



SHE STOLE A LIFE.
NOW SHE MUST PAY
WITH HER HEART.

COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J. MAAS

BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY

LONDON NEW DELHI NEW YORK SYDNEY

For Josh—

Because you would go Under the Mountain for me.

I love you.

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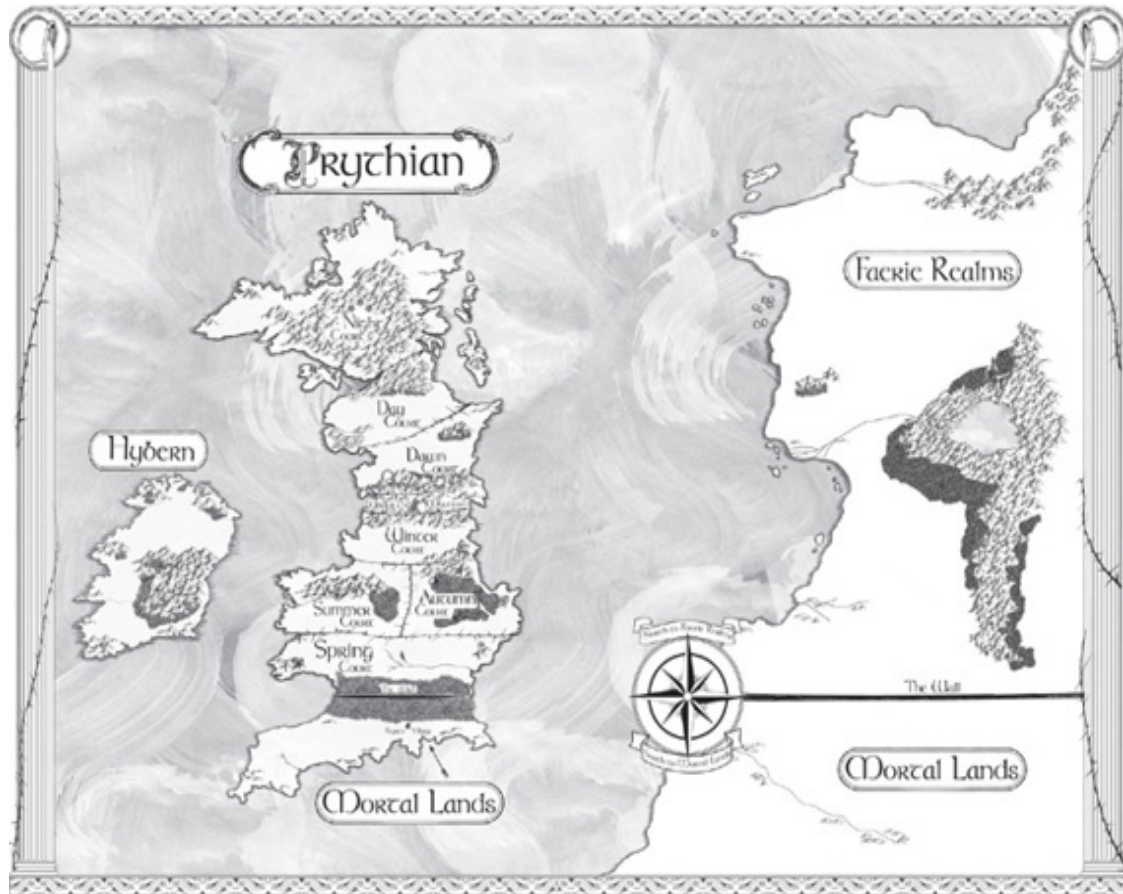
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Pronunciation Guide

Also by Sarah J. Maas

Map



Chapter 1

The forest had become a labyrinth of snow and ice.

I'd been monitoring the parameters of the thicket for an hour, and my vantage point in the crook of a tree branch had turned useless. The gusting wind blew thick flurries to sweep away my tracks, but buried along with them any signs of potential quarry.

Hunger had brought me farther from home than I usually risked, but winter was the hard time. The animals had pulled in, going deeper into the woods than I could follow, leaving me to pick off stragglers one by one, praying they'd last until spring.

They hadn't.

I wiped my numb fingers over my eyes, brushing away the flakes clinging to my lashes. Here there were no telltale trees stripped of bark to mark the deer's passing—they hadn't yet moved on. They would remain until the bark ran out, then travel north past the wolves' territory and perhaps into the faerie lands of Prythian—where no mortals would dare go, not unless they had a death wish.

A shudder skittered down my spine at the thought, and I shoved it away, focusing on my surroundings, on the task ahead. That was all I could do, all I'd been able to do for years: focus on surviving the week, the day, the hour ahead. And now, with the snow, I'd be lucky to spot anything—especially from my position up in the tree, scarcely able to see fifteen feet ahead. Stifling a groan as my stiff limbs protested at the movement, I unstrung my bow before easing off the tree.

The icy snow crunched under my fraying boots, and I ground my teeth. Low visibility, unnecessary noise—I was well on my way to yet another fruitless hunt.

Only a few hours of daylight remained. If I didn't leave soon, I'd have to navigate my way home in the dark, and the warnings of the town hunters still rang fresh in my mind: giant wolves were on the prowl, and in numbers. Not to mention whispers of strange folk spotted in the area, tall and eerie and deadly.

Anything but faeries, the hunters had beseeched our long-forgotten gods—and I had secretly prayed alongside them. In the eight years we'd been living in our village, two days' journey from the immortal border of Prythian, we'd been spared an attack—though traveling peddlers sometimes brought stories of distant border towns left in splinters and bones and ashes. These accounts, once rare enough to be dismissed by the village elders as hearsay, had in recent months become commonplace whisperings on every market day.

I had risked much in coming so far into the forest, but we'd finished our last loaf of bread yesterday, and the remainder of our dried meat the day before. Still, I would have rather spent another night with a hungry belly than found myself satisfying the appetite of a wolf. Or a faerie.

Not that there was much of me to feast on. I'd turned gangly by this time of the year, and could count a good number of my ribs. Moving as nimbly and quietly as I could between the trees, I pushed a hand against my hollow and aching stomach. I knew the expression that would be on my two elder sisters' faces when I returned to our cottage empty-handed yet again.

After a few minutes of careful searching, I crouched in a cluster of snow-heavy brambles. Through the thorns, I had a half-decent view of a clearing and the small brook flowing through it. A few holes in the ice suggested it was still frequently used. Hopefully something would come by. Hopefully.

I sighed through my nose, digging the tip of my bow into the ground, and leaned my forehead against the crude curve of wood. We wouldn't last another week without food. And too many families had already started begging for me to hope for

handouts from the wealthier townsfolk. I'd witnessed firsthand exactly how far their charity went.

I eased into a more comfortable position and calmed my breathing, straining to listen to the forest over the wind. The snow fell and fell, dancing and curling like sparkling spindrifts, the white fresh and clean against the brown and gray of the world. And despite myself, despite my numb limbs, I quieted that relentless, vicious part of my mind to take in the snow-veiled woods.

Once it had been second nature to savor the contrast of new grass against dark, tilled soil, or an amethyst brooch nestled in folds of emerald silk; once I'd dreamed and breathed and thought in color and light and shape. Sometimes I would even indulge in envisioning a day when my sisters were married and it was only me and Father, with enough food to go around, enough money to buy some paint, and enough time to put those colors and shapes down on paper or canvas or the cottage walls.

Not likely to happen anytime soon—perhaps ever. So I was left with moments like this, admiring the glint of pale winter light on snow. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done it—bothered to notice anything lovely or interesting.

Stolen hours in a decrepit barn with Isaac Hale didn't count; those times were hungry and empty and sometimes cruel, but never lovely.

The howling wind calmed into a soft sighing. The snow fell lazily now, in big, fat clumps that gathered along every nook and bump of the trees. Mesmerizing—the lethal, gentle beauty of the snow. I'd soon have to return to the muddy, frozen roads of the village, to the cramped heat of our cottage. Some small, fragmented part of me recoiled at the thought.

Bushes rustled across the clearing.

Drawing my bow was a matter of instinct. I peered through the thorns, and my breath caught.

Less than thirty paces away stood a small doe, not yet too scrawny from winter, but desperate enough to wrench bark

from a tree in the clearing.

A deer like that could feed my family for a week or more.

My mouth watered. Quiet as the wind hissing through dead leaves, I took aim.

She continued tearing off strips of bark, chewing slowly, utterly unaware that her death waited yards away.

I could dry half the meat, and we could immediately eat the rest—stews, pies ... Her skin could be sold, or perhaps turned into clothing for one of us. I needed new boots, but Elain needed a new cloak, and Nesta was prone to crave anything someone else possessed.

My fingers trembled. So much food—such salvation. I took a steadying breath, double-checking my aim.

But there was a pair of golden eyes shining from the brush adjacent to mine.

The forest went silent. The wind died. Even the snow paused.

We mortals no longer kept gods to worship, but if I had known their lost names, I would have prayed to them. All of them. Concealed in the thicket, the wolf inched closer, its gaze set on the oblivious doe.

He was enormous—the size of a pony—and though I'd been warned about their presence, my mouth turned bone-dry.

But worse than his size was his unnatural stealth: even as he inched closer in the brush, he remained unheard, unspotted by the doe. No animal that massive could be so quiet. But if he was no ordinary animal, if he was of Prythian origin, if he was somehow a faerie, then being eaten was the least of my concerns.

If he was a faerie, I should already be running.

Yet maybe ... maybe it would be a favor to the world, to my village, to myself, to kill him while I remained undetected. Putting an arrow through his eye would be no burden.

But despite his size, he *looked* like a wolf, moved like a wolf. *Animal*, I reassured myself. *Just an animal*. I didn't let myself consider the alternative—not when I needed my head clear, my breathing steady.

I had a hunting knife and three arrows. The first two were ordinary arrows—simple and efficient, and likely no more than bee stings to a wolf that size. But the third arrow, the longest and heaviest one, I'd bought from a traveling peddler during a summer when we'd had enough coppers for extra luxuries. An arrow carved from mountain ash, armed with an iron head.

From songs sung to us as lullabies over our cradles, we all knew from infancy that faeries hated iron. But it was the ash wood that made their immortal, healing magic falter long enough for a human to make a killing blow. Or so legend and rumor claimed. The only proof we had of the ash's effectiveness was its sheer rarity. I'd seen drawings of the trees, but never one with my own eyes—not after the High Fae had burned them all long ago. So few remained, most of them small and sickly and hidden by the nobility within high-walled groves. I'd spent weeks after my purchase debating whether that overpriced bit of wood had been a waste of money, or a fake, and for three years, the ash arrow had sat unused in my quiver.

Now I drew it, keeping my movements minimal, efficient—anything to avoid that monstrous wolf looking in my direction. The arrow was long and heavy enough to inflict damage—possibly kill him, if I aimed right.

My chest became so tight it ached. And in that moment, I realized my life boiled down to one question: Was the wolf alone?

I gripped my bow and drew the string farther back. I was a decent shot, but I'd never faced a wolf. I'd thought it made me lucky—even blessed. But now ... I didn't know where to hit or how fast they moved. I couldn't afford to miss. Not when I had only one ash arrow.

And if it was indeed a faerie's heart pounding under that fur, then good riddance. Good riddance, after all their kind had done to us. I wouldn't risk this one later creeping into our village to slaughter and maim and torment. Let him die here and now. I'd be glad to end him.

The wolf crept closer, and a twig snapped beneath one of his paws—each bigger than my hand. The doe went rigid. She glanced to either side, ears straining toward the gray sky. With the wolf's downwind position, she couldn't see or smell him.

His head lowered, and his massive silver body—so perfectly blended into the snow and shadows—sank onto its haunches. The doe was still staring in the wrong direction.

I glanced from the doe to the wolf and back again. At least he was alone—at least I'd been spared that much. But if the wolf scared the doe off, I was left with nothing but a starving, oversize wolf—possibly a faerie—looking for the next-best meal. And if he killed her, destroying precious amounts of hide and fat ...

If I judged wrongly, my life wasn't the only one that would be lost. But my life had been reduced to nothing but risks these past eight years that I'd been hunting in the woods, and I'd picked correctly most of the time. Most of the time.

The wolf shot from the brush in a flash of gray and white and black, his yellow fangs gleaming. He was even more gargantuan in the open, a marvel of muscle and speed and brute strength. The doe didn't stand a chance.

I fired the ash arrow before he destroyed much else of her.

The arrow found its mark in his side, and I could have sworn the ground itself shuddered. He barked in pain, releasing the doe's neck as his blood sprayed on the snow—so ruby bright.

He whirled toward me, those yellow eyes wide, hackles raised. His low growl reverberated in the empty pit of my stomach as I surged to my feet, snow churning around me, another arrow drawn.

But the wolf merely looked at me, his maw stained with blood, my ash arrow protruding so vulgarly from his side. The snow began falling again. He *looked*, and with a sort of awareness and surprise that made me fire the second arrow. Just in case—just in case that intelligence was of the immortal, wicked sort.

He didn't try to dodge the arrow as it went clean through his wide yellow eye.

He collapsed to the ground.

Color and darkness whirled, eddying in my vision, mixing with the snow.

His legs were twitching as a low whine sliced through the wind. Impossible—he should be dead, not dying. The arrow was through his eye almost to the goose fletching.

But wolf or faerie, it didn't matter. Not with that ash arrow buried in his side. He'd be dead soon enough. Still, my hands shook as I brushed off snow and edged closer, still keeping a good distance. Blood gushed from the wounds I'd given him, staining the snow crimson.

He pawed at the ground, his breathing already slowing. Was he in much pain, or was his whimper just his attempt to shove death away? I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

The snow swirled around us. I stared at him until that coat of charcoal and obsidian and ivory ceased rising and falling. Wolf—definitely just a wolf, despite his size.

The tightness in my chest eased, and I loosed a sigh, my breath clouding in front of me. At least the ash arrow had proved itself to be lethal, regardless of who or what it took down.

A rapid examination of the doe told me I could carry only one animal—and even that would be a struggle. But it was a shame to leave the wolf.

Though it wasted precious minutes—minutes during which any predator could smell the fresh blood—I skinned him and cleaned my arrows as best I could.

If anything, it warmed my hands. I wrapped the bloody side of his pelt around the doe's death-wound before I hoisted her across my shoulders. It was several miles back to our cottage, and I didn't need a trail of blood leading every animal with fangs and claws straight to me.

Grunting against the weight, I grasped the legs of the deer and spared a final glance at the steaming carcass of the wolf. His remaining golden eye now stared at the snow-heavy sky, and for a moment, I wished I had it in me to feel remorse for the dead thing.

But this was the forest, and it was winter.

Chapter 2

The sun had set by the time I exited the forest, my knees shaking. My hands, stiff from clenching the legs of the deer, had gone utterly numb miles ago. Not even the carcass could ward off the deepening chill.

The world was awash in hues of dark blue, interrupted only by shafts of buttery light escaping from the shuttered windows of our dilapidated cottage. It was like striding through a living painting—a fleeting moment of stillness, the blues swiftly shifting to solid darkness.

As I trudged up the path, each step fueled only by near-dizzying hunger, my sisters' voices fluttered out to meet me. I didn't need to discern their words to know they most likely were chattering about some young man or the ribbons they'd spotted in the village when they should have been chopping wood, but I smiled a bit nonetheless.

I kicked my boots against the stone door frame, knocking the snow from them. Bits of ice came free from the gray stones of the cottage, revealing the faded ward-markings etched around the threshold. My father had once convinced a passing charlatan to trade the engravings against faerie harm in exchange for one of his wood carvings. There was so little that my father was ever able to do for us that I hadn't possessed the heart to tell him the engravings were useless ... and undoubtedly fake. Mortals didn't possess magic—didn't possess any of the superior strength and speed of the faeries or High Fae. The man, claiming some High Fae blood in his ancestry, had just carved the whorls and swirls and runes around the door and windows, muttered a few nonsense words, and ambled on his way.

I yanked open the wooden door, the frozen iron handle biting my skin like an asp. Heat and light blinded me as I

slipped inside.

“Feyre!” Elain’s soft gasp scraped past my ears, and I blinked back the brightness of the fire to find my second-eldest sister before me. Though she was bundled in a threadbare blanket, her gold-brown hair—the hair all three of us had—was coiled perfectly about her head. Eight years of poverty hadn’t stripped from her the desire to look lovely. “Where did you get that?” The undercurrent of hunger honed her words into a sharpness that had become too common in recent weeks. No mention of the blood on me. I’d long since given up hope of them actually noticing whether I came back from the woods every evening. At least until they got hungry again. But then again, my mother hadn’t made *them* swear anything when they stood beside her deathbed.

I took a calming breath as I slung the doe off my shoulders. She hit the wooden table with a thud, rattling a ceramic cup on its other end.

“Where do you think I got it?” My voice had turned hoarse, each word burning as it came out. My father and Nesta still silently warmed their hands by the hearth, my eldest sister ignoring him, as usual. I peeled the wolf pelt from the doe’s body, and after removing my boots and setting them by the door, I turned to Elain.

Her brown eyes—my father’s eyes—remained pinned on the doe. “Will it take you long to clean it?” Me. Not her, not the others. I’d never once seen their hands sticky with blood and fur. I’d only learned to prepare and harvest my kills thanks to the instruction of others.

Elain pushed her hand against her belly, probably as empty and aching as my own. It wasn’t that Elain was cruel. She wasn’t like Nesta, who had been born with a sneer on her face. Elain sometimes just ... didn’t grasp things. It wasn’t meanness that kept her from offering to help; it simply never occurred to her that she might be capable of getting her hands dirty. I’d never been able to decide whether she actually didn’t understand that we were truly poor or if she just refused to accept it. It still hadn’t stopped me from buying her seeds for

the flower garden she tended in the milder months, whenever I could afford it.

And it hadn't stopped her from buying me three small tins of paint—red, yellow, and blue—during that same summer I'd had enough to buy the ash arrow. It was the only gift she'd ever given me, and our house still bore the marks of it, even if the paint was now fading and chipped: little vines and flowers along the windows and thresholds and edges of things, tiny curls of flame on the stones bordering the hearth. Any spare minutes I'd had that bountiful summer I used to bedeck our house in color, sometimes hiding clever decorations inside drawers, behind the threadbare curtains, underneath the chairs and table.

We hadn't had a summer that easy since.

"Feyre." My father's deep rumble came from the fire. His dark beard was neatly trimmed, his face spotless—like my sisters'. "What luck you had today—in bringing us such a feast."

From beside my father, Nesta snorted. Not surprising. Any bit of praise for anyone—me, Elain, other villagers—usually resulted in her dismissal. And any word from our father usually resulted in her ridicule as well.

I straightened, almost too tired to stand, but braced a hand on the table beside the doe as I shot Nesta a glare. Of us, Nesta had taken the loss of our fortune the hardest. She had quietly resented my father from the moment we'd fled our manor, even after that awful day one of the creditors had come to show just how displeased he was at the loss of his investment.

But at least Nesta didn't fill our heads with useless talk of regaining our wealth, like my father. No, she just spent whatever money I didn't hide from her, and rarely bothered to acknowledge my father's limping presence at all. Some days, I couldn't tell which of us was the most wretched and bitter.

"We can eat half the meat this week," I said, shifting my gaze to the doe. The deer took up the entirety of the rickety table that served as our dining area, workspace, and kitchen. "We can dry the other half," I went on, knowing that no matter

how nicely I phrased it, I'd still do the bulk of it. "And I'll go to the market tomorrow to see how much I can get for the hides," I finished, more to myself than to them. No one bothered to confirm they'd heard me, anyway.

My father's ruined leg was stretched out before him, as close to the fire's heat as it could get. The cold, or the rain, or a change in temperature always aggravated the vicious, twisted wounds around his knee. His simply carved cane was propped up against his chair—a cane he'd made for himself ... and that Nesta was sometimes prone to leaving far out of his reach.

He could find work if he wasn't so ashamed, Nesta always said when I hissed about it. She hated him for the injury, too—for not fighting back when that creditor and his thugs had burst into the cottage and smashed his knee again and again. Nesta and Elain had fled into the bedroom, barricading the door. I had stayed, begging and weeping through every scream of my father, every crunch of bone. I'd soiled myself—and then vomited right on the stones before the hearth. Only then did the men leave. We never saw them again.

We'd used a massive chunk of our remaining money to pay for the healer. It had taken my father six months to even walk, a year before he could go a mile. The coppers he brought in when someone pitied him enough to buy his wood carvings weren't enough to keep us fed. Five years ago, when the money was well and truly gone, when my father still couldn't—wouldn't—move much about, he hadn't argued when I announced that I was going hunting.

He hadn't bothered to attempt to stand from his seat by the fire, hadn't bothered to look up from his wood carving. He just let me walk into those deadly, eerie woods that even the most seasoned hunters were wary of. He'd become a little more aware now—sometimes offered signs of gratitude, sometimes hobbled all the way into town to sell his carvings—but not much.

"I'd love a new cloak," Elain said at last with a sigh, at the same moment Nesta rose and declared: "I need a new pair of boots."

I kept quiet, knowing better than to get in the middle of one of their arguments, but I glanced at Nesta's still-shiny pair by the door. Beside hers, my too-small boots were falling apart at the seams, held together only by fraying laces.

"But I'm freezing with my raggedy old cloak," Elain pleaded. "I'll shiver to death." She fixed her wide eyes on me and said, "Please, Feyre." She drew out the two syllables of my name—*fay-ruh*—into the most hideous whine I'd ever endured, and Nesta loudly clicked her tongue before ordering her to shut up.

I drowned them out as they began quarreling over who would get the money the hide would fetch tomorrow and found my father now standing at the table, one hand braced against it to support his weight as he inspected the deer. His attention slid to the giant wolf pelt. His fingers, still smooth and gentlemanly, turned over the pelt and traced a line through the bloody underside. I tensed.

His dark eyes flicked to mine. "Feyre," he murmured, and his mouth became a tight line. "Where did you get this?"

"The same place I got the deer," I replied with equal quiet, my words cool and sharp.

His gaze traveled over the bow and quiver strapped to my back, the wooden-hilted hunting knife at my side. His eyes turned damp. "Feyre ... the risk ..."

I jerked my chin at the pelt, unable to keep the snap from my voice as I said, "I had no other choice."

What I really wanted to say was: *You don't even bother to attempt to leave the house most days. Were it not for me, we would starve. Were it not for me, we'd be dead.*

"Feyre," he repeated, and closed his eyes.

My sisters had gone quiet, and I looked up in time to see Nesta crinkle her nose with a sniff. She picked at my cloak. "You stink like a pig covered in its own filth. Can't you at least *try* to pretend that you're not an ignorant peasant?"

I didn't let the sting and ache show. I'd been too young to learn more than the basics of manners and reading and writing

when our family had fallen into misfortune, and she'd never let me forget it.

She stepped back to run a finger over the braided coils of her gold-brown hair. "Take those disgusting clothes off."

I took my time, swallowing the words I wanted to bark back at her. Older than me by three years, she somehow looked younger than I did, her golden cheeks always flushed with a delicate, vibrant pink. "Can you make a pot of hot water and add wood to the fire?" But even as I asked, I noticed the woodpile. There were only five logs left. "I thought you were going to chop wood today."

Nesta picked at her long, neat nails. "I hate chopping wood. I always get splinters." She glanced up from beneath her dark lashes. Of all of us, Nesta looked the most like our mother—especially when she wanted something. "Besides, Feyre," she said with a pout, "you're so much better at it! It takes you half the time it takes me. Your hands are suited for it—they're already so rough."

My jaw clenched. "Please," I asked, calming my breathing, knowing an argument was the last thing I needed or wanted. "Please get up at dawn to chop that wood." I unbuttoned the top of my tunic. "Or we'll be eating a cold breakfast."

Her brows narrowed. "I will do no such thing!"

But I was already walking toward the small second room where my sisters and I slept. Elain murmured a soft plea to Nesta, which earned her a hiss in response. I glanced over my shoulder at my father and pointed to the deer. "Get the knives ready," I said, not bothering to sound pleasant. "I'll be out soon." Without waiting for an answer, I shut the door behind me.

The room was large enough for a rickety dresser and the enormous ironwood bed we slept in. The sole remnant of our former wealth, it had been ordered as a wedding gift from my father to my mother. It was the bed in which we'd been born, and the bed in which my mother died. In all the painting I'd done to our house these past few years, I'd never touched it.

I slung off my outer clothes onto the sagging dresser—frowning at the violets and roses I'd painted around the knobs of Elain's drawer, the crackling flames I'd painted around Nesta's, and the night sky—whorls of yellow stars standing in for white—around mine. I'd done it to brighten the otherwise dark room. They'd never commented on it. I don't know why I'd ever expected them to.

Groaning, it was all I could do to keep from collapsing onto the bed.



We dined on roasted venison that night. Though I knew it was foolish, I didn't object when each of us had a small second helping until I declared the meat off-limits. I'd spend tomorrow preparing the deer's remaining parts for consumption, then I'd allot a few hours to currying up both hides before taking them to the market. I knew a few vendors who might be interested in such a purchase—though neither was likely to give me the fee I deserved. But money was money, and I didn't have the time or the funds to travel to the nearest large town to find a better offer.

I sucked on the tines of my fork, savoring the remnants of fat coating the metal. My tongue slipped over the crooked prongs—the fork was part of a shabby set my father had salvaged from the servants' quarters while the creditors ransacked our manor home. None of our utensils matched, but it was better than using our fingers. My mother's dowry flatware had long since been sold.

My mother. Imperious and cold with her children, joyous and dazzling among the peerage who frequented our former estate, doting on my father—the one person whom she truly loved and respected. But she also had truly loved parties—so much so that she didn't have time to do anything with me at all save contemplate how my budding abilities to sketch and paint might secure me a future husband. Had she lived long enough to see our wealth crumble, she would have been shattered by it—more so than my father. Perhaps it was a merciful thing that she died.

If anything, it left more food for us.

There was nothing left of her in the cottage beyond the ironwood bed—and the vow I'd made.

Every time I looked toward a horizon or wondered if I should just walk and walk and never look back, I'd hear that promise I made eleven years ago as she wasted away on her deathbed. *Stay together, and look after them.* I'd agreed, too young to ask why she hadn't begged my elder sisters, or my father. But I'd sworn it to her, and then she'd died, and in our miserable human world—shielded only by the promise made by the High Fae five centuries ago—in our world where we'd forgotten the names of our gods, a promise was law; a promise was currency; a promise was your bond.

There were times when I hated her for asking that vow of me. Perhaps, delirious with fever, she hadn't even known what she was demanding. Or maybe impending death had given her some clarity about the true nature of her children, her husband.

I set down the fork and watched the flames of our meager fire dance along the remaining logs, stretching out my aching legs beneath the table.

I turned to my sisters. As usual, Nesta was complaining about the villagers—they had no manners, they had no social graces, they had no idea just how shoddy the fabric of their clothes was, even though they pretended that it was as fine as silk or chiffon. Since we had lost our fortune, their former friends dutifully ignored them, so my sisters paraded about as though the young peasants of the town made up a second-rate social circle.

I took a sip from my cup of hot water—we couldn't even afford tea these days—as Nesta continued her story to Elain.

“Well, I said to *him*, ‘If you think you can just ask me so nonchalantly, sir, I’m going to decline!’ And you know what Tomas said?” Arms braced on the table and eyes wide, Elain shook her head.

“Tomas Mandray?” I interrupted. “The woodcutter’s second son?”

Nesta's blue-gray eyes narrowed. "Yes," she said, and shifted to address Elain again.

"What does he want?" I glanced at my father. No reaction—no hint of alarm or sign that he was even listening. Lost to whatever fog of memory had crept over him, he was smiling mildly at his beloved Elain, the only one of us who bothered to really speak to him at all.

"He wants to marry her," Elain said dreamily. I blinked.

Nesta cocked her head. I'd seen predators use that movement before. I sometimes wondered if her unrelenting steel would have helped us better survive—thrive, even—if she hadn't been so preoccupied with our lost status. "Is there a problem, *Feyre*?" She flung my name like an insult, and my jaw ached from clenching it so hard.

My father shifted in his seat, blinking, and though I knew it was foolish to react to her taunts, I said, "You can't chop wood for us, but you want to marry a *woodcutter's* son?"

Nesta squared her shoulders. "I thought all you wanted was for us to get out of the house—to marry off me and Elain so you can have enough time to paint your glorious masterpieces." She sneered at the pillar of foxglove I'd painted along the edge of the table—the colors too dark and too blue, with none of the white freckling inside the trumpets, but I'd made do, even if it had killed me not to have white paint, to make something so flawed and lasting.

I drowned the urge to cover up the painting with my hand. Maybe tomorrow I'd just scrape it off the table altogether. "Believe me," I said to her, "the day you want to marry someone worthy, I'll march up to his house and hand you over. But you're not going to marry Tomas."

Nesta's nostrils delicately flared. "There's nothing you can do. Clare Beddor told me this afternoon that Tomas *is* going to propose to me any day now. And then I'll never have to eat these scraps again." She added with a small smile, "At least I don't have to resort to rutting in the hay with Isaac Hale like an animal."

My father let out an embarrassed cough, looking to his cot by the fire. He'd never said a word against Nesta, from either fear or guilt, and apparently he wasn't going to start now, even if this was the first he was hearing of Isaac.

I laid my palms flat on the table as I stared her down. Elain removed her hand from where it lay nearby, as if the dirt and blood beneath my fingernails would somehow jump onto her porcelain skin. "Tomas's family is barely better off than ours," I said, trying to keep from growling. "You'd be just another mouth to feed. If he doesn't know this, then his parents must."

But Tomas knew—we'd run into each other in the forest before. I'd seen the gleam of desperate hunger in his eyes when he spotted me sporting a brace of rabbits. I'd never killed another human, but that day, my hunting knife had felt like a weight at my side. I'd kept out of his way ever since.

"We can't afford a dowry," I continued, and though my tone was firm, my voice quieted. "For either of you." If Nesta wanted to leave, then fine. Good. I'd be one step closer to attaining that glorious, peaceful future, to attaining a quiet house and enough food and time to paint. But we had nothing—absolutely nothing—to entice any suitor to take my sisters off my hands.

"We're in love," Nesta declared, and Elain nodded her agreement. I almost laughed—when had they gone from mooning over aristos to making doe-eyes at peasants?

"Love won't feed a hungry belly," I countered, keeping my gaze as sturdy as possible.

As if I'd struck her, Nesta leaped from her seat on the bench. "You're just jealous. I heard them saying how Isaac is going to marry some Greenfield village girl for a handsome dowry."

So had I; Isaac had ranted about it the last time we'd met. "Jealous?" I said slowly, digging down deep to bury my fury. "We have nothing to offer them—no dowry; no livestock, even. While Tomas might want to marry you ... you're a burden."

“What do you know?” Nesta breathed. “You’re just a half-wild beast with the nerve to bark orders at all hours of the day and night. Keep it up, and someday—someday, Feyre, you’ll have no one left to remember you, or to care that you ever existed.” She stormed off, Elain darting after her, cooing her sympathy. They slammed the door to the bedroom hard enough to rattle the dishes.

I’d heard the words before—and knew she only repeated them because I’d flinched that first time she spat them. They still burned anyway.

I took a long sip from the chipped mug. The wooden bench beneath my father groaned as he shifted. I took another swallow and said, “You should talk some sense into her.”

He examined a burn mark on the table. “What can I say? If it’s love—”

“It *can’t* be love, not on his part. Not with his wretched family. I’ve seen the way he acts around the village—there’s one thing he wants from her, and it’s *not* her hand in—”

“We need hope as much as we need bread and meat,” he interrupted, his eyes clear for a rare moment. “We need hope, or else we cannot endure. So let her keep this hope, Feyre. Let her imagine a better life. A better world.”

I stood from the table, fingers curling into fists, but there was nowhere to run in our two-room cottage. I looked at the discolored foxglove painting at the edge of the table. The outer trumpets were already chipped and faded, the lower bit of the stem rubbed off entirely. Within a few years, it would be gone—leaving no mark that it had ever been there. That I’d ever been there.

When I looked at my father, my gaze was hard. “There is no such thing.”

Chapter 3

The trampled snow coating the road into our village was speckled with brown and black from passing carts and horses. Elain and Nesta clicked their tongues and grimaced as we made our way along it, dodging the particularly disgusting parts. I knew why they'd come—they'd taken one look at the hides I'd folded into my satchel and grabbed their cloaks.

I didn't bother talking to them, as they hadn't deigned to speak to me after last night, though Nesta had awoken at dawn to chop wood. Probably because she knew I'd be selling the hides at the market today and would go home with money in my pocket. They trailed me down the lone road wending through the snow-covered fields, all the way into our ramshackle village.

The stone houses of the village were ordinary and dull, made grimmer by the bleakness of winter. But it was market day, which meant the tiny square in the center of town would be full of whatever vendors had braved the brisk morning.

From a block away, the scent of hot food wafted by—spices that tugged on the edge of my memory, beckoning. Elain let out a low moan behind me. Spices, salt, sugar—rare commodities for most of our village, impossible for us to afford.

If I did well at the market, perhaps I'd have enough to buy us something delicious. I opened my mouth to suggest it, but we turned the corner and nearly stumbled into one another as we all halted.

“May the Immortal Light shine upon thee, sisters,” said the pale-robed young woman directly in our path.

Nesta and Elain clicked their tongues; I stifled a groan. Perfect. Exactly what I needed, to have the Children of the

Blessed in town on market day, distracting and riling everyone. The village elders usually allowed them to stay for only a few hours, but the sheer presence of the fanatic fools who still worshipped the High Fae made people edgy. Made *me* edgy. Long ago, the High Fae had been our overlords—not gods. And they certainly hadn’t been kind.

The young woman extended her moon-white hands in a gesture of greeting, a bracelet of silver bells—*real* silver—tinkling at her wrist. “Have you a moment to spare so that you might hear the Word of the Blessed?”

“No,” Nesta sneered, ignoring the girl’s hands and nudging Elain into a walk. “We don’t.”

The young woman’s unbound dark hair gleamed in the morning light, and her clean, fresh face glowed as she smiled prettily. There were five other acolytes behind her, young men and women both, their hair long, uncut—all scanning the market beyond for young folk to pester. “It would take but a minute,” the woman said, stepping into Nesta’s path.

It was impressive—truly impressive—to see Nesta go ramrod straight, to square her shoulders and look down her nose at the young acolyte, a queen without a throne. “Go spew your fanatic nonsense to some ninny. You’ll find no converts here.”

The girl shrank back, a shadow flickering in her brown eyes. I reined in my wince. Perhaps not the best way to deal with them, since they could become a true nuisance if agitated —

Nesta lifted a hand, pushing down the sleeve of her coat to show the iron bracelet there. The same one Elain wore; they’d bought matching adornments years ago. The acolyte gasped, eyes wide. “You see this?” Nesta hissed, taking a step forward. The acolyte retreated a step. “This is what you *should* be wearing. Not some silver bells to attract those faerie monsters.”

“How *dare* you wear that vile affront to our immortal friends—”

“Go preach in another town,” Nesta spat.

Two plump and pretty farmers’ wives strolled past on their way to the market, arm in arm. As they neared the acolytes, their faces twisted with identical expressions of disgust. “*Faerie-loving whore*,” one of them hurled at the young woman. I couldn’t disagree.

The acolytes kept silent. The other villager—wealthy enough to have a full necklace of braided iron around her throat—narrowed her eyes, her upper lip curling back from her teeth. “Don’t you idiots understand what those monsters did to us for all those centuries? What they still do for sport, when they can get away with it? You deserve the end you’ll meet at faerie hands. Fools and whores, all of you.”

Nesta nodded her agreement to the women as they continued on their way. We turned back to the young woman still lingering before us, and even Elain frowned in distaste.

But the young woman took a breath, her face again becoming serene, and said, “I lived in such ignorance, too, until I heard the Word of the Blessed. I grew up in a village so similar to this—so bleak and grim. But not one month ago, a friend of my cousin went to the border as our offering to Prythian—and she has not been sent back. Now she dwells in riches and comfort as a High Fae’s bride, and so might you, if you were to take a moment to—”

“She was likely eaten,” Nesta said. “That’s why she hasn’t returned.”

Or worse, I thought, if a High Fae truly was involved in spiriting a human into Prythian. I’d never encountered the cruel, human-looking High Fae who ruled Prythian itself, or the faeries who occupied their lands, with their scales and wings and long, spindly arms that could drag you deep, deep beneath the surface of a forgotten pond. I didn’t know which would be worse to face.

The acolyte’s face tightened. “Our benevolent masters would never harm us. Prythian is a land of peace and plenty. Should they bless you with their attention, you would be glad to live amongst them.”

Nesta rolled her eyes. Elain was shooting glances between us and the market ahead—to the villagers now watching, too. Time to go.

Nesta opened her mouth again, but I stepped between them and ran an eye along the girl's pale blue robes, the silver jewelry on her, the utter cleanness of her skin. Not a mark or smudge to be found. "You're fighting an uphill battle," I said to her.

"A worthy cause." The girl beamed beatifically.

I gave Nesta a gentle push to get her walking and said to the acolyte, "No, it's not."

I could feel the acolytes' attention still fixed on us as we strode into the busy market square, but I didn't look back. They'd be gone soon enough, off to preach in another town. We'd have to take the long way out of the village to avoid them. When we were far enough away, I glanced over a shoulder at my sisters. Elain's face remained set in a wince, but Nesta's eyes were stormy, her lips thin. I wondered if she'd stomp back to the girl and pick a fight.

Not my problem—not right now. "I'll meet you here in an hour," I said, and didn't give them time to cling to me before slipping into the crowded square.

It took me ten minutes to contemplate my three options. There were my usual buyers: the weathered cobbler and the sharp-eyed clothier who came to our market from a nearby town. And then the unknown: a mountain of a woman sitting on the lip of our broken square fountain, without any cart or stall, but looking like she was holding court nonetheless. The scars and weapons on her marked her easily enough. A mercenary.

I could feel the eyes of the cobbler and clothier on me, sense their feigned disinterest as they took in the satchel I bore. Fine—it would be that sort of day, then.

I approached the mercenary, whose thick, dark hair was shorn to her chin. Her tan face seemed hewn of granite, and her black eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of me. Such

interesting eyes—not just one shade of black, but ... many, with hints of brown that glimmered amongst the shadows. I pushed against that useless part of my mind, the instincts that had me thinking about color and light and shape, and kept my shoulders back as she assessed me as a potential threat or employer. The weapons on her—gleaming and wicked—were enough to make me swallow. And stop a good two feet away.

“I don’t barter goods for my services,” she said, her voice clipped with an accent I’d never heard before. “I only accept coin.”

A few passing villagers tried their best not to look too interested in our conversation, especially as I said, “Then you’ll be out of luck in this sort of place.”

She was massive even sitting down. “What is your business with me, girl?”

She could have been aged anywhere from twenty-five to thirty, but I supposed I looked like a girl to her in my layers, gangly from hunger. “I have a wolf pelt and a doe hide for sale. I thought you might be interested in purchasing them.”

“You steal them?”

“No.” I held her stare. “I hunted them myself. I swear it.”

She ran those dark eyes down me again. “How.” Not a question—a command. Perhaps someone who had encountered others who did not see vows as sacred, words as bonds. And had punished them accordingly.

So I told her how I’d brought them down, and when I finished, she flicked a hand toward my satchel. “Let me see.” I pulled out both carefully folded hides. “You weren’t lying about the wolf’s size,” she murmured. “Doesn’t seem like a faerie, though.” She examined them with an expert eye, running her hands over and under. She named her price.

I blinked—but stifled the urge to blink a second time. She was overpaying—by a lot.

She looked beyond me—past me. “I’m assuming those two girls watching from across the square are your sisters. You all have that brassy hair—and that hungry look about you.”

Indeed, they were still trying their best to eavesdrop without being spotted.

“I don’t need your pity.”

“No, but you need my money, and the other traders have been cheap all morning. Everyone’s too distracted by those calf-eyed zealots bleating across the square.” She jerked her chin toward the Children of the Blessed, still ringing their silver bells and jumping into the path of anyone who tried to walk by.

The mercenary was smiling faintly when I turned back to her. “Up to you, girl.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Someone once did the same for me and mine, at a time when we needed it most. Figure it’s time to repay what’s due.”

I watched her again, weighing. “My father has some wood carvings that I could give you as well—to make it more fair.”

“I travel light and have no need for them. These, however”—she patted the pelts in her hands—“save me the trouble of killing them myself.”

I nodded, my cheeks heating as she reached for the coin purse inside her heavy coat. It was full—and weighed down with at least silver, possibly gold, if the clinking was any indication. Mercenaries tended to be well paid in our territory.

Our territory was too small and poor to maintain a standing army to monitor the wall with Prythian, and we villagers could rely only on the strength of the Treaty forged five hundred years ago. But the upper class could afford hired swords, like this woman, to guard their lands bordering the immortal realm. It was an illusion of comfort, just as the markings on our threshold were. We all knew, deep down, that there was nothing to be done against the faeries. We’d all been told it, regardless of class or rank, from the moment we were born, the warnings sung to us while we rocked in cradles, the rhymes chanted in schoolyards. One of the High Fae could

turn your bones to dust from a hundred yards away. Not that my sisters or I had ever seen it.

But we still tried to believe that something—anything—might work against them, if we ever were to encounter them. There were two stalls in the market catering to those fears, offering up charms and baubles and incantations and bits of iron. I couldn't afford them—and if they did indeed work, they would buy us only a few minutes to prepare ourselves. Running was futile; so was fighting. But Nesta and Elain still wore their iron bracelets whenever they left the cottage. Even Isaac had an iron cuff around one wrist, always tucked under his sleeve. He'd once offered to buy me one, but I'd refused. It had felt too personal, too much like payment, too ... permanent a reminder of whatever we were and weren't to each other.

The mercenary transferred the coins to my waiting palm, and I tucked them into my pocket, their weight as heavy as a millstone. There was no possible chance that my sisters hadn't spotted the money—no chance they weren't already wondering how they might persuade me to give them some.

"Thank you," I said to the mercenary, trying and failing to keep the bite from my voice as I felt my sisters sweep closer, like vultures circling a carcass.

The mercenary stroked the wolf pelt. "A word of advice, from one hunter to another."

I lifted my brows.

"Don't go far into the woods. I wouldn't even get close to where you were yesterday. A wolf this size would be the least of your problems. More and more, I've been hearing stories about those *things* slipping through the wall."

A chill spider-walked down my spine. "Are they—are they going to attack?" If it were true, I'd find a way to get my family off our miserable, damp territory and head south—head far from the invisible wall that bisected our world before they could cross it.

Once—long ago and for millennia before that—we had been slaves to High Fae overlords. Once, we had built them glorious, sprawling civilizations from our blood and sweat, built them temples to their feral gods. Once, we had rebelled, across every land and territory. The War had been so bloody, so destructive, that it took six mortal queens crafting the Treaty for the slaughter to cease on both sides and for the wall to be constructed: the North of our world conceded to the High Fae and faeries, who took their magic with them; the South to we cowering mortals, forever forced to scratch out a living from the earth.

“No one knows what the Fae are planning,” the mercenary said, her face like stone. “We don’t know if the High Lords’ leash on their beasts is slipping, or if these are targeted attacks. I guarded for an old nobleman who claimed it had been getting worse these past fifty years. He got on a boat south two weeks ago and told me I should leave if I was smart. Before he sailed off, he admitted that he’d had word from one of his friends that in the dead of night, a pack of martax crossed the wall and tore half his village apart.”

“Martax?” I breathed. I knew there were different types of faeries, that they varied as much as any other species of animal, but I knew only a few by name.

The mercenary’s night-dark eyes flickered. “Body big as a bear’s, head something like a lion’s—and three rows of teeth sharper than a shark’s. And mean—meaner than all three put together. They left the villagers in literal ribbons, the nobleman said.”

My stomach turned. Behind us, my sisters seemed so fragile—their pale skin so infinitely delicate and shredable. Against something like the martax, we’d never stand a chance. Those Children of the Blessed were fools—fanatic fools.

“So we don’t know what all these attacks mean,” the mercenary went on, “other than more hires for me, and you keeping well away from the wall. Especially if the High Fae start turning up—or worse, one of the High Lords. They would make the martax seem like dogs.”

I studied her scarred hands, chapped from the cold. “Have you ever faced another type of faerie?”

Her eyes shuttered. “You don’t want to know, girl—not unless you want to be hurling up your breakfast.”

I was indeed feeling ill—ill and jumpy. “Was it deadlier than the martax?” I dared ask.

The woman pulled back the sleeve of her heavy jacket, revealing a tanned, muscled forearm flecked with gruesome, twisted scars. The arc of them so similar to—“Didn’t have the brute force or size of a martax,” she said, “but its bite was full of poison. Two months—that’s how long I was down; four months until I had the strength to walk again.” She pulled up the leg of her trousers. Beautiful, I thought, even as the horror of it writhed in my gut. Against her tanned skin, the veins were black—solid black, spiderwebbed, and creeping like frost. “Healer said there was nothing to be done for it—that I’m lucky to be walking with the poison still in my legs. Maybe it’ll kill me one day, maybe it’ll cripple me. But at least I’ll go knowing I killed it first.”

The blood in my own veins seemed to chill as she lowered the cuff of her pants. If anyone in the square had seen, no one dared speak about it—or to come closer. And I’d had enough for one day. So I took a step back, steadying myself against what she’d told me and shown me. “Thanks for the warnings,” I said.

Her attention flicked behind me, and she gave a faintly amused smile. “Good luck.”

Then a slender hand clamped onto my forearm, dragging me away. I knew it was Nesta before I even looked at her.

“They’re dangerous,” Nesta hissed, her fingers digging into my arm as she continued to pull me from the mercenary. “Don’t go near them again.”

I stared at her for a moment, then at Elain, whose face had gone pale and tight. “Is there something I need to know?” I asked quietly. I couldn’t remember the last time Nesta had

tried to warn me about anything; Elain was the only one she bothered to really look after.

“They’re brutes, and will take any copper they can get, even if it’s by force.”

I glanced at the mercenary, who was still examining her new pelts. “She robbed you?”

“Not her,” Elain murmured. “Some other one who passed through. We had only a few coins, and he got mad, but—”

“Why didn’t you report him—or tell me?”

“What could you have done?” Nesta sneered. “Challenged him to a fight with your bow and arrows? And who in this sewer of a town would even care if we reported anything?”

“What about your Tomas Mandray?” I said coolly.

Nesta’s eyes flashed, but a movement behind me caught her eye, and she gave me what I supposed was her attempt at a sweet smile—probably as she remembered the money I now carried. “Your friend is waiting for you.”

I turned. Indeed, Isaac was watching from across the square, arms crossed as he leaned against a building. Though the eldest son of the only well-off farmer in our village, he was still lean from the winter, and his brown hair had turned shaggy. Relatively handsome, soft-spoken, and reserved, but with a sort of darkness running beneath it all that had drawn us to each other, that shared understanding of how wretched our lives were and would always be.

We’d vaguely known each other for years—since my family had moved to the village—but I had never thought much about him until we’d wound up walking down the main road together one afternoon. We’d only talked about the eggs he was bringing to market—and I’d admired the variation in colors within the basket he bore—browns and tans and the palest blues and greens. Simple, easy, perhaps a bit awkward, but he’d left me at my cottage feeling not quite so ... alone. A week later, I pulled him into that decrepit barn.

He’d been my first and only lover in the two years since. Sometimes we’d meet every night for a week, others we’d go

a month without setting eyes on each other. But every time was the same: a rush of shedding clothes and shared breaths and tongues and teeth. Occasionally we'd talk—or, rather, *he'd* talk about the pressures and burdens his father placed on him. Often, we wouldn't say a word the entire time. I couldn't say our lovemaking was particularly skilled, but it was still a release, a reprieve, a bit of selfishness.

There was no love between us, and never had been—at least what I assumed people meant when they talked about love—yet part of me had sunk when he'd said he would soon be married. I wasn't yet desperate enough to ask him to see me after he was wed.

Isaac inclined his head in a familiar gesture and then ambled off down the street—out of town and to the ancient barn, where he would be waiting. We were never inconspicuous about our dealings with each other, but we did take measures to keep it from being too obvious.

Nesta clicked her tongue, crossing her arms. “I do hope you two are taking precautions.”

“It's a bit late to pretend to care,” I said. But we were careful. Since I couldn't afford it, Isaac himself took the contraceptive brew. He knew I wouldn't have touched him otherwise. I reached into my pocket, drawing out a twenty-mark copper. Elain sucked in a breath, and I didn't bother to look at either of my sisters as I pushed it into her palm and said, “I'll see you at home.”



Later, after another dinner of venison, when we were all gathered around the fire for the quiet hour before bed, I watched my sisters whispering and laughing together. They'd spent every copper I'd given them—on what, I didn't know, though Elain had brought back a new chisel for our father's wood carving. The cloak and boots they'd whined about the night before had been too expensive. But I hadn't scolded them for it, not when Nesta went out a second time to chop more wood without my asking. Mercifully, they'd avoided another confrontation with the Children of the Blessed.

My father was dozing in his chair, his cane laid across his gnarled knee. As good a time as any to broach the subject of Tomas Mandray with Nesta. I turned to her, opening my mouth.

But there was a roar that half deafened me, and my sisters screamed as snow burst into the room and an enormous, growling shape appeared in the doorway.

Chapter 4

I didn't know how the wooden hilt of my hunting knife had gotten into my hand. The first few moments were a blur of the snarling of a gigantic beast with golden fur, the shrieking of my sisters, the blistering cold cascading into the room, and my father's terror-stricken face.

Not a martax, I realized—though the relief was short-lived. The beast had to be as large as a horse, and while his body was somewhat feline, his head was distinctly wolfish. I didn't know what to make of the curled, elk-like horns that protruded from his head. But lion or hound or elk, there was no doubting the damage his black, daggerlike claws and yellow fangs could inflict.

Had I been alone in the woods, I might have let myself be swallowed by fear, might have fallen to my knees and wept for a clean, quick death. But I didn't have room for terror, wouldn't give it an inch of space, despite my heart's wild pounding in my ears. Somehow, I wound up in front of my sisters, even as the creature reared onto its hind legs and bellowed through a maw full of fangs: "*MURDERERS!*"

But it was another word that echoed through me:

Faerie.

Those ridiculous wards on our threshold were as good as cobwebs against him. I should have asked the mercenary how she'd killed that faerie. But the beast's thick neck—that looked like a good home for my knife.

I dared a glance over my shoulder. My sisters screamed, kneeling against the wall of the hearth, my father crouched in front of them. Another body for me to defend. Stupidly, I took another step toward the faerie, keeping the table between us, fighting the shaking in my hand. My bow and quiver were

across the room—past the beast. I'd have to get around him to reach the ash arrow. And buy myself enough time to fire it.

“*MURDERERS!*” the beast roared again, hackles raised.

“P-please,” my father babbled from behind me, failing to find it in himself to come to my side. “Whatever we have done, we did so unknowingly, and—”

“W-w-we didn't kill anyone,” Nesta added, choking on her sobs, arm lifted over her head, as if that tiny iron bracelet would do anything against the creature.

I snatched another dinner knife off the table, the best I could do unless I found a way to get to the quiver. “Get out,” I snapped at the creature, brandishing the knives before me. No iron in sight that I could use as a weapon—unless I chucked my sisters' bracelets at him. “Get out, and begone.” With my trembling hands, I could barely keep my grip on the hilts. A nail—I'd take a damned iron nail, if it were available.

He bellowed at me in response, and the entire cottage shook, the plates and cups rattling against one another. But it left his massive neck exposed. I hurled my hunting knife.

Fast—so fast I could barely see it—he slashed out with a paw, sending it skittering away as he snapped for my face with his teeth.

I leaped back, almost stumbling over my cowering father. The faerie could have killed me—could have, yet the lunge had been a warning. Nesta and Elain, weeping, prayed to whatever long-forgotten gods might still be skulking about.

“*WHO KILLED HIM?*” The creature stalked toward us. He set a paw on the table, and it groaned beneath him. His claws thudded as they embedded in the wood, one by one.

I dared another step forward as the beast stretched his snout over the table to sniff at us. His eyes were green and flecked with amber. Not animal eyes, not with their shape and coloring. My voice was surprisingly even as I challenged: “Killed who?”

He growled, low and vicious. “The wolf,” he said, and my heart stumbled a beat. The roar was gone, but the wrath