

Chapter 34: Rhysand's Bargain and Survival

Chapter 34 unfolds with the Attor, a monstrous embodiment of malice and cruelty, dragging me through the twisting tunnels beneath the mountain. Its grip was merciless as it hauled me toward the throne room. It made no effort to strip me of my weapons, fully aware that they would be worthless against whatever horror awaited me. As the stifling darkness of the cavern walls pressed closer, I clung to the names of those I cherished—Tamlin, Alis and her boys, my sisters, Lucien—whispering them in my mind like a silent prayer, a fragile shield against the fear threatening to consume me.

When we emerged into the vast chamber, the grandeur of the throne room momentarily stole my breath despite the suffocating tension that filled the air. Towering stone pillars, etched with intricate carvings, loomed over the gathered High Fae, their elegant figures adorned in shimmering silks as they danced and whispered among themselves. The contrast between their gilded revelry and the cold menace that clung to the space was jarring, making it clear that beneath their laughter lay a court built on cruelty and fear.

I was thrown onto the hard stone floor before Amarantha, the High Queen of Under the Mountain, whose beauty was as striking as it was unsettling. Her presence was suffused with an air of absolute control, her piercing gaze drinking in my disheveled form with the detached amusement of a predator toying with its prey. Beside her, motionless yet ever-present, sat Tamlin—his golden mask still obscuring his face, his warrior's stance unshaken, but his soul seemingly shackled beneath the weight of her rule.

Amarantha's voice dripped with mockery as she questioned my presence, feigning curiosity at my intrusion into her domain. Desperation guided my tongue, and I boldly declared my intent—to reclaim Tamlin, to break whatever curse bound him to her, to defy the horror she had woven over Prythian. My words, however, only provoked amusement, a cruel smile spreading across her lips as she let the gathered court revel in my audacity.

With the ease of someone who had orchestrated countless nightmares, Amarantha reminded me of her cruelty, gesturing toward the broken, lifeless body of Clare Beddor. The sight of her mangled corpse twisted something deep inside me—a brutal consequence of a name I had once given in an attempt to save myself. Shame and fury warred within me, but I could not allow either to take root; I had no room for weakness, not now, not in the face of a queen who thrived on it.

Then, with a voice laced in deceptive sweetness, Amarantha extended an offer—one that reeked of sadistic delight. If I wished to save Tamlin and end his curse, I would have to prove myself by completing three impossible trials of her choosing or, alternatively, solving a single riddle. Alis had warned me against bargains with the wicked, yet I had no alternatives. Failure was not an option.

Every instinct screamed at me to tread carefully, but I knew hesitation would be seen as cowardice, as an admission of weakness. With my heartbeat hammering in my ears, I met Amarantha's gaze and accepted her challenge, knowing full well the horrors that awaited me. The room erupted with laughter and whispers, the High Fae reveling in the entertainment my suffering would soon provide.

Fear coiled in my stomach like a living thing, but beneath it burned something stronger—determination. I wasn't fighting for power or vengeance; I was fighting for love, for the promise of a future not shackled by Amarantha's darkness. Love for Tamlin, for the memories of those I had lost, and for the fragile hope that light could still pierce the overwhelming shadows that surrounded us.

As I was dragged away, preparing to endure whatever nightmare Amarantha had devised, I made myself a promise. No matter what lay ahead, I would fight. I would endure. And I would not break, no matter how much she tried to make me.