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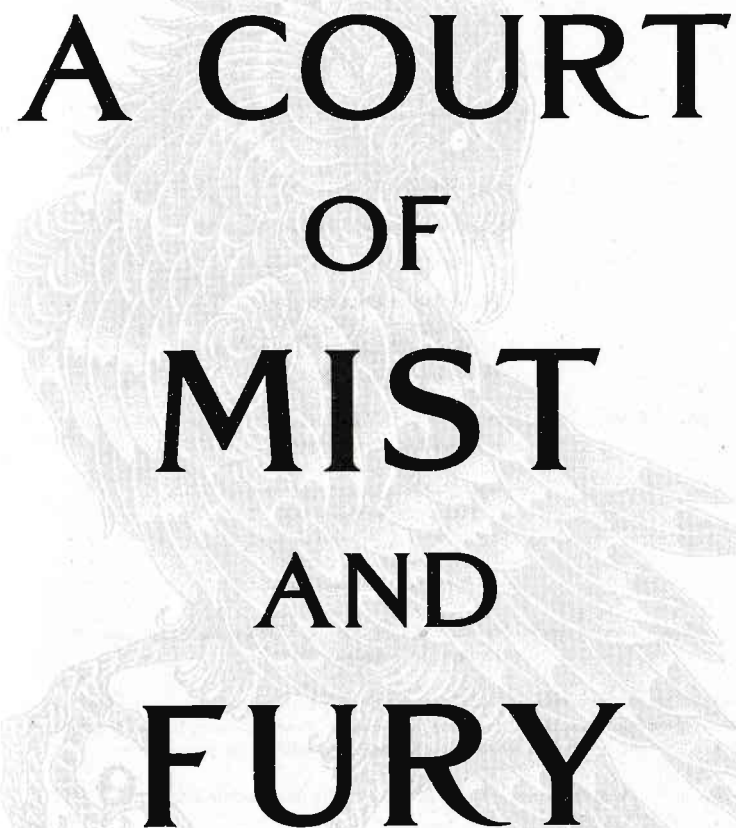
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A COURT
OF
MIST
AND
FURY

SARAH J. MAAS

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Murderer. Butcher. Monster. Liar. Deceiver.

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

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

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

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

I knew the face that stared up at me.

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

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

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

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

And plunged the ash dagger into my awaiting heart.

PART ONE

THE HOUSE OF BEASTS

CHAPTER

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I mouthed the words.

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

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

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

Sighing through my nose, I unfolded my fingers.

My right hand was plain, smooth. Perfectly Fae.

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

I scowled at it.

At whoever might be watching through that tattoo.

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

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

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

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

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

Mountains and darkness and stars and death.

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

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

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

I wished I felt nothing.

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

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

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

And now I had eternity to live with it.

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

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

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

He'd since spent many nights like that.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

"I want to go."

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The wards are up—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I love you,” Tamlin said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A hundred years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I didn’t complain—not when Ianthe knew everyone in the court and outside of it. She’d linger by my side at events and dinners, feeding me details about those in attendance, and was the main reason why I’d

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survived the merry whirlwind of Winter Solstice. She'd been the one presiding over the various ceremonies, after all—and I'd been more than happy to let her choose what manner of wreaths and garlands should adorn the manor and grounds, what silverware complemented each meal.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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