

A COURT
OF
WINGS
AND
RUIN

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

B L O O M S B U R Y

COURT
OF
WINGS
AND
RUIN

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

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A Court of Thorns and Roses Coloring Book

COURT
OF
WINGS
AND
RUIN

SARAH J. MAAS



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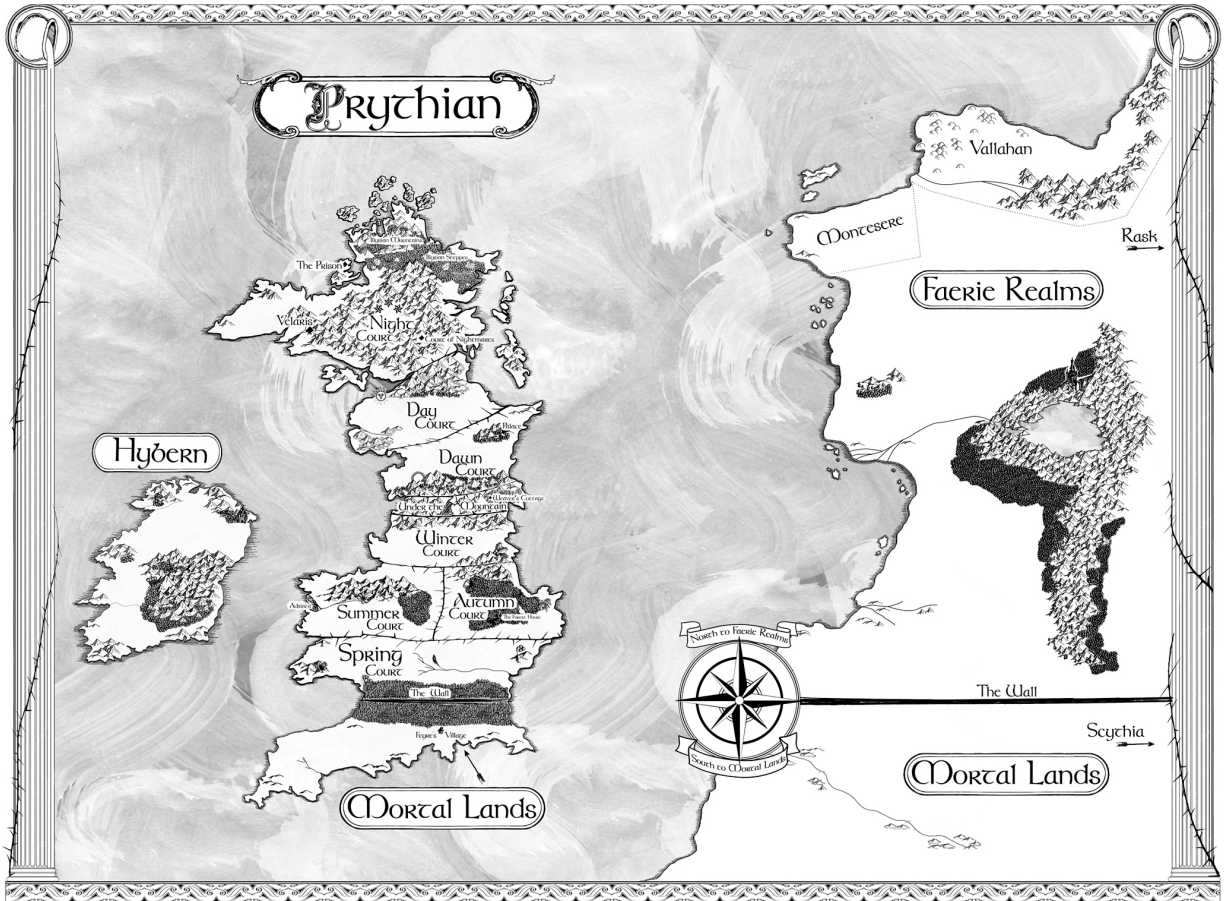
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Rhysand
Two Years Before the Wall

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

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

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

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

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

The keep looming at my back was too valuable to be yielded to the Loyalists. Not just for its location in the heart of the continent, but for the supplies it guarded. For the forges that smoldered day and night on its western side, toiling to stock our forces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I crunched down with an armored boot on the flagpole of a Loyalist standard-bearer, smearing red mud across the tusked

boar embroidered on its emerald flag.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The latter was unlikely, as my father kept him close for spying, but Cassian ... Cassian could have been reassigned. I wouldn't have put it past my father to shift Cassian to a unit most likely to

be slaughtered. As this one had been, barely half limping off the battlefield earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not him.

I picked my way through the corpses to another Illyrian.

Then another. And another.

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

Mile after mile. A kingdom of the rotting dead.

And still I looked.

PART ONE

PRINCESS OF CARRION

CHAPTER

1

Feyre

The painting was a lie.

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

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

Incessant, unrelenting spring.

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

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

I supposed that in the past weeks, I had crafted my demeanor as intricately as one of these paintings. I supposed that if I had also chosen to show myself as I truly wished, I would have been

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

But not yet.

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

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

The paintbrush snapped between my fingers.

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

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

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

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

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

High Lady of the Night Court.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To Lucien.

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps along with her reasons for laying her hands on whatever males she pleased, whether they wished her to or not. For doing it to Rhys, and Lucien.

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

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

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

Lucien still seemed to doubt it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That bedroom was now a tomb.

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

His room.

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

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

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

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

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

Though I wondered if, after Velaris, it was even necessary. Our enemies knew of the city, knew it was a place of good and peace. And had tried to destroy it at the first opportunity.

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

"She's going to spin a story that you'll want to hear," Lucien warned.

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

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

"She was working to ensure Hybern's alliance held strong."

Lucien halted me with a hand around my elbow.

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

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

Lucien breathed, "Where is he keeping her?"

I knew who he meant.

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

"Tell me anyway. List all of them."

"You'll die the moment you set foot in his territory."

"I survived well enough when I found you."

"You couldn't see that he had me in thrall. You let him take me back." Lie, lie, lie.

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

"You don't even know Elain. The mating bond is just a physical reaction overriding your good sense."

"Is that what it did to you and Rhys?"

A quiet, dangerous question. But I made fear enter my eyes, let myself drag up memories of the Weaver, the Carver, the Middengard Wyrms so that old terror drenched my scent. "I don't want to talk about that," I said, my voice a rasping wobble.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Pretty, poisoned lies. But finding her true motive ... I’d been waiting these weeks for this meeting. Had spent these weeks pretending to convalesce, pretending to *heal* from the horrors I’d survived at Rhysand’s hands.

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

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

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

Lucien answered, “If you expect our gratitude, you’ll be waiting a while, Ianthe.”

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

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

“At the cost of how many others?” Lucien demanded.

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

“What I saw in Hybern,” Lucien said, gripping the arms of his chair hard enough that the carved wood groaned. “Any promises he made of peace and immunity ...” He halted, as if remembering that Ianthe might very well feed this back to the king. He loosened

his grip on the chair, his long fingers flexing before settling on the arms again. “We have to be careful.”

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

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

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

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

But Tamlin said, “We’ll all try.”

That was his new favorite word: *try*.

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

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

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

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

word that families should ... relocate to the eastern part of the territory. For the time being.”

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

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

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

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