



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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COURT
OF
THORNS
AND
ROSES

BLOOMSBURY

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OF THORNS
AND ROSES



BLOOMSBURY

NEW YORK LONDON NEW DELHI SYDNEY

*For Josh—
Because you would go Under the Mountain for me.
I love you.*

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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