafts of pure gold through the windows.

I had no doubt she'd planned the timing, just as she had planned the stop in the middle of one of those sunbeams, angled so her hair glowed and the jewel atop her head burned with blue fire. I would have titled the painting *Model Piety*.

After she'd been briefly introduced by Tamlin, she'd mostly cooed over Jurian—who had only scowled at her like some insect buzzing in his ear.

Dagdan and Brannagh had listened to her fawning with enough boredom that I was starting to wonder if the two of them perhaps preferred no one's company but each other's. In whatever unholy capacity. Not a blink of interest toward the beauty who often made males and females stop to gape. Perhaps any sort of physical passion had long ago been drained away, alongside their souls.

So the Hybern royals and Jurian had tolerated Ianthe for about a minute before they'd found their food more interesting. A slight that no doubt explained why she had decided to meet us here, awaiting our return as we rode in.

It was my first time on a horse in months, and I was stiff enough that I could barely move as the party dismounted. I gave Lucien a subtle, pleading look, and he barely hid his smirk as he sauntered over to me.

Our dispersing party watched as he braced my waist in his broad hands and easily hefted me off the horse, none more closely than Ianthe.

I only patted Lucien on the shoulder in thanks. Ever the courtier, he bowed back.

It was hard, sometimes, to remember to hate him. To remember the game I was already playing.

Ianthe trilled, "A successful journey, I hope?"

I jerked my chin toward the royals. "They seemed pleased."

Indeed, whatever they'd been looking for, they'd found agreeable. I hadn't dared ask too many prying questions. Not yet.

Ianthe bowed her head. "Thank the Cauldron for that."

"What do you want," Lucien said a shade too flatly.

She frowned but lifted her chin, folding her hands before her as she said, “We’re to have a party in honor of our guests—and to coincide with the Summer Solstice in a few days. I wished to speak to Feyre about it.” A two-faced smile. “Unless you have an objection to that.”

“He doesn’t,” I answered before Lucien could say something he’d regret. “Give me an hour to eat and change, and I’ll meet you in the study.”

Perhaps a tinge more assertive than I’d once been, but she nodded all the same. I linked my elbow with Lucien’s and steered him away. “See you soon,” I told her, and felt her gaze on us as we walked from the dim stables and into the bright midday light.

His body was taut, near-trembling.

“What happened between you?” I hissed when we were lost among the hedges and gravel paths of the garden.

“It’s not worth repeating.”

“When I—was taken,” I ventured, almost stumbling on the word, almost saying *left*. “Did she and Tamlin . . .”

I was not faking the twisting low in my gut.

“No,” he said hoarsely. “No. When Calanmai came along, he refused. He flat-out refused to participate. I replaced him in the Rite, but . . .”

I’d forgotten. Forgotten about Calanmai and the Rite. I did a mental tally of the days.

No wonder I’d forgotten. I’d been in that cabin in the mountains. With Rhys buried in me. Perhaps we’d generated our own magic that night.

But Lucien . . . “You took Ianthe into that cave on Calanmai?”

He wouldn’t meet my gaze. “She insisted. Tamlin was . . . Things were bad, Feyre. I went in his stead, and I did my duty to the court. I went of my own free will. And we completed the Rite.”

No wonder she’d backed off him. She’d gotten what she wanted.

“Please don’t tell Elain,” he said. “When we—when we find her again,” he amended.

He might have completed the Great Rite with Ianthe of his own free will, but he certainly hadn't enjoyed it. Some line had been blurred—badly.

And my heart shifted a bit in my chest as I said to him with no guile whatsoever, "I won't tell anyone unless you say so." The weight of that jeweled knife and belt seemed to grow. "I wish I had been there to stop it. I should have been there to stop it." I meant every word.

Lucien squeezed our linked arms as we rounded a hedge, the house rising up before us. "You are a better friend to me, Feyre," he said quietly, "than I ever was to you."



Alis frowned at the two dresses hanging from the armoire door, her long brown fingers smoothing over the chiffon and silk.

"I don't know if the waist can be taken out," she said without peering back at where I sat on the edge of the bed. "We took so much of it in that there's not much fabric left to play with . . . You might very well need to order new ones."

She faced me then, running an eye over my robed body.

I knew what she saw—what lies and poisoned smiles couldn't hide: I had become wraith-thin while living here after Amarantha. Yet for all Rhys had done to harm me, I'd gained back the weight I'd lost, put on muscle, and discarded the sickly pallor in favor of sun-kissed skin.

For a woman who had been tortured and tormented for months, I looked remarkably well.

Our eyes held across the room, the silence hewn only by the humming of the few remaining servants in the hallway, busy with preparations for the solstice tomorrow morning.

I'd spent the past two days playing the pretty pet, allowed into meetings with the Hybern royals mostly because I remained quiet. They were as cautious as we were, hedging Tamlin and Lucien's questions about the movements of their armies, their foreign allies—and other allies within

Prythian. The meetings went nowhere, as all *they* wanted to know was information about our own forces.

And about the Night Court.

I fed Dagdan and Brannagh details both true and false, mixing them together seamlessly. I laid out the Illyrian host amongst the mountains and steppes, but selected the strongest clan as their weakest; I mentioned the efficiency of those blue stones from Hybern against Cassian's and Azriel's power but failed to mention how easily they'd worked around them. Any questions I couldn't evade, I feigned memory loss or trauma too great to bear recalling.

But for all my lying and maneuvering, the royals were too guarded to reveal much of their own information. And for all my careful expressions, Alis seemed the only one who noted the tiny tells that even I couldn't control.

"Do you think there are any gowns that will fit for solstice?" I said casually as her silence continued. "The pink and green ones fit, but I've worn them thrice already."

"You never cared for such things," Alis said, clicking her tongue.

"Am I not allowed to change my mind?"

Those dark eyes narrowed slightly. But Alis yanked open the armoire doors, the dresses swaying with it, and riffled through its dark interior. "You could wear this." She held up an outfit.

A set of turquoise Night Court clothes, cut so similarly to Amren's preferred fashion, dangled from her spindly fingers. My heart lurched.

"That—why—" Words stumbled out of me, bulky and slippery, and I silenced myself with a sharp yank on my inner leash. I straightened. "I have never known you to be cruel, Alis."

A snort. She chucked the clothes back into the armoire. "Tamlin shredded the two other sets—missed this one because it was in the wrong drawer."

I wove a mental thread into the hallway to ensure no one was listening. "He was upset. I wish he'd destroyed that pair, too."

“I was there that day, you know,” Alis said, folding her spindly arms across her chest. “I saw the Morrigan arrive. Saw her reach into that cocoon of power and pick you up like a child. I begged her to take you out.”

My swallow wasn’t feigned.

“I never told him that. Never told any of them. I let them think you’d been abducted. But you clung to her, and she was willing to slaughter all of us for what had happened.”

“I don’t know why you’d assume that.” I tugged the edges of my silk robe tighter around me.

“Servants talk. And Under the Mountain, I never heard of or saw Rhysand laying a hand on a servant. Guards, Amarantha’s cronies, the people he was ordered to kill, yes. But never the meek. Never those unable to defend themselves.”

“He’s a monster.”

“They say you came back different. Came back wrong.” A crow’s laugh. “I never bother to tell them I think you came back right. Came back right at last.”

A precipice yawned open before me. Lines—there were lines here, and my survival and that of Prythian depended upon navigating them. I rose from the bed, hands shaking slightly.

But then Alis said, “My cousin works in the palace at Adriata.”

Summer Court. Alis had originally been from the Summer Court, and had fled here with her two nephews after her sister had been brutally murdered during Amarantha’s reign.

“Servants in that palace are not meant to be seen or heard, but they see and hear plenty when no one believes they’re present.”

She was my friend. She had helped me at great risk Under the Mountain. Had stood by me in the months after. But if she jeopardized everything—

“She said you visited. And that you were healthy, and laughing, and happy.”

“It was a lie. He made me act that way.” The wobble in my voice didn’t take much to summon.

A knowing, crooked smile. “If you say so.”

“I *do* say so.”

Alis pulled out a dress of creamy white. “You never got to wear this one. I had it ordered for after your wedding day.”

It wasn’t exactly bride-like, but rather pure. Clean. The kind of gown I’d have resented when I returned from Under the Mountain, desperate to avoid any comparison to my ruined soul. But now . . . I held Alis’s stare, and wondered which of my plans she’d deciphered.

Alis whispered, “I will only say this once. Whatever you plan to do, I beg you leave my boys out of it. Take whatever retribution you desire, but please spare them.”

I would never—I almost began. But I only shook my head, knotting my brows, utterly confused and distressed. “All I want is to settle back into life here. To heal.”

Heal the land of the corruption and darkness spreading across it.

Alis seemed to understand it, too. She set the dress on the armoire door, airing out the loose, shining skirts.

“Wear this on solstice,” she said quietly.

So I did.

CHAPTER 4

Summer Solstice was exactly as I had remembered: streamers and ribbons and garlands of flowers everywhere, casks of ale and wine hauled out to the foothills surrounding the estate, High Fae and lesser faeries alike flocking to the celebrations.

But what had not existed here a year ago was Ianthe.

The celebrating would be sacrilege, she intoned, if we did not give thanks first.

So we all were up two hours before the dawn, bleary-eyed and none of us too keen to endure her ceremony as the sun crested the horizon on the longest day of the year. I wondered if Tarquin had to weather such tedious rituals in his shining palace by the sea. Wondered what sort of celebrations would occur in Adriata today, with the High Lord of Summer who had come so very close to being a friend.

As far as I knew, despite the murmurings between servants, Tarquin still had never sent word to Tamlin about the visit Rhys, Amren, and I had made. What did the Summer lord now think of my changed circumstances? I had little doubt Tarquin had heard. And I prayed he stayed out of it until my work here was finished.

Alis had found me a luxurious white velvet cloak for the brisk ride into the hills, and Tamlin had lifted me onto a moon-pale mare with wildflowers woven into her silver mane. If I had wanted to paint a picture of serene purity, it would have been the image I cast that morning, my hair braided above my head, a crown of white hawthorn blossoms upon it. I'd dabbed rouge onto my cheeks and lips—a slight hint of color. Like the first blush of spring across a winter landscape.

As our procession arrived at the hill, a gathered crowd of hundreds already atop it, all eyes turned to me. But I kept my gaze ahead, to where Ianthe stood before a rudimentary stone altar bedecked in flowers and the first fruits and grains of summer. The hood was off her pale blue robe for once, the silver circlet now resting directly atop her golden head.

I smiled at her, my mare obediently pausing at the northern arc of the half circle that the crowd had formed around the hill's edge and Ianthe's altar, and wondered if Ianthe could spy the wolf grinning beneath.

Tamlin helped me off the horse, the gray light of predawn shimmering along the golden threads in his green jacket. I forced myself to meet his eyes as he set me on the soft grass, aware of every other stare upon us.

The memory gleamed in his gaze—in the way his gaze dipped to my mouth.

A year ago, he had kissed me on this day. A year ago, I'd danced amongst these people, carefree and joyous for the first time in my life, and had believed it was the happiest I'd ever been and ever would be.

I gave him a little, shy smile and took the arm he extended. Together, we crossed the grass toward Ianthe's stone altar, the Hybern royals, Jurian, and Lucien trailing behind.

I wondered if Tamlin was also remembering another day all those months ago, when I'd worn a different white gown, when there had also been flowers strewn about.

When my mate had rescued me after I'd decided not to go through with the wedding, some fundamental part of me knowing it wasn't right. I had believed I didn't deserve it, hadn't wanted to burden Tamlin for an eternity with someone as broken as I'd been at the time. And Rhys . . . Rhys would have let me marry him, believing me to be happy, wanting me to be happy even if it killed him. But the moment I had said no . . . He had saved me. Helped me save myself.

I glanced sidelong at Tamlin.

But he was studying my hand, braced on his arm. The empty finger where that ring had once perched.

What did he make of it—where did he think that ring had gone, if Lucien had hidden the evidence? For a heartbeat, I pitied him.

Pitied that not only Lucien had lied to him, but Alis as well. How many others had seen the truth of my suffering—and tried to spare *him* from it?

Seen my suffering and done nothing to help *me*.

Tamlin and I paused before the altar, Ianthe offering us a serene, regal nod.

The Hybern royals shifted on their feet, not bothering to hide their impatience. Brannagh had made barely veiled complaints about the solstice at dinner last night, declaring that in Hybern they did not bother with such odious things and got on with the revelry. And implying, in her way, that soon, neither would we.

I ignored the royals as Ianthe lifted her hands and called to the crowd behind us, "A blessed solstice to us all."

Then began an endless string of prayers and rituals, her prettiest young acolytes assisting with the pouring of sacred wine, with the blessing of the harvest goods on the altar, with beseeching the sun to rise.

A lovely, rehearsed little number. Lucien was half-asleep behind me.

But I'd gone over the ceremony with Ianthe, and knew what was coming when she lifted the sacred wine and intoned, "As the light is strongest today, let it drive out unwanted darkness. Let it banish the black stain of evil."

Jab after jab at my mate, my home. But I nodded along with her.

“Would Princess Brannagh and Prince Dagdan do us the honor of imbibing this blessed wine?”

The crowd shifted. The Hybern royals blinked, frowning to each other.

But I stepped aside, smiling prettily at them and gesturing to the altar.

They opened their mouths, no doubt to refuse, but Ianthe would not be denied. “Drink, and let our new allies become new friends,” she declared. “Drink, and wash away the endless night of the year.”

The two daemati were likely testing that cup for poison through whatever magic and training they possessed, but I kept the bland smile on my face as they finally approached the altar and Brannagh accepted the outstretched silver cup.

They each barely had a sip before they made to step back. But Ianthe cooed at them, insisting they come behind the altar to witness our ceremony at her side.

I had made sure she knew precisely how disgusted they were with her rituals. How they would do their best to stomp out her usefulness as a leader of her people once they arrived. She now seemed inclined to convert them.

More prayers and rituals, until Tamlin was summoned to the other side of the altar to light a candle for the souls extinguished in the past year—to now bring them back into the light’s embrace when the sun rose.

Pink began to stain the clouds behind them.

Jurian was also called forward to recite one final prayer I’d requested Ianthe add, in honor of the warriors who fought for our safety each day.

And then Lucien and I were standing alone in the circle of grass, the altar and horizon before us, the crowd at our backs and sides.

From the rigidity of his posture, the dart of his gaze over the site, I knew he was now running through the prayers and how I had worked

with Ianthe on the ceremony. How he and I remained on this side of the line right as the sun was about to break over the world, and the others had been maneuvered away.

Ianthe stepped toward the hill's edge, her golden hair tumbling freely down her back as she lifted her arms to the sky. The location was intentional, as was the positioning of her arms.

She'd made the same gesture on Winter Solstice, standing in the precise spot where the sun would rise between her upraised arms, filling them with light. Her acolytes had discreetly marked the place in the grass with a carved stone.

Slowly, the golden disc of the sun broke over the hazy greens and blues of the horizon.

Light filled the world, clear and strong, spearing right for us.

Ianthe's back arched, her body a mere vessel for the solstice's light to fill, and what I could see of her face was already limned in pious ecstasy.

The sun rose, a held, gilded note echoing through the land.

The crowd began to murmur.

Then cry out.

Not at Ianthe.

But at me.

At me, resplendent and pure in white, beginning to glow with the light of day as the sun's path flowed directly over me instead.

No one had bothered to confirm or even notice that Ianthe's marker stone had moved five feet to the right, too busy with my parading arrival to spy a phantom wind slide it through the grass.

It took Ianthe longer than anyone else to look.

To turn to see that the sun's power was not filling her, blessing her.

I released the damper on the power that I had unleashed in Hybern, my body turning incandescent as light shone through. Pure as day, pure as starlight.

"Cursebreaker," some murmured. "Blessed," others whispered.

I made a show of looking surprised—surprised and yet accepting of the Cauldron’s choice. Tamlin’s face was taut with shock, the Hybern royals’ nothing short of baffled.

But I turned to Lucien, my light radiating so brightly that it bounced off his metal eye. A friend beseeching another for help. I reached a hand toward him.

Beyond us, I could feel Ianthe scrambling to regain control, to find some way to spin it.

Perhaps Lucien could, too. For he took my hand, and then knelt upon one knee in the grass, pressing my fingers to his brow.

Like stalks of wheat in a wind, the others fell to their knees as well.

For in all of her preening ceremonies and rituals, never had Ianthe revealed any sign of power or blessing. But Feyre Cursebreaker, who had led Prythian from tyranny and darkness . . .

Blessed. Holy. Undimming before evil.

I let my glow spread, until it, too, rippled from Lucien’s bowed form. A knight before his queen.

When I looked to Ianthe and smiled again, I let a little bit of the wolf show.



The festivities, at least, remained the same.

Once the uproar and awe had ebbed, once my own glow had vanished when the sun crested higher than my head, we made our way to the nearby hills and fields, where those who had not attended the ceremony had already heard about my small miracle.

I kept close to Lucien, who was inclined to indulge me, as everyone seemed to be torn between joy and awe, question and concern.

Ianthe spent the next six hours trying to explain what had happened. The Cauldron had blessed her chosen friend, she told whoever would listen. The sun had altered its very path to show how glad it was for my return.

Only her acolytes really paid attention, and half of them appeared only mildly interested.

Tamlin, however, seemed the wariest—as if the blessing had somehow upset me, as if he remembered that same light in Hybern and could not figure out why it disturbed him so.

But duty had him fielding thanks and good wishes from his subjects, warriors, and the lesser lords, leaving me free to wander. I was stopped every now and then by fervent, adoring faeries who wished to touch my hand, to weep a bit over me.

Once, I would have cringed and winced. Now I received their thanks and prayers beatifically, thanking them, smiling at them.

Some of it was genuine. I had no quarrel with the people of these lands, who had suffered alongside the rest. None. But the courtiers and sentries who sought me out . . . I put on a better show for them. Cauldron-blessed, they called me. *An honor*, I merely replied.

On and on I repeated those words, through breakfast and lunch, until I returned to the house to freshen up and take a moment for myself.

In the privacy of my room, I set my crown of flowers on the dressing table and smiled slightly at the eye tattooed into my right palm.

The longest day of the year, I said into the bond, sending along flickers of all that had occurred atop that hill. *I wish I could spend it with you.*

He would have enjoyed my performance—would have laughed himself hoarse afterward at the expression on Ianthe's face.

I finished washing up and was about to head out into the hills again when Rhysand's voice filled my mind.

It'd be an honor, he said, laughter in every word, *to spend even a moment in the company of Feyre Cauldron-blessed.*

I chuckled. The words were distant, strained. Keep it quick—I had to keep it quick, or risk exposure. And more than anything, I needed to ask, to know—

Is everyone all right?

I waited, counting the minutes. *Yes. As well as we can be. When do you come home to me?*

Each word was quieter than the last.

Soon, I promised him. Hybern is here. I'll be done soon.

He didn't reply—and I waited another few minutes before I again donned my flower crown and strode down the stairs.

As I emerged into the bedecked garden, though, Rhysand's faint voice filled my head once more. *I wish I could spend today with you, too.*

The words wrapped a fist around my heart, and I forced them from my mind as I returned to the party in the hills, my steps heavier than they'd been when I floated into the house.

But lunch had been cleared away, and dancing had begun.

I saw him waiting on the outskirts of one of the circles, observing every move I took.

I glanced between the grass and the crowd and the cluster of musicians coaxing such lively music from drums and fiddles and pipes as I approached, no more than a shy, hesitant doe.

Once, those same sounds had shaken me awake, had made me dance and dance. I supposed they were now little more than weapons in my arsenal as I stopped before Tamlin, lowered my lashes, and asked softly, "Will you dance with me?"

Relief, happiness, and a slight edge of concern. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes, of course."

So I let him lead me into the swift dance, spinning and tilting me, people gathering to cheer and clap. Dance after dance after dance, until sweat was running down my back as I worked to keep up, keep that smile on my face, to remember to laugh when my hands were within strangling distance of his throat.

The music eventually shifted into something slower, and Tamlin eased us into the melody. When others had found their own partners more interesting to watch, he murmured, "This morning . . . Are you all right?"

My head snapped up. “Yes. I—I don’t know what that was, but yes. Is Ianthe . . . mad?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t see it coming—I don’t think she handles surprises very well.”

“I should apologize.”

His eyes flashed. “What for? Perhaps it was a blessing. Magic still surprises *me*. If she’s angry, it’s her problem.”

I made a show of considering, then nodded. Pressed closer, loathing every place where our bodies touched. I didn’t know how Rhys had endured it—endured Amarantha. For five decades.

“You look beautiful today,” Tamlin said.

“Thank you.” I made myself peer up into his face. “Lucien—Lucien told me that you didn’t complete the Rite at Calanmai. That you refused.”

And you let Ianthe take him into that cave instead.

His throat bobbed. “I couldn’t stomach it.”

And yet you could stomach making a deal with Hybern, as if I were a stolen item to be returned. “Maybe this morning was not just a blessing for me,” I offered.

A stroke of his hand down my back was his only reply.

That was all we said for the next three dances, until hunger dragged me toward the tables where dinner had now been laid out. I let him fill a plate for me, let him serve me himself as we found a spot under a twisted old oak and watched the dancing and the music.

I nearly asked if it was worth it—if giving up this sort of peace was worth it, in order to have me back. For Hybern would come here, use these lands. And there would be no more singing and dancing. Not once they arrived.

But I kept quiet as the sunlight faded and night finally fell.

The stars winked into existence, dim and small above the blazing fires.

I watched them through the long hours of celebrating, and could have sworn that they kept me company, my silent and stalwart friends.

CHAPTER 5

I crawled back to the manor two hours after midnight, too exhausted to last until dawn.

Especially when I noted the way Tamlin looked at me, remembering that dawn last year when he'd led me away and kissed me as the sun rose.

I asked Lucien to escort me, and he'd been more than happy to do so, given that his own status as a mated male made him uninterested in any sort of female company these days. And given that Ianthe had been trying to corner him all day to ask about what had happened at the ceremony.

I changed into my nightgown, a small, lacy thing I'd once worn for Tamlin's enjoyment and now was glad to don thanks to the day's sweat still clinging to my skin, and flopped into bed.

For nearly half an hour, I kicked at the sheets, tossing and turning, thrashing.

The Attor. The Weaver. My sisters being thrown into the Cauldron. All of them twined and eddied around me. I let them.

Most of the others were still celebrating when I yelped, a sharp, short cry that had me bouncing from the bed.

My heart thundered along my veins, my bones, as I cracked open the door, sweating and haggard, and padded across the hall.

Lucien answered on the second knock.

“I heard you—what’s wrong.” He scanned me, russet eye wide as he noted my disheveled hair, my sweaty nightgown.

I swallowed, a silent question on my face, and he nodded, retreating into the room to let me inside. Bare from the waist up, he’d managed to haul on a pair of pants before opening the door, and hastily buttoned them as I strode past.

His room had been bedecked in Autumn Court colors—the only tribute to his home he’d ever let show—and I surveyed the night-dark space, the rumpled bedsheets. He perched on the rolled arm of a large chair before the blackened fire, watching me wring my hands in the center of the crimson carpet.

“I dream about it,” I rasped. “Under the Mountain. And when I wake up, I can’t remember where I am.” I lifted my now-unmarred left arm before me. “I can’t remember *when* I am.”

Truth—and half a lie. I still dreamed of those horrible days, but no longer did they consume me. No longer did I run to the bathroom in the middle of the night to hurl my guts up.

“What did you dream of tonight?” he asked quietly.

I dragged my eyes to his, haunted and bleak. “She had me spiked to the wall. Like Clare Beddor. And the Attor was—”

I shuddered, running my hands over my face.

Lucien rose, stalking to me. The ripple of fear and pain at my own words masked my scent enough, masked my own power as my dark snares picked up a slight vibration in the house.

Lucien paused half a foot from me. He didn’t so much as object as I threw my arms around his neck, burying my face against his warm, bare chest. It was seawater from Tarquin’s own gift that slipped from my eyes, down my face, and onto his golden skin.

Lucien loosed a heavy sigh and slid an arm around my waist, the

other threading through my hair to cradle my head. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m sorry.”

He held me, stroking soothing lines down my back, and I calmed my weeping, those seawater tears drying up like wet sand in the sun.

I lifted my head from his sculpted chest at last, my fingers digging into the hard muscles of his shoulders as I peered into his concerned face. I took deep, heaving breaths, my brows knotting and mouth parting as I—

“What’s going on.”

Lucien whipped his head toward the door.

Tamlin stood there, face a mask of cold calm. The beginnings of claws glinted at his knuckles.

We pushed away, too swiftly to be casual. “I had a nightmare,” I explained, straightening my nightgown. “I—I didn’t want to wake the house.”

Tamlin was just staring at Lucien, whose mouth had tightened into a thin line as he marked those claws, still half-drawn.

“I had a nightmare,” I repeated a bit sharply, gripping Tamlin’s arm and leading him from the room before Lucien could so much as open his mouth.

I closed the door, but could still feel Tamlin’s attention fixed on the male behind it. He didn’t sheath his claws. Didn’t summon them any further, either.

I strode the few feet to my room, watching Tamlin assess the hall. The distance between my door and Lucien’s. “Good night,” I said, and shut the door in Tamlin’s face.

I waited the five minutes it took Tamlin to decide not to kill Lucien, and then smiled.

I wondered if Lucien had pieced it together. That I had known Tamlin would come to my room tonight, after I had given him so many shy touches and glances today. That I had changed into my most indecent nightgown not for the heat, but so that when my invisible snares in

the house informed me that Tamlin had finally worked up the nerve to come to my bedroom, I'd look the part.

A feigned nightmare, the evidence set into place with my thrashed sheets. I'd left Lucien's door open, with him too distracted and unsuspecting of why I'd really be there to bother to shut it, or notice the shield of hard air I'd placed around the room so that he wouldn't hear or scent Tamlin as he arrived.

Until Tamlin saw us there, limbs entwined, my nightgown askew, staring at each other so intently, so full of *emotion* that we'd either just been starting or finishing up. That we didn't even notice until Tamlin was right there—and that invisible shield vanished before he could sense it.

A nightmare, I'd told Tamlin.

I was the nightmare.

Preying on what Tamlin had feared from my very first days here.

I had not forgotten that long-ago fight he'd picked with Lucien. The warning he'd given him to stop flirting with me. To stay away. The fear that I'd preferred the red-haired lord over him and that it would threaten every plan he had. *Back off*, he'd told Lucien.

I had no doubt Tamlin was now running through every look and conversation since then. Every time Lucien had intervened on my behalf, both Under the Mountain and afterward. Weighing how much that new mating bond with Elain held sway over his friend.

Considering how this very morning, Lucien had knelt before me, swearing fealty to a newborn god, as if we had both been Cauldron-blessed.

I let myself smile for a moment longer, then dressed.

There was more work to do.

CHAPTER 6

A set of keys to the estate gates had gone missing.

But after last night's incident, Tamlin didn't appear to care.

Breakfast was silent, the Hybern royals sullen at being kept waiting so long to see the second cleft in the wall, and Jurian, for once, too tired to do anything but shovel meat and eggs into his hateful mouth.

Tamlin and Lucien, it seemed, had spoken before the meal, but the latter made a point to keep a healthy distance from me. To not look at or speak to me, as if still needing to convince Tamlin of our innocence.

I debated asking Jurian outright if he'd stolen the keys from whatever guard had lost them, but the silence was a welcome reprieve.

Until Ianthe breezed in, carefully avoiding acknowledging me, as if I was indeed the blinding sun that had been stolen from her.

"I am sorry to interrupt your meal, but there is a matter to discuss, High Lord," Ianthe said, pale robes swirling at her feet as she halted halfway to the table.

All of us perked up at that.

Tamlin, brooding and snarly, demanded, "What is it."

She made a show of realizing the Hybern royals were present.

Listening. I tried not to snort at the oh-so-nervous glance she threw their way, then to Tamlin. The next words were no surprise whatsoever. “Perhaps we should wait until after the meal. When you are alone.”

No doubt a power play, to remind them that she did, in fact, have sway here—with Tamlin. That Hybern, too, might want to remain on her good side, considering the *information* she bore. But I was cruel enough to say sweetly, “If we can trust our allies in Hybern to go to war with us, then we can trust them to use discretion. Go ahead, Ianthe.”

She didn’t so much as look in my direction. But now caught between outright insult and politeness . . . Tamlin weighed our company against Ianthe’s posture and said, “Let’s hear it.”

Her white throat bobbed. “There is . . . My acolytes discovered that the land around my temple is . . . dying.”

Jurian rolled his eyes and went back to his bacon.

“Then tell the gardeners,” Brannagh said, returning to her own food. Dagdan snickered into his cup of tea.

“It is not a matter of gardening.” Ianthe straightened. “It is a blight upon the land. Grass, root, bud—all of it, shriveled up and sickly. It reeks of the naga.”

It was an effort not to glance to Lucien—to see if he also noticed the too-eager gleam in her eye. Even Tamlin loosed a sigh, as if he saw it for what it was: an attempt to regain some ground, perhaps a scheme to poison the earth and then miraculously heal it.

“There are other spots in the woods where things have died and are not coming back,” Ianthe went on, pressing a silver-adorned hand to her chest. “I fear it’s a warning that the naga are gathering—and plan to attack.”

Oh, I’d gotten under her skin. I’d been wondering what she’d do after yesterday’s solstice, after I’d robbed her of her moment and power. But this . . . Clever.

I hid my smirk down deep and said gently, “Ianthe, perhaps it *is* a case for the groundskeepers.”

She stiffened, at last facing me. *You think you're playing the game*, I itched to tell her, *but you have no idea that every choice you made last night and this morning were only steps I nudged you toward*.

I jerked my chin toward the royals, then Lucien. “We’re heading out this afternoon to survey the wall, but if the problem remains when we return in a few days, I’ll help you look into it.”

Those silver-ringed fingers curled into loose fists at her sides. But like the true viper she was, Ianthe said to Tamlin, “Will you be joining them, High Lord?”

She looked to me and Lucien—the assessment too lingering to be casual.

A faint, low headache was already forming, made worse with every word out of her mouth. I’d been up too late, and had gotten too little sleep—and I needed my strength for the days ahead. “He will not,” I said, cutting off Tamlin before he could reply.

He set down his utensils. “I think I will.”

“I don’t need an escort.” Let him unravel the layers of defensiveness in that statement.

Jurian snorted. “Starting to doubt our good intentions, High Lord?”

Tamlin snarled at him. “Careful.”

I placed a hand flat on the table. “I’ll be fine with Lucien and the sentries.”

Lucien seemed inclined to sink into his seat and disappear forever.

I surveyed Dagdan and Brannagh and smiled a bit. “I can defend myself, if it comes to that,” I said to Tamlin.

The daemati smiled back at me. I hadn’t felt another touch on my mental barriers, or the ones I’d been working to keep around as many people here as possible. The constant use of my power was wearing on me, however—being away from this place for four or five days would be a welcome relief.

Especially as Ianthe murmured to Tamlin, “Perhaps you *should* go, my friend.” I waited—waited for whatever nonsense was about to come

out of that pouty mouth— “You never know when the Night Court will attempt to snatch her away.”

I had a blink to debate my reaction. To opt for leaning back in my chair, shoulders curling inward, hauling up those images of Clare, of Rhys with those ash arrows through his wings—any sort of way to dredge my scent in fear. “Have you news?” I whispered.

Brannagh and Dagdan looked *very* interested at that.

The priestess opened her mouth, but Jurian cut her off, drawling, “There is no news. Their borders are secure. Rhysand would be a fool to push his luck by coming here.”

I stared at my plate, the portrait of bowed terror.

“A fool, yes,” Ianthe countered, “but one with a vendetta.” She faced Tamlin, the morning sun catching in the jewel atop her head. “Perhaps if you returned to him his family’s wings, he might . . . settle.”

For a heartbeat, silence rippled through me.

Followed by a wave of roaring that drowned out nearly every thought, every self-preserving instinct. I could barely hear over that bellowing in my blood, my bones.

But the words, the offer . . . A cheap attempt at snaring me. I pretended not to hear, not to care. Even as I waited and waited for Tamlin’s reply.

When Tamlin answered, his voice was low. “I burned them a long time ago.”

I could have sworn there was something like remorse—remorse and shame—in his words.

Ianthe only tsked. “Too bad. He might have paid handsomely for them.”

My limbs ached with the effort of not leaping over the table to smash her head into the marble floor.

But I said to Tamlin, soothing and gentle, “I’ll be fine out there.” I touched his hand, brushing my thumb over the back of his palm. Held his stare. “Let’s not start down this road again.”

As I pulled away, Tamlin merely fixed Lucien with a look, any trace of that guilt gone. His claws slid free, embedding in the scar-flecked wood of his chair's arm. "Be careful."

None of us pretended it was anything but a threat.



It was a two-day ride, but took us only a day to get there with winnowing-walking-winnowing. We could manage a few miles at a time, but Dagdan was slower than I'd anticipated, given that he had to carry his sister and Jurian.

I didn't fault him for it. With each of us bearing another, the drain was considerable. Lucien and I both bore a sentry, minor lords' sons who had been trained to be polite and watchful. Supplies, as a result, were limited. Including tents.

By the time we made it to the cleft in the wall, darkness was falling.

The few supplies we'd hauled also had encumbered our winnowing through the world, and I let the sentries erect the tents for us, ever the lady keen to be waited on. Our dinner around the small fire was near-silent, none of us bothering to speak, save for Jurian, who questioned the sentries endlessly about their training. The twins retreated to their own tent after they'd picked at the meat sandwiches we'd packed, frowning at them as if they were full of maggots instead, and Jurian wandered off into the woods soon after, claiming he wanted a walk before he retired.

I hauled myself into the canvas tent when the fire was dying out, the space barely big enough for Lucien and me to sleep shoulder to shoulder.

His red hair gleamed in the faint firelight a moment later as he shoved through the flaps and swore. "Maybe I should sleep out there."

I rolled my eyes. "Please."

A wary, considering glance as he knelt and removed his boots. "You know Tamlin can be . . . sensitive about things."

"He can also be a pain in my ass," I snapped, and slithered under the

blankets. “If you yield to him on every bit of paranoia and territorialism, you’ll just make it worse.”

Lucien unbuttoned his jacket but remained mostly dressed as he slid onto his sleeping roll. “I think it’s made worse because you two haven’t . . . I mean, you haven’t, right?”

I stiffened, tugging the blanket higher onto my shoulders. “No. I don’t want to be touched like that—not for a while.”

His silence was heavy—sad. I hated the lie, hated it for how filthy it felt to wield it. “I’m sorry,” he said. And I wondered what else he was apologizing for as I faced him in the darkness of our tent.

“Isn’t there some way to get out of this deal with Hybern?” My words were barely louder than the murmuring embers outside. “I’m back, I’m safe. We could find some way around it—”

“No. The King of Hybern crafted his bargain with Tamlin too cleverly, too clearly. Magic bound them—magic will strike him if he does not allow Hybern into these lands.”

“In what way? Kill him?”

Lucien’s sigh ruffled my hair. “It will claim his own powers, maybe kill him. Magic is all about balance. It’s why he couldn’t interfere with your bargain with Rhysand. Even the person who tries to sever the bargain faces consequences. If he’d kept you here, the magic that bound you to Rhys might have come to claim *his* life as payment for yours. Or the life of someone else he cared about. It’s old magic—old and strange. It’s why we avoid bargains unless it’s necessary: even the scholars at the Day Court don’t know how it works. Believe me, I’ve asked.”

“For me—you asked them for me.”

“Yes. I went last winter to inquire about breaking your bargain with Rhys.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I—we didn’t want to give you false hope. And we didn’t dare let Rhysand get wind of what we were doing, in case he found a way to interfere. To stop it.”

“So Ianthe pushed Tamlin to Hybern instead.”

“He was frantic. The scholars at the Day Court worked too slowly. I begged him for more time, but you’d already been gone for months. He wanted to act, not wait—despite that letter you sent. *Because* of that letter you sent. I finally told him to go ahead with it after—after that day in the forest.”

I turned onto my back, staring at the sloped ceiling of the tent.

“How bad was it?” I asked quietly.

“You saw your room. He trashed it, the study, his bedroom. He—he killed the sentries who’d been on guard. After he got the last bit of information from them. He executed them in front of everyone in the manor.”

My blood chilled. “You didn’t stop him.”

“I tried. I begged him for mercy. He didn’t listen. He *couldn’t* listen.”

“The sentries didn’t try to stop him, either?”

“They didn’t dare. Feyre, he’s a High Lord. He’s a different *breed*.”

I wondered if he’d say the same thing if he knew what I was.

“We were backed into a corner with no options. None. It was either go to war with the Night Court *and* Hybern, or ally with Hybern, let them try to stir up trouble, and then use that alliance to our own advantage further down the road.”

“What do you mean,” I breathed.

But Lucien realized what he’d said, and hedged, “We have enemies in every court. Having Hybern’s alliance will make them think twice.”

Liar. Trained, clever liar.

I loosed a heaving, sleepy breath. “Even if they’re now our allies,” I mumbled, “I still hate them.”

A snort. “Me too.”



“Get up.”

Blinding sunlight cut into the tent, and I hissed.

The order was drowned out by Lucien's snarl as he sat up. "Out," he ordered Jurian, who looked us over once, sneered, and stalked away.

I'd rolled onto Lucien's bedroll at some point, any schemes indeed second to my most pressing demand—warmth. But I had no doubt Jurian would tuck away the information to throw in Tamlin's face when we returned: we'd shared a tent, and had been *very* cozy upon awakening.

I washed in the nearby stream, my body stiff and aching from a night on the ground, with or without the help of a bedroll.

Brannagh was prowling for the stream by the time I'd finished. The princess gave me a cold, thin smile. "I'd pick Beron's son, too."

I stared at the princess beneath lowered brows.

She shrugged, her smile growing. "Autumn Court males have fire in their blood—and they fuck like it, too."

"I suppose you know from experience?"

A chuckle. "Why do you think I had so much fun in the War?"

I didn't bother to hide my disgust.

Lucien caught me cringing at him when her words replayed for the tenth time an hour later, while we hiked the half mile toward the crack in the wall. "What?" he demanded.

I shook my head, trying not to imagine Elain subject to that . . . fire.

"Nothing," I said, just as Jurian swore ahead.

We were both moving at his barked curse—and then broke into a run at the sound of a sword whining free of its sheath. Leaves and branches whipped at me, but then we were at the wall, that invisible, horrible marker humming and throbbing in my head.

And staring right at us through the hole were three Children of the Blessed.

CHAPTER 7

Brannagh and Dagdan looked like they'd just found second breakfast waiting for them.

Jurian had his sword out, the two young women and one young man gaping between him and the others. Then at us, their eyes widening further as they noted Lucien's cruel beauty.

They dropped to their knees. "Masters and Mistresses," they beseeched us, their silver jewelry glinting in the dappled sunlight through the leaves. "You have found us on our journey."

The two royals smiled so broadly I could see all of their too-white teeth.

Jurian, for once, seemed torn before he snapped, "What are you doing here?"

The dark-haired girl at the front was lovely, her honey-gold skin flushed as she lifted her head. "We have come to dwell in the immortal lands; we have come as tribute."

Jurian cut cold, hard eyes to Lucien. "Is this true?"

Lucien stared him down. "We accept no tribute from the human lands. Least of all children."

Never mind that the three of them appeared only a few years younger than myself.

“Why don’t you come through,” Brannagh cooed, “and we can . . . enjoy ourselves.” She was indeed sizing up the brown-haired young man and the other girl, her hair a ruddy brown, face sharp but interesting. From the way Dagdan was leering at the beautiful girl in front, I knew he’d silently made his claim already.

I shoved in front of them and said to the three mortals, “Get out. Go back to your villages, back to your families. You cross this wall, and you will die.”

They balked, rising to their feet, faces taut with fear—and awe. “We have come to live in peace.”

“There is no such thing here. There is only death for your kind.”

Their eyes slid to the immortals behind me. The dark-haired girl blushed at Dagdan’s intent stare, seeing the High Fae beauty and none of the predator.

So I struck.

The wall was a screeching, terrible vise, crushing my magic, battering my head.

But I speared my power through that gap, and slammed into their minds.

Too hard. The young man flinched a bit.

So soft—defenseless. Their minds yielded like butter melting on my tongue.

I beheld pieces of their lives like shards in a broken mirror, flashing every which way: the dark-haired girl was rich, educated, headstrong—had wanted to escape an arranged marriage and believed Prythian was a better option. The ruddy-haired girl had known nothing but poverty and her father’s fists, which had turned more violent after they’d ended her mother’s life. The young man had sold himself on the streets of a large village until the Children had come one day and offered him something better.

I worked quickly. Neatly.

I was finished before three heartbeats had passed, before Brannagh had even drawn breath to say, “There is no death here. Only pleasure, if you are willing.”

Even if they weren’t willing, I wanted to add.

But the three of them now blinked—balking.

Beholding us for what we were: deadly, merciless. The truth behind the spun stories.

“We—perhaps have . . . made a mistake,” their leader said, retreating a step.

“Or perhaps this was fate,” Brannagh countered with a snake’s smile.

They kept backing away. Kept seeing the histories I’d planted into their minds—that we were here to hurt and kill them, that we had done so with all their friends, that we’d use and discard them. I showed them the naga, the Bogge, the Middengard Wyrms; I showed them Clare and the golden-haired queen, skewered on that lamppost. The memories I gave them became stories they had ignored—but now understood with us before them.

“Come here,” Dagdan ordered.

The words were kindling to their fear. The three of them turned, heavy pale robes twisting with them, and bolted for the trees.

Brannagh tensed, as if she’d charge through the wall after them, but I gripped her arm and hissed, “If you pursue them, then you and I will have a problem.”

In emphasis, I dragged mental talons down her own shield.

The princess snarled at me.

But the humans were already gone.

I prayed they’d listen to the other command I’d woven into their minds: to get on a boat, get as many friends as they could, and flee for the continent. To return here only when the war was over, and to warn as many humans as possible to get out before it was too late.

The Hybern royals growled their displeasure, but I ignored it as I took up a spot against a tree and settled in to wait, not trusting them to stay on this side of the border.

The royals resumed their work, stalking up and down the wall.

A moment later, a male body came up beside mine.

Not Lucien, I realized with a jolt, but did not so much as flinch.

Jurian's eyes were on the place where the humans had been.

"Thank you," he said, his voice rough.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, well aware that Lucien carefully watched from the shade of a nearby oak.

Jurian gave me a knowing smirk and sauntered after Dagdan.



They took all day.

Whatever it was they were inspecting, whatever they were hunting for, the royals didn't inform us.

And after the confrontation that morning, I knew pushing them into revealing it wouldn't happen. I'd used up my allotted tolerance for the day.

So we spent another night in the woods, which was precisely how I wound up sitting across the fire from Jurian after the twins had crawled into their tent and the sentries had taken up their watch positions. Lucien had gone to the stream to get more water, and I watched the flame dance amongst the logs, feeling it echo inside myself.

Spearing my power through the wall had left me with a lingering, pounding headache all day, more than a bit dizzy. I had no doubt sleep would claim me fast and hard, but the fire was too warm and the spring night too brisk to willingly breach that long gap of darkness between the flame and my tent.

"What happens to the ones who do make it through the wall?" Jurian asked, the hard panes of his face cast in flickering relief by the fire.

I ground the heel of my boot into the grass. "I don't know. They never came back once they went over. But while Amarantha ruled,