


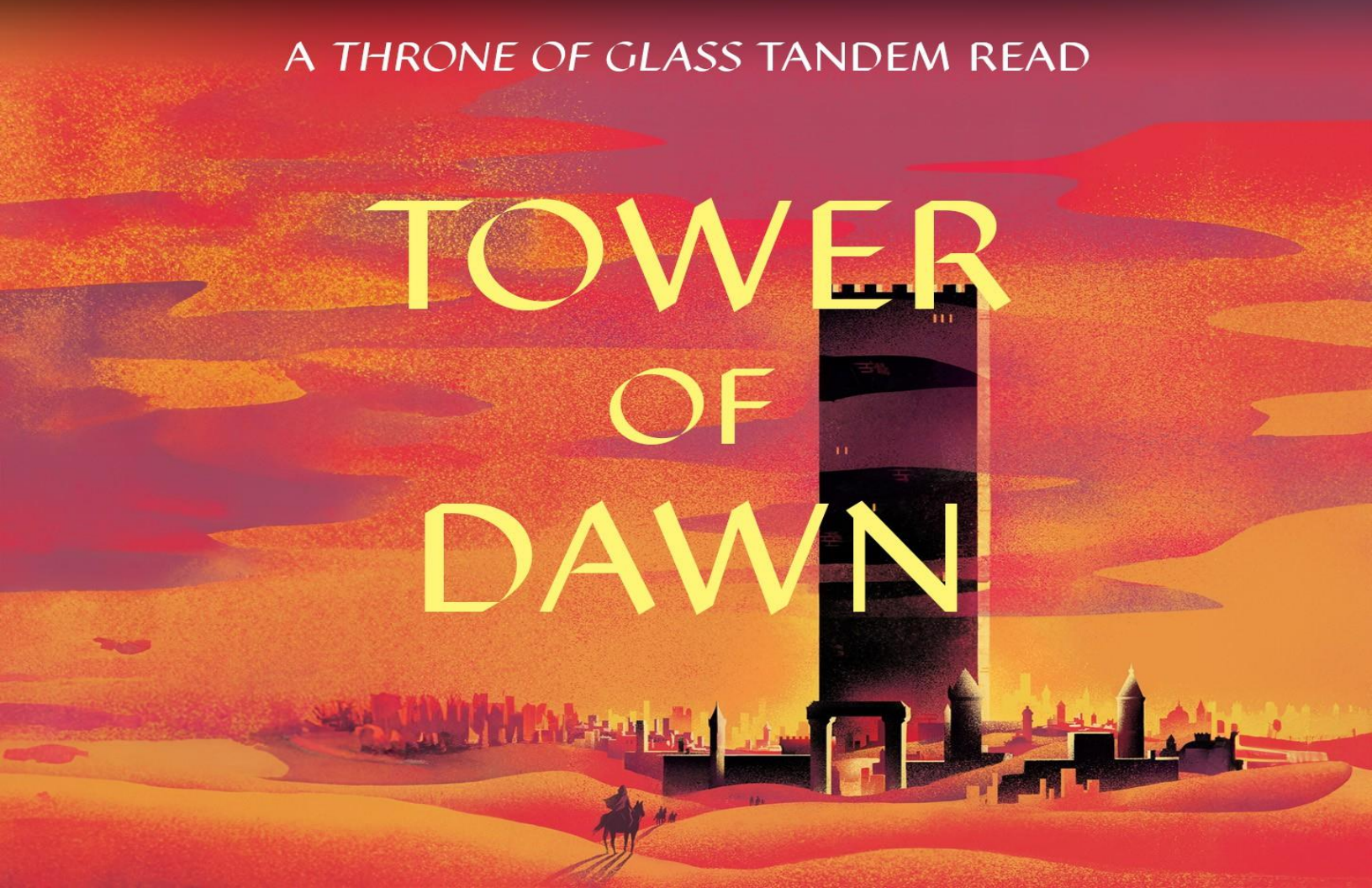
SARAH J. MAAS

EMPIRE
OF
STORMS



A THRONE OF GLASS TANDEM READ

TOWER
OF
DAWN



SARAH J. MAAS

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

EMPIRE
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— A *Throne of Glass* NOVEL —

BLOOMSBURY

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SARAH J. MAAS

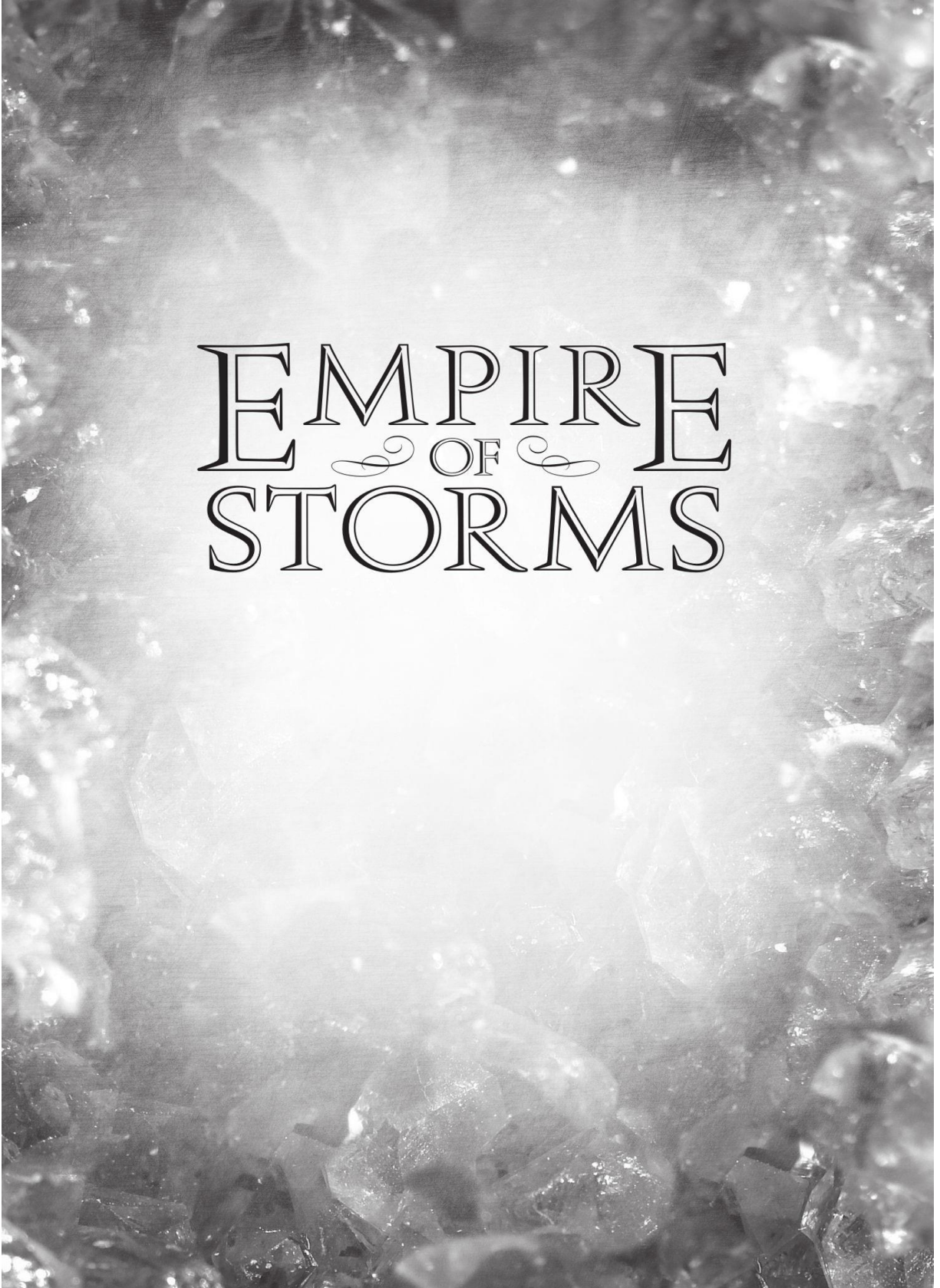


TOWER
of
DAWN

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY



EMPIRE
OF
STORMS



TOWER DAŠÍČH

*For Tamar,
my champion, fairy godmother, and knight in shining armor.
Thank you for believing in this series from page one.*

*For my grandmother, Camilla,
who crossed mountains and seas,
and whose own remarkable story is my favorite epic of all*

EMPIRE OF STORMS

— » *the Throne of Glass* is a *NOVEL* —

SARAH J. MAAS



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The Throne of Glass Colouring Book



A Court of Thorns and Roses series

*A Court of Thorns and Roses A Court of Mist and Fury A Court of Wings
and Ruin •*

A Court of Thorns and Roses Colouring Book

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NIGHTFALL

The bone drums had been pounding across the jagged slopes of the Black Mountains since sundown.

From the rocky outcropping on which her war tent groaned against the dry wind, Princess Elena Galathynius had monitored the dread-lord's army all afternoon as it washed across those mountains in ebony waves. And now that the sun had long since vanished, the enemy campfires flickered across the mountains and valley below like a blanket of stars.

So many fires—so many, compared to those burning on her side of the valley.

She did not need the gift of her Fae ears to hear the prayers of her human army, both spoken and silent. She'd offered up several herself in the past few hours, though she knew they would go unanswered.

Elena had never considered where she might die—never considered that it might be so far from the rocky green of Terrasen. That her body might not be burned, but devoured by the dread-lord's beasts.

There would be no marker to tell the world where a Princess of Terrasen had fallen. There would be no marker for any of them.

"You need rest," a rough male voice said from the tent entrance behind her.

Elena looked over her shoulder, her unbound silver hair snagging on the intricate leather scales of her armor. But Gavin's dark gaze was already on the two armies stretching below them. On that narrow black band of demarcation, too soon to be breached.

For all his talk of rest, Gavin hadn't removed his own armor upon entering their tent hours before. Only minutes ago had his war leaders finally shoved out of the tent, bearing maps in their hands and not a shred of hope in their hearts. She could scent it on them—the fear. The despair.

Gavin's steps hardly crunched on the dry, rocky earth as he approached her lonely vigil, near-silent thanks to his years roaming the wilds of the South. Elena again faced those countless enemy fires.

He said hoarsely, "Your father's forces could still make it."

A fool's hope. Her immortal hearing had picked up every word of the hours of debate raging inside the tent behind them. "This valley is now a death trap," Elena said.

And she had led them all here.

Gavin did not answer.

"Come dawn," Elena went on, "it will be bathed in blood."

The war leader at her side remained silent. So rare for Gavin, that silence. Not a flicker of that untamed fierceness shone in his uptilted eyes, and his shaggy brown hair hung limp. She couldn't remember the last time either of them had bathed.

Gavin turned to her with that frank assessment that had stripped her bare from the moment she'd first met him in her father's hall nearly a year ago. Lifetimes ago.

Such a different time, a different world—when the lands had still been full of singing and light, when magic hadn't begun to flicker in the growing shadow of Erawan and his demon soldiers. She wondered how long Orynth would hold out once the slaughter here in the South had ended. Wondered if Erawan would first destroy her father's shining palace atop the mountain, or if he would burn the royal library—burn the heart and knowledge of an age. And then burn its people.

"Dawn is yet hours away," said Gavin, his throat bobbing. "Time enough for you to make a run for it."

"They'd tear us to shreds before we could clear the passes—"

"Not us. You." The firelight cast his tan face in flickering relief. "You alone."

"I will not abandon these people." Her fingers grazed his. "Or you."

Gavin's face didn't stir. "There is no avoiding tomorrow. Or the bloodshed. You overheard what the messenger said—I know you did. Anielle is a slaughterhouse. Our allies from the North are gone. Your father's army is too far behind. We will all die before the sun is fully risen."

"We'll all die one day anyway."

“No.” Gavin squeezed her hand. “I will die. Those people down there—they will die. Either by sword or time. But you...” His gaze flicked to her delicately pointed ears, the heritage of her father. “You could live for centuries. Millennia. Do not throw it away for a doomed battle.”

“I would sooner die tomorrow than live for a thousand years with a coward’s shame.”

But Gavin stared across the valley again. At his people, the last line of defense against Erawan’s horde.

“Get behind your father’s lines,” he said roughly, “and continue the fight from there.”

She swallowed hard. “It would be no use.”

Slowly, Gavin looked at her. And after all these months, all this time, she confessed, “My father’s power is failing. He is close—decades now—from the fading. Mala’s light dims inside him with every passing day. He cannot stand against Erawan and win.” Her father’s last words before she’d set out on this doomed quest months ago: *My sun is setting, Elena. You must find a way to ensure yours still rises.*

Gavin’s face leached of color. “You choose now to tell me this?”

“I choose now, Gavin, because there is no hope for me, either—whether I flee tonight or fight tomorrow. The continent will fall.”

Gavin shifted toward the dozen tents on the outcropping. His friends.

Her friends.

“None of us are walking away tomorrow,” he said.

And it was the way his words broke, the way his eyes shone, that had her reaching for his hand once more. Never—not once in all their adventures, in all the horrors that they had endured together—had she seen him cry.

“Erawan will win and rule this land, and all others, for eternity,” Gavin whispered.

Soldiers stirred in their camp below. Men and women, murmuring, swearing, weeping. Elena tracked the source of their terror—all the way across the valley.

One by one, as if a great hand of darkness wiped them away, the fires of the dread-lord’s camp went out. The bone drums beat louder.

He had arrived at last.

Erawan himself had come to oversee the final stand of Gavin’s army.

“They are not going to wait until dawn,” Gavin said, a hand lurching to where Damaris was sheathed at his side.

But Elena gripped his arm, the hard muscle like granite beneath his leather armor.

Erawan had come.

Perhaps the gods were still listening. Perhaps her mother’s fiery soul had convinced them.

She took in Gavin’s harsh, wild face—the face that she had come to cherish above all others. And she said, “We are not going to win this battle. And we are not going to win this war.”

His body quivered with the restraint to keep from going to his war leaders, but he gave her the respect of listening. They’d both given each other that, had learned it the hard way.

With her free hand, Elena lifted her fingers in the air between them. The raw magic in her veins now danced, from flame to water to curling vine to cracking ice. Not an endless abyss like her father’s, but a versatile, nimble gift of magic. Granted by her mother. “We are not going to win this war,” Elena repeated, Gavin’s face aglow in the light of her uncut power. “But we can delay it a little while. I can get across that valley in an hour or two.” She curled her fingers into a fist, and snuffed out her magic.

Gavin’s brows furrowed. “What you speak of is madness, Elena. Suicide. His lieutenants will catch you before you can even slip through the lines.”

“Exactly. They’ll bring me right to him, now that he has come. They’ll consider me his prized prisoner—not his assassin.”

“No.” An order and a plea.

“Kill Erawan, and his beasts will panic. Long enough for my father’s forces to arrive, unite with whatever remains of ours, and crush the enemy legions.”

“You say ‘kill Erawan’ as if that is some easy task. He is a Valg *king*, Elena. Even if they bring you to him, he will leash you to his will before you can make a move.”

Her heart strained, but she forced the words out. “That is why...” She couldn’t stop her wobbling lips. “That is why I need you to come with me instead of fight with your men.”

Gavin only stared at her.

“Because I need...” Tears slid down her cheeks. “I need you as a distraction. I need you to buy me time to get past his inner defenses.” Just as the battle tomorrow would buy them time.

Because Erawan would go for Gavin first. The human warrior who had been a bastion against the Dark Lord’s forces for so long, who had fought him when no other would ... Erawan’s hatred for the human prince was rivaled only by his hatred for her father.

Gavin studied her for a long moment, then reached to brush her tears away. “He cannot be killed, Elena. You heard what your father’s oracle whispered.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“And even if we manage to contain him—trap him...” Gavin considered her words. “You know that we are only pushing the war onto someone else—to whoever one day rules these lands.”

“This war,” she said quietly, “is but the second movement in a game that has been played since those ancient days across the sea.”

“We put it off for someone else to inherit if he’s freed. And it will not save those soldiers down there from slaughter tomorrow.”

“If we do not act, there won’t be anyone to inherit this war,” Elena said. Doubt danced in Gavin’s eyes. “Even now,” she pushed, “our magic is failing, our gods abandoning us. Running from us. We have no Fae allies beyond those in my father’s army. And their power, like his, is fading. But perhaps, when that third movement comes ... perhaps the players in our unfinished game will be different. Perhaps it will be a future in which Fae and humans fight side by side, ripe with power. Maybe they will find a way to end this. So we will lose this battle, Gavin,” she said. “Our friends will die on that killing field come dawn, and we will use it as our distraction to contain Erawan so that Erilea might have a future.”

His lips tightened, his sapphire eyes wide.

“No one must know,” she said, her voice breaking. “Even if we succeed, no one must know what we do.”

Doubt etched deep lines into his face. She gripped his hand harder. “*No one*, Gavin.”

Agony rippled across his features. But he nodded.

Hand in hand, they stared toward the darkness coating the mountains, the dread-lord’s bone drums pounding like hammers on iron. Too soon,

those drums would be drowned out by the screams of dying soldiers. Too soon, the valley fields would be carved with streams of blood.

Gavin said, “If we are to do this, we need to leave now.” His attention again snagged on the nearby tents. No good-byes. No last words. “I’ll give Holdren the order to lead tomorrow. He’ll know what to tell the others.”

She nodded, and it was confirmation enough. Gavin released her hand, striding for the tent closest to their own, to where his dearest friend and most loyal war leader was likely making the best of his final hours with his new wife.

Elena drew her eyes away before Gavin’s broad shoulders pushed through the heavy flaps.

She gazed over the fires, across the valley, to the darkness perched on the other side. She could have sworn it stared back, sworn she heard the thousand whetstones as the dread-lord’s beasts sharpened their poison-slick claws.

She lifted her eyes toward the smoke-stained sky, the plumes parting for a heartbeat to reveal a star-flecked night.

The Lord of the North flickered down at her. Perhaps the final gift of Mala to these lands—in this age, at least. Perhaps a thank-you to Elena herself, and a farewell.

Because for Terrasen, for Erilea, Elena would walk into the eternal darkness lurking across the valley to buy them all a chance.

Elena sent up a final prayer on a pillar of smoke rising from the valley floor that the unborn, faraway scions of this night, heirs to a burden that would doom or save Erilea, would forgive her for what she was about to do.

PART ONE

The Fire-Bringer

CHAPTER 1

Elide Lochan's breath scorched her throat with every gasping inhale as she limped up the steep forest hill.

Beneath the soggy leaves coating Oakwald's floor, loose gray stones made the slope treacherous, the towering oaks stretching too high above for her to grip any branches should she tumble down. Braving the potential fall in favor of speed, Elide scrambled over the lip of the craggy summit, her leg twanging with pain as she slumped to her knees.

Forested hills rolled away in every direction, the trees like the bars of a never-ending cage.

Weeks. It had been weeks since Manon Blackbeak and the Thirteen had left her in this forest, the Wing Leader ordering her to head north. To find her lost queen, now grown and mighty—and to also find Celaena Sardothien, whoever she was, so that Elide might repay the life debt she owed to Kaltain Rompier.

Even weeks later, her dreams were plagued by those final moments in Morath: the guards who had tried to drag her to be implanted with Valg offspring, the Wing Leader's complete massacre of them, and Kaltain Rompier's final act—carving the strange, dark stone from where it had been sewn into her arm and ordering Elide to take it to Celaena Sardothien.

Right before Kaltain turned Morath into a smoldering ruin.

Elide put a dirty, near-trembling hand to the hard lump tucked in the breast pocket of the flying leathers she still wore. She could have sworn a faint throbbing echoed into her skin, a counterbeat to her own racing heart.

Elide shuddered in the watery sunlight trickling through the green canopy. Summer lay heavy over the world, the heat now oppressive enough that water had become her most precious commodity.

It had been from the start—but now her entire day, her *life*, revolved around it.

Fortunately, Oakwald was rife with streams after the last of the melted mountain snows had snaked from their peaks. Unfortunately, Elide had learned the hard way about what water to drink.

Three days, she'd been near death with vomiting and fever after gulping down that stagnant pond water. Three days, she'd shivered so badly she thought her bones would crack apart. Three days, quietly weeping in pitiful despair that she'd die here, alone in this endless forest, and no one would ever know.

And through it all, that stone in her breast pocket thrummed and throbbed. In her fevered dreams, she could have sworn it whispered to her, sang lullabies in languages that she did not think human tongues could utter.

She hadn't heard it since, but she still wondered. Wondered if most humans would have died.

Wondered whether she carried a gift or a curse northward. And if this Celaena Sardothien would know what to do with it.

Tell her that you can open any door, if you have the key, Kaltain had said. Elide often studied the iridescent black stone whenever she halted for a needed break. It certainly didn't look like a key: rough-hewn, as if it had been cleaved from a larger chunk of stone. Perhaps Kaltain's words were a riddle meant only for its recipient.

Elide unslung her too-light pack from her shoulders and yanked open the canvas flap. She'd run out of food a week ago and had taken to scavenging for berries. They were all foreign, but a whisper of a memory from her years with her nursemaid, Finnula, had warned her to rub them on her wrist first—to see if they raised any reaction.

Most of the time, too much of the time, they did.

But every now and then she'd stumble across a bush sagging with the right ones, and she'd gorge herself before filling her pack. Fishing inside the pink-and-blue-stained canvas interior, Elide dug out the last handful, wrapped in her spare shirt, the white fabric now a splotchy red and purple.

One handful—to last until she found her next meal.

Hunger gnawed at her, but Elide ate only half. Maybe she'd find more before she stopped for the night.

She didn't know how to hunt—and the thought of catching another living thing, of snapping its neck or bashing in its skull with a rock ... She was not yet that desperate.

Perhaps it made her not a Blackbeak after all, despite her mother's hidden bloodline.

Elide licked her fingers clean of the berry juice, dirt and all, and hissed as she stood on stiff, sore legs. She wouldn't last long without food but couldn't risk venturing into a village with the money Manon had given her, or toward any of the hunters' fires she'd spotted these past few weeks.

No—she had seen enough of the kindness and mercy of men. She would never forget how those guards had leered at her naked body, why her uncle had sold her to Duke Perrington.

Wincing, Elide swung her pack over her shoulders and carefully set off down the hill's far slope, picking her way among the rocks and roots.

Maybe she'd made a wrong turn. How would she know when she'd crossed Terrasen's border, anyway?

And how would she ever find her queen—her court?

Elide shoved the thoughts away, keeping to the murky shadows and avoiding the splotches of sunlight. It'd only make her thirstier, hotter.

Find water, perhaps more important than finding berries, before darkness set in.

She reached the foot of the hill, suppressing a groan at the labyrinth of wood and stone.

It seemed she now stood in a dried streambed wending between the hills. It curved sharply ahead—northward. A sigh rattled out of her. Thank Anneith. At least the Lady of Wise Things had not abandoned her yet.

She'd follow the streambed for as long as possible, staying northward, and then—

Elide didn't know what sense, exactly, picked up on it. Not smell or sight or sound, for nothing beyond the rot of the loam and the sunlight and stones and the whispering of the high-above leaves was out of the ordinary.

But—there. Like some thread in a great tapestry had snagged, her body locked up.

The humming and rustling of the forest went quiet a heartbeat later.

Elide scanned the hills, the streambed. The roots of an oak atop the nearest hill jutted from the slope's grassy side, providing a thatch of wood

and moss over the dead stream. Perfect.

She limped for it, ruined leg barking, stones clattering and wrenching at her ankles. She could nearly touch the tips of the roots when the first hollowed-out *boom* echoed.

Not thunder. No, she would never forget this one particular sound—for it, too, haunted her dreams both awake and asleep.

The beating of mighty, leathery wings. Wyverns.

And perhaps more deadly: the Ironteeth witches who rode them, senses as sharp and fine-tuned as their mounts’.

Elide lunged for the overhang of thick roots as the wing beats neared, the forest silent as a graveyard. Stones and sticks ripped at her bare hands, her knees banging on the rocky dirt as she pressed herself into the hillside and peered at the canopy through the latticework of roots.

One beat—then another not even a heartbeat after. Synced enough that anyone in the forest might think it was only an echo, but Elide knew: two witches.

She’d picked up enough in her time in Morath to know the Ironteeth were under orders to keep their numbers hidden. They’d fly in perfect, mirrored formation, so listening ears might only report one wyvern.

But these two, whoever they were, were sloppy. Or as sloppy as one of the immortal, lethal witches could be. Lower-level coven members, perhaps. Out on a scouting mission.

Or hunting for someone, a small, petrified voice whispered in her head.

Elide pressed harder into the soil, roots digging into her back as she monitored the canopy.

And *there*. The blur of a swift-moving, massive shape gliding right above the canopy, rattling the leaves. A leathery, membranous wing, its edge tipped in a curved, poison-slick talon, flashed in the sunlight.

Rarely—so rarely—were they ever out in daylight. Whatever they hunted—it had to be important.

Elide didn’t dare breathe too loudly until those wing beats faded, sailing due north.

Toward the Ferian Gap—where Manon had mentioned the second half of the host was camped.

Elide only moved when the forest’s buzzing and chittering resumed. Staying still for so long had caused her muscles to cramp, and she groaned

as she stretched out her legs, then her arms, then rolled her shoulders.

Endless—this journey was endless. She'd give anything for a safe roof over her head. And a hot meal. Maybe seeking them out, if only for a night, was worth the risk.

Picking her way along the bone-dry streambed, Elide made it two steps before that sense-that-was-not-a-sense twanged again, as if a warm, female hand had gripped her shoulder to stop.

The tangled wood murmured with life. But she could feel it—feel something out there.

Not witches or wyverns or beasts. But someone—someone was watching her.

Someone was following her.

Elide casually unsheathed the fighting knife Manon had given her upon leaving this miserable forest.

She wished the witch had taught her how to kill.



Lorcan Salvaterre had been running from those gods-damned beasts for two days now.

He didn't blame them. The witches had been pissed when he'd snuck into their forest camp in the dead of night, slaughtered three of their sentinels without them or their mounts noticing, and dragged a fourth into the trees for questioning.

It had taken him two hours to get the Yellowlegs witch to break, hidden so deep down the throat of a cave that even her screams had been contained. Two hours, and then she was singing for him.

Twin witch armies now stood poised to take the continent: one in Morath, one in the Ferian Gap. The Yellowlegs knew nothing of what power Duke Perrington wielded—knew nothing of what Lorcan hunted: the

other two Wyrdkeys, the siblings to the one he wore on a long chain around his neck. Three slivers of stone cleaved from an unholy Wyrdgate, each key capable of tremendous and terrible power. And when all three Wyrdkeys were united ... they could open that gate between worlds. Destroy those worlds—or summon their armies. And far, far worse.

Lorcan had granted the witch the gift of a swift death.

Her sisters had been hunting him since.

Crouched in a thicket tucked into the side of a steep slope, Lorcan watched the girl ease from the roots. He'd been hiding here first, listening to the clamor of her clumsy approach, and had watched her stumble and limp when she finally heard what swept toward them.

She was delicately built, small enough that he might have thought her barely past her first bleed were it not for the full breasts beneath her close-fitting leathers.

Those clothes had snared his interest immediately. The Yellowlegs had been wearing similar ones—all the witches had. Yet this girl was human.

And when she turned in his direction, those dark eyes scanned the forest with an assessment that was too old, too practiced, to belong to a child. At least eighteen—maybe older. Her pale face was dirty, gaunt. She'd likely been out here for a while, struggling to find food. And the knife she palmed shook enough to suggest she likely had no idea what to do with it.

Lorcan remained hidden, watching her scan the hills, the stream, the canopy.

She knew he was out there, somehow.

Interesting. When he wanted to stay hidden, few could find him.

Every muscle in her body was tense—but she finished scanning the gully, forcing a soft breath through her pursed lips, and continued on. Away from him.

Each step was limping; she'd likely hurt herself crashing through the trees.

The length of her braid snapped against her pack, her silky hair dark like his own. Darker. Black as a starless night.

The wind shifted, blowing her scent toward him, and Lorcan breathed it in, allowing his Fae senses—the senses he'd inherited from his prick of a father—to assess, analyze, as they had done for over five centuries.

Human. Definitely human, but—

He knew that scent.

During the past few months, he'd slaughtered many, many creatures who bore its reek.

Well, wasn't this convenient. Perhaps a gift from the gods: someone useful to interrogate. But later—once he had a chance to study her. Learn her weaknesses.

Lorcan eased from the thicket, not even a twig rustling at his passing.

The demon-possessed girl limped up the streambed, that useless knife still out, her grip on its hilt wholly ineffective. Good.

And so Lorcan began his hunt.

CHAPTER 2

The patter of rain trickling through the leaves and low-lying mists of Oakwald Forest nearly drowned out the gurgle of the swollen stream cutting between the bumps and hollows.

Crouched beside the brook, empty skins forgotten on the mossy bank, Aelin Ashryver Galathynius extended a scarred hand over the rushing water and let the song of the early-morning storm wash over her.

The groaning of breaking thunderheads and the sear of answering lightning had been a violent, frenzied beat since the hour before dawn—now spreading farther apart, calming their fury, as Aelin soothed her own burning core of magic.

She breathed in the chill mists and fresh rain, dragging them deep into her lungs. Her magic guttered in answer, as if yawning good morning and tumbling back to sleep.

Indeed, around the camp just within view, her companions still slept, protected from the storm by an invisible shield of Rowan's making, and warmed from the northern chill that persisted even in the height of summer by a merry ruby flame that she'd kept burning all night. It was the flame that had been the difficult thing to work around—how to keep it crackling while also summoning the small gift of water her mother had given her.

Aelin flexed her fingers over the stream.

Across the brook, atop a mossy boulder tucked into the arms of a gnarled oak, a pair of tiny bone-white fingers flexed and cracked, a mirror to her own movements.

Aelin smiled and said so quietly it was barely audible over the stream and rain, "If you have any pointers, friend, I'd love to hear them."

The spindly fingers darted back over the crest of the rock—which, like so many in these woods, had been carved with symbols and whorls.

The Little Folk had been tracking them since they crossed the border into Terrasen. *Escorting*, Aedion had insisted whenever they spotted large, depthless eyes blinking from a tangle of brambles or peering through a cluster of leaves atop one of Oakwald's famed trees. They hadn't come close enough for Aelin to even get a solid look at them.

But they'd left small gifts just outside the border of Rowan's nightly shields, somehow deposited without alerting whichever of them was on watch.

One morning, it had been a crown of forest violets. Aelin had given it to Evangeline, who had worn the crown on her red-gold head until it fell apart. The next morning, two crowns waited: one for Aelin, and a smaller one for the scarred girl. Another day, the Little Folk left a replica of Rowan's hawk form, crafted from gathered sparrow feathers, acorns, and beetle husks. Her Fae Prince had smiled a bit when he'd found it—and carried it in his saddlebag since.

Aelin herself smiled at the memory. Though knowing the Little Folk were following their every step, listening and watching, had made things ... difficult. Not in any real way that mattered, but slipping off into the trees with Rowan was certainly less romantic knowing they had an audience. Especially whenever Aedion and Lysandra got so sick of their silent, heated glances that the two made up flimsy excuses to get Aelin and Rowan out of sight and scent for a while: the lady had dropped her nonexistent handkerchief on the nonexistent path far behind; they needed more logs for a fire that did not require wood to burn.

And as for her current audience...

Aelin splayed her fingers over the stream, letting her heart become as still as a sun-warmed forest pool, letting her mind shake free of its normal boundaries.

A ribbon of water fluttered up from the stream, gray and clear, and she wended it through her spread fingers as if she were threading a loom.

She tilted her wrist, admiring the way she could see her skin through the water, letting it slip down her hand and curl about her wrist. She said to the faerie watching from the other side of the boulder, "Not much to report to your companions, is it?"

Soggy leaves crunched behind her, and Aelin knew it was only because Rowan wanted her to hear his approach. "Careful, or they'll leave

something wet and cold in your bedroll next time.”

Aelin made herself release the water into the stream before she looked over a shoulder. “Do you think they take requests? Because I’d hand over my kingdom for a hot bath right about now.”

Rowan’s eyes danced as she eased to her feet. She lowered the shield she’d put around herself to keep dry—the steam off the invisible flame blending with the mist around them. The Fae Prince lifted a brow. “Should I be concerned that you’re so chatty this early in the morning?”

She rolled her eyes and turned toward the rock where the faerie had been monitoring her shoddy attempts to master water. But only rain-slick leaves and snaking mist remained.

Strong hands slid over her waist, tugging her into his warmth, as Rowan’s lips grazed her neck, right under her ear.

Aelin arched back into him while his mouth roved across her throat, heating mist-chilled skin. “Good morning to you,” she breathed.

Rowan’s responding grumble set her toes curling.

They hadn’t dared stop at an inn, even after crossing into Terrasen three days ago, not when there were still so many enemy eyes fixed on the roads and taprooms. Not when there were still streaming lines of Adarlanian soldiers finally marching out of her gods-damned territory—thanks to Dorian’s decrees.

Especially when those soldiers might very well march right back here, might choose to ally themselves with the monster squatting down in Morath rather than their true king.

“If you want to take a bath so badly,” Rowan murmured against her neck, “I spotted a pool about a quarter mile back. You could heat it—for both of us.”

She ran her nails down the back of his hands, up his forearms. “I’d boil all the fish and frogs inside it. I doubt it’d be very pleasant then.”

“At least we’d have breakfast prepared.”

She laughed under her breath, and Rowan’s canines scratched the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. Aelin dug her fingers into the powerful muscles of his forearms, savoring the strength there. “The lords won’t be here until sundown. We’ve got time.” Her words were breathless, barely more than a whisper.

Upon crossing the border, Aedion had sent messages to the few lords he trusted, coordinating the meeting that was to happen today—in this clearing, which Aedion himself had used for covert rebel meetings these long years.

They'd arrived early to scope out the land, the pitfalls and advantages. Not a trace of any humans lingered: Aedion and the Bane had always ensured any evidence was wiped away from unfriendly eyes. Her cousin and his legendary legion had already done so much to ensure the safety of Terrasen this past decade. But they were still taking no risks, even with lords who had once been her uncle's banner men.

"Tempting as it might be," Rowan said, nipping her ear in a way that made it hard to think, "I need to be on my way in an hour." To scout the land ahead for any threats. Featherlight kisses brushed over her jaw, her cheek. "And what I said still holds. I'm not taking you against a tree the first time."

"It wouldn't be against a tree—it'd be in a pool." A dark laugh against her now-burning skin. It was an effort to keep from taking one of his hands and guiding it up to her breasts, to beg him to touch, take, taste. "You know, I'm starting to think you're a sadist."

"Trust me, I don't find it easy, either." He tugged her a bit harder against him, letting her feel the evidence pushing with impressive demand against her backside. She nearly groaned at that, too.

Then Rowan pulled away, and she frowned at the loss of his warmth, at the loss of those hands and that body and that mouth. She turned, finding his pine-green eyes pinned on her, and a thrill sparked through her blood brighter than any magic.

But he said, "Why *are* you so coherent this early?"

She stuck out her tongue. "I took over the watch for Aedion, since Lysandra and Fleetfoot were snoring loud enough to wake the dead." Rowan's mouth twitched upward, but Aelin shrugged. "I couldn't sleep anyway."

His jaw tightened as he glanced to where the amulet was hidden beneath her shirt and the dark leather jacket atop it. "Is the Wyrdkey bothering you?"

"No, it's not that." She'd taken to wearing the amulet after Evangeline had looted through her saddlebags and donned the necklace. They'd only

discovered it because the child had returned from washing herself with the Amulet of Orynth proudly displayed over her traveling clothes. Thank the gods they'd been deep in Oakwald at the time, but—Aelin wasn't taking any other chances.

Especially since Lorcan still believed he had the real thing.

They hadn't heard from the immortal warrior since he'd left Rifthold, and Aelin often wondered how far south he'd gotten—if he'd yet realized he bore a fake Wyrdkey within an equally fake Amulet of Orynth. If he'd discovered where the other two had been hidden by the King of Adarlan and Duke Perrington.

Not Perrington—Erawan.

A chill snaked down her back, as if the shadow of Morath had taken form behind her and run a clawed finger along her spine.

“It's just ... this meeting,” Aelin said, waving a hand. “Should we have done it in Orynth? Out in the woods like this just seems so ... cloak-and-dagger.”

Rowan's eyes again drifted toward the northern horizon. At least another week lay between them and the city—the once-glorious heart of her kingdom. Of this continent. And when they got there, it would be an endless stream of councils and preparations and decisions that only she could make. This meeting Aedion had arranged would just be the start of it.

“Better to go into the city with established allies than to enter not knowing what you might find,” Rowan said at last. He gave her a wry smile and aimed a pointed look at Goldryn, sheathed across her back, and the various knives strapped to her. “And besides: I thought ‘cloak-and-dagger’ was your middle name.”

She offered him a vulgar gesture in return.

Aedion had been so careful with his messages while setting up the meeting—had selected this spot far from any possible casualties or spying eyes. And even though he trusted the lords, whom he'd familiarized her with these past weeks, Aedion still hadn't informed them how many traveled in their party—what their talents were. Just in case.

No matter that Aelin was the bearer of a weapon capable of wiping out this entire valley, along with the gray Staghorn Mountains watching over it. And that was just her magic.

Rowan played with a strand of her hair—grown almost to her breasts again. “You’re worried because Erawan hasn’t made a move yet.”

She sucked on a tooth. “What is he waiting for? Are we fools for expecting an invitation to march on him? Or is he letting us gather our strength, letting *me* return with Aedion to get the Bane and raise a larger army around it, only so he can savor our utter despair when we fail?”

Rowan’s fingers stilled in her hair. “You heard Aedion’s messenger. That blast took out a good chunk of Morath. He might be rebuilding himself.”

“No one has claimed that blast as their doing. I don’t trust it.”

“You trust nothing.”

She met his eyes. “I trust you.”

Rowan brushed a finger along her cheek. The rain turned heavy again, its soft patter the only sound for miles.

Aelin lifted onto her toes. She felt Rowan’s eyes on her the whole time, felt his body go still with predatory focus, as she kissed the corner of his mouth, the bow of his lips, the other corner.

Soft, taunting kisses. Designed to see which one of them yielded first.

Rowan did.

With a sharp intake of breath, he gripped her hips, tugging her against him as he slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss until her knees threatened to buckle. His tongue brushed hers—lazy, deft strokes that told her precisely what he was capable of doing elsewhere.

Embers sparked in her blood, and the moss beneath them hissed as rain turned to steam.

Aelin broke the kiss, breathing ragged, satisfied to find Rowan’s own chest rising and falling in an uneven rhythm. So new—this thing between them was still so new, so ... raw. Utterly consuming. The desire was only the start of it.

Rowan made her magic sing. And maybe that was the *carranam* bond between them, but ... her magic wanted to dance with his. And from the frost sparkling in his eyes, she knew his own demanded the same.

Rowan leaned forward until they were brow-to-brow. “Soon,” he promised, his voice rough and low. “Let’s get somewhere safe—somewhere defensible.”

Because her safety always would come first. For him, keeping her protected, keeping her alive, would always come first. He'd learned it the hard way.

Her heart strained, and she pulled back to lift a hand to his face. Rowan read the softness in her eyes, her body, and his own inherent fierceness slipped into a gentleness that so few would ever see. Her throat ached with the effort of keeping the words in.

She'd been in love with him for a while now. Longer than she wanted to admit.

She tried not to think about it, whether he felt the same. Those things—those wishes—were at the bottom of a very, very long and bloody priority list.

So Aelin kissed Rowan gently, his hands again locking around her hips.

“Fireheart,” he said onto her mouth.

“Buzzard,” she murmured onto his.

Rowan laughed, the rumble echoing in her chest.

From the camp, Evangeline's sweet voice chirped through the rain, “Is it time for breakfast?”

Aelin snorted. Sure enough, Fleetfoot and Evangeline were now nudging at poor Lysandra, sprawled out as a ghost leopard by the immortal-burning fire. Aedion, across the fire, lay as unmoving as a boulder. Fleetfoot would likely leap on him next.

“This cannot end well,” Rowan muttered.

Evangeline howled, “*Fooooood!*” Fleetfoot's answering howl followed a heartbeat later.

Then Lysandra's snarl rippled toward them, silencing girl and hound.

Rowan laughed again—and Aelin thought she might never get sick of it, that laugh. That smile.

“We should make breakfast,” he said, turning toward the camp, “before Evangeline and Fleetfoot ransack the whole site.”

Aelin chuckled but glanced over her shoulder to the forest stretching toward the Staghorns. Toward the lords who were hopefully making their way southward—to decide how they would proceed with war ... and rebuilding their broken kingdom.

When she looked back, Rowan was halfway to the camp, Evangeline's red-gold hair flashing as she bounded through the dripping trees, begging

the prince for toast and eggs.

Her family—and her kingdom.

Two dreams long believed lost, she realized as the northern wind ruffled her hair. That she would do anything—ruin herself, sell herself—to protect.

Aelin was about to head for the camp to spare Evangeline from Rowan's cooking when she noticed the object atop the boulder across the stream.

She cleared the stream in one bound and carefully studied what the faerie had left.

Fashioned with twigs, cobwebs, and fish scales, the tiny wyvern was unnervingly accurate, its wings spread wide and thorn-fanged mouth roaring.

Aelin left the wyvern where it was, but her eyes shifted southward, toward the ancient flow of Oakwald, and Morath looming far beyond it. To Erawan reborn, waiting for her with his host of Iron-teeth witches and Valg foot soldiers.

And Aelin Galathynius, Queen of Terrasen, knew the time would soon come to prove just how much she'd bleed for Erilea.



It was useful, Aedion Ashryver thought, to travel with two gifted magic-wielders. Especially during piss-poor weather.

The rains lingered throughout the day as they prepared for the meeting. Rowan had flown northward twice now to track the progress of the lords, but he hadn't seen or scented them.

No one braved the notoriously muddy Terrasen roads in this weather. But with Ren Allsbrook in their company, Aedion had little doubt they'd stay hidden until sunset anyway. Unless the weather had delayed them. Which was a good possibility.

Thunder boomed, so close that the trees shuddered. Lightning flashed with little pause for breath, limning the soaked leaves with silver,

illuminating the world so brightly that his Fae senses were blinded. But at least he was dry. And warm.

They'd avoided civilization so much that Aedion had hardly witnessed or been able to track how many magic-wielders had crept out of hiding—or who was now enjoying the return of their gifts. He'd only seen one girl, no older than nine, weaving tendrils of water above her village's lone fountain for the entertainment and delight of a gaggle of children.

Stone-faced, scarred adults had looked on from the shadows, but none had interfered for better or worse. Aedion's messengers had already confirmed that most people now knew the King of Adarlan had wielded his dark powers to repress magic these last ten years. But even so, he doubted those who had suffered its loss, then the extermination of their kind, would comfortably reveal their powers anytime soon.

At least until people like his companions, and that girl in the square, showed the world it was safe to do so. That a girl with a gift of water could ensure her village and its farmlands thrived.

Aedion frowned at the darkening sky, idly twirling the Sword of Orynth between his palms. Even before magic had vanished, there had been one kind feared above all others, its bearers pariahs at best, dead at worst. Courts in every land had sought them as spies and assassins for centuries. But *his* court—

A delighted, throaty purr rumbled through their little camp, and Aedion shifted his stare to the subject of his thoughts. Evangeline was kneeling on her sleeping mat, humming to herself as she gently ran the horse's brush through Lysandra's fur.

It had taken him days to get used to the ghost leopard form. Years in the Staghorns had drilled the gut-level terror into him. But there was Lysandra, claws retracted, sprawled on her belly as her ward groomed her.

Spy and assassin indeed. A smile tugged on his lips at the pale green eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure. That'd be a fine sight for the lords to see when they arrived.

The shape-shifter had used these weeks of travel to try out new forms: birds, beasts, insects that had a tendency to buzz in his ear or bite him. Rarely—so rarely—had Lysandra taken the human form he'd met her in. Given all that had been done to her and all she'd been forced to do in that human body, Aedion didn't blame her.

Though she'd have to take human form soon, when she was introduced as a lady in Aelin's court. He wondered if she'd wear that exquisite face, or find another human skin that suited her.

More than that, he often wondered what it felt like to be able to change bone and skin and color—though he hadn't asked. Mostly because Lysandra hadn't been in human form long enough to do so.

Aedion looked to Aelin, seated across the fire with Fleetfoot sprawled in her lap, playing with the hound's long ears—waiting, as they all were. His cousin, however, was studying the ancient blade—her father's blade—that Aedion so unceremoniously twirled and tossed from hand to hand, every inch of the metal hilt and cracked bone pommel as familiar to him as his own face. Sorrow flickered in her eyes, as fast as the lightning above, and then vanished.

She'd returned the sword to him upon their departure from Rifthold, choosing to bear Goldryn instead. He'd tried to convince her to keep Terrasen's sacred blade, but she'd insisted it was better off in his hands, that he deserved the honor more than anyone else, including her.

She'd grown quieter the farther north they'd traveled. Perhaps weeks on the road had sapped her.

After tonight, depending on what the lords reported, he'd try to find her a quiet place to rest for a day or two before they made the last leg of the trek to Orynth.

Aedion uncoiled to his feet, sheathing the sword beside the knife Rowan had gifted him, and stalked to her. Fleetfoot's feathery tail thumped in greeting as he sat beside his queen.

"You could use a haircut," she said. Indeed, his hair had grown longer than he usually kept it. "It's almost the same length as mine." She frowned. "It makes us look like we coordinated it."

Aedion snorted, stroking the dog's head. "So what if we did?"

Aelin shrugged. "If you want to start wearing matching outfits as well, I'm in."

He grinned. "The Bane would never let me live it down."

His legion now camped just outside of Orynth, where he'd ordered them to shore up the city's defenses and wait. Wait to kill and die for her.

And with the money Aelin had schemed and butchered to claim from her former master this spring, they could buy themselves an army to follow

behind the Bane. Perhaps mercenaries, too.

The spark in Aelin's eyes died a bit as if she, too, considered all that commanding his legion implied. The risks and costs—not of gold, but lives. Aedion could have sworn the campfire guttered as well.

She had slaughtered and fought and nearly died again and again for the past ten years. Yet he knew she would balk at sending soldiers—at sending *him*—to fight.

That, above all else, would be her first test as queen.

But before that ... this meeting. “You remember everything I told you about them?”

Aelin gave him a flat look. “Yes, I remember everything, cousin.” She poked him hard in the ribs, right where the still-healing tattoo Rowan had inked on him three days ago now lay. All their names, entwined in a complex Terrasen knot right near his heart. Aedion winced as she jabbed the sore flesh, and he batted away her hand as she recited, “Murtaugh was a farmer's son, but married Ren's grandmother. Though he wasn't born into the Allsbrook line, he still commands the seat, despite his insistence that Ren take up the title.” She looked skyward. “Darrow is the wealthiest landowner after yours truly, and more than that, he holds sway over the few surviving lords, mostly through his years of carefully handling Adarlan during the occupation.” She gave him a glare sharp enough to slice skin.

Aedion lifted his hands. “Can you blame me for wanting to make sure this goes smoothly?”

She shrugged but didn't bite his head off.

“Darrow was your uncle's lover,” he added, stretching his legs out before him. “For decades. He's never spoken once to me about your uncle, but ... they were very close, Aelin. Darrow didn't publicly mourn Orlon beyond what was required after the passing of a king, but he became a different man afterward. He's a hard bastard now, but still a fair one. Much of what he's done has been out of his unfading love for Orlon—and for Terrasen. His own maneuvering kept us from becoming completely starved and destitute. Remember that.” Indeed, Darrow had long straddled a line between serving the King of Adarlan and undermining him.

“I. Know,” she said tightly. Pushing too far—that tone was likely her first and last warning that he was starting to piss her off. He'd spent many of the miles they'd traveled these past few days telling her about Ren, and

Murtaugh, and Darrow. Aedion knew she could likely now recite their land holdings, what crops and livestock and goods they yielded, their ancestors, and dead and surviving family members from this past decade. But pushing her about it one last time, making sure she knew ... He couldn't shut the instincts down to ensure it all went well. Not when so much was at stake.

From where he'd been perched on a high branch to monitor the forest, Rowan clicked his beak and flapped into the rain, sailing through his shield as if it parted for him.

Aedion eased to his feet, scanning the forest, listening. Only the trickle of rain on leaves filled his ears. Lysandra stretched, baring her long teeth as she did so, her needlelike claws slipping free and glinting in the firelight.

Until Rowan gave the all clear—until it was just those lords and no one else—the safety protocols they'd established would hold.

Evangeline, as they had taught her, crept to the fire. The flames pulled apart like drawn curtains to allow her and Fleetfoot, sensing the child's fear and pressing close, passage to an inner ring that would not burn her. But would melt the bones of their enemies.

Aelin merely glanced at Aedion in silent order, and he stepped toward the western side of the fire, Lysandra taking up a spot at the southern point. Aelin took the northern but gazed west—toward where Rowan had flapped away.

A dry, hot breeze flowed through their little bubble, and sparks danced like fireflies at Aelin's fingers, her hand hanging casually at her side. The other gripped Goldryn, the ruby in its hilt bright as an ember.

Leaves rustled and branches snapped, and the Sword of Orynth gleamed gold and red in the light of Aelin's flames as he drew it free. He angled the ancient dagger Rowan had gifted him in his other hand. Rowan had been teaching Aedion—teaching all of them, really—about the Old Ways these weeks. About the long-forgotten traditions and codes of the Fae, mostly abandoned even in Maeve's court. But reborn here, and enacted now, as they fell into the roles and duties that they had sorted out and decided for themselves.

Rowan emerged from the rain in his Fae form, his silver hair plastered to his head, his tattoo stark on his tan face. No sign of the lords.

But Rowan held his hunting knife against the bared throat of a young, slender-nosed man and escorted him toward the fire—the stranger's travel-

stained, soaked clothes bearing Darrow's crest of a striking badger.
"A messenger," Rowan ground out.



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