

HER DESTINY AWAITS. BUT FIRST, VENGEANCE...



QUEEN
of
SHADOWS

SARAH J. MAAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOMSBURY

For Alex Bracken—

*For the six years of e-mails,
For the thousands of pages critiqued,
For your tiger heart and your Jedi wisdom,
And for just being you.*

*I'm so glad I e-mailed you that day.
And so grateful you wrote back.*

ALSO BY SARAH J. MAAS

The Throne of Glass series

Throne of Glass
Crown of Midnight
Heir of Fire

•

The Assassin's Blade



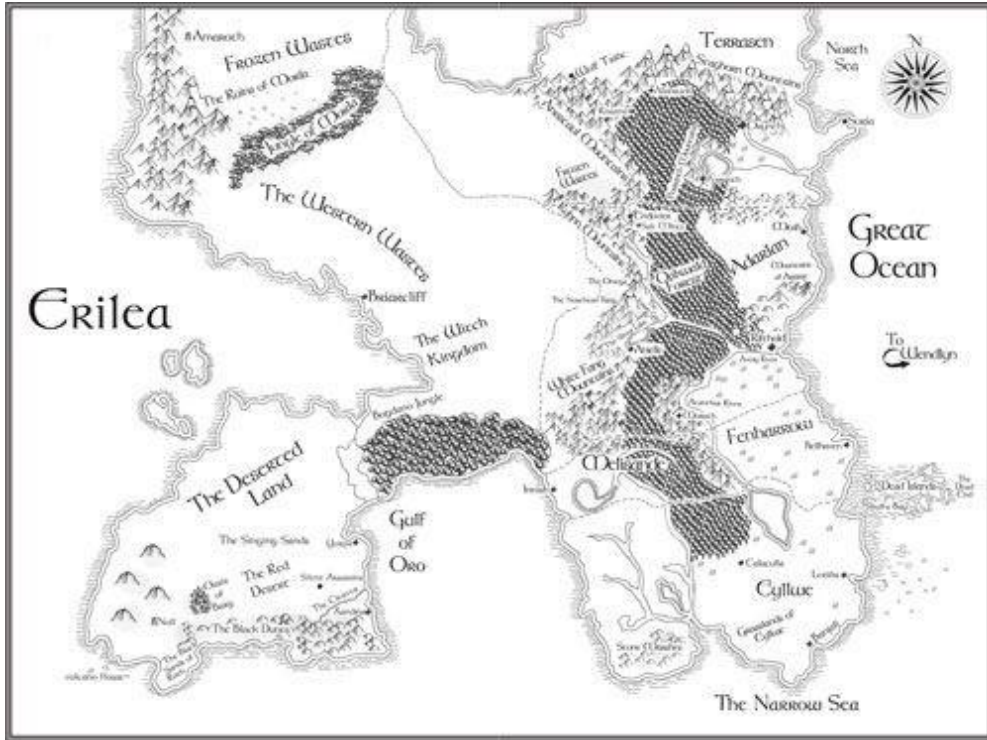
A Court of Thorns and Roses

QUEEN *of* SHADOWS

SARAH J. HTAAS



BL00 / \S BUR7



PART ONE

LADY OF SHADOWS

There was a thing waiting in the darkness.

It was ancient, and cruel, and paced in the shadows leashing his mind. It was not of his world, and had been brought here to fill him with its primordial cold. Some invisible barrier still separated them, but the wall crumbled a little more every time the thing stalked along its length, testing its strength.

He could not remember his name.

That was the first thing he'd forgotten when the darkness enveloped him weeks or months or eons ago. Then he'd forgotten the names of the others who had meant so much to him. He could recall horror and despair—only because of the solitary moment that kept interrupting the blackness like the steady beat of a drum: a few minutes of screaming and blood and frozen wind. There had been people he loved in that room of red marble and glass; the woman had lost her head—

Lost, as if the beheading were her fault.

A lovely woman with delicate hands like golden doves. It was not her fault, even if he could not remember her name. It was the fault of the man on the glass throne, who had ordered that guard's sword to sever flesh and bone.

There was nothing in the darkness beyond the moment when that woman's head thudded to the ground. There was nothing *but* that moment, again and again and again—and that thing pacing nearby, waiting for him to break, to yield, to let it in. A prince.

He could not remember if the thing was the prince, or if he himself had once been a prince. Not likely. A prince would not have allowed that woman's head to be cut off. A prince would have stopped the blade. A prince would have saved her.

Yet he had not saved her, and he knew there was no one coming to save him.

There was still a real world beyond the shadows. He was forced to participate in it by the man who had ordered the slaughter of that lovely woman. And when he did, no one noticed that he had become hardly more than a marionette, struggling to speak, to act past the shackles on his mind. He hated them for not noticing. That was one of the emotions he still knew.

I was not supposed to love you. The woman had said that—and then she died. She should not have loved him, and he should not have dared to love her. He deserved this darkness, and once the invisible boundary shattered and the waiting thing pounced, infiltrating and filling him ... he'd have earned it.

So he remained bound in night, witnessing the scream and the blood and the impact of flesh on stone. He knew he should struggle, knew he *had* struggled in those final seconds before the collar of black stone had clamped around his neck.

But there was a thing waiting in the darkness, and he could not bring himself to fight it for much longer.

Aelin Ashryver Galathynius, heir of fire, beloved of Mala Light-Bringer, and rightful Queen of Terrasen, leaned against the worn oak bar and listened carefully to the sounds of the pleasure hall, sorting through the cheers and moans and bawdy singing. Though it had chewed up and spat out several owners over the past few years, the subterranean warren of sin known as the Vaults remained the same: uncomfortably hot, reeking of stale ale and unwashed bodies, and packed to the rafters with lowlifes and career criminals.

More than a few young lords and merchants' sons had swaggered down the steps into the Vaults and never seen daylight again. Sometimes it was because they flashed their gold and silver in front of the wrong person; sometimes it was because they were vain or drunk enough to think that they could jump into the fighting pits and walk out alive. Sometimes they mishandled one of the women for hire in the alcoves flanking the cavernous space and learned the hard way about which people the owners of the Vaults really valued.

Aelin sipped from the mug of ale the sweating barkeep had slid her moments before. Watery and cheap, but at least it was cold. Above the tang of filthy bodies, the scent of roasting meat and garlic floated to her. Her stomach grumbled, but she wasn't stupid enough to order food. One, the meat was usually courtesy of rats in the alley a level above; two, wealthier patrons usually found it laced with something that left them awakening in the aforementioned alley, purse empty. If they woke up at all.

Her clothes were dirty, but fine enough to mark her as a thief's target. So she'd carefully examined her ale, sniffing and then sipping it before deeming it safe. She'd still have to find food at some point soon, but not until she learned what she needed to from the Vaults: what the hell had happened in Rifthold in the months she'd been gone.

And what client Arobynn Hamel wanted to see so badly that he was risking a meeting here—especially when brutal, black-uniformed guards

were roaming the city like packs of wolves.

She'd managed to slip past one such patrol during the chaos of docking, but not before noting the onyx wyvern embroidered on their uniforms. Black on black—perhaps the King of Adarlan had grown tired of pretending he was anything but a menace and had issued a royal decree to abandon the traditional crimson and gold of his empire. Black for death; black for his two Wyrkeys; black for the Valg demons he was now using to build himself an unstoppable army.

A shudder crawled along her spine, and she drained the rest of her ale. As she set down the mug, her auburn hair shifted and caught the light of the wrought-iron chandeliers.

She'd hurried from the docks to the riverside Shadow Market—where anyone could find anything they wanted, rare or contraband or commonplace—and purchased a brick of dye. She'd paid the merchant an extra piece of silver to use the small room in the back of the shop to dye her hair, still short enough to brush just below her collarbones. If those guards had been monitoring the docks and had somehow seen her, they would be looking for a golden-haired young woman. *Everyone* would be looking for a golden-haired young woman, once word arrived in a few weeks that the King's Champion had failed in her task to assassinate Wendlyn's royal family and steal its naval defense plans.

She'd sent a warning to the King and Queen of Eyllwe months ago, and knew they'd take the proper precautions. But that still left one person at risk before she could fulfill the first steps of her plan—the same person who might be able to explain the new guards by the docks. And why the city was noticeably quieter, tenser. Hushed.

If she were to overhear anything regarding the Captain of the Guard and whether he was safe, it would be here. It was only a matter of listening to the right conversation or sitting with the right card partners. What a fortunate coincidence, then, that she'd spotted Tern—one of Arobynn's favored assassins—buying the latest dose of his preferred poison at the Shadow Market.

She'd followed him here in time to spy several more of Arobynn's assassins converging on the pleasure hall. They never did that—not unless their master was present. Usually only when Arobynn was taking a meeting with someone very, very important. Or dangerous.

After Tern and the others had slipped inside the Vaults, she'd waited on the street for a few minutes, lingering in the shadows to see whether Arobynn arrived, but no such luck. He must have already been within.

So she'd come in on the heels of a group of drunken merchants' sons, spotted where Arobynn was holding court, and done her best to remain unnoticed and unremarkable while she lurked at the bar—and observed.

With her hood and dark clothes, she blended in well enough not to garner much attention. She supposed that if anyone was foolish enough to attempt to rob her, it made them fair game to be robbed right back. She *was* running low on money.

She sighed through her nose. If her people could only see her: Aelin of the Wildfire, assassin and pickpocket. Her parents and uncle were probably thrashing in their graves.

Still. Some things were worth it. Aelin crooked a gloved finger at the bald barkeep, signaling for another ale.

"I'd mind how much you drink, girl," sneered a voice beside her.

She glanced sidelong at the average-sized man who had slipped up beside her at the bar. She would have known him for his ancient cutlass if she hadn't recognized the disarmingly common face. The ruddy skin, the beady eyes and thick brows—all a bland mask to hide the hungry killer beneath.

Aelin braced her forearms on the bar, crossing one ankle over the other. "Hello, Tern." Arobynn's second in command—or he had been two years ago. A vicious, calculating little prick who had always been more than eager to do Arobynn's dirty work. "I figured it was only a matter of time before one of Arobynn's dogs sniffed me out."

Tern leaned against the bar, flashing her a too-bright smile. "If memory serves, you were always his favorite bitch."

She chuckled, facing him fully. They were nearly equal in height—and with his slim build, Tern had been unnervingly good at getting into even the most well-guarded places. The barkeep, spotting Tern, kept well away.

Tern inclined his head over a shoulder, gesturing to the shadowy back of the cavernous space. "Last banquette against the wall. He's finishing up with a client."

She flicked her gaze in the direction Tern indicated. Both sides of the Vaults were lined with alcoves teeming with whores, barely curtained off from the crowds. She skipped over the writhing bodies, over the gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed women waiting to earn their keep in this festering shit-

hole, over the people who monitored the proceedings from the nearest tables—guards and voyeurs and fleshmongers. But there, tucked into the wall adjacent to the alcoves, were several wooden booths.

Exactly the ones she'd been discreetly monitoring since her arrival.

And in the one farthest from the lights ... a gleam of polished leather boots stretched out beneath the table. A second pair of boots, worn and muddy, were braced on the floor across from the first, as if the client were ready to bolt. Or, if he were truly stupid, to fight.

He was certainly stupid enough to have let his personal guard stay visible, a beacon alerting anyone who cared to notice that something rather important was happening in that last booth.

The client's guard—a slender, hooded young woman armed to the teeth—was leaning against a wooden pillar nearby, her silky, shoulder-length dark hair shining in the light as she carefully monitored the pleasure hall. Too stiff to be a casual patron. No uniform, no house colors or sigils. Not surprising, given the client's need for secrecy.

The client probably thought it was safer to meet here, when these sorts of meetings were usually held at the Assassins' Keep or one of the shadowy inns owned by Arobynn himself. He had no idea that Arobynn was also a major investor in the Vaults, and it would take only a nod from Aelin's former master for the metal doors to lock—and the client and his guard to never walk out again.

It still left the question of why Arobynn had agreed to meet here.

And still left Aelin looking across the hall toward the man who had shattered her life in so many ways.

Her stomach tightened, but she smiled at Tern. "I knew the leash wouldn't stretch far."

Aelin pushed off the bar, slipping through the crowd before the assassin could say anything else. She could feel Tern's stare fixed right between her shoulder blades, and knew he was aching to plunge his cutlass there.

Without bothering to glance back, she gave him an obscene gesture over her shoulder.

His barked string of curses was far better than the bawdy music being played across the room.

She noted each face she passed, each table of revelers and criminals and workers. The client's personal guard now watched her, a gloved hand slipping to the ordinary sword at her side.

Not your concern, but nice try.

Aelin was half tempted to smirk at the woman. Might have done so, actually, if she wasn't focused on the King of the Assassins. On what waited for her in that booth.

But she was ready—or as ready as she could ever be. She'd spent long enough planning.

Aelin had given herself a day at sea to rest and to miss Rowan. With the blood oath now eternally binding her to the Fae Prince—and him to her—his absence was like a phantom limb. She still felt that way, even when she had so much to do, even though missing her *carranam* was useless and he'd no doubt kick her ass for it.

The second day they'd been apart, she'd offered the ship's captain a silver coin for a pen and a stack of paper. And after locking herself in her cramped stateroom, she'd begun writing.

There were two men in this city responsible for destroying her life and the people she'd loved. She would not leave Rifthold until she'd buried them both.

So she'd written page after page of notes and ideas, until she had a list of names and places and targets. She'd memorized every step and calculation, and then she'd burned the pages with the power smoldering in her veins, making sure every last scrap was nothing more than ash floating out the porthole window and across the vast, night-darkened ocean.

Though she had braced herself, it had still been a shock weeks later when the ship had passed some unseen marker just off the coast and her magic vanished. All that fire she'd spent so many months carefully mastering ... gone as if it had never existed, not even an ember left flickering in her veins. A new sort of emptiness—different from the hole Rowan's absence left in her.

Stranded in her human skin, she'd curled up on her cot and recalled how to breathe, how to think, how to move her damn body without the immortal grace she'd become so dependent on. She was a useless fool for letting those gifts become a crutch, for being caught unguarded when they were again ripped from her. Rowan definitely would have kicked her ass for *that*—once he'd recovered himself. It was enough to make her glad she'd asked him to stay behind.

So she had breathed in the brine and the wood, and reminded herself that she'd been trained to kill with her bare hands long before she'd ever learned

to melt bones with her fire. She did not need the extra strength, speed, and agility of her Fae form to bring down her enemies.

The man responsible for that initial brutal training—the man who had been savior and tormentor, but never declared himself father or brother or lover—was now steps away, still speaking with his oh-so-important client.

Aelin pushed against the tension threatening to lock up her limbs and kept her movements feline-smooth as she closed the final twenty feet between them.

Until Arobynn's client rose to his feet, snapping something at the King of the Assassins, and stormed toward his guard.

Even with the hood, she knew the way he moved. She knew the shape of the chin poking from the shadows of the cowl, the way his left hand tended to brush against his scabbard.

But the sword with the eagle-shaped pommel was not hanging at his side.

And there was no black uniform—only brown, nondescript clothes, spotted with dirt and blood.

She grabbed an empty chair and pulled it up to a table of card players before the client had taken two steps. She slid into the seat and focused on breathing, on listening, even as the three people at the table frowned at her.

She didn't care.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the guard jerk her chin toward her.

"Deal me in," Aelin muttered to the man beside her. "Right now."

"We're in the middle of a game."

"Next round, then," she said, relaxing her posture and slumping her shoulders as Chaol Westfall cast his gaze in her direction.

Chaol was Arobynn's client.

Or he wanted something from her former master badly enough to risk meeting here.

What the *hell* had happened while she was away?

She watched the cards being slapped down on the ale-damp table, even as the captain's attention fixed on her back. She wished she could see his face, see anything in the gloom underneath that hood. Despite the splattering of blood on his clothes, he moved as though no injuries plagued him.

Something that had been coiled tightly in her chest for months slowly loosened.

Alive—but where had the blood come from?

He must have deemed her nonthreatening, because he merely motioned to his companion to go, and they both strolled toward the bar—no, toward the stairs beyond. He moved at a steady, casual pace, though the woman at his side was too tense to pass for unconcerned. Fortunately for them all, no one looked his way as he left, and the captain didn't glance in her direction again.

She'd moved fast enough that he likely hadn't been able to detect that it was her. Good. Good, even if she would have known him moving or still, cloaked or bare.

There he went, up the stairs, not even glancing down, though his companion continued watching her. Who the hell was *that*? There hadn't been any female guards at the palace when she'd left, and she had been fairly certain the king had an absurd no-women rule.

Seeing Chaol changed nothing—not right now.

She curled her hand into a fist, keenly aware of the bare finger on her right hand. It hadn't felt naked until now.

A card landed before her. "Three silvers to join," the bald, tattooed man beside her said as he dealt the cards, inclining his head toward the tidy pile of coins in the center.

Meeting with Arobynn—she'd never thought Chaol was stupid, but *this* ... Aelin rose from the chair, cooling the wrath that had started to boil in her veins. "I'm dead broke," she said. "Enjoy the game."

The door atop the stone stairs was already shut, Chaol and his companion gone.

She gave herself a second to wipe any expression beyond mild amusement off her face.

Odds were, Arobynn had planned the whole thing to coincide with her arrival. He'd probably sent Tern to the Shadow Market just to catch her eye, to draw her here. Maybe he knew what the captain was up to, whose side the young lord was now on; maybe he'd just lured her here to worm his way into her mind, to shake her up a bit.

Getting answers from Arobynn would come at a price, but it was smarter than running after Chaol into the night, though the urge had her muscles locking up. Months—months and months since she'd seen him, since she'd left Adarlan, broken and hollow.

But no more.

Aelin swaggered the last few steps to the banquette and paused in front of it, crossing her arms as she beheld Arobynn Hamel, the King of the Assassins and her former master, smiling up at her.



Lounging in the shadows of the wooden banquette, a glass of wine before him, Arobynn looked exactly as he had the last time she'd seen him: a fine-boned aristo face, silky auburn hair that grazed his shoulders, and a deep-blue tunic of exquisite make, unbuttoned with an assumed casualness at the top to reveal the toned chest beneath. No sign at all of a necklace or chain. His long, muscled arm was draped across the back of the bench, and his tanned, scar-flecked fingers drummed a beat in time with the hall music.

"Hello, darling," he purred, his silver eyes bright even in the dimness.

No weapons save for a beautiful rapier at his side, its ornate, twisting guards like a swirling wind bound in gold. The only overt sign of the wealth that rivaled the riches of kings and empresses.

Aelin slid onto the bench across from him, too aware of the wood still warm from Chaol. Her own daggers pressed against her with every movement. Goldryn was a heavy weight at her side, the massive ruby in its

hilt hidden by her dark cloak—the legendary blade utterly useless in such tight quarters. No doubt why he'd picked the booth for this meeting.

"You look more or less the same," she said, leaning against the hard bench and tugging back her hood. "Rifthold continues to treat you well."

It was true. In his late thirties, Arobynn remained handsome, and as calm and collected as he'd been at the Assassins' Keep during the dark blur of days after Sam had died.

There were many, many debts to be paid for what happened back then.

Arobynn looked her up and down—a slow, deliberate examination. "I think I preferred your natural hair color."

"Precautions," she said, crossing her legs and surveying him just as slowly. No indication that he was wearing the Amulet of Orynth, the royal heirloom he'd stolen from her when he found her half-dead on the banks of the Florine. He'd allowed her to believe the amulet that secretly contained the third and final Wyrdkey had been lost to the river. For a thousand years, her ancestors had unwittingly worn the amulet, and it had made their kingdom—*her* kingdom—a powerhouse: prosperous and safe, the ideal to which all courts in all lands were held. Still, she'd never seen Arobynn wear any sort of chain around his neck. He probably had it squirreled away somewhere at the Keep. "I wouldn't want to wind up back in Endovier."

Those silver eyes sparkled. It was an effort to keep from reaching for a dagger and throwing it hard.

But too much was dependent on him to kill him right away. She'd had a long, long while to think this over—what she wanted to do, how she wanted to do it. Ending it here and now would be a waste. Especially when he and Chaol were somehow tangled up.

Perhaps *that* was why he'd lured her here—so she would spy Chaol with him ... and hesitate.

"Indeed," Arobynn said, "I'd hate to see you back in Endovier, too. Though I will say these past two years have made you even more striking. Womanhood suits you." He cocked his head, and she knew it was coming before he amended, "Or should I say queen-hood?"

It had been a decade since they'd spoken baldly of her heritage, or of the title he had helped her walk away from, had taught her to hate and fear. Sometimes he'd mentioned it in veiled terms, usually as a threat to keep her bound to him. But he had never once said her true name—not even when

he'd found her on that icy riverbank and carried her into his house of killers.

"What makes you think I have any interest in that?" she said casually.

Arobynn shrugged his broad shoulders. "One can't put much faith in gossip, but word arrived about a month ago from Wendlyn. It claimed that a certain lost queen put on a rather spectacular show for an invading legion from Adarlan. Actually, I believe the title our esteemed friends in the empire now like to use is 'fire-breathing bitch-queen.'"

Honestly, she almost found it funny—flattering, even. She'd known word would spread about what she had done to General Narrok and the three other Valg princes squatting like toads inside human bodies. She just hadn't realized everyone would learn of it so quickly. "People will believe anything they hear these days."

"True," Arobynn said. At the other end of the Vaults, a frenzied crowd roared at the fighters slugging it out in the pits. The King of the Assassins looked toward it, smiling faintly.

It had been almost two years since she'd stood in that crowd, watching Sam take on vastly inferior fighters, hustling to raise enough money to get them out of Rifthold and away from Arobynn. A few days later, she'd wound up in a prison wagon bound for Endovier, but Sam ...

She'd never discovered where they'd buried Sam after Rourke Farran—second in command to Ioan Jayne, the Crime Lord of Rifthold—had tortured and killed him. She'd killed Jayne herself, with a dagger hurled into his meaty face. And Farran ... She'd later learned that Farran had been murdered by Arobynn's own bodyguard, Wesley, as retribution for what had been done to Sam. But that wasn't her concern, even if Arobynn had killed Wesley to mend the bond between the Assassins' Guild and the new Crime Lord. Another debt.

She could wait; she could be patient. She merely said, "So you're doing business here now? What happened to the Keep?"

"Some clients," Arobynn drawled, "prefer public meetings. The Keep can make people edgy."

"Your client must be new to the game, if he didn't insist on a private room."

"He didn't trust me that much, either. He thought the main floor would be safer."

“He must not know the Vaults, then.” No, Chaol had never been here, as far as she knew. She’d usually avoided telling him about the time she’d spent in this festering place. Like she’d avoided telling him a good many things.

“Why don’t you just ask me about him?”

She kept her face neutral, disinterested. “I don’t particularly care about your clients. Tell me or don’t.”

Arobynn shrugged again, a beautiful, casual gesture. A game, then. A bit of information to hold against her, to keep from her until it was useful. It didn’t matter if it was valuable information or not; it was the withholding, the power of it, that he loved.

Arobynn sighed. “There is so much I want to ask you—to know.”

“I’m surprised you’re admitting that you don’t already know everything.”

He rested his head against the back of the booth, his red hair gleaming like fresh blood. As an investor in the Vaults, she supposed he didn’t need to bother hiding his face here. No one—not even the King of Adarlan—would be stupid enough to go after him.

“Things have been wretched since you left,” Arobynn said quietly.

Left. As if she’d willingly gone to Endovier; as if he hadn’t been responsible for it; as if she had just been away on holiday. But she knew him too well. He was still feeling her out, despite having lured her here. Perfect.

He glanced at the thick scar across her palm—proof of the vow she’d made to Nehemia to free Eyllwe. Arobynn clicked his tongue. “It hurts my heart to see so many new scars on you.”

“I rather like them.” It was the truth.

Arobynn shifted in his seat—a deliberate movement, as all his movements were—and the light fell on a wicked scar stretching from his ear to his collarbone.

“I rather like that scar, too,” she said with a midnight smile. That explained why he’d left the tunic unbuttoned, then.

Arobynn waved a hand with fluid grace. “Courtesy of Wesley.”

A casual reminder of what he was capable of doing, what he could endure. Wesley had been one of the finest warriors she’d ever encountered. If he hadn’t survived the fight with Arobynn, few existed who would. “First Sam,” she said, “then me, then Wesley—what a tyrant you’ve become. Is there anyone at all left in the Keep besides darling Tern, or have you put

down every person who displeased you?” She glanced at Tern, loitering at the bar, and then at the other two assassins seated at separate tables halfway across the room, trying to pretend they weren’t monitoring every movement she made. “At least Harding and Mullin are alive, too. But they’ve always been so good at kissing your ass that I have a hard time imagining you ever bringing yourself to kill them.”

A low laugh. “And here I was, thinking my men were doing a good job of keeping hidden in the crowd.” He sipped from his wine. “Perhaps you’ll come home and teach them a few things.”

Home. Another test, another game. “You know I’m always happy to teach your sycophants a lesson—but I have other lodgings prepared while I’m here.”

“And how long will your visit be, exactly?”

“As long as necessary.” To destroy him and get what she needed.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” he said, drinking again. No doubt from a bottle brought in just for him, as there was no way in the dark god’s burning realm that Arobynn would drink the watered-down rat’s blood they served at the bar. “You’ll have to be here for a few weeks at least, given what happened.”

Ice coated her veins. She gave Arobynn a lazy grin, even as she began praying to Mala, to Deanna, the sister-goddesses who had watched over her for so many years.

“You *do* know what happened, don’t you?” he said, swirling the wine in his glass.

Bastard—bastard for making her confirm she didn’t know. “Does it explain why the royal guard has such spectacular new uniforms?” *Not Chaol or Dorian, not Chaol or Dorian, not Chaol or—*

“Oh, no. Those men are merely a delightful new addition to our city. My acolytes have such fun tormenting them.” He drained his glass. “Though I’d bet good money that the king’s new guard was present the day it happened.”

She kept her hands from shaking, despite the panic devouring every last shred of common sense.

“No one knows what, exactly, went on that day in the glass castle,” Arobynn began.

After all that she had endured, after what she had overcome in Wendlyn, to return to this ... She wished Rowan were beside her, wished she could smell his pine-and-snow scent and know that no matter what news Arobynn

bore, no matter how it shattered her, the Fae warrior would be there to help put the pieces back together.

But Rowan was across an ocean—and she prayed he'd never get within a hundred miles of Arobynn.

“Why don't you get to the point,” she said. “I want to have a few hours of sleep tonight.” Not a lie. With every breath, exhaustion wrapped tighter around her bones.

“I would have thought,” Arobynn said, “given how close you two were, and your *abilities*, that you'd somehow be able to sense it. Or at least hear of it, considering what he was accused of.”

The prick was enjoying every second of this. If Dorian was dead or hurt

“Your cousin Aedion has been imprisoned for treason—for conspiring with the rebels here in Rifthold to depose the king and put you back on the throne.”

The world stopped.

Stopped, and started, then stopped again.

“But,” Arobynn went on, “it seems you had no idea about that little plot of his, which makes me wonder whether the king was merely looking for an excuse to lure a certain fire-breathing bitch-queen back to these shores. Aedion is to be executed in three days at the prince's birthday party as the main entertainment. Practically screams *trap*, doesn't it? I'd be a little more subtle if I'd planned it, but you can't blame the king for sending a loud message.”

Aedion. She mastered the swarm of thoughts that clouded her mind—batted it aside and focused on the assassin in front of her. He wouldn't tell her about Aedion without a damn good reason.

“Why warn me at all?” she said. Aedion was captured by the king; Aedion was destined for the gallows—as a trap for her. Every plan she had was ruined.

No—she could still see those plans through to the end, still do what she had to. But Aedion ... Aedion had to come first. Even if he later hated her, even if he spat in her face and called her a traitor and a whore and a lying murderer. Even if he resented what she had done and become, she would save him.

“Consider the tip a favor,” Arobynn said, rising from the bench. “A token of good faith.”

She'd bet there was more—perhaps tied to a certain captain whose warmth lingered in the wooden bench beneath her.

She stood as well, sliding out of the booth. She knew that more spies than Arobynn's lackeys monitored them—had seen her arrive, wait at the bar, and then head to this banquet. She wondered if her old master knew, too.

Arobynn only smiled at her, taller by a head. And when he reached out, she allowed him to brush his knuckles down her cheek. The calluses on his fingers said enough about how often he still practiced. "I do not expect you to trust me; I do not expect you to love me."

Only once, during those days of hell and heartbreak, had Arobynn ever said that he loved her in any capacity. She'd been about to leave with Sam, and he had come to her warehouse apartment, begging her to stay, claiming that he was angry with her for leaving and that everything he'd done, every twisted scheme, had been enacted out of spite for her moving out of the Keep. She'd never known in what way he'd meant those three words—*I love you*—but she'd been inclined to consider them another lie in the days that followed, after Rourke Farran had drugged her and put his filthy hands all over her. After she'd rotted away in that dungeon.

Arobynn's eyes softened. "I missed you."

She stepped out of his reach. "Funny—I was in Rifthold this fall and winter, and you never tried to see me."

"How could I dare? I thought you'd kill me on sight. But then I got word this evening that you had returned at last—and I hoped you might have changed your mind. You'll forgive me if my methods of getting you here were ... roundabout."

Another move and countermove, to admit to the how but not the real why. She said, "I have better things to do than care about whether you live or die."

"Indeed. But you would care a great deal if your beloved Aedion died." Her heartbeat thundered through her, and she braced herself. Arobynn continued, "My resources are yours. Aedion is in the royal dungeon, guarded day and night. Any help you need, any support—you know where to find me."

"At what cost?"

Arobynn looked her over once more, and something low in her abdomen twisted at the gaze that was anything but that of a brother or father. "A favor—just one favor." Warning bells pealed in her head. She'd be better

off making a bargain with one of the Valg princes. “There are creatures lurking in my city,” he said. “Creatures who wear the bodies of men like clothing. I want to know what they are.”

Too many threads were now poised to tangle.

She said carefully, “What do you mean?”

“The king’s new guard has a few of them among its commanders. They’re rounding up people suspected of being sympathetic to magic—or those who once possessed it. Executions every day, at sunrise and sunset. These *things* seem to thrive on them. I’m surprised you didn’t notice them lurking about the docks.”

“They’re all monsters to me.” But Chaol hadn’t looked or felt like them. A small mercy.

He waited.

So did she.

She let herself break first. “Is this my favor, then? Telling you what I know?” There was little use in denying she was aware of the truth—or asking how he’d become aware that she knew it.

“Part of it.”

She snorted. “Two favors for the price of one? How typical.”

“Two sides of the same coin.”

She stared flatly at him, and then said, “Through years of stealing knowledge and some strange, archaic power, the king has been able to stifle magic, while also summoning ancient demons to infiltrate human bodies for his growing army. He uses rings or collars of black stone to allow the demons to invade their hosts, and he’s been targeting former magic-wielders, as their gifts make it easier for the demons to latch on.” Truth, truth, truth—but not the whole truth. Not about the Wyrddmarks or Wyrddkeys—never to Arobynn. “When I was in the castle, I encountered some of the men he’d corrupted, men who fed off that power and became stronger. And when I was in Wendlyn, I faced one of his generals, who had been seized by a demon prince of unimaginable power.”

“Narrok,” Arobynn mused. If he was horrified, if he was shocked, his face revealed none of it.

She nodded. “They devour life. A prince like that can suck the soul right out of you, feed on you.” She swallowed, and real fear coated her tongue. “Do the men you’ve seen—these commanders—have collars or rings?” Chaol’s hands had been bare.

“Just rings,” Arobynn said. “Is there a difference?”

“I think only a collar can hold a prince; the rings are for lesser demons.”

“How do you kill them?”

“Fire,” she said. “I killed the princes with fire.”

“Ah. Not the usual sort, I take it.” She nodded. “And if they wear a ring?”

“I’ve seen one of them killed with a sword through the heart.” Chaol had killed Cain that easily. A small relief, but ... “Beheading might work for the ones with collars.”

“And the people who used to own those bodies—they’re gone?”

Narrok’s pleading, relieved face flashed before her. “It would seem so.”

“I want you to capture one and bring it to the Keep.”

She started. “Absolutely not. And why?”

“Perhaps it will be able to tell me something useful.”

“Go capture it yourself,” she snapped. “Find me another favor to fulfill.”

“You’re the only one who has faced these things and lived.” There was nothing merciful in his gaze. “Capture one for me at your earliest convenience—and I’ll assist you with your cousin.”

To face one of the Valg, even a lesser Valg ...

“Aedion comes first,” she said. “We rescue Aedion, and then I’ll risk my neck getting one of the demons for you.”

Gods help them all if Arobynn ever realized that he might control that demon with the amulet he had hidden away.

“Of course,” he said.

She knew it was foolish, but she couldn’t help the next question. “To what end?”

“This is my city,” he purred. “And I don’t particularly care for the direction in which it’s headed. It’s bad for my investments, and I’m sick of hearing the crows feasting day and night.”

Well, at least they agreed on something. “A businessman through and through, aren’t you?”

Arobynn continued to pin her with that lover’s gaze. “Nothing is without a price.” He brushed a kiss against her cheekbone, his lips soft and warm. She fought the shudder that trembled through her, and made herself lean into him as he brought his mouth against her ear and whispered, “Tell me what I must do to atone; tell me to crawl over hot coals, to sleep on a bed of nails, to carve up my flesh. Say the word, and it is done. But let me care for

you as I once did, before ... before that madness poisoned my heart. Punish me, torture me, wreck me, but let me help you. Do this small thing for me—and let me lay the world at your feet.”

Her throat went dry, and she pulled back far enough to look into that handsome, aristocratic face, the eyes shining with a grief and a predatory intent she could almost taste. If Arobynn knew about her history with Chaol, and had summoned the captain here ... Had it been for information, to test her, or some grotesque way to assure himself of his dominance? “There is nothing—”

“No—not yet,” he said, stepping away. “Don’t say it yet. Sleep on it. Though, before you do—perhaps pay a visit to the southeastern section of the tunnels tonight. You might find the person you’re looking for.” She kept her face still—bored, even—as she tucked away the information. Arobynn moved toward the crowded room, where his three assassins were alert and ready, and then looked back at her. “If you are allowed to change so greatly in two years, may I not be permitted to have changed as well?”

With that, he sauntered off between the tables. Tern, Harding, and Mullin fell into step behind him—and Tern glanced in her direction just once, to give her the exact same obscene gesture she’d given him earlier.

But Aelin stared only at the King of the Assassins, at his elegant, powerful steps, at the warrior’s body disguised in nobleman’s clothes.

Liar. Trained, cunning liar.

There were too many eyes in the Vaults for her to scrub at her cheek, where the phantom imprint of Arobynn’s lips still whispered, or at her ear, where his warm breath lingered.

Bastard. She glanced at the fighting pits across the hall, at the prostitutes clawing out a living, at the men who ran this place, who had profited for too long from so much blood and sorrow and pain. She could almost see Sam there—almost picture him fighting, young and strong and glorious.

She tugged on her gloves. There were many, many debts to be paid before she left Rifthold and took back her throne. Starting now. Fortunate that she was in a killing sort of mood.

It was only a matter of time before either Arobynn showed his hand or the King of Adarlan’s men found the trail she’d carefully laid from the docks. Someone would be coming for her—within moments, actually, if the shouts followed by utter silence behind the metal door atop the stairs were any indication. At least that much of her plan remained on course. She’d deal with Chaol later.

With a gloved hand, she plucked up one of the coppers

Arobynn had left on the table. She stuck out her tongue at the brutish, unforgiving profile of the

king stamped on one side— then at the roaring wyvern gracing the other. Heads, Arobynn had betrayed her again. Tails, the king’s men. The iron door at the top of the stairs groaned open, cool night air pouring in.

With a half smile, she flipped the coin with her thumb.

The coin was still rotating when four men in black uniforms appeared atop the stone stairs, an assortment of vicious weapons strapped to their bodies. By the time the copper thudded on the table, the wyvern glinting in the dim light, Aelin Galathynius was ready for bloodshed.

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