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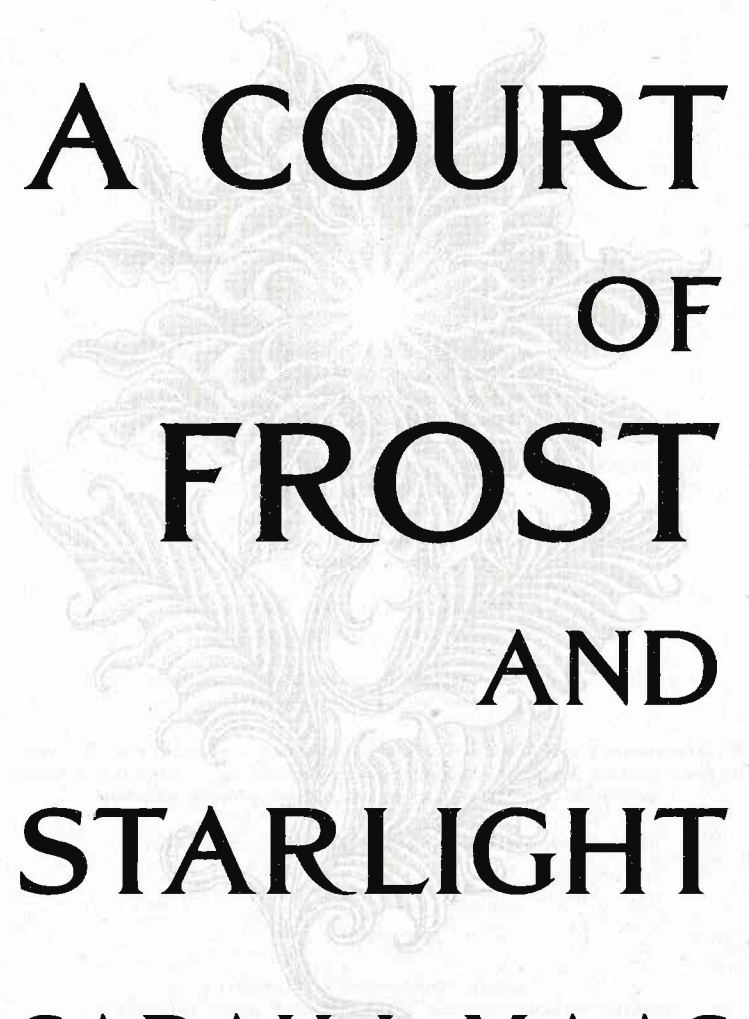
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A COURT
OF
FROST
AND
STARLIGHT
SARAH J. MAAS

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CHAPTER

1

Feyre

The first snow of winter had begun whipping through Velaris an hour earlier.

The ground had finally frozen solid last week, and by the time I'd finished devouring my breakfast of toast and bacon, washed down with a heady cup of tea, the pale cobblestones were dusted with fine, white powder.

I had no idea where Rhys was. He hadn't been in bed when I'd awoken, the mattress on his side already cold. Nothing unusual, as we were both busy to the point of exhaustion these days.

Seated at the long cherrywood dining table at the town house, I frowned at the whirling snow beyond the leaded glass windows.

Once, I had dreaded that first snow, had lived in terror of long, brutal winters.

But it had been a long, brutal winter that had brought me so deep into the woods that day nearly two years ago. A long, brutal winter that had made me desperate enough to kill a wolf, that had eventually led me here—to this life, this . . . happiness.

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The snow fell, thick clumps plopping onto the dried grass of the tiny front lawn, crusting the spikes and arches of the decorative fence beyond it.

Deep inside me, rising with every swirling flake, a sparkling, crisp power stirred. I was High Lady of the Night Court, yes, but also one blessed with the gifts of all the courts. It seemed Winter now wanted to play.

Finally awake enough to be coherent, I lowered the shield of black adamant guarding my mind and cast a thought down the soul-bridge between me and Rhys. *Where'd you fly off to so early?*

My question faded into blackness. A sure sign that Rhys was nowhere near Velaris. Likely not even within the borders of the Night Court. Also not unusual—he'd been visiting our war allies these months to solidify our relationships, build trade, and keep tabs on their post-wall intentions. When my own work allowed it, I often joined him.

I scooped up my plate, draining my tea to the dregs, and padded toward the kitchen. Playing with ice and snow could wait.

Nuala was already preparing for lunch at the worktable, no sign of her twin, Cerridwen, but I waved her off as she made to take my dishes. "I can wash them," I said by way of greeting.

Up to the elbows in making some sort of meat pie, the half-wraith gave me a grateful smile and let me do it. A female of few words, though neither twin could be considered shy. Certainly not when they worked—spied—for both Rhys and Azriel.

"It's still snowing," I observed rather pointlessly, peering out the kitchen window at the garden beyond as I rinsed off the plate, fork, and cup. Elain had already readied the garden for winter, veiling the more delicate bushes and beds with burlap. "I wonder if it'll let up at all."

Nuala laid the ornate lattice crust atop the pie and began pinching the edges together, her shadowy fingers making quick, deft work of it. "It'll be nice to have a white Solstice," she said, voice lilting and yet hushed. Full of whispers and shadows. "Some years, it can be fairly mild."

Right. The Winter Solstice. In a week. I was still new enough to being High Lady that I had no idea what my formal role was to be. If we'd have a High Priestess do some odious ceremony, as Ianthe had done the year before—

A year. Gods, nearly a year since Rhys had called in his bargain, desperate to get me away from the poison of the Spring Court, to save me from my despair. Had he been only a minute later, the Mother knew what would have happened. Where I'd now be.

Snow swirled and eddied in the garden, catching in the brown fibers of the burlap covering the shrubs.

My mate—who had worked so hard and so selflessly, all without hope that I would ever be with him.

We had both fought for that love, bled for it. Rhys had died for it.

I still saw that moment, in my sleeping and waking dreams. How his face had looked, how his chest had not risen, how the bond between us had shredded into ribbons. I still felt it, that hollowness in my chest where the bond had been, where *he* had been. Even now, with that bond again flowing between us like a river of star-flecked night, the echo of its vanishing lingered. Drew me from sleep; drew me from a conversation, a painting, a meal.

Rhys knew exactly why there were nights when I would cling tighter to him, why there were moments in the bright, clear sunshine that I would grip his hand. He knew, because *I* knew why his eyes sometimes turned distant, why he occasionally just blinked at

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all of us as if not quite believing it and rubbed his chest as if to ease an ache.

Working had helped. Both of us. Keeping busy, keeping focused—I sometimes dreaded the quiet, idle days when all those thoughts snared me at last. When there was nothing but me and my mind, and that memory of Rhys lying dead on the rocky ground, the King of Hybern snapping my father's neck, all those Illyrians blasted out of the sky and falling to earth as ashes.

Perhaps one day, even the work wouldn't be a battlement to keep the memories out.

Mercifully, plenty of work remained for the foreseeable future. Rebuilding Velaris after the attacks from Hybern being only one of many monumental tasks. For other tasks required doing as well—both in Velaris and beyond it: in the Illyrian Mountains, in the Hewn City, in the vastness of the entire Night Court. And then there were the other courts of Prythian. And the new, emerging world beyond.

But for now: Solstice. The longest night of the year. I turned from the window to Nuala, who was still fussing over the edges of her pie. "It's a special holiday here as well, right?" I asked casually. "Not just in Winter and Day." And Spring.

"Oh, yes," Nuala said, stooping over the worktable to examine her pie. Skilled spy—trained by Azriel himself—and master cook. "We love it dearly. It's intimate, warm, lovely. Presents and music and food, sometimes feasting under the starlight . . ." The opposite of the enormous, wild, days-long party I'd been subjected to last year. But—presents.

I had to buy presents for all of them. Not had to, but *wanted* to.

Because all my friends, now my family, had fought and bled and nearly died as well.

I shut out the image that tore through my mind: Nesta, leaning over a wounded Cassian, the two of them prepared to die together against the King of Hybern. My father's corpse behind them.

I rolled my neck. We could use something to celebrate. It had become so rare for all of us to be gathered for more than an hour or two.

Nuala went on, "It's a time of rest, too. And a time to reflect on the darkness—how it lets the light shine."

"Is there a ceremony?"

The half-wraith shrugged. "Yes, but none of us go. It's more for those who wish to honor the light's rebirth, usually by spending the entire night sitting in absolute darkness." A ghost of a smirk. "It's not quite such a novelty for my sister and me. Or for the High Lord."

I tried not to look too relieved that I wouldn't be dragged to a temple for hours as I nodded.

Setting my clean dishes to dry on the little wooden rack beside the sink, I wished Nuala luck on lunch, and headed upstairs to dress. Cerridwen had already laid out clothes, but there was still no sign of Nuala's twin as I donned the heavy charcoal sweater, the tight black leggings, and fleece-lined boots before loosely braiding back my hair.

A year ago, I'd been stuffed into fine gowns and jewels, made to parade in front of a preening court who'd gawked at me like a prized breeding mare.

Here . . . I smiled at the silver-and-sapphire band on my left hand. The ring I'd won for myself from the Weaver in the Wood.

My smile faded a bit.

I could see her, too. See Stryga standing before the King of

Hybern, covered in the blood of her prey, as he took her head in his hands and snapped her neck. Then threw her to his beasts.

I clenched my fingers into a fist, breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth, until the lightness in my limbs faded, until the walls of the room stopped pressing on me.

Until I could survey the blend of personal objects in Rhys's room—our room. It was by no means a small bedroom, but it had lately started to feel . . . tight. The rosewood desk against one wall was covered in papers and books from both of our own dealings; my jewelry and clothes now had to be divided between here and my old bedroom. And then there were the weapons.

Daggers and blades, quivers and bows. I scratched my head at the heavy, wicked-looking *mace* that Rhys had somehow dumped beside the desk without my noticing.

I didn't even want to know. Though I had no doubt Cassian was somehow behind it.

We could, of course, store everything in the pocket between realms, but . . . I frowned at my own set of Illyrian blades, leaning against the towering armoire.

If we got snowed in, perhaps I'd use the day to organize things. Find room for everything. Especially that mace.

It would be a challenge, since Elain still occupied a bedroom down the hall. Nesta had chosen her own home across the city, one that I opted to not think about for too long. Lucien, at least, had taken up residence in an elegant apartment down by the river the day after he'd returned from the battlefields. And the Spring Court.

I hadn't asked Lucien any questions about that visit—*to Tamlin*.

Lucien hadn't explained the black eye and cut lip, either. He'd

only asked Rhys and me if we knew of a place to stay in Velaris, since he did not wish to inconvenience us further by staying at the town house, and did not wish to be isolated at the House of Wind.

He hadn't mentioned Elain, or his proximity to her. Elain had not asked him to stay, or to go. And whether she cared about the bruises on his face, she certainly hadn't let on.

But Lucien had remained, and found ways to keep busy, often gone for days or weeks at a time.

Yet even with Lucien and Nesta staying in their own apartments, the town house was a bit small these days. Even more so if Mor, Cassian, and Azriel stayed over. And the House of Wind was too big, too formal, too far from the city proper. Nice for a night or two, but . . . I loved this house.

It was my home. The first I'd really had in the ways that counted.

And it'd be nice to celebrate the Solstice here. With all of them, crowded as it might be.

I scowled at the pile of papers I had to sort through: letters from other courts, priestesses angling for positions, and kingdoms both human and faerie. I'd put them off for weeks now, and had finally set aside this morning to wade through them.

High Lady of the Night Court, Defender of the Rainbow and the . . . Desk.

I snorted, flicking my braid over a shoulder. Perhaps my Solstice gift to myself would be to hire a personal secretary. Someone to read and answer those things, to sort out what was vital and what could be put aside. Because a little extra time to myself, for *Rhys* . . .

I'd look through the court budget that Rhys never really cared to follow and see what could be moved around for the possibility of such a thing. For him and for me.

I knew our coffers ran deep, knew we could easily afford it and not make so much as a dent in our fortune, but I didn't mind the work. I loved the work, actually. This territory, its people—they were as much my heart as my mate. Until yesterday, nearly every waking hour had been packed with helping them. Until I'd been politely, graciously, told to *go home and enjoy the holiday*.

In the wake of the war, the people of Velaris had risen to the challenge of rebuilding and helping their own. Before I'd even come up with an idea of *how* to help them, multiple societies had been created to assist the city. So I'd volunteered with a handful of them for tasks ranging from finding homes for those displaced by the destruction to visiting families affected during the war to helping those without shelter or belongings ready for winter with new coats and supplies.

All of it was vital; all of it was good, satisfying work. And yet . . . there was more. There was *more* that I could do to help. Personally. I just hadn't figured it out yet.

It seemed I wasn't the only one eager to assist those who'd lost so much. With the holiday, a surge of fresh volunteers had arrived, cramming the public hall near the Palace of Thread and Jewels, where so many of the societies were headquartered. *Your help has been crucial, Lady, one charity matron had said to me yesterday. You have been here nearly every day—you have worked yourself to the bone. Take the week off. You've earned it. Celebrate with your mate.*

I'd tried to object, insisting that there were still more coats to hand out, more firewood to be distributed, but the faerie had just motioned to the crowded public hall around us, filled to the brim with volunteers. *We have more help than we know what to do with.*

When I'd tried objecting again, she'd shooed me out the front door. And shut it behind me.

Point taken. The story had been the same at every other organization I'd stopped by yesterday afternoon. *Go home and enjoy the holiday.*

So I had. At least, the first part. The *enjoying* bit, however . . .

Rhys's answer to my earlier inquiry about his whereabouts finally flickered down the bond, carried on a rumble of dark, glittering power. *I'm at Devlon's camp.*

It took you this long to respond? It was a long distance to the Illyrian Mountains, yes, but it shouldn't have taken minutes to hear back.

A sensual huff of laughter. *Cassian was ranting. He didn't take a breath.*

My poor Illyrian baby. We certainly do torment you, don't we?

Rhys's amusement rippled toward me, caressing my innermost self with night-veiled hands. But it halted, vanishing as quickly as it had come. *Cassian's getting into it with Devlon. I'll check in later.* With a loving brush against my senses, he was gone.

I'd get a full report about it soon, but for now . . .

I smiled at the snow waltzing outside the windows.

CHAPTER

2

Rhysand

It was barely nine in the morning, and Cassian was already pissed.

The watery winter sun tried and failed to bleed through the clouds looming over the Illyrian Mountains, the wind a boom across the gray peaks. Snow already lay inches deep over the bustling camp, a vision of what would soon befall Velaris.

It had been snowing when I departed at dawn—perhaps there would be a good coating already on the ground by the time I returned. I hadn't had a chance to ask Feyre about it during our brief conversation down the bond minutes ago, but perhaps she would go for a walk with me through it. Let me show her how the City of Starlight glistened under fresh snow.

Indeed, my mate and city seemed a world away from the hive of activity in the Windhaven camp, nestled in a wide, high mountain pass. Even the bracing wind that swept between the peaks, belying the camp's very name by whipping up dervishes of snow, didn't deter the Illyrians from going about their daily chores.

For the warriors: training in the various rings that opened onto a sheer drop to the small valley floor below, those not present out

on patrol. For the males who hadn't made the cut: tending to various trades, whether merchants or blacksmiths or cobblers. And for the females: drudgery.

They didn't see it as such. None of them did. But their required tasks, whether old or young, remained the same: cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, clothes-making, laundry . . . There was honor in such tasks—pride and good work to be found in them. But not when every single one of the females here was *expected* to do it. And if they shirked those duties, either one of the half-dozen camp-mothers or whatever males controlled their lives would punish them.

So it had been, as long as I'd known this place, for my mother's people. The world had been reborn during the war months before, the wall blasted to nothingness, and yet some things did not alter. Especially here, where change was slower than the melting glaciers scattered amongst these mountains. Traditions going back thousands of years, left mostly unchallenged.

Until us. Until now.

Drawing my attention away from the bustling camp beyond the edge of the chalk-lined training rings where we stood, I schooled my face into neutrality as Cassian squared off against Devlon.

"The girls are busy with preparations for the Solstice," the camp-lord was saying, his arms crossed over his barrel chest. "The wives need all the help they can get, if all's to be ready in time. They can practice next week."

I'd lost count of how many variations of this conversation we'd had during the decades Cassian had been pushing Devlon on this.

The wind whipped Cassian's dark hair, but his face remained hard as granite as he said to the warrior who had begrudgingly trained us, "The girls can help their mothers *after* training is done

for the day. We'll cut practice down to two hours. The rest of the day will be enough to assist in the preparations."

Devlon slid his hazel eyes to where I lingered a few feet away. "Is it an order?"

I held that gaze. And despite my crown, my power, I tried not to fall back into the trembling child I'd been five centuries ago, that first day Devlon had towered over me and then hurled me into the sparring ring. "If Cassian says it's an order, then it is."

It had occurred to me, during the years we'd been waging this same battle with Devlon and the Illyrians, that I could simply rip into his mind, all their minds, and make them agree. Yet there were some lines I could not, would not cross. And Cassian would never forgive me.

Devlon grunted, his breath a curl of steam. "An hour."

"Two hours," Cassian countered, wings flaring slightly as he held a hard line that I'd been called in this morning to help him maintain.

It had to be bad, then, if my brother had asked me to come. Really damn bad. Perhaps we needed a permanent presence out here, until the Illyrians remembered things like consequences.

But the war had impacted us all, and with the rebuilding, with the human territories crawling out to meet us, with other Fae kingdoms looking toward a wall-less world and wondering what shit they could get away with . . . We didn't have the resources to station someone out here. Not yet. Perhaps next summer, if the climate elsewhere was calm enough.

Devlon's cronies loitered in the nearest sparring ring, sizing up Cassian and me, the same way they had our entire lives. We'd slaughtered enough of them in the Blood Rite all those centuries

ago that they still kept back, but . . . It had been the Illyrians who had bled and fought this summer. Who had suffered the most losses as they took on the brunt of Hybern and the Cauldron.

That any of the warriors survived was a testament to their skill and Cassian's leadership, but with the Illyrians isolated and idle up here, that loss was starting to shape itself into something ugly. Dangerous.

None of us had forgotten that during Amarantha's reign, a few of the war-bands had gleefully bowed to her. And I knew none of the Illyrians had forgotten that we'd spent those first few months after her downfall hunting down those rogue groups. And ending them.

Yes, a presence here was needed. But later.

Devlon pushed, crossing his muscled arms. "The boys need a nice Solstice after all they endured. Let the girls give one to them."

The bastard certainly knew what weapons to wield, both physical and verbal.

"Two hours in the ring each morning," Cassian said with that same hard tone that even I knew not to push unless I wanted a flat-out brawl. He didn't break Devlon's gaze. "The *boys* can help decorate, clean, and cook. They've got two hands."

"Some do," Devlon said. "Some came home without one."

I felt, more than saw, the wound strike deep in Cassian.

It was the cost of leading my armies: each injury, death, scar—he took them all as his own personal failings. And being around these warriors, seeing those missing limbs and brutal injuries still healing or that would never heal . . .

"They practice for ninety minutes," I said, soothing the dark power that began to roil in my veins, seeking a path into the