



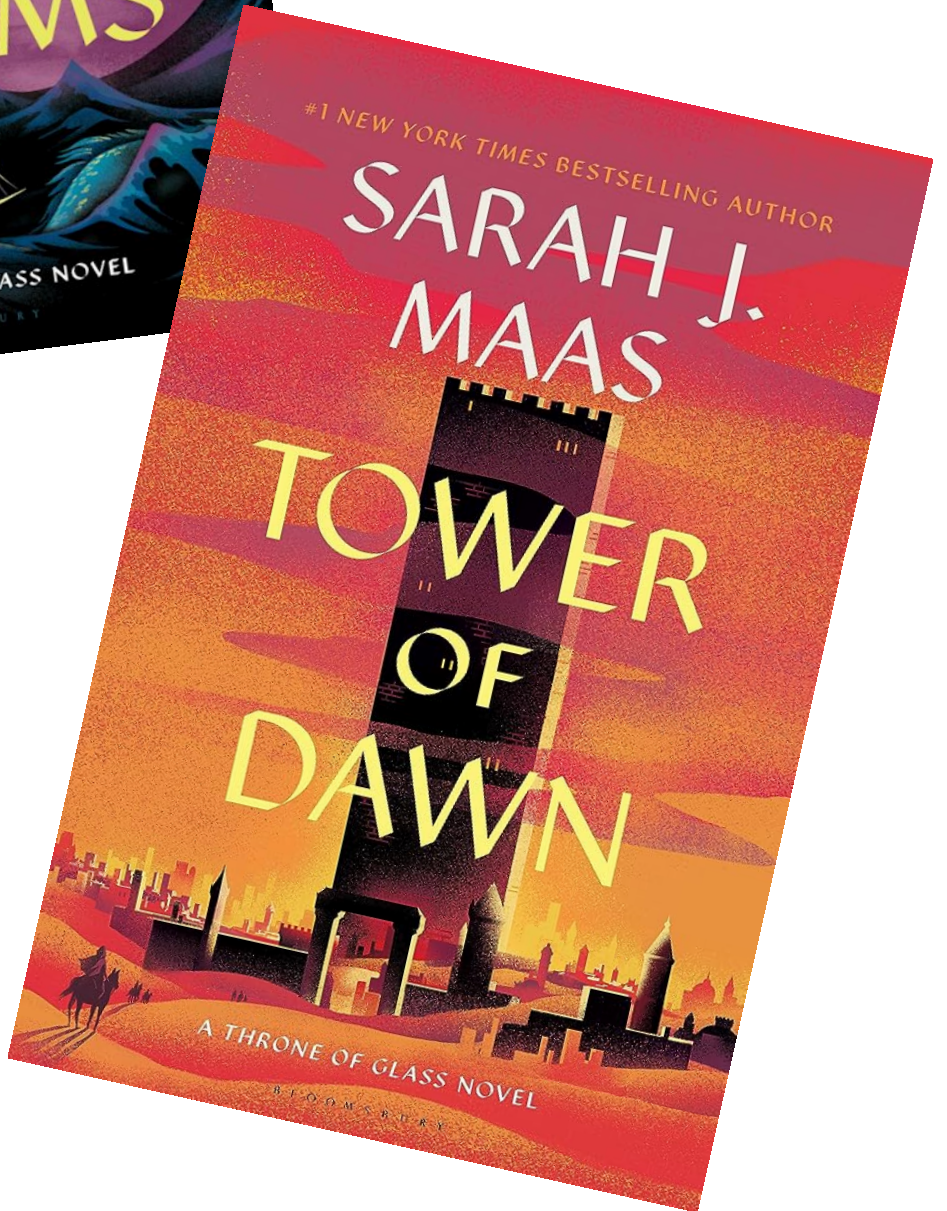
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J.
MAAS

EMPIRE
OF
STORMS

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J.
MAAS

TOWER
OF
DAWN

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY

*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*

BOOKS BY SARAH J. MAAS

The Throne of Glass series

Assassin's Blade

Throne of Glass

Crown of Midnight

Heir of Fire

Queen of Shadows

Empire of Storms

Tower of Dawn

•

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

THRONE OF GLASS *Reading Guide*

There are two ways to read Throne of Glass. I would strongly recommend the Romantic read-through for all readers, old and new. But for those purists out there, I've included a list of the books in publication order.

ROMANTIC

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| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Throne of Glass | <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Queen of Shadows |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Crown of Midnight | <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Tower of Dawn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Heir of Fire | <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Empire of Storms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. The Assassin's Blade | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Kingdom of Ash |

The Romantic reading order places The Assassin's Blade at the point where it'll make the most emotional impact for you. It also positions Tower of Dawn to allow you the best transition from Empire of Storms to Kingdom of Ash.

PURIST

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. The Assassin's Blade | <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Queen of Shadows |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Throne of Glass | <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Empire of Storms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Crown of Midnight | <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Tower of Dawn |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Heir of Fire | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Kingdom of Ash |

The Purist reading order keeps the entire series in publication order. The Assassin's Blade is a prequel, and thus belongs at the beginning. Tower of Dawn was written after Empire of Storms, though they take place at the same time.

EMPIRE OF STORMS & TOWER OF DAWN

An alternative option to reading either Empire of Storms or Tower of Dawn first is to read them together. They are their own stories in two different locations with no overlap, but that take place at the same time. The following checklist provides you with a way to read them in alternating, chronological order.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> EOS - Nightfall | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH17 | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH30 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH36 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH53 |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH7 | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH20 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH34 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH42 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH57 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH8 | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH21 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tower of Dawn CH35 | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH54 | <input type="checkbox"/> Empire of Storms CH68 |
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EMPIRE OF STORMS

CONTENTS

Nightfall

Part One: The Fire-Bringer

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39

Part Two: Fireheart

Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

Chapter 51

Chapter 52

Chapter 53

Chapter 54

Chapter 55

Chapter 56

Chapter 57

Chapter 58

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Chapter 63

Chapter 64

Chapter 65

Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Chapter 68

Chapter 69

Chapter 70

Chapter 71

Chapter 72

Chapter 73

Chapter 74

Chapter 75

Acknowledgments

TOWER OF DAWN

CONTENTS

Map

Part One: The God-City

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Part Two: Mountains and Seas

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Forty-Four

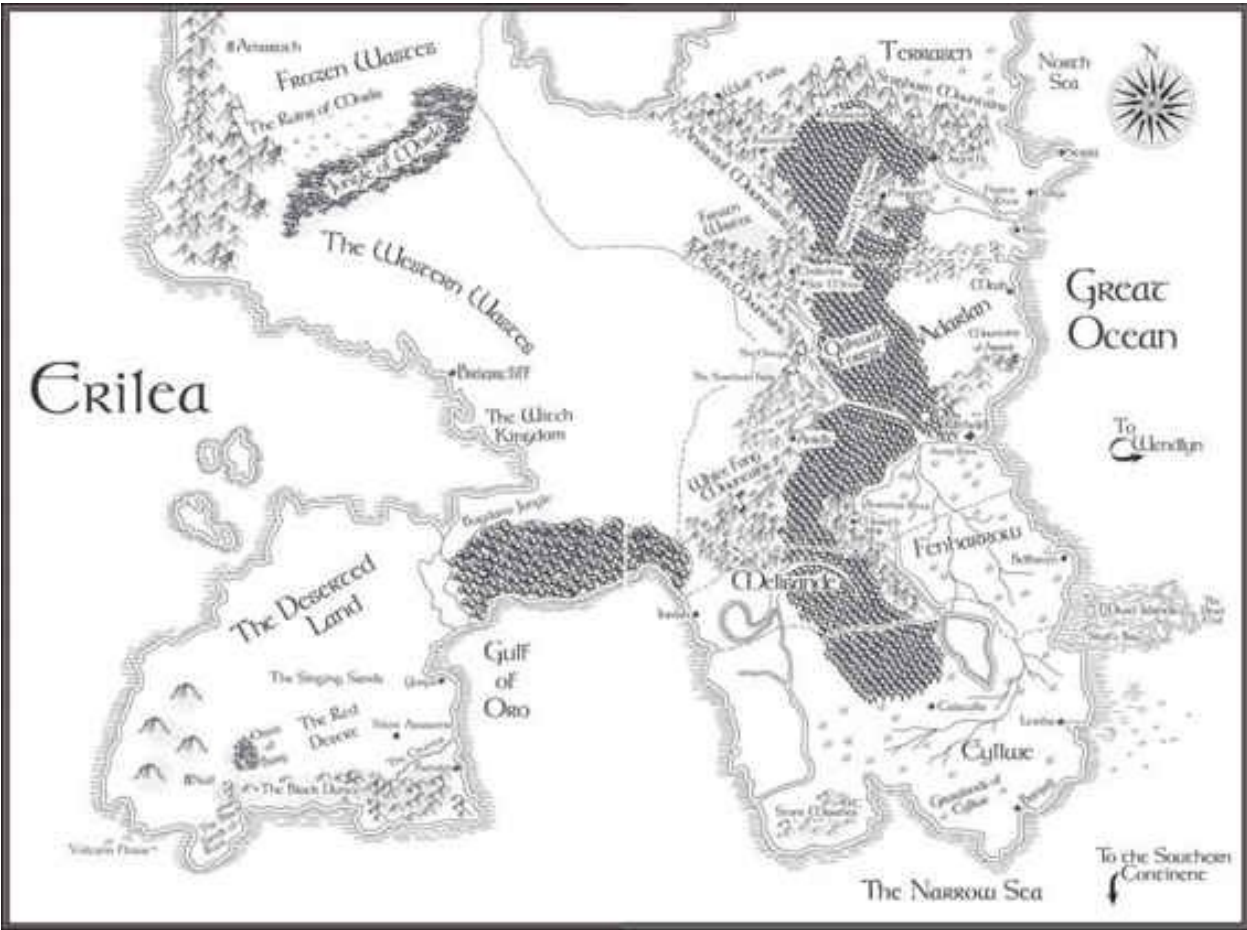
Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One
Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three
Chapter Sixty-Four
Chapter Sixty-Five
Chapter Sixty-Six
Chapter Sixty-Seven
Chapter Sixty-Eight

Fireheart

Acknowledgments





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

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 Wyrddate, 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.

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 Ironteeth 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.



Aelin decided right then and there she didn't particularly enjoy surprises.

The messenger's blue eyes were wide, but his rain-slick, freckled face was calm. Steady. Even as he took in Lysandra, her fangs gilded with firelight. Even

as Rowan nudged him forward, that cruel knife still angled at his throat.

Aedion jerked his chin at Rowan. “He can’t very well deliver the message with a blade at his windpipe.”

Rowan lowered his weapon, but the Fae Prince didn’t sheathe his knife. Didn’t move more than a foot from the man.

Aedion demanded, “Where are they?”

The man bowed swiftly to her cousin. “At a tavern, four miles from here, General—”

The words died as Aelin at last stepped around the curve of the fire. She kept it burning high, kept Evangeline and Fleetfoot ensconced within. The messenger let out a small noise.

He knew. With the way he kept glancing between her and Aedion, seeing the same eyes, the same hair color ... he knew. And as if the thought had hit him, the messenger bowed.

Aelin watched the way the man lowered his eyes, watched the exposed back of his neck, his skin shining with rain. Her magic simmered in response. And that thing—that hideous power hanging between her breasts—seemed to open an ancient eye at all the commotion.

The messenger stiffened, wide-eyed at Lysandra’s silent approach, her whiskers twitching as she sniffed at his wet clothes. He was smart enough to remain still.

“Is the meeting canceled?” Aedion said tightly, scanning the woods again.

The man winced. “No, General—but they want you to come to the tavern where they’re staying. Because of the rain.”

Aedion rolled his eyes. “Go tell Darrow to drag his carcass out here. Water won’t kill him.”

“It’s not Lord Darrow,” the man said quickly. “With all due respect, Lord Murtaugh’s slowed down this summer. Lord Ren didn’t want him out in the dark and rain.”

The old man had ridden across the kingdoms like a demon from hell this spring, Aelin remembered. Perhaps it had taken its toll. Aedion sighed. “You know we’ll need to scout the tavern first. The meeting will be later than they want.”

“Of course, General. They’ll expect that.” The messenger cringed as he at last spotted Evangeline and Fleetfoot within the flame’s ring of safety. And despite the Fae Prince armed beside him, despite the ghost leopard with unsheathed claws sniffing at him, the sight of Aelin’s fire made his face go

deathly pale. “But they are waiting—and Lord Darrow is impatient. Being outside Orynth’s walls makes him anxious. Makes us all anxious, these days.”

Aelin snorted softly. *Indeed.*

Manon Blackbeak stood at attention by one end of the long, dark bridge into Morath and watched her grandmother's coven descend from the gray clouds.

Even with the plumes and pillars of smoke from the countless forges, the High Witch of the Blackbeak Witch-Clan's voluminous obsidian robes were unmistakable. No other dressed as the Matron did. Her coven swept from the heavy cloud cover, keeping a respectful distance from the Matron and the extra rider flanking her massive bull.

Manon, her Thirteen in rank behind her, made no movement as the wyverns and their riders landed on the dark stones of the courtyard across the bridge. Far below, the rushing of a filthy, ruined river roared, vying with the scrape of talons on stone and the rustle of settling wings.

Her grandmother had come to Morath.

Or what was left of it, when one-third was nothing more than rubble.

Asterin hissed in a breath as Manon's grandmother dismounted in a smooth movement, scowling at the black fortress looming above Manon and her Thirteen. Duke Perrington was already waiting in his council chamber, and Manon had no doubt his pet, Lord Vernon, would do his best to undermine and shake her at every turn. If Vernon were to make a move to be rid of Manon, it would be now—when her grandmother was seeing for herself what Manon had accomplished.

And failed to do.

Manon kept her back straight as her grandmother strode across the broad stone bridge, her steps drowned out by the rush of the river, the beat of distant wings, and those forges working day and night to equip their army. When she could see the white in her grandmother's eyes, Manon bowed.

The creak of flying leathers told her the Thirteen had followed suit.

When Manon lifted her head, her grandmother was before her.

Death, cruel and cunning, waited in that gold-flecked onyx stare.

"Take me to the duke," the Matron said by way of greeting.

Manon felt her Thirteen stiffen. Not at the words, but at the High Witch's

coven now following on her heels. Rare—so rare for them to track her, guard her.

But this was a citadel of men—and demons. And this would be an extended stay, if not permanent, judging by the fact that her grandmother had brought along the beautiful, dark-haired young witch currently warming her bed. The Matron would be a fool not to take extra protection. Even if the Thirteen had always been enough. Should have been enough.

It was an effort not to flick out her iron nails at the imagined threat.

Manon bowed again and turned in to the towering, open doors to Morath. The Thirteen parted for Manon and the Matron as they passed, then closed ranks like a lethal veil. No chances—not when the heir and the Matron were concerned.

Manon's steps were near-silent as she led her grandmother through the dark halls, the Thirteen and the Matron's coven trailing close. The servants, through either spying or some human instinct, were nowhere to be found.

The Matron spoke as they ascended the first of many spiral stairwells toward the duke's new council chamber. "Anything to report?"

"No, Grandmother." Manon avoided the urge to glance sidelong at the witch—at the silver-streaked dark hair, the pale features carved with ancient hate, the rusted teeth on permanent display.

The face of the High Witch who had branded Manon's Second. Who had cast Asterin's stillborn witchling into the fire, denying her the right to hold her once. Who had then beaten and broken her Second, thrown her into the snow to die, and lied to Manon about it for nearly a century.

Manon wondered what thoughts now churned through Asterin's head as they walked. Wondered what went through the heads of Sorrel and Vesta, who had found Asterin in the snow. Then healed her.

And never told Manon about it, either.

Her grandmother's creature—that's what Manon was. It had never seemed like a hateful thing.

"Did you discover who caused the explosion?" The Matron's robes swirled behind her as they entered the long, narrow hallway toward the duke's council chamber.

"No, Grandmother."

Those gold-flecked black eyes snapped to her. "How convenient, Wing Leader, that you complain about the duke's breeding experiments—only for the Yellowlegs to be incinerated days later."

Good riddance, Manon almost said. Despite the covens lost in the blast, good rutting riddance that the breeding of those Yellowlegs-Valg witchlings had stopped. But Manon felt, rather than saw or heard, her Thirteen's attention fix on her grandmother's back.

And perhaps something like fear went through Manon.

At the Matron's accusation—and the line her Thirteen were drawing. Had drawn for some time now.

Defiance. That's what it had been these past months. If the High Witch learned of it, she'd tie Manon to a post and whip her back until her skin was hanging in strips. She'd make the Thirteen watch, to prove their powerlessness to defend their heir, and then give them the same treatment. Perhaps chucking salted water on them when she was done. Then do it again, day after day.

Manon said coolly, "I heard a rumor it was the duke's pet—that human woman. But as she was incinerated in the blaze, no one can confirm. I didn't want to waste your time with gossip and theories."

"She was leashed to him."

"It would seem her shadowfire was not." Shadowfire—the mighty power that would have melted their enemies within heartbeats when combined with the mirror-lined witch towers the three Matrons had been building in the Ferian Gap. But with Kaltain gone ... so was the threat of pure annihilation.

Even if the duke would suffer no other master now that his king was dead. He'd rejected the Crown Prince's claim to the throne.

Her grandmother said nothing as they continued onward.

The other piece on the board—the sapphire-eyed prince who had once been in thrall to a Valg prince himself. Now free. And allied with that golden-haired young queen.

They reached the council room doors, and Manon wiped all thoughts from her head as the blank-faced guards opened the black rock for them.

Manon's senses honed to a killing calm the moment she laid eyes on the ebony glass table and who stood at it.

Vernon: tall, lanky, ever-smirking, clad in Terrasen green.

And a golden-haired man, his skin pale as ivory.

No sign of the duke. The stranger twisted toward them. Even her grandmother gave pause.

Not at the man's beauty, not at the strength in his sculpted body or the fine black clothes he wore. But at those gold eyes. Twin to Manon's.

The eyes of the Valg kings.

~

Manon assessed the exits, the windows, the weapons she would use when they fought their way out. Instinct had her stepping in front of her grandmother; training had her palming two knives before the golden-eyed man could blink.

But the man fixed those Valg eyes on her. He smiled.

“Wing Leader.” He looked to her grandmother and inclined his head. “Matron.”

The voice was carnal and lovely and cruel. But the tone, the demand in it ...

Something in Vernon’s smirk now seemed too strained, his tan skin too pale.

“Who are you,” Manon said to the stranger, more an order than a question.

The man jerked his chin toward the unclaimed seats at the table. “You know perfectly well who I am, Manon Blackbeak.”

Perrington. In another body, somehow. Because...

Because that otherworldly, foul thing she had sometimes glimpsed staring out through his eyes ... Here it was, given flesh.

The Matron’s tight face told her she’d already guessed.

“I grew tired of wearing that sagging meat,” he said, sliding with feline grace into the chair beside Vernon. A wave of long, powerful fingers. “My enemies know who I am. My allies might as well, too.”

Vernon bowed his head and murmured, “My Lord Erawan, if it would please you, allow me to fetch the Matron refreshments. Her journey has been long.”

Manon assessed the tall, reedy man. Two gifts he had offered them: respect to her grandmother, and the knowledge of the duke’s true name. Erawan.

She wondered what Ghislaine, on guard in the hall beyond, knew of him.

The Valg king nodded his approval. The Lord of Perranth hustled to the small buffet table against the wall, grabbing a ewer as Manon and the Matron slid into the seats across from the demon king.

Respect—something Vernon had not once offered without a mocking grin. But now...

Perhaps now that the Lord of Perranth realized what manner of monster held his leash, he was desperate for allies. Knew, perhaps, that Manon ... that Manon might have indeed been part of that explosion.

Manon accepted the carved-horn cups of water Vernon set before them but did not drink. Neither did her grandmother.

Across the table, Erawan smiled faintly. No darkness, no corruption leaked from him—as if he were powerful enough to keep it contained, unnoticed, save

for those eyes. Her eyes.

Behind them, the rest of the Thirteen and her grandmother's coven remained in the hall, only their Seconds lingering in the room as the doors were sealed again.

Trapping them all with the Valg king.

"So," Erawan said, looking them over in a way that had Manon clamping her lips to keep from baring her teeth, "are the forces at the Ferian Gap prepared?"

Her grandmother yielded a short dip of her chin. "They move at sundown. They'll be in Rifthold two days after that."

Manon didn't dare shift in her seat. "You're sending the host to Rifthold?"

The demon king flashed her a narrowed glance. "I am sending *you* to Rifthold, to take back my city. When you have finished your task, the Ferian legion will be stationed there under the command of Iskra Yellowlegs."

To Rifthold. To finally, *finally* fight, to see what their wyverns could do in battle— "Do they suspect the attack?"

A lifeless smile. "Our forces will move too swiftly for word to reach them." No doubt why this information had been contained until now.

Manon tapped a foot on the slate floor, already itching to move, to command the others in preparations. "How many of the Morath covens do I bring northward?"

"Iskra flies with the second half of our aerial legion. I would think that only a few covens from Morath would be necessary." A challenge—and a test.

Manon considered. "I fly with my Thirteen and two escort covens." No need for their enemies to get a good count on how many covens flew in the aerial legion—or for the entirety to go when she'd bet good money that even the Thirteen would be enough to sack the capital.

Erawan just inclined his head in agreement. Her grandmother gave her a barely perceptible nod—as close to approval as she'd ever get.

But Manon asked, "What of the prince?" King. King Dorian.

Her grandmother shot her a look, but the demon said, "I want you to personally bring him to me. If he survives the attack."

And with the fiery queen now gone, Dorian Havilliard and his city were defenseless.

It mattered little to her. It was war.

Fight this war, and go home to the Wastes at the end of it. Even if this man, this demon king, might very well renege on his word.

She'd deal with that later. But first ... open battle. She could already hear its

wild song in her blood.

The demon king and her grandmother were speaking again, and Manon cleared away the melody of clashing shields and sparking swords long enough to process their words.

“Once the capital is secured, I want those boats on the Avery.”

“The men of the Silver Lake have agreed?” Her grandmother studied the map weighted to the glass table by smooth stones. Manon followed the Matron’s stare to the Silver Lake, at the other end of the Avery, and to its city, nestled against the White Fangs: Anielle.

Perrington—Erawan—shrugged his broad shoulders. “Its lord has not yet declared allegiance to me or the boy-king. I suspect when word reaches him of Rifthold’s demise, we will find his messengers groveling on our doorstep.” A flicker of a smile. “Their Keep along the Western Falls of the lake still bears scars from the last time my armies marched. I have seen the countless monuments in Anielle to that war—its lord will know how easily I can again turn his city into a charnel house.”

Manon studied the map again, shutting out the questions.

Old. The Valg king was so old as to make her feel young. To make her grandmother look like a child, too.

Fool—perhaps her grandmother had been a fool to sell them into an unwitting alliance with this creature. She made herself meet Erawan’s stare. “With strongholds in Morath, Rifthold, and Anielle, that only covers the southern half of Adarlan. What of north of the Ferian Gap? Or south of Adarlan?”

“Bellhaven remains under my control—its lords and merchants love their gold too much. Melisande...” The demon king’s golden eyes fixed on the western country across the mountains. “Eyllwe lies shattered beneath her, Fenharrow in barren shambles to the east. It remains in Melisande’s best interest to continue allying her forces with my own, especially when Terrasen hasn’t a copper to its name.” The king’s stare roamed northward. “Aelin Galathynius will have reached her seat by now. And when Rifthold is gone, she will also find how very alone she is in the North. Brannon’s heir has no allies on this continent. Not anymore.”

But Manon noted the way the demon king’s eyes darted to Eyllwe—just for a flicker.

She looked to her grandmother, silent yet watching Manon with an expression that promised death if she pushed too far. But Manon said to Erawan,

“Your capital is the heart of your commerce. If I unleash my legion upon it, you will have few human allies—”

“Last I looked, Manon Blackbeak, it was *my* legion.”

Manon held Erawan’s burning gaze, even as it stripped her bare. “Turn Rifthold into a complete ruin,” she said flatly, “and rulers like the Lord of Anielle or the Queen of Melisande or the Lords of Fenharrow might very well find it worth the risk to rally against you. If you wreck your own capital, why should they believe your claims of alliance? Send a decree ahead of us that the king, the queen are enemies to the continent. Establish us as liberators of Rifthold, not conquerors, and you will have the other rulers thinking twice before allying with Terrasen. I will sack the city for you enough to display our might—but keep the Ironteeth host from leaving it in rubble.”

Those gold eyes narrowed with consideration.

She knew her grandmother was one more word away from gouging her nails down Manon’s cheek, but she kept her shoulders back. She didn’t care about the city, its people. But this war could indeed turn against them if the annihilation of Rifthold united their scattered enemies. And delay the Blackbeaks that much more from returning to the Wastes.

Vernon’s eyes flicked to meet hers. Fear—and calculation. He murmured to Erawan, “The Wing Leader has a point, milord.” What did Vernon know that she didn’t?

But Erawan angled his head, his golden hair sliding across his brow. “That is why you are my Wing Leader, Manon Blackbeak, and why Iskra Yellowlegs did not win the position.”

Disgust and pride warred in her, but she nodded.

“One more thing.”

She remained still, waiting.

The demon king lounged in his seat. “There is a glass wall in Rifthold. Impossible to miss.” She knew it—had perched atop it. “Damage the city enough to instill fear, show our power. But that wall ... Bring it down.”

She only said, “Why?”

Those golden eyes simmered like hot coals. “Because destroying a symbol can break the spirits of men as much as bloodshed.”

That glass wall—Aelin Galathynius’s power. And mercy. Manon held that gaze long enough to nod. The king jerked his chin toward the shut doors in silent dismissal.

Manon was out of the room before he’d turned back to Vernon. It did not

occur to her until she was long gone that she should have remained to protect the Matron.



The Thirteen did not speak until they had landed at their personal armory in the army camp below, had not even risked it while saddling their wyverns in the new aerie.

Sweeping through the smoke and gloom that always wreathed Morath, the two escort covens Manon had selected—both Blackbeaks—steered for their own armories. Good.

Now standing in the mud of the valley floor outside the cobbled-together labyrinth of forges and tents, Manon said to her assembled Thirteen, “We fly in thirty minutes.” Behind them, blacksmiths and handlers were already rushing to haul armor onto the chained-down wyverns.

If they were smart, or fast, they wouldn’t wind up between those jaws. Already, Asterin’s sky-blue mare was sizing up the man closest to her.

Manon was half tempted to see if she’d take a bite out of him, but she said to her coven, “If we are lucky, we will arrive before Iskra and set the tone for how the sacking unfolds. If we are not, we seek out Iskra and her coven upon arriving and staunch the slaughter. Leave the prince to me.” She didn’t dare look at Asterin as she said it. “I have no doubt the Yellowlegs will try to claim his head. Stop any one of them who dares take it.”

And perhaps put an end to Iskra as well. Accidents happened all the time in battle.

The Thirteen bowed their heads in acquiescence. Manon jerked her head over a shoulder, to the armory under the shoddy canvas tents. “Full armor.” She gave them a slashing grin. “We don’t want to make our grand appearance looking anything but our best.”

Twelve matching grins met hers, and they peeled away, heading toward the tables and dummies where their armor had been carefully and meticulously built these past months.

Only Asterin remained at her side as Manon grabbed Ghislaine by an arm when the curly-haired sentinel strode past.

She murmured over the clank of forges and roar of wyverns, “Tell us what you know of Erawan.” Ghislaine opened her mouth, dark skin wan, and Manon snapped, “*Concisely.*”

Ghislaine swallowed hard, nodding as the rest of the Thirteen readied beyond them. The warrior-scholar whispered so only Manon and Asterin could hear. “He was one of the three Valg kings who invaded this world at the dawn of time. The other two were either killed or sent back to their dark world. He was stranded here, with a small army. He fled to this continent after Maeve and Brannon squashed his forces, and spent a thousand years rebuilding his numbers in secret, deep beyond the White Fangs. When he was ready, when he noticed that King Brannon’s flame was dimming, Erawan launched his attack to claim this continent. Legend has it that he was defeated by Brannon’s own daughter and her human mate.”

Asterin snorted. “It would seem that legend is wrong.”

Manon released Ghislaine’s arm. “Get ready. Tell the others when you can.”

Ghislaine bowed her head and stalked into the arsenal.

Manon ignored Asterin’s narrow stare. Now was not the time for this conversation.

She found the mute blacksmith by his usual forge, sweat streaming down his soot-stained brow. But his eyes were solid, calm, as he pulled back the canvas tarp on his worktable to reveal her armor. Polished, ready.

The suit of dark metal had been fashioned like intricate wyvern scales. Manon ran a finger along the overlapping plates and lifted a gauntlet, perfectly formed to her own hand. “It’s beautiful.”

Horrible, yet beautiful. She wondered what he made of the fact that he’d forged this armor for her to wear while ending the lives of his countrymen. His ruddy face revealed nothing.

She stripped off her red cloak and began donning the armor bit by bit. It slid over her like a second skin, flexible and pliant where she needed it to be, unyielding where her life depended on it.

When she was done, the blacksmith looked her over and nodded, then reached below his table to place another object on its surface. For a heartbeat, Manon only stared at the crowned helmet.

It had been forged of the same dark metal, the nose and brow guards fashioned so that most of her face would be in shadow—save for her mouth. And her iron teeth. The six lances of the crown jutted upward like small swords.

A conqueror’s helm. A demon’s helm.

Manon felt the eyes of her Thirteen, now armed, upon her as she tucked her braid into the neck of her armor and lifted the helmet over her head.

It fitted easily, its interior cool against her hot skin. Even with the shadows

that hid most of her face, she could see the blacksmith with perfect clarity as his chin dipped in approval.

She had no idea why she bothered, but Manon found herself saying, “Thank you.”

Another shallow nod was his only reply before she swept from his table.

Soldiers cowered from her storming path as she signaled to the Thirteen and mounted Abraxos, her wyvern preening in his new armor.

She didn't look back at Morath as they took to the gray skies.

Aedion and Rowan did not let Darrow's messenger go ahead to warn the lords of their arrival. If this was some maneuver to get them on uneven footing, despite all that Murtaugh and Ren had done for them this spring, then they'd gain the advantage whatever way they could.

Aelin supposed that she should have taken the stormy weather as an omen. Or perhaps Murtaugh's age provided a convenient excuse for Darrow to test her. She leashed her temper at the thought.

The tavern was erected at a crossroads just inside the tangle of Oakwald. With the rain and night settling in, it was packed, and they had to pay double to stable their horses. Aelin was fairly certain that one word from her, one flicker of that telltale fire, would have cleared out not only the stables, but also the tavern itself.

Lysandra had padded off half a mile away, and when they arrived, she slunk from the bushes and nodded her fuzzy, drenched head at Aelin. All clear.

Inside the inn, there were no rooms to be found for rent, and the taproom itself was crammed full of travelers, hunters, and whoever else was escaping the downpour. Some even sat against the walls—and Aelin supposed that it was how she and her friends might very well spend their evening once this meeting concluded.

A few heads twisted their way as they entered, but dripping hoods and cloaks concealed their faces and weapons, and those heads quickly returned to their drinks or cards or drunken songs.

Lysandra had finally shifted back into her human form—and true to her oath months ago, her once-full breasts were now smaller. Despite what awaited them in the private dining room at the back of the inn, Aelin caught the shape-shifter's eye and smirked.

"Better?" she murmured over Evangeline's head as Darrow's messenger, Aedion at his side, strolled through the crowd.

Lysandra's grin was half feral. "Oh, you have no idea."

Behind them, Aelin could have sworn Rowan chuckled.

The messenger and Aedion turned down a hallway, the dim candlelight flickering amongst the raindrops still sliding off the round, scarred shield strapped across her cousin's back. The Wolf of the North, who, even though he had won battles with his Fae speed and strength, had earned the respect and loyalty of his legion as a man—as a human. Aelin, still in her Fae form, wondered if she should have shifted herself.

Ren Allsbrook waited in there. Ren, another childhood friend, whom she had almost killed, *tried* to kill this past winter, and who had no idea who she really was. Who had stayed at her apartment without realizing it belonged to his lost queen. And Murtaugh ... She had vague memories of the man, mostly involving him sitting at her uncle's table, slipping her extra blackberry tarts.

Any good that remained, any shred of safety, it was thanks to Aedion, the dents and scratches marring his shield utter proof of it, and to the three men who awaited her.

Aelin's shoulders began to curve inward, but Aedion and the messenger paused before a wooden door, knocking once. Fleetfoot brushed against her calf, tail wagging, and Aelin smiled down at the hound, who shook herself again, flinging droplets of water. Lysandra snorted. Bringing a wet dog into a covert meeting—very queenly.

But Aelin had promised herself, months and months ago, that she would not pretend to be anything but what she was. She had crawled through darkness and blood and despair—she had survived. And even if Lord Darrow could offer men and funding for a war ... she had both, too. More would be better, but—she was not empty-handed. She had done that for herself. For them all.

Aelin squared her shoulders as Aedion stepped into the room, already speaking to those inside: “Just like you bastards to make us trudge through the rain because you don't want to get wet. Ren, looking put-out, as usual. Murtaugh, always a pleasure. Darrow—your hair looks as bad as mine.”

Someone said from within in a dry, cold voice, “Given the secrecy with which you arranged this meeting, one would think you were sneaking through your own kingdom, Aedion.”

Aelin reached the ajar door, debating whether it was worth it to open the conversation by telling the fools inside to keep their voices down, but—

They were. With her Fae ears, she picked up more sounds than the average human. She stepped ahead of Lysandra and Evangeline, letting them enter behind her as she paused in the doorway to survey the private dining room.

One window, cracked to soothe the stifling heat of the inn. A large

rectangular table before a roaring hearth, littered with empty plates, crumbs, and worn serving platters. Two old men sat at it, one with the messenger whispering something in his ear too softly for her Fae hearing before he bowed to all of them and saw himself out. Both old men straightened as they looked past where Aedion stood before the table—to her.

But Aelin focused upon the dark-haired young man by the hearth, an arm braced against the mantel, his scarred, tan face slack.

She remembered those twin swords at his back. Those dark, burning eyes.

Her mouth had gone slightly dry by the time she tugged back her hood. Ren Allsbrook started.

But the old men had risen to their feet. She knew one of them.

Aelin didn't know how she hadn't recognized Murtaugh that night she'd gone to the warehouse to end so many of them. Especially when he'd been the one who halted her slaughtering.

The other old man, though ... while wrinkled, his face was strong—hard. Without amusement or joy or warmth. A man used to getting his way, to being obeyed without question. His body was thin and wiry, but his spine was still straight. Not a warrior of the sword, but of the mind.

Her great-uncle, Orlon, had been both. And kind—she'd never heard a stern or raging word from Orlon. This man, though ... Aelin held Darrow's gray-eyed gaze, predator recognizing predator.

“Lord Darrow,” she said, inclining her head. She couldn't help the crooked grin. “You look toasty.”

Darrow's plain face remained unmoved. Unimpressed.

Well, then.

Aelin watched Darrow, waiting—refusing to break his stare until he bowed.

A dip of his head was all he offered.

“A bit lower,” she purred.

Aedion's gaze snapped to her, full of warning.

Darrow did no such thing.

It was Murtaugh who bowed deeply at the waist and said, “Majesty. We apologize for sending the messenger to fetch you—but my grandson worries after my health.” An attempt at a smile. “To my chagrin.”

Ren ignored his grandfather and pushed off the mantel, his boot-steps the only sound as he rounded the table. “You knew,” he breathed to Aedion.

Lysandra, wisely, shut the door and bid Evangeline and Fleetfoot to stand by the window—to watch for any peering eyes. Aedion gave Ren a little smile.

“Surprise.”

Before the young lord could retort, Rowan stepped to Aelin’s side and pulled back his hood.

The men stiffened as the Fae warrior was revealed in his undimmed glory—glazed violence already in his eyes. Already focused on Lord Darrow.

“Now, that is a sight I have not seen for an age,” Darrow murmured.

Murtaugh mastered his shock—and perhaps a bit of fear—enough to extend a hand toward the empty chairs across from them. “Please, sit. Apologies for the mess. We hadn’t realized the messenger might retrieve you so swiftly.” Aelin made no move to sit. Neither did her companions. Murtaugh added, “We can order fresh food if you wish. You must be famished.” Ren shot his grandfather an incredulous look that told her everything she needed to know about the rebel’s opinion of her.

Lord Darrow was watching her again. Assessing.

Humility—gratitude. She should try; she *could* try, damn it. Darrow had sacrificed for her kingdom; he had men and money to offer in the upcoming battle with Erawan. *She* had called this meeting; *she* had asked these lords to meet them. Who cared if it was in another location? They were all here. It was enough.

Aelin forced herself to walk to the table. To claim the chair across from Darrow and Murtaugh.

Ren remained standing, monitoring her with dark fire in his eyes.

She said quietly to Ren, “Thank you—for helping Captain Westfall this spring.”

A muscle flickered in Ren’s jaw, but he said, “How does he fare? Aedion mentioned his injuries in his letter.”

“Last I heard, he was on his way to the healers in Antica. To the Torre Cesme.”

“Good.”

Lord Darrow said, “Would you care to enlighten me on how you know each other, or shall I be required to guess?”

Aelin began counting to ten at the tone. But it was Aedion who said as he claimed a seat, “Careful, Darrow.”

Darrow interlaced his gnarled but manicured fingers and set them on the table. “Or what? Shall you burn me to ash, Princess? Melt my bones?”

Lysandra slipped into a chair beside Aedion and asked with the sweet, unthreatening politeness that had been trained into her, “Is there any water left in

that pitcher? Traveling through the storm was rather taxing.”

Aelin could have kissed her friend for the attempt at dulling the razor-sharp tension.

“Who, pray tell, are you?” Darrow frowned at the exquisite beauty, the uptilted eyes that did not shy from his despite her gentle words. Right—he had not known who traveled with her and Aedion. Or what gifts they bore.

“Lysandra,” Aedion answered, unbuckling his shield and setting it on the floor behind them with a heavy thunk. “Lady of Caraverre.”

“There is no Caraverre,” Darrow said.

Aelin shrugged. “There is now.” Lysandra had settled on the name a week ago, whatever it meant, bolting upright in the middle of the night and practically shouting it at Aelin once she’d mastered herself long enough to shift back into her human form. Aelin doubted she’d soon forget the image of a wide-eyed ghost leopard trying to speak. She smiled a bit at Ren, still watching her like a hawk. “I took the liberty of buying the land your family yielded. Looks like you’ll be neighbors.”

“And what bloodline,” Darrow asked, his mouth tightening at the brand across Lysandra’s tattoo, the mark visible no matter what form she took, “does Lady Lysandra hail from?”

“We didn’t arrange this meeting to discuss bloodlines and heritage,” Aelin countered evenly. She looked to Rowan, who gave a confirming nod that the inn staff was far from the room and no one was within hearing range.

Her Fae Prince stalked to the serving table against the wall to fetch the water Lysandra had asked for. He sniffed it, and she knew his magic swept through it, probing the water for any poison or drug, while he floated four glasses over to them on a phantom wind.

The three lords watched in wide-eyed silence. Rowan sat and casually poured the water, then summoned a fifth cup, filled it, and floated it to Evangeline. The girl beamed at the magic and went back to staring out the rain-splattered window. Listening while pretending to be pretty, to be useless and small, as Lysandra had taught her.

Lord Darrow said, “At least your Fae warrior is good for something other than brute violence.”

“If this meeting is interrupted by unfriendly forces,” Aelin said smoothly, “you’ll be glad for that brute violence, Lord Darrow.”

“And what of your particular skill set? Should I be glad of that, too?”

She didn’t care how he’d learned. Aelin cocked her head, choosing each

word, forcing herself to think it through for once. “Is there a skill set that you would prefer I possess?”

Darrow smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes. “Some control would do Your Highness well.”

On either side of her, Rowan and Aedion were taut as bowstrings. But if *she* could keep her temper leashed, then they could—

Your Highness. Not Majesty.

“I’ll take that into consideration,” she said with a little smile of her own. “As for why my court and I wished to meet with you today—”

“Court?” Lord Darrow raised his silver brows. Then he slowly raked his stare over Lysandra, then Aedion, and finally Rowan. Ren was gaping at them all, something like longing—and dismay—on his face. “This is what you consider a court?”

“Obviously, the court will be expanded once we’re in Orynth—”

“And for that matter, I do not see how there can even *be* a court, as you are not yet queen.”

She kept her chin high. “I’m not sure I catch your meaning.”

Darrow sipped from his tankard of ale. The plunk as he set it down echoed through the room. Beside him, Murtaugh had gone still as death. “Any ruler of Terrasen must be approved by the ruling families of each territory.”

Ice, cold and ancient, cracked through her veins. Aelin wished she could blame it on the thing hanging from her neck.

“Are you telling me,” she said too quietly, fire flickering in her gut, dancing along her tongue, “that even though I am the last living Galathynius, my throne does not yet belong to me?”

She felt Rowan’s attention fix upon her face, but she didn’t look away from Lord Darrow.

“I am telling you, Princess, that while you might be the last living direct descendant of Brannon, there are other possibilities, other directions to go in, should you be deemed unfit.”

“Weylan, please,” Murtaugh cut in. “We did not accept the offer to meet for this. It was to discuss rebuilding, to *help* her and work with her.”

They all ignored him.

“Other possibilities such as yourself?” Aelin asked Darrow. Smoke curled in her mouth. She swallowed it down, nearly choking on it.

Darrow didn’t so much as flinch. “You can hardly expect us to allow a nineteen-year-old assassin to parade into our kingdom and start yapping orders,

regardless of her bloodline.”

Think it through, take a deep breath. Men, money, support from your already-broken people. That’s what Darrow offers, what you can stand to gain, if you just control your rutting temper.

She stifled the fire in her veins into murmuring embers. “I understand that my personal history might be considered problematic—”

“I find everything about you, Princess, to be problematic. The least of which is your choice in friends and *court* members. Can you explain to me why a common whore is in your company and being passed as a lady? Or why one of Maeve’s minions is now sitting at your side?” He tossed a sneer in Rowan’s direction. “Prince Rowan, is it?” He must have pieced it together from what the messenger had whispered in his ear upon arriving. “Oh, yes, we’ve heard of you. What an interesting turn of events, that when our kingdom is weakest and its heir so young, one of Maeve’s most trusted warriors manages to gain a foothold, after so many years of gazing at our kingdom with such longing. Or perhaps the better question is, why serve at Maeve’s feet when you could rule beside Princess Aelin?”

It took considerable effort to keep her fingers from curling into fists. “Prince Rowan is my *carranam*. He is above any doubt.”

“*Carranam*. A long-forgotten term. What other things did Maeve teach you in Doranelle this spring?”

She bit back her retort as Rowan’s hand grazed hers beneath the table—his face bored, uninterested. The calm of a feral, frozen storm. *Permission to speak, Majesty?*

She had a feeling Rowan would very, very much enjoy the task of shredding Darrow into little pieces. She also had the feeling that she’d very, very much enjoy joining him.

Aelin gave a slight nod, at a loss for words herself as she struggled to keep her flames at bay.

Honestly, she felt slightly bad for Darrow as the Fae Prince gave him a look laced with three hundred years of cold violence. “Are you accusing me of taking the blood oath to my queen with dishonor?”

Nothing human, nothing merciful in those words.

To his credit, Darrow didn’t shrink. Rather, he raised his brows at Aedion, then turned and shook his head at Aelin. “You gave away the sacred oath to this ... male?”

Ren gaped a bit as he surveyed Aedion, that scar stark against his tan skin.

She had not been there to protect him from it. Or to protect Ren's sisters when their magic academy became a slaughterhouse during Adarlan's invasion. Aedion caught Ren's surprise and subtly shook his head, as if to say, *I'll explain later*.

But Rowan leaned back in his chair with a faint smile—and it was a horrifying, terrible thing. “I have known many princesses with kingdoms to inherit, Lord Darrow, and I can tell you that absolutely none of them were ever stupid enough to allow a male to manipulate them that way, least of all my queen. But if I were going to scheme my way onto a throne, I'd pick a far more peaceful and prosperous kingdom.” He shrugged. “But I do not think my brother and sister in this room would allow me to live for very long if they suspected I meant their queen ill—or their kingdom.”

Aedion gave a grim nod, but beside him, Lysandra straightened—not in anger or surprise, but pride. It broke Aelin's heart as much as it lightened it.

Aelin smiled slowly at Darrow, flames banking. “How long did it take you to come up with a list of every possible thing to insult me with and accuse me of during this meeting?”

Darrow ignored her and jerked his chin at Aedion. “You're rather quiet tonight.”

“I don't think you particularly want to hear my thoughts right now, Darrow,” Aedion replied.

“Your blood oath is stolen by a foreign prince, your queen is an assassin who appoints common whores to serve her, and yet you have nothing to say?”

Aedion's chair groaned, and Aelin dared a look—to find him gripping the sides of it so hard his knuckles were white.

Lysandra, though stiff-backed, did not give Darrow the pleasure of blushing with shame.

And she was done. Sparks danced at her fingertips beneath the table.

But Darrow went on before Aelin could speak or incinerate the room. “Perhaps, Aedion, if you hope to still gain an official position in Terrasen, you could see if your kin in Wendlyn have reconsidered the betrothal proposition of so many years ago. See if they'll recognize you as family. What a difference it might have made, if you and our beloved Princess Aelin had been betrothed—if Wendlyn had not rejected the offer to formally unite our kingdoms, likely at Maeve's behest.” A smile in Rowan's direction.

Her world tilted a bit. Even Aedion had paled. No one had ever hinted that there had been an official attempt at betrothing them. Or that the Ashryvers had

truly left Terrasen to war and ruin.

“Whatever will the adoring masses say of their savior princess,” Darrow mused, putting his hands flat on the table, “when they hear of how she has spent her time while they suffered?” A slap in the face, one after another. “But,” Darrow added, “you’ve always been good at whoring yourself out, Aedion. Though I wonder if Princess Aelin knows what—”

Aelin lunged.

Not with flame, but steel.

The dagger shuddering between Darrow’s fingers flickered with the light of the crackling hearth.

She snarled in the old man’s face, Rowan and Aedion half out of their chairs, Ren reaching for a weapon, but looking sick—sick at the sight of the ghost leopard now sitting where Lysandra had been a moment ago.

Murtaugh gaped at the shape-shifter. But Darrow glared at Aelin, his face white with rage.

“You want to sling insults at me, Darrow, then go ahead,” Aelin hissed, her nose almost touching his. “But you insult my own again, and I won’t miss next time.” She flicked her eyes to the dagger between the old man’s splayed fingers, a hairsbreadth separating the blade from his speckled flesh.

“I see you inherited your father’s temper,” Darrow sneered. “Is this how you plan to rule? When you don’t like someone, you’ll threaten them?” He slid his hand from the blade and pulled back far enough to cross his arms. “What would Orlon think of this behavior, this bullying?”

“Choose your words wisely, Darrow,” Aedion warned.

Darrow lifted his brows. “All the work I have done, all that I have sacrificed these past ten years, has been in Orlon’s name, to honor him and to save his kingdom—*my* kingdom. I do not plan to let a spoiled, arrogant child destroy that with her temper tantrums. Did you enjoy the riches of Rifthold these years, Princess? Was it very easy to forget us in the North when you were buying clothes and serving the monster who butchered your family and friends?”

Men, and money, and a unified Terrasen.

“Even your cousin, despite his whoring, helped us in the North. And Ren Allsbrook”—a wave of the hand in Ren’s direction—“while you were living in luxury, did you know that Ren and his grandfather were scraping together every copper they could, all to find a way to keep the rebel effort alive? That they squatted in shanties and slept under horses?”

“That’s enough,” Aedion said.

“Let him go on,” Aelin said, sitting back in her seat and crossing her arms.

“What else is there to say, Princess? Do you think the people of Terrasen will be glad to have a queen who served their enemy? Who shared a bed with the son of their enemy?”

Lysandra snarled softly, rattling the glasses.

Darrow was unfazed. “And a queen who now undoubtedly shares a bed with a Fae Prince who served the other enemy at our backs—what do you suppose our people will make of *that*?”

She didn’t want to know how Darrow had guessed, what he’d read between them.

“Who shares my bed,” she said, “is none of your concern.”

“And that is why you are not fit to rule. Who shares the queen’s bed is *everyone*’s concern. Will you lie to our people about your past, deny that you served the deposed king—and served his son, too, in a different manner?”

Beneath the table, Rowan’s hand shot out to grip her own, his fingers coated in ice that soothed the fire starting to flicker at her nails. Not in warning or reprimand—just to tell her that he, too, was struggling with the effort to keep from using the pewter food platter to smash in Darrow’s face.

So she didn’t break Darrow’s stare, even as she laced her fingers with Rowan’s.

“I will tell *my* people,” Aelin said quietly but not weakly, “the entire truth. I will show them the scars on my back from Endovier, the scars on my body from my years as Celaena Sardothien, and I will tell them that the new King of Adarlan is not a monster. I will tell them that we have one enemy: the bastard down in Morath. And Dorian Havilliard is the only chance for survival—and future peace between our two kingdoms.”

“And if he is not? Will you shatter his stone castle as you shattered the glass one?”

Chaol had mentioned this—months ago. She should have considered it more, that ordinary humans might demand checks against her power. Against the power of the court gathering around her. But let Darrow believe she’d shattered the glass castle; let him believe she’d killed the king. Better than the potentially disastrous truth.

“Should you still wish to be a part of Terrasen,” Darrow continued when none of them replied, “I’m sure Aedion can find some use for you in the Bane. But I will have no use for you in Orynth.”

She flicked her brows up. “Is there anything else that you have to say to

me?”

His gray eyes turned flinty. “I do not recognize your right to rule; I do not recognize you as the rightful Queen of Terrasen. Neither do the Lords Sloane, Ironwood, and Gunnar, who make up the remaining surviving majority of what was once your uncle’s court. Even if the Allsbrook family sides with you, that is still one vote against four. General Ashryver has no lands or title here—and no say as a result. As for *Lady Lysandra*, Caraverre is not a recognized territory, nor do we recognize her lineage or your *purchase* of those lands.” Formal words, for a formal declaration. “Should you return to Orynth and seize your throne without our invitation, it will be considered an act of war and treason.” Darrow pulled a piece of paper from his jacket—lots of fancy writing and four different signatures on the bottom. “As of this moment, until it is otherwise decided, you shall remain a princess by blood—but not queen.”

Aelin stared and stared at that piece of paper, at the names that had been signed long before tonight, the men who had decided against her without meeting her, the men who had changed her future, her kingdom, with just their signatures.

Perhaps she should have waited to call this meeting until she was in Orynth—until her people saw her return and it would have been harder to kick her to the curb of the palace.

Aelin breathed, “Our doom gathers in the South of Adarlan—yet this is what you focus on?”

Darrow sneered, “When we have need of your ... skill set, we will send word.”

No fire burned in her, not even an ember. As if Darrow had clenched it in his fist, snuffed it out.

“The Bane,” Aedion said with a hint of that legendary insolence, “will answer to none but Aelin Galathynius.”

“The Bane,” Darrow spat, “is now ours to command. In the event that there is no fit ruler on the throne, the lords control the armies of Terrasen.” He again surveyed Aelin, as if sensing the vague plan to publicly return to her city, to make it harder for him to shut her out, glimmering as it formed. “Set foot in Orynth, girl, and you will pay.”

“Is that a threat?” Aedion snarled, a hand darting to grip the hilt of the Sword of Orynth sheathed at his side.

“It is the law,” Darrow said simply. “One generations of Galathynius rulers have honored.”

There was such a roaring in her head, and such a still emptiness in the world beyond.

“The Valg march on us—a Valg *king* marches on us,” Aedion pushed, the general incarnate. “And *your queen*, Darrow, might be the only person capable of keeping them at bay.”

“War is a game of numbers, not magic. You know this, Aedion. You fought at Theralis.” The great plain before Orynth, host to the final, doomed battle as

the empire had swept down upon them. Most of Terrasen's forces and commanders had not walked away from the bloodbath, so thorough streams ran red for days afterward. If Aedion had fought in it ... Gods, he must have been barely fourteen. Her stomach turned. Darrow concluded, "Magic failed us once before. We will not trust in it again."

Aedion snapped, "We will need allies—"

"There are no allies," Darrow said. "Unless Her Highness decides to be useful and gain us men and arms through marriage"—a sharp glance at Rowan—"we are alone."

Aelin debated revealing what she knew, the money she'd schemed and killed to attain, but—

Something cold and oily clanged through her. Marriage to a foreign king or prince or emperor.

Would this be the cost? Not just in blood shed, but in dreams yielded? To be a princess eternal, but never a queen? To fight with not just magic, but the other power in her blood: royalty.

She could not look at Rowan, could not face those pine-green eyes without being sick.

She had laughed once at Dorian—*laughed* and scolded him for admitting that the thought of marriage to anyone but his soul-bonded was abhorrent. She'd chided him for choosing love over the peace of his kingdom.

Perhaps the gods did hate her. Perhaps this was her test. To escape one form of enslavement only to walk into another. Perhaps this was the punishment for those years in Rifthold's riches.

Darrow gave her a small, satisfied smile. "Find me allies, Aelin Galathynius, and perhaps we shall consider your role in Terrasen's future. Think on it. Thank you for asking us to meet."

Silently, Aelin rose to her feet. The others did as well. Save for Darrow.

Aelin plucked up the piece of paper he had signed and examined the damning words, the scribbled signatures. The crackling fire was the only sound.

Aelin silenced it.

And the candles. And the wrought-iron chandelier over the table.

Darkness fell, cleaved only by twin sharp inhales of breath—Murtaugh and Ren. The patter of rain filled the black room.

Aelin spoke into the dark, toward where Darrow was seated. "I suggest, Lord Darrow, that you become accustomed to this. For if we lose this war, darkness will reign forever."

There was a scratch and a hiss—then a match sputtered as it lit a candle on the table. Darrow’s wrinkled, hateful face flickered into view. “Men can make their own light, Heir of Brannon.”

Aelin stared at the sole flame Darrow had sparked. The paper in her hands wilted into ashes.

Before she could speak, Darrow said, “That is our law—our right. You ignore that decree, Princess, and you defile all that your family stood and died for. The Lords of Terrasen have spoken.”

Rowan’s hand was solid against her lower back. But Aelin looked to Ren, his face tight. And over the roaring in her head, she said, “Whether or not you vote in my favor, there is a spot for you in this court. For what you helped Aedion and the captain do. For Nehemia.” Nehemia, who had worked with Ren, fought with him. Something like pain rippled in Ren’s eyes, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Darrow cut him off.

“What a waste of a life that was,” Darrow spat. “A princess actually dedicated to her people, who fought until her last breath for—”

“One more word,” Rowan said softly, “and I don’t care how many lords support you or what your laws are. One more word about that, and I will gut you before you can get up from that chair. Understand?”

For the first time, Darrow looked into Rowan’s eyes and blanched at the death he found waiting there. But the lord’s words had found their mark, leaving a shuddering sort of numbness in their wake.

Aedion snatched Aelin’s dagger off the table. “We’ll take your thoughts into consideration.” He scooped up his shield and put a hand on Aelin’s shoulder to guide her from the room. It was only the sight of that dented and scarred shield, the ancient sword hanging at his side, that set her feet moving, slicing through that thick numbness.

Ren moved to open the door, stepping into the hall beyond to scan it, giving Lysandra a wide berth as she padded past, Evangeline and Fleetfoot on her fluffy tail, secrecy be damned.

Aelin met the young lord’s eyes and drew in breath to say something, when Lysandra snarled down the hall.

A dagger was instantly in Aelin’s hand, angled and ready.

But it was Darrow’s messenger, hurtling for them.

“Rifthold,” he panted as he skidded to a stop, flinging rain on them. “One of the scouts from the Ferian Gap just raced past. The Ironteeth host flies for Rifthold. They mean to sack the city.”

~

Aelin stood in a clearing just past the inn's glow, the cold rain plastering her hair and raising bumps on her skin. Soaking them all, because Rowan now buckled on the extra blades she handed him, conserving each drop of his magic for what he was about to do.

They'd let the messenger spill the information he'd received—not much at all.

The Ironteeth host lingering in the Ferian Gap were now flying for Rifthold. Dorian Havilliard would be their target. Dead or alive.

They'd be upon the city by nightfall tomorrow, and once Rifthold was taken ... Erawan's net across the middle of the continent would be complete. No forces from Melisande, Fenharrow, or Eyllwe could reach them—and none of Terrasen's forces could get to them, either. Not without wasting months to trek around the mountains.

"There's nothing to be done for the city," Aedion said, his voice cutting through the rain. The three of them lingered under the cover of a large oak, all keeping an eye on Ren and Murtaugh, who were speaking with Evangeline and Lysandra, now back in her human form. Her cousin went on, rain pinging against the shield across his back, "If the witches fly on Rifthold, then Rifthold already is gone."

Aelin wondered if Manon Blackbeak would be leading the attack—if it'd be a blessing. The Wing Leader had saved them once before, but only as a payment for a life debt. She doubted the witch would feel obliged to throw them a bone anytime soon.

Aedion met Rowan's gaze. "Dorian must be saved at all costs. I know Perrington's—Erawan's—style. Don't believe any promises they make, and don't let Dorian be taken again." Aedion dragged a hand through his rain-soaked hair and added, "Or yourself, Rowan."

They were the most hideous words she'd ever heard. Rowan's confirming nod made her knees buckle. She tried not to think about the two glass vials Aedion had handed the prince moments before. What they contained. She didn't even know when or where he'd acquired them.

Anything but that. Anything but—

Rowan's hand brushed hers. "I will save him," he murmured.

"I wouldn't ask this of you unless it was ... Dorian is vital. Lose him, and we lose any support in Adarlan." And one of the few magic-wielders who could

stand against Morath.

Rowan's nod was grim. "I serve you, Aelin. Do not apologize for putting me to use."

Because only Rowan, riding the winds with his magic, could reach Rifthold in time. Even now, he might be too late. Aelin swallowed hard, fighting the feeling that the world was being ripped from under her feet.

A glimmer of movement near the tree line caught her eye, and Aelin schooled her face into neutrality as she studied what had been left by little, spindly hands at the base of a gnarled oak. None of the others so much as blinked in its direction.

Rowan finished with his weapons, glancing between her and Aedion with a warrior's frankness. "Where do I meet you once I've secured the prince?"

Aedion said, "Run north. Stay clear of the Ferian Gap—"

Darrow appeared at the other end of the clearing, barking an order for Murtaugh to come to him.

"No," Aelin said. Both warriors turned.

She stared northward into the roiling rain and lightning.

She would not set foot in Orynth; she would not see her home.

Find me allies, Darrow had sneered.

She didn't dare glance at what the Little Folk had left in the shadow of that rain-lashed tree mere feet away.

Aelin said to Aedion, "If Ren is to be trusted, you tell him to get to the Bane, and to be ready to march and press from the North. If we are not to lead them, then they will have to work around Darrow's orders as best they can."

Aedion's brows rose. "What are you thinking?"

Aelin jerked her chin at Rowan. "Get a boat and travel south with Dorian. Land is too risky, but your winds on the seas can get you there in a few days. To Skull's Bay."

"Shit," Aedion breathed.

But Aelin pointed with a thumb over a shoulder to Ren and Murtaugh as she said to her cousin, "You told me that they were in communication with Captain Rolfe. Get one of them to write a letter of recommendation for us. Right now."

"I thought *you* knew Rolfe," Aedion said.

Aelin gave him a grim smile. "He and I parted on ... bad terms, to say the least. But if Rolfe can be turned to our side..."

Aedion finished for her, "Then we'd have a small fleet that could unite North and South—brave the blockades."

And it was a good thing she'd taken all that gold from Arobynn to pay for it. "Skull's Bay might be the only safe place for us to hide—to contact the other kingdoms." She didn't dare tell them that Rolfe might have far more than a fleet of blockade runners to offer them, if she played it right. She said to Rowan, "Wait for us there. We'll strike out for the coast tonight, and sail to the Dead Islands. We'll be two weeks behind you."

Aedion clasped Rowan on the shoulder in farewell and headed for Ren and Murtaugh. A heartbeat later, the old man was hobbling into the inn, Darrow on his heels, demanding answers.

As long as Murtaugh wrote that letter to Rolfe, she didn't care.

Alone with Rowan, Aelin said, "Darrow expects me to take this order lying down. But if we can rally a host in the South, we can push Erawan right onto the blades of the Bane."

"It still might not convince Darrow and the others—"

"I'll deal with that later," she said, spraying water as she shook her head. "For now, I have no plans to lose this war because some old bastard has learned he likes playing king."

Rowan's grin was fierce, wicked. He leaned in, grazing his mouth against hers. "I have no plans to let him keep that throne, either, Aelin."

She only breathed, "Come back to me." The thought of what awaited him down in Rifthold struck her again. Gods—oh, gods. If anything happened to him...

He brushed a knuckle down her wet cheek, tracing her mouth with his thumb. She put a hand on his muscled chest, right where those two vials of poison were now hidden. For a heartbeat, she debated turning the deadly liquid within into steam.

But if Rowan was caught, if Dorian was caught ... "I can't—I can't let you go—"

"You can," he said with little room for argument. The voice of her prince-commander. "And you will." Rowan again traced her mouth. "When you find me again, we will have that night. I don't care where, or who is around." He pressed a kiss to her neck and said onto her rain-slick skin, "You are my Fireheart."

She grabbed his face in both hands, drawing him down to kiss her.

Rowan wrapped his arms around her, crushing her against him, his hands roaming as if he were branding the feel of her into his palms. His kiss was savage—ice and fire twining together. Even the rain seemed to pause as they at

last drew away, panting.

And through the rain and fire and ice, through the dark and lightning and thunder, a word flickered into her head, an answer and a challenge and a truth she immediately denied, ignored. Not for herself, but for him—for *him*—

Rowan shifted in a flash brighter than lightning.

When she finished blinking, a large hawk was flapping up through the trees and into the rain-tossed night. Rowan loosed a shriek as he banked right—toward the coast—the sound a farewell and a promise and a battle cry.

Aelin swallowed the tightness in her throat as Aedion approached and gripped her shoulder. “Lysandra wants Murtaugh to take Evangeline. For ‘lady training.’ The girl refuses to go. You might need to ... help.”

The girl was indeed clinging to her mistress, shoulders shaking with the force of her weeping. Murtaugh looked on helplessly, now back from the inn.

Aelin stalked through the mud, the ground squelching. How far away, how long ago, their merry morning now seemed.

She touched Evangeline’s soaked hair, and the girl pulled back long enough for Aelin to say to her, “You are a member of my court. And as such, you answer to me. You are wise, and brave, and a joy—but we are headed into dark, horrible places where even I fear to tread.”

Evangeline’s lip wobbled. Something in Aelin’s chest strained, but she let out a low whistle, and Fleetfoot, who had been cowering from the rain under their horses, slunk over.

“I need you to care for Fleetfoot,” Aelin said, stroking the hound’s damp head, her long ears. “Because in those dark, horrible places, a dog would be in peril. You are the only one I trust with her safety. Can you look after her for me?” She should have cherished them more—those happy, calm, boring moments on the road. Should have savored each second they were all together, all safe.

Above the girl, Lysandra’s face was tight—her eyes shone with more than just the rain. But the lady nodded at Aelin, even as she surveyed Murtaugh once more with a predator’s focus.

“Stay with Lord Murtaugh, learn about this court and its workings, and protect my friend,” Aelin said to Evangeline, squatting to kiss Fleetfoot’s sodden head. Once. Twice. The dog absently licked the rain off her face. “Can you do that?” Aelin repeated.

Evangeline stared at the dog, at her mistress. And nodded.

Aelin kissed the girl’s cheek and whispered into her ear, “Work your magic

on these miserable old men while you're at it." She pulled away to wink at the girl. "Win me back my kingdom, Evangeline."

But the girl was beyond smiles, and nodded again.

Aelin kissed Fleetfoot one last time and turned to her awaiting cousin as Lysandra knelt in the mud before the girl, brushing back her wet hair and speaking too low for her Fae ears to detect.

Aedion's mouth was a hard line as he dragged his eyes away from Lysandra and the girl and inclined his head toward Ren and Murtaugh. Aelin fell into step beside him, pausing a few feet from the Allsbrook lords.

"Your letter, Majesty," Murtaugh said, extending a wax-sealed tube.

Aelin took it, bowing her head in thanks.

Aedion said to Ren, "Unless you want to swap one tyrant for another, I suggest you get the Bane and any others ready to push from the North."

Murtaugh answered for his grandson, "Darrow means well—"

"Darrow," Aedion interrupted, "is now a man of limited days."

They all looked to her. But Aelin watched the inn flickering through the trees—and the old man once again storming for them, a force of nature in his own right. She said, "We don't touch Darrow."

"What?" Aedion snapped.

Aelin said, "I'd bet all my money that he's already taken the steps to ensure that if he meets an untimely death, we never set foot in Orynth again." Murtaugh gave her a grim, confirming nod. Aelin shrugged. "So we don't touch him. We play his game—play by rules and laws and oaths."

Several feet away, Lysandra and Evangeline still spoke softly, the girl now crying in her mistress's arms, Fleetfoot anxiously nuzzling her hip.

Aelin met Murtaugh's stare. "I do not know you, Lord, but you were loyal to my uncle—to my family these long years." She slid a dagger free of a hidden sheath along her thigh. They flinched as she sliced into her palm. Even Aedion started. Aelin clenched her bloodied palm into a fist, holding it in the air between them. "Because of that loyalty, you will understand what blood promises mean to *me* when I say if that girl comes to harm, physical or otherwise, I do not care what laws exist, what rules I will break." Lysandra had now turned to them, her shifter senses detecting blood. "If Evangeline is hurt, you will burn. *All* of you."

"Threatening your loyal court?" sneered a cold voice as Darrow halted a few feet away. Aelin ignored him. Murtaugh was wide-eyed—so was Ren.

Her blood seeped into the sacred earth. "Let this be your test."

Aedion swore. He understood. If the Lords of Terrasen could not keep one

child safe in their kingdom, could not find it in themselves to save Evangeline, to look after someone who could do them no good, gain them no wealth or rank ... they would deserve to perish.

Murtaugh bowed again. "Your will is mine, Majesty." He added quietly, "I lost my granddaughters. I will not lose another." With that, the old man walked toward where Darrow waited, pulling the lord aside.

Her heart strained, but Aelin said to Ren, that scar hidden by the shadows of his rain-drenched hood, "I wish we had time to speak. Time for me to explain."

"You're good at walking away from this kingdom. I don't see why now would be different."

Aedion let out a snarl, but Aelin cut him off. "Judge me all you like, Ren Allsbrook. But do not fail this kingdom."

She saw the unspoken retort flash in Ren's eyes. *Like you did for ten years.*

The blow struck low and deep, but she turned away. As she did, she noted how Ren's eyes fell on the little girl—on the brutal scars across Evangeline's face. Near-twins to the ones on his own. Something in his gaze softened, just a bit.

But Darrow was now thundering toward Aelin, pushing past Murtaugh, his face white with anger. "You—" he started.

Aelin held up a hand, flame leaping at her fingertips, rain turning to steam above it. Blood snaked down her wrist from the deep cut, sibling to the other on her right hand, bright as Goldryn's ruby, peeking over her shoulder. "I'll make one more promise," she said, folding her bloodied hand into a fist as she lowered it before them. Darrow tensed.

Her blood dripped onto the sacred soil of Terrasen, and her smile turned lethal. Even Aedion held his breath beside her.

Aelin said, "I promise you that no matter how far I go, no matter the cost, when you call for my aid, I will come. I promise you on my blood, on my family's name, that I will not turn my back on Terrasen as you have turned your back on me. I promise you, Darrow, that when the day comes and you crawl for my help, I will put my kingdom before my pride and not kill you for this. I think the true punishment will be seeing me on the throne for the rest of your miserable life."

His face had gone from white to purple.

She just turned away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Darrow demanded. So Murtaugh had not filled him in on her plan to go to the Dead Islands. Interesting.

She looked over her shoulder. “To call in old debts and promises. To raise an army of assassins and thieves and exiles and commoners. To finish what was started long, long ago.”

Silence was his answer.

So Aelin and Aedion strode to where Lysandra now monitored them, solemn-faced in the rain, Evangeline hugging herself as Fleetfoot leaned against the silently weeping girl.

Aelin said to the shape-shifter and the general, locking out the sorrow from her heart, locking out the pain and worry from her mind, “We travel now.”

And when they dispersed to gather the horses, Aedion brushing a kiss to Evangeline’s soaked head before Murtaugh and Ren led her back to the inn with considerable gentleness, Darrow striding ahead with no farewell whatsoever, when Aelin was alone, she finally approached that shadowed, gnarled tree.

The Little Folk had known about the wyvern attack this morning.

So she’d supposed that this little effigy, already falling apart under the torrent of rain, was another message of sorts. One just for her.

Brannon’s temple on the coast had been rendered carefully—a clever little contraption of twigs and rocks to form the pillars and altar ... And on the sacred rock in its center, they’d created a white stag from raw sheep’s wool, his mighty antlers no more than curling thorns.

An order—where to go, what she needed to obtain. She was willing to listen, play along. Even if it had meant telling the others only half the truth.

Aelin broke apart the temple reconstruction but left the stag in her palm, the wool deflating in the rain.

Horses nickered as Aedion and Lysandra hauled them closer, but Aelin felt him a heartbeat before he emerged between the distant, night-veiled trees. Too far in the wood to be anything but a ghost, a figment of an ancient god’s dream.

Barely breathing, she watched him for as long as she dared, and when Aelin mounted her horse, she wondered if her companions could tell that it was not rain gleaming on her face as she tugged on her black hood.

Wondered if they, too, had spied the Lord of the North standing watch deep in the forest, the white stag’s immortal glow muted in the rain, come to bid Aelin Galathynius farewell.

PART ONE
THE GOD-CITY

1

Chaol Westfall, former Captain of the Royal Guard and now Hand to the newly crowned King of Adarlan, had discovered that he hated one sound above all others.

Wheels.

Specifically, their clattering along the planks of the ship on which he'd spent the past three weeks sailing through storm-tossed waters. And now their rattle and thunk over the shining green marble floors and intricate mosaics throughout the Khagan of the Southern Continent's shining palace in Antica.

With nothing to do beyond sit in the wheeled chair that he'd deemed had become both his prison and his only path to seeing the world, Chaol took in the details of the sprawling palace perched atop one of the capital city's countless hills. Every bit of material had been taken from and built in honor of some portion of the khagan's mighty empire:

Those polished green floors his chair now clattered over were hewn from quarries in the southwest of the continent. The red pillars fashioned like mighty trees, their uppermost branches stretching across the domed ceilings high above—all part of one endless receiving hall—had been hauled in from the northeastern, sand-blasted deserts.

The mosaics that interrupted the green marble had been assembled by craftsmen from Tigana, another of the khagan's prized cities at the mountainous southern end of the continent. Each portrayed a scene from the khaganate's rich,

brutal, glorious past: the centuries spent as a nomadic horse-people in the grassy steppes of the continent's eastern lands; the emergence of the first khagan, a warlord who unified the scattered tribes into a conquering force that took the continent piece by piece, wielding cunning and strategic brilliance to forge a sweeping empire; and then depictions of the three centuries since—the various khagans who had expanded the empire, distributing the wealth from a hundred territories across the lands, building countless bridges and roads to connect them all, ruling over the vast continent with precision and clarity.

Perhaps the mosaics provided a vision of what Adarlan might have been, Chaol mused as the murmurings of the gathered court flitted between the carved pillars and gilded domes ahead. That is, if Adarlan hadn't been ruled by a man controlled by a demon king hell-bent on turning this world into a feast for his hordes.

Chaol twisted his head to peer up at Nesryn, stone-faced behind him as she pushed his chair. Only her dark eyes, darting over every passing face and window and column, revealed any sort of interest in the khagan's sprawling home.

They'd saved their finest set of clothes for today, and the newly appointed Captain of the Guard was indeed resplendent in her crimson-and-gold uniform. Where Dorian had dug up one of the uniforms Chaol had once worn with such pride, he had no idea.

He'd initially wanted to wear black, simply because color ... He'd never felt comfortable with colors, save the red and gold of his kingdom. But black had become the color of Erawan's Valg-infested guards. They had worn those black-on-black uniforms as they'd terrorized Rifthold. As they'd rounded up, tortured, and then butchered his men.

Then strung them along the palace gates to swing in the wind.

He'd barely been able to look at the Antican guards they'd passed on their way here, both in the streets and in this very palace—standing proud and alert,

swords at their backs and knives at their sides. Even now, he resisted the urge to glance to where he knew they'd be stationed in the hall, exactly where he would have positioned his own men. Where he himself would undoubtedly have been standing, monitoring all, while emissaries from a foreign kingdom arrived.

Nesryn met his stare, those ebony eyes cool and unblinking, her shoulder-length black hair swaying with each step. Not a trace of nerves flickered across her lovely, solemn face. No inkling that they were about to meet one of the most powerful men in the world—a man who could alter the fate of their own continent in the war surely now breaking out across Adarlan and Terrasen.

Chaol faced forward without saying a word. The walls and pillars and arched doorways had ears and eyes and mouths, she'd warned him.

It was that thought alone that kept Chaol from fiddling with the clothes he'd finally decided upon: light brown pants, knee-high chestnut-colored boots, a white shirt of finest silk, mostly concealed by a dark teal jacket. The jacket was simple enough, the cost of it only revealed by the fine brass buckles down the front and the glimmer of delicate golden thread skimming the high collar and edges. No sword hung from his leather belt—the absence of that comforting weight like some phantom limb.

Or legs.

Two tasks. He had two tasks while here, and he still was not certain which one would prove the more impossible:

Convincing the khagan and his six would-be heirs to lend their considerable armies to the war against Erawan ...

Or finding a healer in the Torre Cesme who could discover some way to get him walking again.

To—he thought with no small ripple of disgust—fix him.

He hated that word. Almost as much as the clattering of the wheels. *Fix*. Even if that's what he was beseeching the legendary healers to do for him, the word still grated, made his gut churn.

He shoved the word and the thought from his mind as Nesryn followed the near-silent flock of servants who had led them from the docks, through the winding and dusty cobblestoned streets of Antica, all the way up the sloped avenue to the domes and thirty-six minarets of the palace itself.

Strips of white cloth—from silk to felt to linen—had been hanging from countless windows and lanterns and doorways. Likely because of some official or distant royal relation dying recently, Nesryn had murmured. Death rituals were varied and often a blend from the countless kingdoms and territories now governed by the khaganate, but the white cloth was an ancient holdover from the centuries when the khagan's people had roamed the steppes and laid their dead to rest under the watchful, open sky.

The city had been hardly gloomy, though, as they traveled through it. People still hurried about in clothes of various makes, vendors still called out their wares, acolytes in temples of wood or stone—every god had a home in Antica, Nesryn supplied—still beckoned to those on the street. All of it, even the palace, watched over by the shining, pale-stoned tower atop one of its southern hills.

The Torre. The tower that housed the finest mortal healers in the world. Chaol had tried not to look too long at it through the carriage windows, even if the massive tower could be seen from nearly every street and angle of Antica. None of the servants had mentioned it, or pointed out the dominant presence that seemed to rival even the khagan's palace.

No, the servants hadn't said much at all on the trek here, even regarding the mourning-banners flapping in the dry wind. Each of them remained silent, men and women alike, their dark hair shining and straight, and each wore loose pants and flowing jackets of cobalt and bloodred edged with pale gold. Paid servants—but descendants of the slaves who had once been owned by the khagan's bloodline. Until the previous khagan, a visionary and firebrand, had outlawed slavery a generation ago as one of her countless improvements to the empire. The khagan had freed her slaves but kept them on as paid servants—along with

their children. And now their children's children.

Not a single one of them appeared underfed or undercompensated, and none had shown even a flicker of fear as they'd escorted Chaol and Nesryn from the ship to the palace. The current khagan, it seemed, treated his servants well. Hopefully his yet-undecided Heir would as well.

Unlike Adarlan or Terrasen, inheritance of the empire was decided by the khagan—not by birth order or gender. Having as many children as possible to provide him or her with a wide pool to choose from made that choice only somewhat easier. And rivalry amongst the royal children ... It was practically a blood sport. All designed to prove to their parent who was the strongest, the wisest, the most suited to rule.

The khagan was required by law to have a sealed document locked away in an unmarked, hidden trove—a document that listed his or her Heir, should death sweep upon them before it could be formally announced. It could be altered at any time, but it was designed to avoid the one thing the khaganate had lived in fear of since that first khagan had patched together the kingdoms and territories of this continent: collapse. Not from outside forces, but from war within.

That long-ago first khagan had been wise. Not once during the three hundred years of the khaganate had a civil war occurred.

And as Nesryn pushed him past the graceful bowing of the servants now paused between two enormous pillars, as the lush, ornate throne room spread before them with its dozens of people gathered around the golden dais glittering in the midday sun, Chaol wondered which of the five figures standing before the enthroned man would one day be chosen to rule this empire.

The only sounds came from the rustling clothing of the four dozen people—he counted in the span of a few casual blinks—gathered along either side of that glinting dais, forming a wall of silk and flesh and jewels, a veritable avenue through which Nesryn wheeled him.

Rustling clothing—and the clatter and squeak of the wheels. She'd oiled

them this morning, but weeks at sea had worn on the metal. Every scrape and shriek was like nails on stone.

But he kept his head high. Shoulders back.

Nesryn paused a healthy distance from the dais—from the wall of five royal children, all in their prime, male and female, standing between them and their father.

Defense of their emperor: a prince or princess's first duty. The easiest way to prove their loyalty, to angle for being tapped Heir. And the five before them ...

Chaol schooled his face into neutrality as he counted again. Only five. Not the six Nesryn had described.

But he didn't scan the hall for the missing royal sibling as he bowed at the waist. He'd practiced the movement over and over this final week at sea, as the weather had turned hotter, the air becoming dry and sunbaked. Doing it in the chair still felt unnatural, but Chaol bowed low—until he was staring at his unresponsive legs, at his spotless brown boots and the feet he could not feel, could not move.

From the whisper of clothing to his left, he knew Nesryn had come to his side and was bowing deeply as well.

They held it for the three breaths Nesryn claimed were required.

Chaol used those three breaths to settle himself, to shut out the weight of what was upon them both.

He had once been skilled at maintaining an unfaltering composure. He'd served Dorian's father for years, had taken orders without so much as blinking. And before that, he'd endured his own father, whose words had been as cutting as his fists. The true and current Lord of Anielle.

The *Lord* now in front of Chaol's name was a mockery. A mockery and a lie that Dorian had refused to abandon despite Chaol's protests.

Lord Chaol Westfall, Hand of the King.

He hated it. More than the sound of wheels. More than the body he now

could not feel beneath his hips, the body whose stillness still surprised him, even all these weeks later.

He was Lord of Nothing. Lord of Oath-Breakers. Lord of Liars.

And as Chaol lifted his torso and met the upswept eyes of the white-haired man on that throne, as the khagan's weathered brown skin crinkled in a small, cunning smile ... Chaol wondered if the khagan knew it as well.

Dorian Havilliard, King of Adarlan, hated the silence.

It had become his companion, walking beside him through the near-empty halls of his stone castle, crouching in the corner of his cluttered tower room at night, sitting across the table at each meal.

He had always known he would one day be king.

He had not expected to inherit a shattered throne and vacant stronghold.

His mother and younger brother were still ensconced in their mountain residence in Ararat. He had not sent for them. He'd given the order to remain, actually.

If only because it would mean the return of his mother's preening court, and he'd gladly take the silence over their tittering. If only because it would mean looking into his mother's face, his brother's face, and lying about who had destroyed the glass castle, who had slaughtered most of their courtiers, and who had ended his father. Lying about *what* his father had been—the demon that had dwelled inside him.

A demon that had reproduced with his mother—not once, but twice.

Standing on the small stone balcony atop his private tower, Dorian gazed at the glittering sprawl of Rifthold beneath the setting sun, at the sparkling ribbon of the Avery as it wended inland from the sea, curving around the city like the coils of a snake, and then flowing straight through the continent's heart.

He lifted his hands before the view, his palms callused from the exercises and swordplay he'd made himself start learning once more. His favorite guards—Chaol's men—were all dead.

Tortured and killed.

His memories of his time beneath the Wyrdstone collar were dim and blurred. But in his nightmares, he sometimes stood in a dungeon far beneath this castle, blood that was not his own coating his hands, screams that were not his own ringing in his ears, begging him for mercy.

Not him, he told himself. The Valg prince had done it. His *father* had done it.

He'd still had difficulty meeting the stare of the new Captain of the Guard, a

friend of Nesryn Faliq, as he'd asked the man to show him how to fight, help him become stronger, faster.

Never again. Never again would he be weak and useless and frightened.

Dorian cast his gaze southward, as if he could see all the way to Antica. He wondered if Chaol and Nesryn had gotten there—wondered if his friend was already at the Torre Cesme, having his broken body healed by its gifted masters.

The demon inside his father had done that, too—snapped Chaol's spine.

The man fighting inside his father had kept the blow from being fatal.

Dorian had possessed no such control, no such strength, when he watched the demon use his own body—when the demon had tortured and killed and taken what it wanted. Maybe his father had been the stronger man in the end. The better man.

Not that he'd ever had a chance to know him as a man. As a human.

Dorian flexed his fingers, frost sparking in his palm. Raw magic—yet there was no one here to teach him. No one he dared ask.

He leaned against the stone wall beside the balcony door.

He lifted his hand toward the pale band marking his throat. Even with the hours he'd spent outside training, the skin where the collar had once laid had not darkened to a golden tan. Maybe it always would remain pale.

Maybe his dreams would always be haunted by that demon prince's hissing voice. Maybe he would always wake up with his sweat feeling like Sorscha's blood on him, like Aelin's blood as he stabbed her.

Aelin. Not a word from her—or from anyone regarding the queen's return to her kingdom. He tried not to worry, to contemplate why there was such silence.

Such silence, when Nesryn and Chaol's scouts now brought him news that Morath was stirring.

Dorian glanced inside, toward the pile of papers on his cluttered desk, and winced. He still had a disgusting amount of paperwork to do before sleep: letters to sign, plans to read—

Thunder murmured across the city.

Perhaps a sign that he should get to work, unless he wanted to be up until the black hours of the morning once again. Dorian turned inside, sighing sharply through his nose, and thunder boomed again.

Too soon, and the sound too short-lived.

Dorian scanned the horizon. No clouds—nothing but the red-and-pink-and-gold sky.

But the city lounging at the foot of the castle's hill seemed to pause. Even the

muddy Avery seemed to halt its slithering as the *boom* sounded again.

He had heard that sound before.

His magic roiled in his veins, and he wondered what it sensed as ice coated his balcony against his will, so swift and cold the stones groaned.

He tried to reel it back in—as if it were a ball of yarn that had tumbled from his hands—but it ignored him, spreading thicker, faster over the stones. Along the arch of the doorway behind him, down the curving face of the tower—

A horn sounded in the west. A high, bleating note.

It was cut off before it finished.

With the angle of the balcony, he couldn't see its source. He rushed into his room, leaving his magic to the stones, and hurtled for the open western window. He was halfway through the pillars of books and papers when he spied the horizon. When his city began screaming.

Spreading into the distance, blotting out the sunset like a storm of bats, flew a legion of wyverns.

Each bore armed witches, roaring their battle cries to the color-stained sky.



Manon and her Thirteen had been flying without stop, without sleep. They'd left the two escort covens behind yesterday, their wyverns too exhausted to keep up. Especially when the Thirteen had been going on all those extra runs and patrols for months—and had quietly, solidly built up their stamina.

They flew high to keep hidden, and through gaps in the clouds, the continent had flashed below in varying shades of summer green and butter yellow and sparkling sapphire. Today had been clear enough that no clouds concealed them as they hurtled for Rifthold, the sun beginning its final descent toward the west.

Toward her lost homeland.

With the height and distance, Manon fully beheld the carnage as the horizon at last revealed the sprawl of the capital city.

The attack had begun without her. Iskra's legion was still falling upon it, still spearing for the palace and the glass wall that crested over the city at its eastern edge.

She nudged Abraxos with her knees, a silent command to go faster.

He did—but barely. He was drained. They all were.

Iskra wanted the victory for herself. Manon had no doubt the Yellowlegs heir had received orders to yield ... but only once Manon arrived. Bitch. *Bitch* to get

here first, not to wait—

Closer and closer they swept for the city.

The screams reached them soon enough. Her red cape became a millstone.

Manon aimed Abraxos for the stone castle atop the hill, barely peeking above that shining glass wall—the wall she had been ordered to bring down—and hoped she had not been too late in one regard.

And that she knew what the hell she was doing.

Dorian had sounded the alarm, but the guards already knew. And when he'd gone to rush down the tower stairs, they blocked his path, telling him to stay in his tower. He tried to go again, to help—but they begged him to stay. *Begged* him, so that they would not lose him.

It was the desperation, how *young* their voices were, that kept him in the tower. But not useless.

Dorian stood atop his balcony, a hand raised before him.

From the distance, he could do nothing as the wyverns unleashed hell beyond the glass wall. They shredded through buildings, ripping apart roofs with their talons, snatching up people—*his* people—from the street.

They covered the skies like a blanket of fangs and claws, and though arrows from the city guards hit true, the wyverns did not pause.

Dorian rallied his magic, willing it to obey, summoning ice and wind to his palm, letting it build.

He should have trained, should have asked Aelin to teach him *something* when she was here.

The wyverns sailed closer to the castle and the glass wall still around it, as if they'd wanted to show him precisely how powerless he was before they came for him.

Let them come. Let them get close enough for his magic.

He might not have Aelin's long range, might not be able to encircle the city with his power, but if they got close enough...

He would not be weak or cowering again.

The first of the wyverns crested the glass wall. Huge—so much bigger than the white-haired witch and her scarred mount. Six of them flapped for his castle, for his tower. For its king.

He'd give them a king.

He let them draw nearer, clenching his fingers into a fist, burrowing down, down, down into his magic. Many witches lingered at the glass wall, slamming their wyverns' tails into it, cracking that opaque glass bit by bit. Like the six who

sailed for the castle were all it would take to sack it.

He could see their figures now—see their iron-studded leather, the setting sun glinting on the massive breastplates of the wyverns as they raced over the still-healing castle grounds.

And when Dorian could see their iron teeth as they grinned at him, when the shouts of the guards so valiantly firing arrows from the castle doors and windows became a din in his ears, he extended his hand toward the witches.

Ice and wind tore into them, shredding through beast and rider.

The guards shouted in alarm—then fell into a stunned silence.

Dorian gasped for breath, gasped to remember his name and what he was as the magic drained out of him. He'd killed while enslaved, but never of his own free will.

And as the dead meat rained down, thudding on the castle grounds, as their blood misted the air ... *More*, his magic moaned, spiraling down and up at the same time, dragging him again into its icy eddies.

Beyond the cracking glass wall, his city was bleeding. Screaming in terror.

Four more wyverns crossed the now-crumbling glass wall, banking as the riders beheld their shredded sisters. Cries shattered from their immortal throats, the tendrils of the yellow bands across their brows snapping in the wind. They shot their wyverns into the sky, as if they'd rise and rise and then plunge down directly atop him.

A smile danced on Dorian's lips as he unleashed his magic again, a two-pronged whip snapping for the ascending wyverns.

More blood and chunks of wyvern and witch fell to the ground, all coated with ice so thick they shattered upon the courtyard flagstones.

Dorian tunneled deeper. Maybe if he could get into the city, he could cast a wider net—

That was when the other attack hit. Not from ahead or above or below.

But from behind.

His tower rocked to the side, and Dorian was flung forward, slamming into the stone balcony, narrowly avoiding flipping over the edge.

Stone cracked and wood splintered, and he was spared from a crushing bit of rock only by the magic he'd flung around himself as he covered his head.

He whirled toward the interior of his bedroom. A giant, gaping hole had been ripped into the side and roof. And perched on the broken stone, a solidly built witch now smiled at him with flesh-shredding iron teeth, a faded band of yellow leather around her brow.

He rallied his magic, but it sputtered to a flicker.

Too soon, too fast, he realized. Too uncontrolled. Not enough time to draw up the full depths of his power. The wyvern's head snaked into the tower.

Behind him, six other wyverns crested the wall, soaring for his exposed back. And the wall itself ... Aelin's wall ... Beneath those frantic, furious claws and tails ... it collapsed entirely.

Dorian eyed the door to the tower stairs, where the guards should have already been charging through. Only silence waited.

So close—but getting to it would require passing in front of the wyvern's maw. Exactly why the witch was smiling.

One chance—he'd have one chance to do this.

Dorian clenched his fingers, not granting the witch time to study him further.

He flung out a hand, ice shattering from his palm and into the eyes of the wyvern. It roared, rearing back, and he ran.

Something sharp nicked his ear and embedded in the wall before him. A dagger.

He kept sprinting for the door—

The tail whipped through his vision a heartbeat before it slammed into his side.

His magic was a film around him, shielding his bones, his skull, as he was hurled against the stone wall. Hard enough that the stones cracked. Hard enough that most humans would have been dead.

Stars and darkness danced in his vision. The door was so close.

Dorian tried to rise, but his limbs wouldn't obey.

Stunned; stunned by—

Wet warmth leaked just below his ribs. Blood. Not a deep cut, but enough to hurt, courtesy of one of the spines on that tail. Spines coated in a greenish sheen.

Venom. Some sort of venom that weakened and paralyzed before it killed—

He wouldn't be taken again, not to Morath, not to the duke and his collars—

His magic thrashed against the venom's paralyzing, lethal kiss. Healing magic. But slow, weakened by his careless expenditure moments before.

Dorian tried to crawl for the door, panting through his gritted teeth.

The witch barked a command to her wyvern, and Dorian rallied enough to crane his head. To see her draw her swords and begin to dismount.

No, no, *no*—

The witch didn't make it to the ground.

One heartbeat she was perched in her saddle, swinging a leg over.

The next, her head was gone, her blood spraying her wyvern as it roared and turned—

And was slammed off the tower by another, smaller wyvern. Scarred and vicious, with glimmering wings.

Dorian didn't wait to see what happened, didn't wonder.

He crawled for the door, his magic devouring the venom that should have killed him, a raging torrent of light fighting with all of its considerable force against that greenish darkness.

Cleaved skin, muscle, and bone itched as they slowly knit together—and that spark flickered and guttered in his veins.

Dorian was reaching for the door handle when the small wyvern landed in the ruined hole of his tower, its enormous fangs dripping blood onto the scattered paperwork he'd been grousing over mere minutes ago. Its armored, lithe rider nimbly leaped off, the arrows in the quiver across her back clacking against the hilt of the mighty sword now strapped alongside it.

She hauled away the helmet crowned with slender, lancelike blades.

He knew her face before he remembered her name.

Knew the white hair, like moonlight on water, that spilled over her dark, scalelike armor; knew the burnt-gold eyes.

Knew that impossibly beautiful face, full of cold bloodlust and wicked cunning.

“Get up,” Manon Blackbeak snarled.



Shit.

The word was a steady chant in Manon's head as she stalked across the ruins of the king's tower, armor thundering against the fallen stones, fluttering paper, and scattered books.

Shit, shit, shit.

Iskra was nowhere to be found—not by the castle, at least. But her coven was.

And when Manon had spied that Yellowlegs sentinel perched inside the tower, readying to claim this kill for herself ... a century of training and instinct had barreled into Manon.

All it had taken was one swipe of Wind-Cleaver as Abraxos flew by, and Iskra's sentinel was dead.

Shit, shit, shit.

Then Abraxos attacked the remaining mount, a dull-eyed bull who hadn't even the chance to roar before Abraxos's teeth were clamped around his broad throat and blood and flesh were flying as they tumbled through the air.

She didn't have a heartbeat to spare to marvel that Abraxos had not balked at the fight, that he had not yielded. Her warrior-hearted wyvern. She'd give him an extra ration of meat.

The young king's dark, bloody jacket was coated in dust and dirt. But his sapphire eyes were clear, if not wide, as she snarled again over the screaming city, "Get up."

He reached a hand toward the iron door handle. Not to call for help or flee, she realized, now a foot from him, but to raise himself.

Manon studied his long legs, more muscled than the last time she'd seen him. Then she noted the wound peeking through the side of his torn jacket. Not deep and not gushing, but—

Shit, shit, shit.

The venom of the wyvern's tail was deadly at worst, paralyzing at best. Paralyzing with just a scratch. He should be dead. Or dying.

"What do you want?" he rasped, eyes darting between her and Abraxos, who was busy monitoring the skies for any other attackers, his wings rustling with impatience.

The king was buying himself time—while his wound healed.

Magic. Only the strongest magic could have kept him from death. Manon snapped, "Quiet," and hauled him to his feet.

He didn't flinch at her touch, or at the iron nails that snagged and ripped through his jacket. He was heavier than she'd estimated—as if he'd packed on more muscle beneath those clothes, too. But with her immortal strength, heaving him to a standing position required little energy.

She'd forgotten how much taller he was. Face-to-face, Dorian panted as he stared down at her and breathed, "Hello, witchling."

Some ancient, predatory part of her awoke at the half smile. It sat up, cocking its ears toward him. Not a whiff of fear. Interesting.

Manon purred back, "Hello, princeling."

Abraxos gave a warning growl, and Manon whipped her head to discover another wyvern sailing hard and fast for them.

"Go," she said, letting him support himself as she hauled open the tower door. The screams of the men levels below rose to meet them. Dorian sagged

against the wall, as if focusing all his attention on staying upright. “Is there another exit? Another way out?”

The king assessed her with a frankness that had her snarling.

Behind them, as if the Mother had stretched out her hand, a mighty wind buffeted the wyvern and rider away from the tower, sending them tumbling into the city. Even Abraxos roared, clinging to the tower stones so hard the rock cracked beneath his claws.

“There are passages,” the king said. “But you—”

“Then find them. Get out.”

He didn’t move from his spot against the wall. “Why.”

The pale line still sliced across his throat, so stark against the golden tan of his skin. But she did not take questioning from mortals. Not even kings. Not anymore.

So she ignored his question and said, “Perrington is not as he seems. He is a demon in a mortal body, and has shed his former skin to don a new one. A golden-haired man. He breeds evil in Morath that he plans to unleash any day now. This is a taste.” She flicked an iron-tipped hand to the destruction around them. “A way to break your spirits and win favor from other kingdoms by casting you as the enemy. Rally your forces before he is given a chance to grow his numbers to an unconquerable size. He means to take not just this continent, but the whole of Erilea.”

“Why would his crowned rider tell me this?”

“My reasons are none of your concern. Flee.” Again, that mighty wind blasted the castle, shoving back any approaching forces, setting the stones groaning. A wind that smelled of pine and snow—a familiar, strange scent. Ancient and clever and cruel.

“You killed that witch.” Indeed, the sentinel’s blood freckled the stones. It coated Wind-Cleaver and her discarded helmet. *Witch Killer.*

Manon shoved the thought away, along with his implied question. “You owe me a life debt, King of Adarlan. Prepare yourself for the day I come to claim it.”

His sensuous mouth tightened. “Fight with us. Now—fight with us *now* against him.”

Through the doorway, screams and battle cries rent the air. Witches had managed to land somewhere—had infiltrated the castle. It’d be a matter of moments before they were found. And if the king was not gone ... She yanked him off the wall and shoved him into the stairwell.

His legs buckled, and he braced a tan hand against the ancient stone wall as

he shot her a glare over a broad shoulder. A *glare*.

“Do you not know death when you see it?” she hissed, low and vicious.

“I have seen death, and worse,” he said, those sapphire eyes frozen as he surveyed her from head to armored boot-tip and back again. “The death you’d offer is kind compared to that.”

It struck something in her, but the king was already limping down the stairs, a hand braced on the wall. Moving so damn slowly while that poison worked its way out of him, his magic surely battling with everything it had to keep him on this side of life.

The door at the base of the tower shattered.

Dorian halted at the four Yellowlegs sentinels who rushed in, snarling up the hollow center of the tower. The witches paused, blinking at their Wing Leader.

Wind-Cleaver twitched in her hand. Kill him—kill him now, before they could spread the word that she’d been spotted with him ... *Shit, shit, shit*.

Manon didn’t have to decide. In a whirlwind of steel, the Yellowlegs died before they could turn toward the warrior who exploded through the doorway.

Silver hair, tattooed face and neck, and slightly pointed ears. The source of that wind.

Dorian swore, staggering down a step, but the Fae warrior’s eyes were on her. Only lethal rage flickered there.

The air in Manon’s throat choked away into nothing.

A strangled sound came out of her, and she stumbled back, clawing at her throat as if she could carve an airway. But the male’s magic held firm.

He’d kill her for what she’d tried to do to his queen. For the arrow Asterin had shot, meaning to strike the queen’s heart. An arrow he had jumped in front of.

Manon crashed to her knees. The king was instantly at her side, studying her for a heartbeat before he roared down the stairs, “*NO!*”

That was all it took. Air flooded her mouth, her lungs, and Manon gasped, back arching as she drank it in.

Her kind had no magical shields against attacks like that. Only when most desperate, most enraged, could a witch summon the core of magic in her—with devastating consequences. Even the most bloodthirsty and soulless of them only whispered of that act: the Yielding.

Dorian’s face swam in her watery vision. Manon still gasped for that fresh, lifesaving air as he said, “Find me when you change your mind, Blackbeak.”

Then the king was gone.

Rowan Whitethorn had flown without food or water or rest for two days.

He'd still reached Rifthold too late.

The capital was in chaos under the claws of the witches and their wyverns. He'd seen enough cities fall over the centuries to know that this one was done for.

Even if the people rallied, it would only be to meet their deaths head-first. The witches had already brought down Aelin's glass wall. Another calculated move by Erawan.

It had been an effort to leave the innocent to fight on their own, to race hard and fast for the stone castle and the king's tower. He had one order, given to him by his queen.

He'd still come too late—but not without a glimmer of hope.

Dorian Havilliard stumbled as they hurried down the castle hallway, Rowan's keen ears and sense of smell keeping them from areas where the fighting raged. If the secret tunnels were watched, if they could not reach the sewers ... Rowan calculated plan after plan. None ended well.

"This way," the king panted. It was the first thing Dorian had said since rushing down the stairs. They were in a residential part of the palace Rowan had only seen from his own scouting outside—in hawk form. The queen's quarters. "There's a secret exit from my mother's bedroom."

The pale white doors to the queen's suite were locked.

Rowan blasted through them with half a thought, wood splintering and impaling the lavish furniture, the art on the walls. Baubles and valuables shattered. "Sorry," Rowan said to the king—not sounding like it at all.

His magic flickered, a distant flutter to let him know it was draining. Two days of riding the winds at breakneck speed, then fighting off those wyverns outside, had taken its toll.

Dorian surveyed the casual damage. "Someone would have done it anyway." No feeling, no sorrow behind it. He hurried through the room, limping a bit. If the king had possessed a fraction less magic, he might have succumbed to the

wyvern's venomous tail.

Dorian reached a large, gilded portrait of a beautiful auburn-haired young woman with a sapphire-eyed babe in her arms.

The king looked at it for a heartbeat longer than necessary, enough to tell Rowan everything. But Dorian hauled the painting toward him. It pulled away to reveal a small trapdoor.

Rowan saw to it that the king went inside first, candle in hand, before using his magic to float the painting back into its resting place, then shutting the door behind them.

The hall was cramped, the stones dusty. But the wind ahead whispered of open spaces, of dampness and mold. Rowan sent a tendril of magic to probe the stairs they now strode down and the many halls ahead. No sign of the cave-in from when they'd destroyed the clock tower. No signs of enemies lying in wait, or the corrupt reek of the Valg and their beasts. A small mercy.

His Fae ears picked up the muffled screams and shouts of the dying above them.

"I should stay," Dorian said softly.

A gift of the king's magic, then—the enhanced hearing. Raw magic that could grant him any gifts: ice, flame, healing, heightened senses and strength. Perhaps shape-shifting, if he tried.

"You are more useful to your people alive," Rowan said, his voice rough against the stones. Exhaustion nagged at him, but he shoved it aside. He'd rest when they were safe.

The king didn't respond.

Rowan said, "I have seen many cities fall. I have seen entire kingdoms fall. And the destruction I saw as I flew in was thorough enough that even with your considerable gifts, there is nothing you could have done." He wasn't entirely sure what they'd do if that destruction were brought to Orynth's doorstep. Or why Erawan was waiting to do it. He'd think about that later.

"I should die with them," was the king's answer.

They reached the bottom of the stairs, the passage now widening into breathable chambers. Rowan again snaked his magic through the many tunnels and stairs. The one to the right suggested a sewer entrance lay at its bottom. Good.

"I was sent here to keep you from doing just that," Rowan said at last.

The king glanced over his shoulder at him, wincing a bit as the motion stretched his still-healing skin. Where Rowan suspected a gaping wound had

been minutes before, now only an angry red scar peeked through the side of his torn jacket. Dorian said, “You were going to kill her.”

He knew whom the king meant. “Why did you tell me not to?”

So the king told him of the encounter as they descended deeper into the castle’s bowels. “I wouldn’t trust her,” Rowan said after Dorian had finished, “but perhaps the gods will throw us a bone. Perhaps the Blackbeak heir will join our cause.”

If her crimes weren’t discovered first. But even if they only had thirteen witches and their wyverns, if that coven was the most skilled of all the Ironteeth ... it could mean the difference between Orynth falling or standing against Erawan.

They reached the castle sewers. Even the rats were fleeing through the small stream entrance, as if the bellowing of the wyverns were a death knell.

They passed an archway sealed off by collapsed stones—no doubt from the hellfire eruption this summer.

Aelin’s passageway, Rowan realized with a tug deep in his chest. And a few steps ahead, an old pool of dried blood stained the stones along the water’s edge. A human reek lingered around it, tainted and foul.

“She gutted Archer Finn right there,” Dorian said, following his stare.

Rowan didn’t let himself think about it, or that these fools had unwittingly given an assassin a room that connected to their queen’s chambers.

There was a boat moored to a stone post, its hull almost rotted through, but solid enough. And the grate to the little river snaking past the castle remained open.

Rowan again speared his magic into the world, tasting the air beyond the sewers. No wings cleaved it, no blood scented its path. A quiet, eastern part of the castle. If the witches had been smart, they’d have sentries monitoring every inch of it.

But from the screaming and pleading going on above, Rowan knew the witches were too lost in their bloodlust to think straight. At least for a few minutes.

Rowan jerked his chin to the boat. “Get in.”

Dorian frowned at the mold and rot. “We’ll be lucky if it doesn’t collapse around us.”

“You,” Rowan corrected. “Around you. Not me. Get in.”

Dorian heard his tone and wisely got in. “What are you—”

Rowan yanked off his cloak and threw it over the king. “Lie down, and put

that over you.”

Face a bit pale, Dorian obeyed. Rowan snapped the ropes with a flash of his knives.

He shifted, wings flapping loudly enough to inform Dorian what had happened. Rowan’s magic groaned and strained while it pushed what looked like an empty, meandering vessel out of the sewers, as if someone had accidentally loosed it.

Flying through the sewer mouth, he shielded the boat with a wall of hard air—containing the king’s scent and keeping any stray arrows from piercing it.

Rowan looked back only once as he flew down the little river, high above the boat.

Only once, at the city that had forged and broken and sheltered his queen.

Her glass wall was no more than chunks and shards gleaming in the streets and the grass.

These past weeks of travel had been torture—the need to claim her, taste her, driving him out of his wits. And given what Darrow had said ... perhaps, despite his promise when he’d left, it had been a good thing that they had not taken that final step.

It had been in the back of his mind long before Darrow and his horse-shit decrees: he was a prince, but in name only.

He had no army, no money. The substantial funds he possessed were in Doranelle—and Maeve would never allow him to claim them. They’d likely already been distributed amongst his meddlesome cousins, along with his lands and residences. It wouldn’t matter if some of them—the cousins he’d been raised with—might refuse to accept out of typical Whitethorn loyalty and stubbornness. All Rowan now had to offer his queen were the strength of his sword, the depth of his magic, and the loyalty of his heart.

Such things did not win wars.

He’d scented the despair on her, though her face had hidden it, when Darrow had spoken. And he knew her fiery soul: she would do it. Consider marriage to a foreign prince or lord. Even if this thing between them ... even if he knew it was not mere lust, or even just love.

This thing between them, the force of it, could devour the world.

And if they picked it, picked *them*, it might very well cause the end of it.

It was why he had not uttered the words he’d meant to tell her for some time, even when every instinct was roaring for him to do it as they parted. And maybe having Aelin only to lose her was his punishment for letting his mate die; his

punishment for finally letting go of that grief and loathing.

The lap of waves was barely audible over the roar of wyverns and the innocents screaming for help that would never come. He shut out the ache in his chest, the urge to turn around.

This was war. These lands would endure far worse in the coming days and months. His queen, no matter how he tried to shield her, would endure far worse.

By the time the boat drifted down the little river snaking toward the Avery delta, a white-tailed hawk soaring high above it, the walls of the stone castle were bathed in blood.

2

There were two parts of her, Nesryn supposed.

The part that was now Captain of Adarlan's Royal Guard, who had made a vow to her king to see that the man in the wheeled chair beside her was healed—and to muster an army from the man enthroned before her. That part of Nesryn kept her head high, her shoulders back, her hands within a nonthreatening distance of the ornate sword at her hip.

Then there was the other part.

The part that had glimpsed the spires and minarets and domes of the god-city breaking over the horizon as they'd sailed in, the shining pillar of the Torre standing proud over it all, and had to swallow back tears. The part that had scented the smoky paprika and crisp tang of ginger and beckoning sweetness of cumin as soon as she had cleared the docks and knew, deep in her bones, that she was *home*. That, yes, she lived and served and would die for Adarlan, for the family still there, but this place, where her father had once lived and where even her Adarlan-born mother had felt more at ease ... These were her people.

The skin in varying shades of brown and tan. The abundance of that shining black hair—*her* hair. The eyes that ranged from uptilted to wide and round to slender, in hues of ebony and chestnut and even the rare hazel and green. Her people. A blend of kingdoms and territories, yes, but ... Here there were no slurs hissed in the streets. Here there would be no rocks thrown by children. Here her sister's children would not feel different. Unwanted.

And that part of her ... Despite her thrown-back shoulders and raised chin, her knees indeed quaked at who—at *what*—stood before her.

Nesryn had not dared tell her father where and what she was leaving to do. Only that she was off on an errand of the King of Adarlan and would not be back for some time.

Her father wouldn't have believed it. Nesryn didn't quite believe it herself.

The khagan had been a story whispered before their hearth on winter nights, his offspring legends told while kneading endless loaves of bread for their bakery. Their ancestors' bedside tales to either lull her into sweet sleep or keep her up all night in bone-deep terror.

The khagan was a living myth. As much of a deity as the thirty-six gods who ruled over this city and empire.

There were as many temples to those gods in Antica as there were tributes to the various khagans. *More.*

They called it the god-city for them—and for the living god seated on the ivory throne atop that golden dais.

It was indeed pure gold, just as her father's whispered legends claimed.

And the khagan's six children ... Nesryn could name them all without introduction.

After the meticulous research Chaol had done while on their ship, she had no doubt he could as well.

But that was not how this meeting was to go.

For as much as *she* had taught the former captain about her homeland these weeks, he'd instructed her on court protocol. He had rarely been so directly involved, yes, but he had witnessed enough of it while serving the king.

An observer of the game who was now to be a prime player. With the stakes unbearably high.

They waited in silence for the khagan to speak.

She'd tried not to gawk while walking through the palace. She had never set

foot inside it during her few visits to Antica over the years. Neither had her father, or his father, or any of her ancestors. In a city of gods, this was the holiest of temples. And deadliest of labyrinths.

The khagan did not move from his ivory throne.

A newer, wider throne, dating from a hundred years ago—when the seventh khagan had chucked out the old one because his large frame didn't fit in it. He'd eaten and drunk himself to death, history claimed, but at least had the good sense to name his Heir before he clutched his chest one day and slumped dead ... right in that throne.

Urus, the current khagan, was no more than sixty, and seemed in far better condition. Though his dark hair had long since gone as white as his carved throne, though scars peppered his wrinkled skin as a reminder to all that *he* had fought for this throne in the final days of his mother's life ... His onyx eyes, slender and uptilted, were bright as stars. Aware and all-seeing.

Atop his snowy head sat no crown. For gods among mortals did not need markers of their divine rule.

Behind him, strips of white silk tied to the open windows fluttered in the hot breeze. Sending the thoughts of the khagan and his family to where the soul of the deceased—whoever they might be, someone important, no doubt—had now rejoined the Eternal Blue Sky and Slumbering Earth that the khagan and all his ancestors still honored in lieu of the pantheon of thirty-six gods their citizens remained free to worship.

Or any other gods outside of it, should their territories be new enough to not yet have had their gods incorporated into the fold. There had to be several of those, since during his three decades of rule, the man seated before them had added a handful of overseas kingdoms to their borders.

A kingdom for every ring adorning his scar-flecked fingers, precious stones glinting among them.

A warrior bedecked in finery. Those hands slid from the arms of his ivory

throne—assembled from the hewn tusks of the mighty beasts that roamed the central grasslands—and settled in his lap, hidden beneath swaths of gold-trimmed blue silk. Indigo dye from the steamy, lush lands in the west. From Balruhn, where Nesryn’s own people had originally hailed, before curiosity and ambition drove her great-grandfather to drag his family over mountains and grasslands and deserts to the god-city in the arid north.

The Faliqs had long been tradesmen, and not of anything particularly fine. Just simple, good cloth and household spices. Her uncle still traded such things and, through various lucrative investments, had become a moderately wealthy man, his family now dwelling in a beautiful home within this very city. A definitive step up from a baker—the path her father had chosen upon leaving these shores.

“It is not every day that a new king sends someone so important to our shores,” the khagan said at last, using their own tongue and not Halha, the language of the southern continent. “I suppose we should deem it an honor.”

His accent was so like her father’s—but the tone lacked the warmth, the humor. A man who had been obeyed his entire life, and fought to earn his crown. And executed two of the siblings who proved to be sore losers. The surviving three ... one had gone into exile, and the other two had sworn fealty to their brother. By having the healers of the Torre render them infertile.

Chaol inclined his head. “The honor is mine, Great Khagan.”

Not *Majesty*—that was for kings or queens. There was no term high or grand enough for this man before them. Only the title that the first of his ancestors had borne: Great Khagan.

“Yours,” the khagan mused, those dark eyes now sliding to Nesryn. “And what of your companion?”

Nesryn fought the urge to bow again. Dorian Havilliard was the opposite of this man, she realized. Aelin Galathynius, however ... Nesryn wondered if the young queen might have more in common with the khagan than she did with the

Havilliard king. Or would, if Aelin survived long enough. If she reached her throne.

Nesryn shoved those thoughts down as Chaol peered at her, his shoulders tightening. Not at the words, not at the company, but simply because she knew that the mere act of having to look *up*, facing this mighty warrior-king in that chair ... Today would be a hard one for him.

Nesryn inclined her head slightly. “I am Nesryn Faliq, Captain of the Royal Guard of Adarlan. As Lord Westfall once was before King Dorian appointed him as his Hand earlier this summer.” She was grateful that years spent living in Rifthold had taught her not to smile, not to cringe or show fear—grateful that she’d learned to keep her voice cool and steady even while her knees quaked.

Nesryn continued, “My family hails from here, Great Khagan. Antica still owns a piece of my soul.” She placed a hand over her heart, the fine threads of her gold-and-crimson uniform, the colors of the empire that had made her family often feel hunted and unwanted, scraping against her calluses. “The honor of being in your palace is the greatest of my life.”

It was, perhaps, true.

If she found time to visit her family in the quiet, garden-filled Runni Quarter—home mostly to merchants and tradesmen like her uncle—they would certainly consider it so.

The khagan only smiled a bit. “Then allow me to welcome you to your true home, Captain.”

Nesryn felt, more than saw, Chaol’s flicker of annoyance. She wasn’t entirely certain what had triggered it: the claim on her homeland, or the official title that had now passed to her.

But Nesryn bowed her head again in thanks.

The khagan said to Chaol, “I will assume you are here to woo me into joining this war of yours.”

Chaol countered a shade tersely, “We’re here at the behest of my king.” A

note of pride at that word. “To begin what we hope will be a new era of prosperous trade and peace.”

One of the khagan’s offspring—a young woman with hair like flowing night and eyes like dark fire—exchanged a wry look with the sibling to her left, a man perhaps three years her elder.

Hasar and Sartaq, then. Third and secondborn, respectively. Each wore similar loose pants and embroidered tunics, with fine leather boots rising to their knees. Hasar was no beauty, but those eyes ... The flame dancing in them as she glanced to her elder brother made up for it.

And Sartaq—commander of his father’s ruk riders. The rukhin.

The northern aerial cavalry of his people had long dwelled in the towering Tavan Mountains with their ruks: enormous birds, eagle-like in shape, large enough to carry off cattle and horses. Without the sheer bulk and destructive weight of the Ironteeth witches’ wyverns, but swift and nimble and clever as foxes. The perfect mounts for the legendary archers who flew them into battle.

Sartaq’s face was solemn, his broad shoulders thrown back. A man perhaps as ill at ease in his fine clothes as Chaol. She wondered if his ruk, Kadara, was perched on one of the palace’s thirty-six minarets, eyeing the cowering servants and guards, waiting impatiently for her master’s return.

That Sartaq was here ... They had to have known, then. Well in advance. That she and Chaol were coming.

The knowing glance that passed between Sartaq and Hasar told Nesryn enough: they, at least, had discussed the possibilities of this visit.

Sartaq’s gaze slid from his sister to Nesryn.

She yielded a blink. His brown skin was darker than the others’—perhaps from all that time in the skies and sunlight—his eyes a solid ebony. Depthless and unreadable. His black hair remained unbound save for a small braid that curved over the arch of his ear. The rest of his hair fell to just past his muscled chest, and swayed slightly as he gave what Nesryn could have sworn was a

mocking incline of his head.

A ragtag, humbled pair, Adarlan had sent. The injured former captain, and the common-bred current one. Perhaps the khagan's initial words about *honor* had been a veiled mention of what he perceived as an insult.

Nesryn dragged her attention away from the prince, even as she felt Sartaq's keen stare lingering like some phantom touch.

"We arrive bearing gifts from His Majesty, the King of Adarlan," Chaol was saying, and twisted in his chair to motion the servants behind them to come forward.

Queen Georgina and her court had practically raided the royal coffers before they'd fled to their mountain estates this spring. And the former king had smuggled out much of what was left during those final few months. But before they'd sailed here, Dorian had ventured into the many vaults beneath the castle. Nesryn still could hear his echoed curse, filthier than she'd ever heard him speak, as he found little more than gold marks within.

Aelin, as usual, had a plan.

Nesryn had been standing beside her new king when Aelin had flipped open two trunks in her chambers. Jewelry fit for a queen—for a Queen of Assassins—had sparkled within.

I've enough funds for now, Aelin had only said to Dorian when he began to object. *Give the khagan some of Adarlan's finest.*

In the weeks since, Nesryn had wondered if Aelin had been glad to be rid of what she'd purchased with her blood money. The jewels of Adarlan, it seemed, would not travel to Terrasen.

And now, as the servants laid out the four smaller trunks—divided from the original two to make it seem like *more*, Aelin had suggested—as they flipped open the lids, the still-silent court pressed in to see.

A murmur went through them at the glistening gems and gold and silver.

"A gift," Chaol declared as even the khagan himself leaned forward to

examine the trove. “From King Dorian Havilliard of Adarlan, and Aelin Galathynius, Queen of Terrasen.”

Princess Hasar’s eyes snapped to Chaol at the second name.

Prince Sartaq only glanced back at his father. The eldest son, Arghun, frowned at the jewels.

Arghun—the politician amongst them, beloved by the merchants and power brokers of the continent. Slender and tall, he was a scholar who traded not in coin and finery but in knowledge.

Prince of Spies, they called Arghun. While his two brothers had become the finest of warriors, Arghun had honed his mind, and now oversaw his father’s thirty-six viziers. So that frown at the treasure ...

Necklaces of diamond and ruby. Bracelets of gold and emerald. Earrings—veritable small chandeliers—of sapphire and amethyst. Exquisitely wrought rings, some crowned with jewels as large as a swallow’s egg. Combs and pins and brooches. Blood-gained, blood-bought.

The youngest of the assembled royal children, a fine-boned, comely woman, leaned the closest. Duva. A thick silver ring with a sapphire of near-obscene size adorned her slender hand, pressed delicately against the considerable swell of her belly.

Perhaps six months along, though the flowing clothes—she favored purple and rose—and her slight build could distort that. Certainly her first child, the result of her arranged marriage to a prince hailing from an overseas territory to the far east, a southern neighbor of Doranelle that had noted the rumblings of its Fae Queen and wanted to secure the protection of the southern empire across the ocean. Perhaps the first attempt, Nesryn and others had wondered, of the khaganate greatly expanding its own considerable continent.

Nesryn didn’t let herself look too long at the life growing beneath that bejeweled hand.

For if one of Duva’s siblings were crowned khagan, the first task of the new

ruler—after his or her sufficient offspring were produced—would be to eliminate any other challenges to the throne. Starting with the offspring of his or her siblings, if they challenged their right to rule.

She wondered how Duva was able to endure it. If she had come to love the babe growing in her womb, or if she was wise enough to not allow such a feeling. If the father of that babe would do everything he could to get that child to safety should it come to that.

The khagan at last leaned back in his throne. His children had straightened again, Duva's hand falling back at her side.

“Jewels,” Chaol explained, “set by the finest of Adarlanian craftsmen.”

The khagan toyed with a citrine ring on his own hand. “If they came from Aelin Galathynius's trove, I have no doubt that they are.”

A beat of silence between Nesryn and Chaol. They had known—anticipated—that the khagan had spies in every land, on every sea. That Aelin's past might be just a tad difficult to work around.

“For you are not only Adarlan's Hand,” the khagan went on, “but also the Ambassador of Terrasen, are you not?”

“Indeed I am,” Chaol said simply.

The khagan rose with only the slightest stiffness, his children immediately stepping aside to clear a path for him to step off the golden dais.

The tallest of them—strapping and perhaps more unchecked than Sartaq's quiet intensity—eyed up the crowd as if assessing any threats within. Kashin. Fourthborn.

If Sartaq commanded the ruks in the northern and central skies, then Kashin controlled the armies on land. Foot soldiers and the horse-lords, mostly. Arghun held sway over the viziers, and Hasar, rumor claimed, had the armadas bowing to her. Yet there remained something less polished about Kashin, his dark hair braided back from his broad-planed face. Handsome, yes—but it was as if life amongst his troops had rubbed off on him, and not necessarily in a bad way.

The khagan descended the dais, his cobalt robes whispering along the floor. And with every step over the green marble, Nesryn realized that this man had indeed once commanded not just the ruks in the skies, but also the horse-lords, *and* swayed the armadas to join him. And then Urus and his elder brother had gone hand-to-hand in combat at the behest of their mother while she lay dying from a wasting sickness that even the Torre could not heal. The son who walked off the sand would be khagan.

The former khagan had a penchant for spectacle. And for this final fight between her two selected offspring, she had placed them in the great amphitheater in the heart of the city, the doors open to any who could claw inside to find a seat. People had sat upon the archways and steps, with thousands cramming the streets that flowed to the white-stoned building. Ruks and their riders had perched on the pillars crowning the uppermost level, more rukhin circling in the skies above.

The two would-be Heirs had fought for six hours.

Not just against each other, but also against the horrors their mother unleashed to test them: great cats sprang from hidden cages beneath the sandy floor; iron-spiked chariots with spear-throwers had charged from the gloom of the tunnel entrances to run them down.

Nesryn's father had been amongst the frenzied mob in the streets, listening to the shouted reports from those dangling off the columns.

The final blow hadn't been an act of brutality or hate.

The now-khagan's elder brother, Orda, had taken a spear to the side thanks to one of those charioteers. After six hours of bloody battle and survival, the blow had kept him down.

And Urus had set aside his sword. Absolute silence had fallen in the arena. Silence as Urus had extended a bloodied hand to his fallen brother—to help him.

Orda had sent a hidden dagger shooting for Urus's heart.

It had missed by two inches.

And Urus had ripped that dagger free, screaming, and plunged it right back into his brother.

Urus did not miss as his brother had.

Nesryn wondered if a scar still marred the khagan's chest as he now strode toward her and Chaol and the jewels displayed. If that long-dead khagan had wept for her fallen son in private, slain by the one who would take her crown in a matter of days. Or if she had never allowed herself to love her children, knowing what must befall them.

Urus, Khagan of the Southern Continent, stopped before Nesryn and Chaol. He towered over Nesryn by a good half foot, his shoulders still broad, spine still straight.

He bent with only a touch of age-granted strain to pluck up a necklace of diamond and sapphire from the chest. It glittered like a living river in his scar-flecked, bejeweled hands.

"My eldest, Arghun," said the khagan, jerking his chin toward the narrow-faced prince monitoring all, "recently informed me of some fascinating information regarding Queen Aelin Ashryver Galathynius."

Nesryn waited for the blow. Chaol just held Urus's gaze.

But the khagan's dark eyes—Sartaq's eyes, she realized—danced as he said to Chaol, "A queen at nineteen would make many uneasy. Dorian Havilliard, at least, has been trained since birth to take up his crown, to control a court and kingdom. But Aelin Galathynius ..."

The khagan chucked the necklace into the chest. Its thunk was as loud as steel on stone.

"I suppose some would call ten years as a trained assassin to be experience."

Murmurs again rippled through the throne room. Hasar's fire-bright eyes practically glowed. Sartaq's face did not shift at all. Perhaps a skill learned from his eldest brother—whose spies had to be skilled indeed if they'd learned of Aelin's past. Even though Arghun himself seemed to be struggling to keep a

smug smile from his lips.

“We may be separated by the Narrow Sea,” the khagan said to Chaol, whose features did not so much as alter, “but even we have heard of Celaena Sardothien. You bring me jewels, no doubt from her own collection. Yet they are jewels for *me*, when my daughter Duva”—a glance toward his pregnant, pretty daughter standing closely beside Hasar—“has yet to receive any sort of wedding gift from either your new king or returned queen, while every other ruler sent theirs nearly half a year ago.”

Nesryn hid her wince. An oversight that could be explained by so many truths—but not ones that they dared voice, not here. Chaol didn’t offer any of them as he remained silent.

“But,” the khagan went on, “regardless of the jewels you’ve now dumped at my feet like sacks of grain, I would still rather have the truth. Especially after Aelin Galathynius shattered your own glass castle, murdered your former king, and seized your capital city.”

“If Prince Arghun has the information,” Chaol said at last with unfaltering coolness, “perhaps you do not need it from me.”

Nesryn stifled her cringe at the defiance, the tone—

“Perhaps not,” the khagan said, even as Arghun’s eyes narrowed slightly. “But I think *you* should like some truth from me.”

Chaol didn’t ask for it. Didn’t look remotely interested beyond his, “Oh?”

Kashin stiffened. His father’s fiercest defender, then. Arghun only exchanged glances with a vizier and smiled toward Chaol like an adder ready to strike.

“Here is why I think you have come, Lord Westfall, Hand to the King.”

Only the gulls wheeling high above the dome of the throne room dared make any noise.

The khagan shut lid after lid on the trunks.

“I think you have come to convince me to join your war. Adarlan is cleaved, Terrasen is destitute, and will no doubt have some issue convincing her surviving

lords to fight for an untried queen who spent ten years indulging herself in Rifthold, purchasing these jewels with blood money. Your list of allies is short and brittle. Duke Perrington's forces are anything but. The other kingdoms on your continent are shattered and separated from your northern territories by Perrington's armies. So you have arrived here, fast as the eight winds can carry you, to beg me to send my armies to your shores. To convince me to spill our blood on a lost cause."

"Some might consider it a noble cause," Chaol countered.

"I am not done yet," the khagan said, lifting a hand.

Chaol bristled but did not speak out of turn again. Nesryn's heart thundered.

"Many would argue," the khagan said, waving that upraised hand toward a few viziers, toward Arghun and Hasar, "that we remain out of it. Or better yet, ally with the force sure to win, whose trade has been profitable for us these ten years."

A wave of that hand toward some other men and women in the gold robes of viziers. Toward Sartaq and Kashin and Duva. "Some would say that we risk allying with Perrington only to potentially face his armies in our harbors one day. That the shattered kingdoms of Eyllwe and Fenharrow might again become wealthy under new rule, and fill our coffers with good trade. I have no doubt you will promise me that it shall be so. You will offer me exclusive trading deals, likely to your own disadvantage. But you are desperate, and there is nothing you possess that I do not already own. That I cannot take if I wish."

Chaol kept his mouth shut, thankfully. Even as his brown eyes simmered at the quiet threat.

The khagan peered into the fourth and final trunk. Jeweled combs and brushes, ornate perfume bottles made by Adarlan's finest glassblowers. The same who had built the castle Aelin had shattered. "So, you have come to convince me to join your cause. And I shall consider it while you stay here. Since you have undoubtedly come for another purpose, too."

A flick of that scarred, jeweled hand toward the chair. Color stained Chaol's tan cheeks, but he did not flinch, did not cower. Nesryn forced herself to do the same.

“Arghun informed me your injuries are new—that they happened when the glass castle exploded. It seems the Queen of Terrasen was not quite so careful about shielding her allies.”

A muscle feathered in Chaol's jaw as everyone, from prince to servant, looked to his legs.

“Because your relations with Doranelle are now strained, also thanks to Aelin Galathynius, I assume the only path toward healing that remains open to you is here. At the Torre Cesme.”

The khagan shrugged, the only reveal of the irreverent warrior-youth he'd once been. “My beloved wife will be deeply upset if I were to deny an injured man a chance at healing”—the empress was nowhere to be seen in this room, Nesryn realized with a start—“so I, of course, shall grant you permission to enter the Torre. Whether its healers will agree to work upon you shall be up to them. Even I do not control the will of the Torre.”

The Torre—the Tower. It dominated the southern edge of Antica, nestled atop its highest hill to overlook the city that sloped down toward the green sea. Domain of its famed healers, and tribute to Silba, the healer-goddess who blessed them. Of the thirty-six gods this empire had welcomed into the fold over the centuries, from religions near and far, in this city of gods ... Silba reigned unchallenged.

Chaol looked like he was swallowing hot coals, but he mercifully managed to bow his head. “I thank you for your generosity, Great Khagan.”

“Rest tonight—I will inform them that you shall be ready tomorrow morning. Since you cannot go to them, one will be sent to you. If they agree.”

Chaol's fingers shifted in his lap, but he did not clench them. Nesryn still held her breath.

“I am at their disposal,” Chaol said tightly.

The khagan shut the final trunk of jewels. “You may keep your presents, Hand of the King, Ambassador to Aelin Galathynius. I have no use for them—and no interest.”

Chaol’s head snapped up, as if something in the khagan’s tone had snared him. “Why.”

Nesryn barely hid her cringe. More of a demand than anyone ever dared make of the man, judging by the surprised anger in the khagan’s eyes, in the glances exchanged between his children.

But Nesryn caught the flicker of something else within the khagan’s eyes. A weariness.

Something oily slid into her gut as she noted the white banners streaming from the windows, all over the city. As she looked to the six heirs and counted again.

Not six.

Five. Only five were here.

Death-banners at the royal household. All over the city.

They were not a mourning people—not in the way they could be in Adarlan, dressing all in black and moping for months. Even amongst the khagan’s royal family, life picked up and went on, their dead not stuffed in stone catacombs or coffins, but shrouded in white and laid beneath the open skies of their sealed-off, sacred reserve on the distant steppes.

Nesryn glanced down the line of five heirs, counting. The eldest five were present. And just as she realized that Tumelun, the youngest—barely seventeen—was not there, the khagan said to Chaol, “Your spies are indeed useless if you have not heard.”

With that, he strode for his throne, leaving Sartaq to step forward, the second-eldest prince’s depthless eyes veiled with sorrow. Sartaq gave Nesryn a silent nod. Yes. Yes, her suspicions were right—

Sartaq's solid, pleasant voice filled the chamber. "Our beloved sister, Tumelun, died unexpectedly three weeks ago."

Oh, gods. So many words and rituals had been passed over; merely coming here to demand their aid in war was uncouth, untoward—

Chaol said into the fraught silence, meeting the stares of each taut-faced prince and princess, then finally the weary-eyed khagan himself, "You have my deepest condolences."

Nesryn breathed, "May the northern wind carry her to fairer plains."

Only Sartaq bothered to nod his thanks, while the others now turned cold and stiff.

Nesryn shot Chaol a silent, warning look not to ask about the death. He read the expression on her face and nodded.

The khagan scratched at a fleck on his ivory throne, the silence as heavy as one of the coats the horse-lords still wore against that bitter northern wind on the steppes and their unforgiving wooden saddles.

"We've been at sea for three weeks," Chaol tried to offer, his voice softer now.

The khagan did not bother to appear understanding. "That would also explain why you are so unaware of the other bit of news, and why these cold jewels might be of more use for *you*." The khagan's lips curled in a mirthless smile. "Arghun's contacts also brought word from a ship this morning. Your royal coffers in Rifthold are no longer accessible. Duke Perrington and his host of flying terrors have sacked Rifthold."

Silence, pulsing and hollow, swept through Nesryn. She wasn't sure if Chaol was breathing.

"We do not have word on King Dorian's location, but he yielded Rifthold to them. Fled into the night, if rumor is to be believed. The city has fallen. Everything to the south of Rifthold belongs to Perrington and his witches now."

Nesryn saw the faces of her nieces and nephews first.

Then the face of her sister. Then her father. Saw their kitchen, the bakery. The pear tarts cooling on the long, wooden table.

Dorian had left them. Left them all to ... to do what? Find help? Survive? Run to Aelin?

Had the royal guard remained to fight? Had anyone fought to save the innocents in the city?

Her hands were shaking. She didn't care. Didn't care if these people clad in riches sneered.

Her sister's children, the great joy in her life ...

Chaol was staring up at her. Nothing on his face. No devastation, no shock.

That crimson-and-gold uniform became stifling. Strangling.

Witches and wyverns. In her city. With those iron teeth and nails. Shredding and bleeding and tormenting. Her family—her *family*—

“Father.”

Sartaq had stepped forward once more. Those onyx eyes slid between Nesryn and the khagan. “It has been a long journey for our guests. Politics aside,” he said, giving a disapproving glance at Arghun, who seemed amused—*amused* at this news he'd brought, that had set the green marble floors roiling beneath her boots—“we are still a nation of hospitality. Let them rest for a few hours. And then join us for dinner.”

Hasar came to Sartaq's side, frowning at Arghun while she did. Perhaps not from reprimand like her brother, but simply for Arghun not telling *her* of this news first. “Let no guest pass through our home and find its comforts lacking.” Even though the words were welcoming, Hasar's tone was anything but.

Their father gave them a bemused glance. “Indeed.” Urus waved a hand toward the servants by the far pillars. “Escort them to their rooms. And dispatch a message to the Torre to send their finest—Hafiza, if she'll come down from that tower.”

Nesryn scarcely heard the rest. If the witches held the city, then the Valg who

had infested it earlier this summer ... There would be no one to fight them. No one to shield her family.

If they had survived.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

She should not have left. Should not have taken this position.

They could be dead, or suffering. Dead. Dead.

She did not notice the female servant who came to push Chaol's chair. Barely noticed the hand Chaol reached out to twine through her own.

Nesryn didn't so much as bow to the khagan as they left.

She could not stop seeing their faces.

The children. Her sister's smiling, round-bellied children.

She should not have come.

3

Nesryn had gone into shock.

And Chaol could not go to her, could not scoop her into his arms and hold her close.

Not when she had walked, silent and drifting like a wraith, right into a bedroom of the lavish suite they'd been appointed on the first floor of the palace, and shut the door behind her. As if she had forgotten anyone else in the world existed.

He didn't blame her.

Chaol let the servant, a fine-boned young woman with chestnut hair that fell in heavy curls to her narrow waist, wheel him into the second bedroom. The suite overlooked a garden of fruit trees and burbling fountains, cascades of pink and purple blossoms hanging from potted plants anchored into the balcony above. They provided living curtains before his towering bedroom windows—doors, he realized.

The servant mumbled something about drawing a bath, her use of his language unwieldy compared to the skill of the khagan and his children. Not that he was in any position to judge: he was barely fluent in any of the other languages within his own continent.

She slipped behind a carved wooden screen that no doubt led into his bathing chamber, and Chaol peered through his still-open bedroom door, across the pale marble foyer, to the shut doors of Nesryn's bedroom.

They should not have left.

He couldn't have done anything, but ... He knew what the not-knowing would do to Nesryn. What it was already doing to him.

Dorian was not dead, he told himself. He had gotten out. Fled. If he were in Perrington's grip—Erawan's grip—they would have known. Prince Arghun would have known.

His city, sacked by the witches. He wondered if Manon Blackbeak had led the attack.

Chaol tried and failed to recount where the debts were stacked between them. Aelin had spared Manon's life at Temis's temple, but Manon had given them vital information about Dorian under the Valg thrall. Did it make them even? Or tentative allies?

It was a waste to hope that Manon would turn against Morath. But he sent up a silent prayer to whatever god might be listening to protect Dorian, to guide his king to friendlier harbors.

Dorian would make it. He was too clever, too gifted, not to. There was no other alternative—none—that Chaol would accept. Dorian was alive, and safe. Or on his way to safety. And when Chaol got a moment, he was going to squeeze the information out of the eldest prince. Mourning or no. Everything Arghun knew, *he* would know. And then he'd ask that servant girl to comb every merchant ship for information about the attack.

No word—there had been no word about Aelin. Where she was now, what she'd been doing. Aelin, who might very well be the thing that cost him this alliance.

He ground his teeth, and was still grinding them as the suite doors opened and a tall, broad-shouldered man strode in as if he owned the place.

Chaol supposed he did. Prince Kashin was alone and unarmed, though he moved with the ease of a person confident in his body's unfailing strength.

How, Chaol supposed, he himself had once walked about the palace in

Rifthold.

Chaol lowered his head in greeting as the prince shut the hall door and surveyed him. It was a warrior's assessment, frank and thorough. When his brown eyes at last met Chaol's, the prince said in Adarlan's tongue, "Injuries like yours are not uncommon here, and I have seen many of them—especially among the horse-tribes. My family's people."

Chaol didn't particularly feel like discussing his injuries with the prince, with anyone, so he only nodded. "I'm sure you have."

Kashin cocked his head, scanning Chaol again, his dark braid slipping over his muscled shoulder. Reading, perhaps, Chaol's desire not to start down this particular road. "My father indeed wishes you both to join us at dinner. And more than that, to join us every night afterward while you are here. And sit at the high table."

It wasn't a strange request of a visiting dignitary, and it was certainly an honor to sit at the khagan's own table, but to send his son to do it ... Chaol considered his next words carefully, then simply chose the most obvious one. "Why?"

Surely the family wished to keep close to one another after losing their youngest member. Inviting strangers to join them—

The prince's jaw tightened. Not a man used to veiling his emotions, as his three elder siblings were. "Arghun reports our palace is safe of spies from Duke Perrington's forces, that his agents have not yet come. I am not of that belief. And Sartaq—" The prince caught himself, as if not wanting to bring in his brother—or potential ally. Kashin grimaced. "There was a reason I chose to live amongst soldiers. The double-talk of this court ..."

Chaol was tempted to say he understood. Had felt that way for most of his life. But he asked, "You think Perrington's forces have infiltrated this court?"

How much did Kashin, or Arghun, know of Perrington's forces—know the truth of the Valg king who wore Perrington's skin? Or the armies he

commanded, worse than any their imaginations might conjure? But that information ... He'd keep that to himself. See if it could somehow be used, if Arghun and the khagan did not know of it.

Kashin rubbed at his neck. "I do not know if it is Perrington, or someone from Terrasen, or Melisande, or Wendlyn. All I know is that my sister is now dead."

Chaol's heart stumbled a beat. But he dared ask, "How did it come about?"

Grief flickered in Kashin's eyes. "Tumelun was always a bit wild, reckless. Prone to moods. One day, happy and laughing; the next, withdrawn and hopeless. They ..." His throat bobbed. "They say she leaped from her balcony because of it. Duva and her husband found her later that night."

Any death in a family was devastating, but a suicide ... "I'm sorry," Chaol offered quietly.

Kashin shook his head, sunlight from the garden dancing on his black hair. "I do not believe it. My Tumelun would not have jumped."

My Tumelun. The words told enough about the prince's closeness to his younger sister.

"You suspect foul play?"

"All I know is that no matter Tumelun's moods ... I knew her. As I know my own heart." He put a hand over it. "She would not have jumped."

Chaol considered his words carefully once again. "As sorry as I am for your loss, do you have any reason to suspect why a foreign kingdom might have engineered it?"

Kashin paced a few steps. "No one within *our* lands would be stupid enough."

"Well, no one within Terrasen or Adarlan would ever do such a thing—even to manipulate you into this war."

Kashin studied him for a heartbeat. "Even a queen who was once an assassin herself?"

Chaol didn't let one flicker of emotion show. "Assassin she might have been, but Aelin had hard lines that she did not cross. Killing or harming children was one of them."

Kashin paused before the dresser against the garden wall, adjusting a gilded box on its polished dark surface. "I know. I read that in my brother's reports, too. Details of her kills." Chaol could have sworn the prince shuddered before he added, "I believe you."

No doubt why the prince was even having this conversation with him.

Kashin went on, "Which leaves not many other foreign powers who might do it—and Perrington at the top of that short list."

"But why target your sister?"

"I do not know." Kashin paced another few steps. "She was young, guileless—she rode with me amongst the Darghan, our mother-clans. Had no *sulde* of her own yet."

At Chaol's narrowed brows, the prince clarified, "It is a spear all Darghan warriors carry. We bind strands of our favored horse's hair to the shaft, beneath the blade. Our ancestors believed that where those hairs waved in the wind, there our destinies waited. Some of us still believe in such things, but even those who think it mere tradition ... we bring them everywhere. There is a courtyard in this palace where my *sulde* and those of my siblings are planted to feel the wind while we remain at our father's palace, right beside his own. But in death ..." Again, that shadow of grief. "In death, they are the only object that we keep. They bear the soul of a Darghan warrior for eternity, and are left planted atop a steppe in our sacred realm." The prince closed his eyes. "Now her soul will roam with the wind."

Nesryn had said as much earlier. Chaol only repeated, "I'm sorry."

Kashin opened his eyes. "Some of my siblings do not believe me about Tumelun. Some do. Our father ... he remains undecided. Our mother will not even leave her room thanks to her grief, and mentioning my suspicions might—I

cannot bring myself to mention them to her.” He rubbed his strong jaw. “So I have convinced my father to have you join us at dinner every night, as a gesture of diplomacy. But I should like you to watch with an outsider’s eyes. To report on anything amiss. Perhaps you will see something we don’t.”

Help them ... and perhaps receive help in return. Chaol said baldly, “If you trust me enough to have me do that, to tell me all this, then why not agree to join with us in this war?”

“It is not my place to say or guess.” A trained soldier. Kashin examined the suite as if assessing any potential enemies lying in wait. “I march only when my father gives the order.”

If Perrington’s forces were already here, if Morath was indeed behind the princess’s murder ... It’d be too easy. Too easy to sway the khagan into siding with Dorian and Aelin. Perrington—Erawan was far smarter than that.

But if Chaol himself were to win over the commander of the khagan’s terrestrial armies to their cause—

“I do not play those games, Lord Westfall,” said Kashin, reading whatever sparked in Chaol’s eyes. “My other siblings are the ones you will wish to convince.”

Chaol tapped a finger on the arm of his chair. “Any advice on that front?”

Kashin snorted, smiling faintly. “Others have come before you—from kingdoms far richer than your own. Some succeeded, some didn’t.” A glance at Chaol’s legs, a flicker of pity entering the prince’s eyes. Chaol clenched the arms of the chair at that pity, from a man who recognized a fellow warrior. “Wishes for good luck are all I can offer you.”

Then the prince was striding for the doors, his long legs eating up the distance.

“If Perrington has an agent here,” Chaol said as Kashin reached the suite doors, “then you’ve already seen that everyone in this palace is in grave danger. You must take action.”

Kashin paused with his hand on the carved doorknob, glancing over his shoulder. “Why do you think I’ve asked a foreign lord for assistance?”

Then the prince was gone, his words hanging in the sweet-scented air. The tone wasn’t cruel, wasn’t insulting, but the warrior’s frankness of it ...

Chaol struggled to master his breathing, even as the thoughts swirled. He’d seen no black rings or collars, but then he hadn’t been looking for them. Had not even considered that the shadow of Morath might have already stretched this far.

Chaol rubbed at his chest. Careful. He’d have to be careful in this court. With what he said publicly—with what he said in this room, too.

Chaol was still staring at the shut door, mulling over all Kashin had implied, when the servant emerged, her tunic and pants replaced by a tied robe of thinnest, sheerest silk. It left nothing to the imagination.

He clamped down on the urge to shout for Nesryn to assist him instead. “Only wash me,” he said, as clearly and firmly as he could.

She showed no nerves, no tremor of hesitation. And he knew she had done this before, countless times, as she only asked, “Am I not to your liking?”

It was a stark, honest question. She was paid well for her services—all the servants were. She chose to be here, and another could easily be found at no risk to her status.

“You are,” Chaol said, only half lying, refusing to let his gaze drop below her eyes. “Very pleasing,” he clarified. “But I only want a bath.” He added, just to be sure, “Nothing else from you.”

He’d expected her gratitude, but the servant only nodded, unruffled. Even with her, he’d have to be careful with what he said. What he and Nesryn might discuss in these rooms.

There hadn’t been a sound or flicker of movement behind Nesryn’s closed bedroom doors. And there certainly wasn’t now.

So he motioned to let the servant push his chair into the bathing chamber, veils of steam rippling through the white-and-blue-tiled room.

The chair glided over carpet and tile, curving around the furniture with little effort. Nesryn herself had found the chair in the now-vacant healers' catacombs of Rifthold's castle, right before they'd sailed here. One of the few items the fleeing healers had left behind, it seemed.

Lighter and sleeker than what he'd expected, the large wheels flanking the seat rotated easily, even when he used the slender metal hand rim to guide them himself. Unlike the stiff bulk of others he'd seen, this chair came equipped with two small front wheels, just on either side of the wooden footrests, each capable of swiveling in any direction he chose. And now they smoothly turned into the wafting steam of the bathing chamber.

A large sunken pool filled most of it, oils gleaming on the surface, interrupted only by scattered, drifting petals. A small window high in the far wall peeked into the greenery of the garden, and candles gilded the billowing steam.

Luxury. Utter luxury while his city suffered. While they pleaded for help that had not come. Dorian would have wanted to stay. Only absolute defeat, no chance of survival, would have prompted him to leave. Chaol wondered if his magic had played any part. Helped any of them.

Dorian would find his way to safety, to allies. He knew it in his bones, though his stomach continued to roil. There was nothing he could do to help his king from here—save for forging this alliance. Even if every instinct screamed at him to return to Adarlan, to find Dorian, he'd stay the course.

Chaol barely noticed the servant removing his boots in efficient tugs. And though he could have done it himself, he barely remarked on her removing his teal jacket, then the shirt beneath. But he dragged himself from his thoughts at last when she began to remove his pants—when he leaned in to help, gritting his teeth as they worked together in stilted silence. It was only when she reached to remove his undershorts that he gripped her wrist.

He and Nesryn still hadn't touched each other. Beyond an ill-fated bout on the ship three days ago, he hadn't conveyed any sort of desire to take that step

once again. He'd wanted to, though. Woke up most mornings aching to, especially when they'd shared that bed in their stateroom. But the thought of being so prone, of not being able to take her the way he'd once done ... It had curdled any brimming lust. Even while grateful that certain parts of him still undoubtedly worked.

"I can get in on my own," Chaol said, and before the servant could move, he gathered the strength in his arms, his back, and began easing himself from the chair. It was an unceremonious process, one he'd figured out during the long days at sea.

First he flicked the locking mechanism on the wheels, the click echoing off the stone and water. With a few motions, he maneuvered himself to the edge of the chair, then removed his feet from the wooden plates and onto the floor, angling his legs to his left as he did so. With his right hand, he gripped the edge of the seat by his knees, while he curled the left into a fist as he bent over to brace it on the cool, steam-slick tiles. Slippery—

The servant only padded over, laid a thick white cloth before him, and backed away. He gave her a grateful, close-lipped smile as he braced his left fist again on the floor, atop the plush cloth, distributing his weight throughout the arm. With an inhaled breath, his right hand still gripping the edge of his chair, he carefully lowered himself to the ground, swinging his rear away from the chair as his knees bent unbidden.

He landed with a thud, but he was on the floor, at least—hadn't toppled over, as he had the first half-dozen times he'd tried it on the ship.

Carefully, he scooted to the edge of the pool stairs, until he could set his feet into the warm water, right atop the second step. The servant strode into the water a heartbeat later, graceful as an egret, her gossamer robe turning as insubstantial as dew while water crept up its length. Her hands were gentle but steady while she gripped him under the arm and helped him hoist himself the last bit into the pool, setting himself down on the top step. Then she guided him down another

and another, until he was sitting up to his shoulders. Eye-level with her full, peaked breasts.

She didn't seem to notice. And he immediately averted his gaze toward the window as she reached for the small tray of supplies she'd left near the lip of the pool. Oils and brushes and soft-looking cloths. Chaol slid his undershorts off while she turned, setting them with a loud, wet smack upon the edge of the pool.

Nesryn still didn't emerge from her room.

So Chaol closed his eyes, submitting himself to the servant's ministrations, and wondered what the hell he was going to do.

Elide Lochan knew she was being hunted.

For three days now, she'd tried to lose whatever tracked her through the endless sprawl of Oakwald. And in the process, she herself had become lost.

Three days hardly sleeping, barely stopping long enough to scavenge for food and water.

She'd turned south once—to backtrack and shake it off her trail. She'd wound up heading a day in that direction. Then west, toward the mountains. Then south, possibly east; she couldn't tell. She'd been running then, Oakwald so dense that she could hardly track the sun. And without a clear view of the stars, not daring to stop and find an easy tree to climb, she couldn't find the Lord of the North—her beacon home.

By noon on the third day, she was close to weeping. From exhaustion, from rage, from bone-deep fear. Whatever took its time hunting her would surely take its time killing her.

Her knife trembled in her hand as she paused in a clearing, a swift, nimble stream dancing through it. Her leg ached—her ruined, useless leg. She'd offer the dark god her soul for a few hours of peace and safety.

Elide dropped the knife into the grass beside her, falling to her knees before the stream and drinking swift and deep. Water filled the gaps in her belly left by berries and roots. She refilled her canteen, hands shaking uncontrollably.

Shaking so hard she dropped the metal cap into the stream.

She swore, plunging into the cold water up to her elbows as she fumbled for the cap, patting the rocks and slick tendrils of river weed, begging for one solitary *break*—

Her fingers closed on the cap as the first howl sounded through the forest.

Elide and the forest went still.

She had heard dogs baying, had listened to the unearthly choruses of wolves when she'd been hauled from Perranth down to Morath.

This was neither. This was...

There had been nights in Morath when she'd been yanked from sleep

because of howls like that. Howls she'd believed were imagined when they didn't sound again. No one ever mentioned them.

But there was the sound. *That* sound.

We shall create wonders that will make the world tremble.

Oh, gods. Elide blindly screwed the cap onto the canteen. Whatever it might be, it was closing in fast. Maybe a tree—high up a tree—might save her. Hide her. Maybe.

Elide twisted to shove her canteen into her bag.

But a warrior was crouched across the stream, a long, wicked knife balanced on his knee.

His black eyes devoured her, his face harsh beneath equally dark, shoulder-length hair as he said in a voice like granite, "Unless you want to be lunch, girl, I suggest you come with me."

A small, ancient voice whispered in her ear that she'd at last found her relentless hunter.

And they'd now both become someone else's prey.



Lorcan Salvaterre listened to the rising snarls in the ancient wood and knew they were likely about to die.

Well, the girl was about to die. Either at the claws of whatever pursued them or at the end of Lorcan's blade. He hadn't yet decided.

Human—the cinnamon-and-elderberries scent of her was utterly human—and yet that *other* smell remained, that tinge of darkness fluttering about her like a hummingbird's wings.

He might have suspected she'd summoned the beasts were it not for the tang of fear staining the air. And for the fact that he'd been tracking her for three days now, letting her lose herself in the tangled labyrinth of Oakwald, and had found little to indicate she was under Valg thrall.

Lorcan rose to his feet, and her dark eyes widened as she took in his towering height. She remained kneeling by the stream, a dirty hand reaching for the dagger she'd foolishly discarded in the grass. She wasn't stupid or desperate enough to lift it against him. "Who are you?"

Her hoarse voice was low—not the sweet, high thing he'd expected from her delicate, fully curved frame. Low and cold and steady.

"If you want to die," Lorcan said, "then go ahead: keep asking questions."

He turned away—northward.

And that was when the second set of snarling began. From the other direction.

Two packs, closing in. Grass and cloth rustled, and when he looked, the girl was on her feet, dagger angled, face sickly pale as she realized what was happening: they were being herded.

“East or west,” Lorcan said. In the five centuries he’d been slaughtering his way across the world, he’d never heard snarls like that from any manner of beast. He thumbed free his hatchet from where it was strapped at his side.

“East,” the girl breathed, eyes darting to either direction. “I—I was told to stay out of the mountains. Wyverns—large, winged beasts—patrol them.”

“I know what a wyvern is,” he said.

Some temper snapped in her dark eyes at his tone, but the fear washed it away. She began backing toward the direction she’d chosen. One of the creatures loosed a keening cry. Not a canine sound. No, this was high-pitched, screeching—like a bat. But deeper. Hungrier. “Run,” he said.

She did.

Lorcan had to give the girl credit: despite the still-injured leg, despite the exhaustion that had made her sloppy these past few days, she bolted like a doe through the trees, her terror likely leeching away any pain. Lorcan leaped the wide stream in an easy movement, closing the distance between them in mere heartbeats. Slow; these humans were so damned slow. Her breathing was already ragged as she hauled herself up a hill, making enough noise to alert their trackers.

Crashing from the brush behind them—from the south. Two or three from the sound of it. Big, from the snapping branches and thudding of footfalls.

The girl hit the top of the hill, stumbling. She stayed upright, and Lorcan eyed the leg again.

There was no point in having tracked her for so long if she died now. For a heartbeat, he contemplated the weight in his jacket—the Wyrdkey tucked away. His magic was strong, the strongest of any demi-Fae male in any kingdom, any realm. But if he used the key—

If he used the key, then he’d deserve the damnation it’d call down upon him.

So Lorcan flung out a net of his power behind them, an invisible barrier wafting black tendrils of wind. The girl stiffened, whipping her head to him as the power rippled away in a wave. Her skin blanched further, but she continued, half falling, half running down the hill.

The impact of four massive bodies against his magic struck a moment later.

The tang of her blood as she sliced herself open on rock and root shoved itself up his nose. She was nowhere near fast enough.

Lorcan opened his mouth to order her to hurry when the invisible wall snapped.

Not snapped, but *cracked*, as if those beasts had cleaved it.

Impossible. No one could get through those shields. Not even Rowan-rutting-Whitethorn.

But sure enough, the magic had been sundered.

The girl hit the gully at the bottom of the hill, near-sobbing at the flat expanse of forest sprawling ahead. She sprinted, dark braid thrashing, pack bouncing against her slim back. Lorcan moved after her, eyeing the trees to either side as the snarling and rustling began again.

They were being herded, but toward what? And if these things had ripped his magic apart...

It had been a long, long while since he'd had a new enemy to study, to break.

"Keep going," he growled, and the girl didn't so much as look over her shoulder as Lorcan slammed to a stop between two towering oaks. He'd been spiraling down into his magic for days, planning to use it on the human-but-not-girl when he grew bored of stalking her. Now his body was rife with it, the power aching to get out.

Lorcan flipped his axe in his hand—once, twice, the metal singing through the dense forest. A chill wind edged in black mist danced between the fingers of his other hand.

Not wind like Whitethorn's, and not light and flame like Whitethorn's bitch-queen. Not even raw magic like the new King of Adarlan.

No, Lorcan's magic was that of will—of death and thought and destruction. There was no name for it.

Not even his queen had known what it was, where it had come from. A gift from the dark god, from Hellas, Maeve had mused—a dark gift, for her dark warrior. And left it at that.

A wild smile danced on Lorcan's lips as he let his magic rise to the surface, let its black roar fill his veins.

He had crumbled cities with this power.

He did not think these beasts, however fell, would fare much better.

They slowed as they closed in, sensing a predator was waiting—sizing him up.

For the first time in a damn long while, Lorcan had no words for what he saw.

Maybe he should have killed the girl. Death at his hand would be a mercy compared to what snarled before him, crouching low on massive, flesh-shredding claws. Not a Wyrddhound. No, these things were far worse.

Their skin was a mottled blue, so dark as to be almost black. Each long, lightly muscled limb had been ruthlessly crafted and honed. For the long claws at the end of their hands—five-fingered hands—now curled as if in anticipation of a strike.

But it was not their bodies that stunned him.

It was the way the creatures halted, smiling beneath their smashed in, bat-like noses to reveal double rows of needlelike teeth, and then stood on their hind legs.

Stood to their full height, as a crawling man might rise. They dwarfed him by a foot at least.

And the physical attributes that seemed unnervingly familiar were confirmed when the one closest to him opened its hideous mouth and said, “We have not tasted your kind’s flesh yet.”

Lorcan’s axe twitched up. “I can’t say I’ve had the pleasure, either.”

There were very, very few beasts who could speak in the tongues of mortal and Fae. Most had developed it through magic, ill-gained or blessed.

But there, slitted with pleasure in anticipation of violence, gleamed dark, human eyes.

Whitethorn had warned of what was occurring in Morath—had mentioned the Wyrddhounds might be the first of many awful things to be unleashed. Lorcan hadn’t realized those things would be nearly eight feet tall and part human, part whatever Erawan had done to turn it into *this*.

The closest one dared a step but hissed—hissed at the invisible line he’d drawn. Lorcan’s power flickered and throbbed at the poisoned claw-tips of the creature as it prodded the shield.

Four against one. Usually easy odds for him.

Usually.

But he bore the Wyrddkey they sought, and that golden ring he’d stolen from Maeve, then given to and stolen from Aelin Galathynius. Athril’s ring. And if they brought either to their master...

Then Erawan would possess all three Wyrddkeys. And would be able to open a door between worlds to unleash his awaiting Valg hordes upon them all. And

as for Athril's golden ring ... Lorcan had no doubt Erawan would destroy the ring forged by Mala herself—the one object in Erilea that granted immunity to its bearer against Wyrdstone ... and the Valg.

So Lorcan moved. Faster than even they could detect, he hurled his axe at the creature farthest from him, its focus pinned on its companion as it prodded his shield.

They all whirled toward their companion as the axe slammed into its neck, deep and permanent. All turned away to see it fall. Lethal by nature, but untrained.

The beasts' attention diverted for a heartbeat, Lorcan's next two knives flew.

Both blades embedded to the hilt in their ridged foreheads, their heads reeling back as the blows sent them clattering to their knees.

The one in the center, the one who had spoken, loosed a primal scream that set Lorcan's ears ringing. It lunged for the shield.

It rebounded, the magic denser this time. Lorcan drew his long-sword and a knife.

And could only watch as the thing roared at the shield and slammed against it with both ruined, clawed hands ... and his magic, his shield, *melted* under its touch.

It stepped through his shield like it was a doorway. "Now we'll play."

Lorcan crouched into a defensive stance, wondering how far the girl had made it, if she'd even turned to look at what pursued them. The sounds of her flight had faded away.

Behind the creature, its companions were twitching.

No—reviving.

They each lifted a strong, clawed hand to the daggers through their skulls—and yanked them out. Metal rasped on bone.

Only the one with its head now attached by a few tendons remained down. Beheading, then.

Even if it meant getting close enough to do so.

The creature before him smiled in savage delight.

"What are you?" Lorcan ground out.

The two others were now on their feet, the wounds in their heads already healed, bristling with menace.

"We are hunters for His Dark Majesty," the leader said with a mock bow. "We are the ilken. And we have been sent to retrieve our quarry."

Those witches had dispatched these beasts for him? Cowards, not to do their

own hunting.

The ilken went on, stepping toward him on legs that bent backward. “We were going to let you have a quick death—a gift.” Its broad nostrils flared, scenting the silent forest. “But as you have stood between us and our prey ... we will savor your long end.”

Not him. He was not what the wyverns had been stalking these days, what these creatures had come to claim. They had no idea what he bore—who he was.

“What do you want with her?” he asked, monitoring the creeping approach of the three.

“It is none of your concern,” the leader said.

“If there is a reward in it, I will help you.”

Dark, soulless eyes flashed toward him. “You do not protect the girl?”

Lorcan gave a shrug, praying they couldn’t scent his bluff as he bought her more time, bought himself time to work out the puzzle of their power. “I don’t even know her name.”

The three ilken looked at one another, a glance of question and decision. Their leader said, “She is important to our king. Retrieve her, and he will fill you with power far greater than feeble shields.”

Was that the price for the humans they’d once been—magic that was somehow immune to what flowed naturally in this world? Or had the choice been taken from them, as surely as their souls had been stolen, too?

“Why is she important?”

They were now within spitting range. He wondered how long it’d take to replenish the supply of whatever power allowed them to cleave through magic. Perhaps they were buying themselves time, too.

The ilken said, “She is a thief and a murderer. She must be brought to our king for justice.”

Lorcan could have sworn an invisible hand touched his shoulder.

He knew that touch—had trusted it his entire life. It had kept him alive this long.

A touch on his back to go forward, to fight and kill and breathe in death. A touch on his shoulder to instead run. To know that only doom waited ahead, and life lay behind.

The ilken smiled once more, its teeth bright in the gloom of the wood.

As if in answer, a scream shattered from the forest behind him.

Elide Lochan stood before a creature birthed from a dark god’s nightmares.

Across the clearing, it towered over her, its talons digging into the loam of the forest floor. “There you are,” it hissed through teeth sharper than a fish’s. “Come with me, girl, and I will grant you a quick end.”

Lies. She saw how it sized her up, claws curling as if it could already feel them shredding into her soft belly. The thing had appeared in her path as if a cloud of night had dropped it there, and had laughed when she screamed. Her knife shook as she raised it.

It stood like a man—spoke like one. And its eyes ... Utterly soulless, yet the shape of them ... They were human, too. Monstrous—what terrible mind had dreamed up such a thing?

She knew the answer.

Help. She needed help. But that man from the stream was likely dead at the claws of the other beasts. She wondered how long that magic of his had held out.

The creature stepped toward her, its muscled legs closing the distance too quickly. She backed toward the trees, the direction she’d come from.

“Is your blood as sweet as your face, girl?” Its grayish tongue tasted the air between them.

Think, think, think.

What would Manon do before such a creature?

Manon, she remembered, came equipped with claws and fangs of her own.

But a small voice whispered in her ear, *So do you. Use what you have.*

There were other weapons than those made of iron and steel.

Though her knees shook, Elide lifted her chin and met the black, human eyes of the creature.

“Careful,” she said, dropping her voice into the purr Manon had so often used to frighten the wits out of everyone. Elide reached into the pocket of her coat, pulling out the shard of stone and clenching it in her fist, willing that otherworldly presence to fill the clearing, the world. She prayed the creature wouldn’t look at her fist, wouldn’t ask what was in it as she drawled, “Do you

think the Dark King will be pleased if you harm me?” She looked down her nose at it. Or as best as she could while standing several feet shorter. “I have been sent to look for the girl. Do not interfere.”

The creature seemed to recognize the fighting leathers then.

Seemed to scent that strange, *off* scent surrounding the rock.

And it hesitated.

Elide kept her face a mask of cold displeasure. “Get out of my sight.”

She almost vomited as she began stalking toward it, toward sure death. But she stomped along, prowling as Manon had so often done. Elide made herself look up into the bat-like, hideous face as she passed. “Tell your brethren that if you interfere again, I will personally oversee what delights you experience upon Morath’s tables.”

Doubt still danced in its eyes—along with real fear. A lucky guess, those words and phrases, based on what she’d overheard. She didn’t let herself consider what had been done to make such a creature quake at the mention.

Elide was five paces from the creature, keenly aware that her spine was now vulnerable to those shredding claws and teeth, when it asked, “Why did you flee at our approach?”

She said without turning, in that cold, vicious voice of Manon Blackbeak, “I do not tolerate the questions of underlings. You have already disrupted my hunt and injured my ankle with your useless attack. Pray that I do not remember your face when I return to the Keep.”

She knew her mistake the moment it sucked in a hissing breath.

Still, she kept her legs moving, back straight.

“What a coincidence,” it mused, “that our prey is similarly lamed.”

Anneith save her. Perhaps it had not noticed the limp until then. Fool. *Fool.*

Running would do her no good—running would proclaim the creature had won, that it was right. She halted, as if her temper had yanked on its leash, and snapped her face toward the creature. “What is that you’re hissing about?”

Utter conviction, utter rage.

Again the creature paused. One chance—just one chance. It’d learn soon enough that it had been duped.

Elide held its gaze. It was like staring a dead snake in the eyes.

She said with that lethal quiet the witches liked to use, “Do not make me reveal what His Dark Majesty put inside *me* on that table.”

As if in response, the stone in her hand throbbed, and she could have sworn darkness flickered.

The creature shuddered, backing away a step.

Elide didn't consider what she held as she sneered one last time and stalked away.

She made it perhaps half a mile before the forest was again full of chittering life.

She fell to her knees and vomited.

Nothing but bile and water came out. She was so busy hurling up her guts with stupid fear and relief that she didn't notice anyone's approach until it was too late.

A broad hand clamped on her shoulder, whirling her around.

She drew her dagger, but too slowly. The same hand released her to slap the blade to the grass.

Elide found herself staring into the dirt-splattered face of the man from the stream. No, not dirt. Blood that reeked—black blood.

“How?” she said, stumbling away a step.

“*You first,*” he snarled, but whipped his head toward the forest behind them. She followed his gaze. Saw nothing.

When she looked at his harsh face, a sword lay against her throat.

She tried to fall back, but he gripped her arm, holding her as steel bit into her skin. “Why do you smell of one of them? Why do they chase you?”

She'd pocketed the stone, or else she might have shown him. But movement might cause him to strike—and that small voice whispered to keep the stone concealed.

She offered another truth. “Because I have spent the past several months in Morath, living amongst that scent. They seek me because I managed to get free. I flee north—to safety.”

Faster than she could see, he lowered his blade—only to slice it across her arm. A scratch, barely more than a whisper of pain.

They both watched as her red blood surged and dribbled.

It seemed answer enough for him.

“You can call me Lorcan,” he said, though she hadn't asked. And with that, he hauled her over his broad shoulder like a sack of potatoes and ran.

Elide knew two things within seconds:

That the remaining creatures—however many there were—had to be on their trail and closing in fast. Had to have realized she'd bluffed her way free.

And that the man, moving swift as a wind between the oaks, was demi-Fae.



Lorcan ran and ran, his lungs gobbling down great gulps of the forest's stifling air. Slung over his shoulder, the girl didn't even whimper as the miles passed. He'd carried packs heavier than her over entire mountain ranges.

Lorcan slowed when his strength at last began to flag, spent quicker thanks to the magic he'd used to get those three beasts into a stranglehold, battering past their natural-born immunity to it, then kill two while he pinned the other long enough to sprint for the girl.

He'd been lucky.

The girl, it seemed, had been smart.

He jogged into a stop, setting her down hard enough that she winced—wincing and hopped a bit on that hurt ankle. Her blood had flowed red instead of the reeking black that implied Valg possession, but it still didn't explain how she'd been able to intimidate that ilken into submission.

"Where are we going?" she said, swinging her pack to pull out her canteen. He waited for the tears and prayers and begging. She just unscrewed the cap of the leather-coated container and swigged deep. Then, to his surprise, offered him some.

Lorcan didn't take it. She merely drank again.

"We're going to the edge of the forest—to the Acanthus River."

"Where—where are we?" The hesitation said enough: she'd calculated the risk of revealing how vulnerable she was with that question ... and decided she was too desperate for the answer.

"What is your name?"

"Marion." She held his gaze with a sort of unflinching steel that had him angling his head.

An answer for an answer. He said, "We're in the middle of Adarlan. You were about a day's hike from the Avery River."

Marion blinked. He wondered if she even knew that—or had considered how she'd cross the mighty body of water that had claimed ships captained by the most seasoned of men and women.

She said, "Are we running, or can I sit for a moment?"

He listened to the sounds of the forest for any hint of danger, then jerked his chin.

Marion sighed as she sat on the moss and roots. She surveyed him. "I thought all the Fae were dead. Even the demi-Fae."

"I'm from Wendlyn. And you," he said, brows rising slightly, "are from Morath."

“Not from. *Escaping* from.”

“Why—and how.”

Her narrowed eyes told him enough: she knew he still didn’t believe her, not entirely, red blood or no. Yet she didn’t answer, instead leaning over her legs to unlace a boot. Her fingers trembled a bit, but she got through the laces, yanking off the boot, removing the sock, and rolling up her leather pant leg to reveal—

Shit. He’d seen plenty of ruined bodies in his day, had done plenty of ruining himself, but rarely were they left so untreated. Marion’s leg was a mess of scar tissue and twisted bone. And right above her misshapen ankle lay still-healing wounds where shackles had unmistakably been.

She said quietly, “Allies of Morath are usually whole. Their dark magic could surely cure a cripple—and they surely would have no use for one.”

That was why she’d managed so well with the limp. She’d had years to master it, from the coloring of the scar tissue.

Marion rolled her pant leg back down but left her foot bare, massaging it. She hissed through her teeth.

He sat on a fallen log a few feet away, taking off his own pack to rifle through it. “Tell me what you know of Morath,” he said, and chucked her a tin of salve straight from Doranelle.

The girl stared at it, those sharp eyes putting together what he was, where he was from, and what that tin likely contained. When she lifted them to his face, she nodded silently in agreement of his offer: relief from the pain for answers. She unscrewed the lid, and he caught the way her mouth parted as she breathed in the pungent herbs.

Pain and pleasure danced across her face as she began rubbing the salve into her old injuries.

And as she worked, she spoke.

Marion told him of the Ironteeth host, of the Wing Leader and the Thirteen, of the armies camped around the mountain Keep, of the places where only screaming echoed, of the countless forges and blacksmiths. She described her own escape: without warning, she didn’t know how, the castle had exploded. She’d seen it as her chance, disguising herself in a witch’s attire, grabbing one of their packs, and running. In the chaos, no one had chased her.

“I’ve been running for weeks,” she said. “Apparently, I’ve barely covered half the distance.”

“To where?”

Marion looked northward. “Terrasen.”

Lorcan stifled a snarl. “You’re not missing much.”

“Have you news of it?” Alarm filled those eyes.

“No,” he said, shrugging. She finished rubbing her foot and ankle. “What’s in Terrasen? Your family?” He had not asked why she’d been brought to Morath. He didn’t particularly care to hear her sad story. Everyone had one, he’d found.

The girl’s face tightened. “I owe a debt to a friend—someone who helped me get out of Morath. She bade me to find someone named Celaena Sardothien. So that is my first task: learning who she is, where she is. Terrasen seems like a better place to start than Adarlan.”

No guile, no whisper of this meeting being anything but chance.

“And then,” the girl went on, the brightness in her eyes growing, “I need to find Aelin Galathynius, the Queen of Terrasen.”

It was an effort not to go for his sword. “Why?”

Marion glanced toward him, as if she’d somehow even forgotten he was there. “I heard a rumor that she’s raising an army to stop the one in Morath. I plan to offer my services.”

“Why?” he said again. Aside from the wits that had kept her out of the ilken’s claws, he saw no other reason for the bitch-queen to need the girl.

Marion’s full mouth tightened. “Because I am from Terrasen and believed my queen dead. And now she is alive, and fighting, so I will fight with her. So that no other girls will be taken from their homes and brought to Morath and forgotten.”

Lorcan debated telling her what he knew: that her two quests were one and the same. But that would lead to questions from her, and he was in no mood—

“Why do you wish to go to Morath? Everyone else is fleeing from it.”

“I was sent by my mistress to stop the threat it poses.”

“You’re one man—male.” Not an insult, but Lorcan stared her down anyway.

“I have my skills, just as you have yours.”

Her eyes darted to his hands, now crusted in dried black blood. He wondered, though, if she was imagining the magic that had sparked there.

He waited for Marion to ask more, but she pulled on her sock, then her boot, and laced it up. “We shouldn’t rest for long.” Indeed.

She eased to her feet, wincing a bit, but gave an appreciative frown toward her leg. Lorcan took that as answer enough regarding the salve’s efficiency. She bent down to retrieve the tin, her dark curtain of hair sweeping over her face. At some point, it had come free of its braid.

She rose, chucking him the tin. He caught it in one hand. “Once we reach the

Acanthus, what then?"

He pocketed the tin in his cloak. "There are countless merchants' caravans and seasonal carnivals wandering the plains—I passed many on my way down here. Some might even be trying to cross the river. We'll get in with one of them. Hide out. Once we've crossed and wandered far enough onto the grasslands, you'll take one north; I'll head south."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. But Marion said, "Why travel with me at all?"

"There are more details regarding Morath's interior that I want from you. I'll keep you from danger, and you'll provide them for me."

The sun began its final descent, bathing the woods in gold. Marion frowned slightly. "You swear it? That you will protect me?"

"I didn't leave you to the ilken today, did I?"

She eyed him with a clarity and frankness that made him pause. "Swear it."

He rolled his eyes. "I promise." The girl had no idea that for the past five centuries, promises were the only currency he really traded in. "I will not abandon you."

She nodded, seemingly satisfied with that. "Then I will tell you what I know."

He started eastward, slinging his pack over his shoulder.

But Marion said, "They'll be hunting for us at every crossing, searching wagons. If they could find me here, they'll find me on any main road."

And find him, too, if the witches were still out for his blood.

Lorcan said, "And you have some idea around this?"

A faint smile danced around her rosebud mouth, despite the horrors they'd escaped, her misery in the woods. "I might."

4

Of all the rooms in the Torre Cesme, Yrene Towers loved this one best.

Perhaps it was because the room, located at the very pinnacle of the pale-stoned tower and its sprawling complex below, had unparalleled views of the sunset over Antica.

Perhaps it was because this was the place where she'd felt the first shred of safety in nearly ten years. The place she had first looked upon the ancient woman now sitting across the paper- and book-strewn desk, and heard the words that changed everything: *You are welcome here, Yrene Towers.*

It had been over two years since then.

Two years of working here, living here, in this tower and in this city of so many peoples, so many foods and caches of knowledge.

It had been all she'd dreamed it would be—and she had seized every opportunity, every challenge, with both hands. Had studied and listened and practiced and saved lives, changed them, until she had climbed to the very top of her class. Until an unknown healer's daughter from Fenharrow was approached by healers old and young, who had trained their entire lives, for her advice and assistance.

The magic helped. Glorious, lovely magic that could make her breathless or so tired she couldn't get out of bed for days. Magic demanded a cost—to both healer and patient. But Yrene was willing to pay it. She had never minded the aftermath of a brutal healing.

If it meant saving a life ... Silba had granted her a gift—and a young stranger had given her another gift, that final night in Innish two years ago. Yrene had no plans to waste either.

She waited in silence as the slender woman across from her finished reading through some message on her chronically messy desk. Despite the servants' best efforts, the ancient rosewood desk was always chaotic, covered with formulas or spells or vials and jars brewing some tonic.

There were two such vials on the desk now, clear orbs atop silver feet fashioned after ibis legs. Being purified by the endless sunshine within the tower.

Hafiza, Healer on High of the Torre Cesme, plucked up one of the vials, swirled its pale blue contents, frowned, and set it down. "The damned thing always takes twice as long as I anticipate." She asked casually, using Yrene's own language, "Why do you think that is?"

Yrene leaned forward in the worn, tufted armchair on her side of the desk to study the tonic. Every meeting, every encounter with Hafiza, was a lesson—a chance to learn. To be challenged. Yrene lifted the vial from its stand, holding it to the golden light of sunset as she examined the thick azure liquid within. "Use?"

"Ten-year-old girl developed a dry cough six weeks ago. Saw the physicians, who advised honey tea, rest, and fresh air. Got better for a time, but returned a week ago with a vengeance."

The physicians of the Torre Cesme were the finest in the world, distinguished only from the Torre's healers by the fact that they did not possess magic. They were the first line of inspection for the healers in the tower, their quarters occupying the sprawling complex around its base.

Magic was precious, its demands costly enough that some Healer on High centuries ago had decreed that if they were to see a patient, a physician must first inspect the person. Perhaps it had been a political maneuver—a bone tossed to the physicians so often passed over by a people clamoring for the cure-all

remedies of magic.

Yet magic could not cure all things. Could not halt death, or bring someone back from it. She'd learned it again and again these past two years, and earlier. And even with the protocols with the physicians, Yrene still—as she had always done—found herself walking toward the sound of coughing in the narrow, sloped streets of Antica.

Yrene tilted the vial this way and that. “The tonic might be reacting to the heat. It's been unseasonably warm, even for us.”

With the end of summer finally near, even after two years, Yrene was still not entirely accustomed to the unrelenting, dry heat of the god-city. Mercifully, some long-ago mastermind had invented the *bidgier*, wind-catching towers set atop buildings to draw in fresh air to the rooms below, some even working in tandem with the few underground canals winding beneath Antica to transform hot wind into cool breezes. The city was peppered with the small towers, like a thousand spears jutting toward the sky, ranging from the small houses made of earthen bricks to the great, domed residences full of shaded courtyards and clear pools.

Unfortunately, the Torre had predated that stroke of brilliance, and though the upper levels possessed some cunning ventilation that cooled the chambers far below, there were plenty of days when Yrene wished some clever architect would take it upon themselves to outfit the Torre with the latest advances. Indeed, with the rising heat and the various fires burning throughout the tower, Hafiza's room was near-sweltering. Which led Yrene to add, “You could put it in a lower chamber—where it's cooler.”

“But the sunlight needed?”

Yrene considered. “Bring in mirrors. Catch the sunlight through the window, and focus it upon the vial. Adjust it a few times a day to match the path of the sun. The cooler temperature and more concentrated sunlight might have the tonic ready sooner.”

A little, pleased nod. Yrene had come to cherish those nods, the light in those

brown eyes. “Quick wits save lives more often than magic,” was Hafiza’s only reply.

She’d said it a thousand times before, usually where Yrene was involved—to her eternal pride—but Yrene bowed her head in thanks and set the vial back upon its stand.

“So,” Hafiza said, folding her hands atop each other on the near-glowing rosewood desk, “Eretia informs me that she believes you are ready to leave us.”

Yrene straightened in her seat, the very same chair she’d sat in that first day she’d climbed the thousand steps to the top of the tower and begged for admittance. The begging had been the least of her humiliations that meeting, the crowning moment being when she dumped the bag of gold on Hafiza’s desk, blurting that she didn’t care what the cost was and to take it all.

Not realizing that Hafiza did not take money from students. No, they paid for their education in other ways. Yrene had suffered through endless indignities and degradations during her year working at the backwater White Pig Inn, but she had never been more mortified than the moment Hafiza ordered her to put the money back in that brown pouch. Scraping the gold off the desk like some cardplayer scrambling to collect his winnings, Yrene had debated leaping right out the arc of windows towering behind Hafiza’s desk.

Much had changed since then. Gone was the homespun dress, the too-slim body. Though Yrene supposed the endless stairs of the Torre had kept in check the weight she’d gained from steady, healthy eating, thanks to the Torre’s enormous kitchens, the countless markets teeming with food stalls, and the dine-in shops along every bustling street and winding alley.

Yrene swallowed once, trying and failing to glean the Healer on High’s face. Hafiza had been the one person here whom Yrene could never read, never anticipate. She’d never once shown a display of temper—something that couldn’t be said of many of the instructors here, Eretia especially—and had never raised her voice. Hafiza had only three expressions: pleased, neutral, and

disappointed. Yrene lived in terror of the latter two.

Not for any punishment. There was no such thing here. No rations held, no pain threatened. Not like at the White Pig, where Nolan had docked her pay if she stepped out of line or was overgenerous with a customer, or if he caught her leaving out nightly scraps for the half-feral urchins who had prowled the filthy streets of Innish.

She'd arrived here thinking it would be the same: people who took her money, who made it harder and harder to leave. She'd spent a year working at the White Pig due to Nolan's increases in her rent, decreases in her pay, his cut of her meager tips, and knowledge that most women in Innish worked the streets, and his place, disgusting as it had been, was a far better alternative.

She'd told herself never again—until she'd arrived here. Until she'd dumped that gold on Hafiza's desk and had been ready to do it all over, indebt and sell herself, just for a chance to learn.

Hafiza did not even consider such things. Her work was in direct opposition to the people who did, the people like Nolan. Yrene still remembered the first time she'd heard Hafiza say in that thick, lovely accent of hers, nearly the same words that Yrene's mother had told her, over and over: they did not charge, students or patients, for what Silba, Goddess of Healing, gifted them for free.

In a land of so many gods that Yrene was still struggling to keep them all straight, at least Silba remained the same.

Yet another clever thing the khaganate had done upon patching together the kingdoms and territories during their years of conquest: keep and adapt the gods of *everyone*. Including Silba, whose dominance over the healers had been established in these lands long ago. History was written by the victors, apparently. Or so Eretia, Yrene's direct tutor, had once told her. Even the gods seemed no more immune to it than mere mortals.

But it didn't stop Yrene from offering up a prayer to Silba and whatever gods might be listening as she said at last, "I am ready, yes."

“To leave us.” Such simple words, offered with that neutral face—calm and patient. “Or have you considered the other option I presented to you?”

Yrene had. She’d thought about it endlessly in the two weeks since Hafiza had summoned her to this office and spoke the one word that had clenched a fist around her heart: *Stay*.

Stay, and learn more—stay, and see what this fledgling life she’d built here might grow into.

Yrene rubbed at her chest as if she could still feel that viselike grip. “War is coming to my home again—the northern continent.” So they called it here. Yrene swallowed. “I want to be there to help those fighting against the empire’s control.”

At last, after so many years, a force was rallying. Adarlan itself had been sundered, if rumors were to be believed, by Dorian Havilliard in the north, and the dead king’s Second, Duke Perrington, in the south. Dorian was backed by Aelin Galathynius, the long-lost queen now ripe with power and ravenous for vengeance, judging by what she’d done to the glass castle and its king. And Perrington, rumor also claimed, was aided by horrors birthed from some dark nightmare.

But if this was the only chance at freedom for Fenharrow ...

Yrene would be there to help, in whatever way she could. She still smelled smoke, late at night or when she was drained after a hard healing. Smoke from that fire those Adarlanian soldiers had built—and burned her mother upon. She still heard her mother’s screaming and felt the wood of that tree trunk dig beneath her nails as she’d hidden at the edge of Oakwald. As she watched them burn her mother alive. After her mother had killed that soldier to buy Yrene time to run.

It had been ten years since then. Nearly eleven. And though she had crossed mountains and oceans ... there were some days when Yrene felt as if she were still standing in Fenharrow, smelling that fire, splinters slicing under her nails,

watching as the soldiers took their torches and burned her cottage, too.

The cottage that had housed generations of Towers healers.

Yrene supposed it was fitting, somehow, she'd wound up *in* a tower herself. With only the ring on her left hand as proof that once, for hundreds of years, there had existed a line of prodigally gifted female healers in the south of Fenharrow. A ring she now toyed with, that last shred of proof that her mother and mother's mother and all the mothers before them had once lived and healed in peace. It was the first of only two objects Yrene would not sell—even before selling herself.

Hafiza had not replied, and so Yrene went on, the sun sinking farther toward the jade waters of the harbor across the city, “Even with magic now returned to the northern continent, many of the healers might not have the training, if any survived at all. I could save many lives.”

“War could also claim *your* life.”

She knew this. Yrene lifted her chin. “I am aware of the risks.”

Hafiza's dark eyes softened. “Yes, yes, you are.”

It had come out during that first, mortifying meeting with the Healer on High.

Yrene had not cried for years—since that day her mother had become ash on the wind—and yet the moment Hafiza had asked about Yrene's parents ... she had buried her face in her hands and wept. Hafiza had come from around that desk and held her, rubbing her back in soothing circles.

Hafiza often did that. Not just to Yrene, but to all her healers, when the hours were long and their backs had cramped and the magic had taken *everything* and it was still not enough. A quiet, steady presence who steeled them, soothed them.

Hafiza was as close to a mother as Yrene had found since she was eleven. And now weeks away from twenty-two, she doubted she'd ever find another like her.

“I have taken the examinations,” Yrene said, even though Hafiza knew that already. She'd given them to Yrene herself, overseeing the grueling week of tests

on knowledge, skill, and actual human practice. Yrene had made sure she received the highest marks of her class. As near to a perfect score as anyone had ever been given here. “I’m ready.”

“Indeed you are. And yet I still wonder how much you might learn in five years, ten years, if you have already learned so much in two.”

Yrene had been too skilled to begin with the acolytes in the lower levels of the Torre.

She’d shadowed her mother since she was old enough to walk and talk, learning slowly, over the years, as all the healers in her family had done. At eleven, Yrene had learned more than most would in another decade. And even during the six years that had followed, where she’d pretended to be an ordinary girl while working on her mother’s cousin’s farm—the family unsure what to really do with her, unwilling to get to know her when war and Adarlan might destroy them all—she’d quietly practiced.

But not too much, not too noticeably. During those years, neighbor had sold out neighbor for even the whisper of magic. And even though magic had vanished, taking Silba’s gift with it, Yrene had been careful never to appear more than a simple farmer’s relative, whose grandmother had perhaps taught her a few natural remedies for fevers or birthing pain or sprained and broken limbs.

In Innish, she’d been able to do more, using her sparse pocket money to purchase herbs, salves. But she didn’t often dare, not with Nolan and Jessa, his favored barmaid, watching her day and night. So these past two years, she’d *wanted* to learn as much as she could. But it had also been an unleashing. Of years of stifling, of lying and hiding.

And that day she’d walked off the boat and *felt* her magic stir, felt it reach for a man limping down the street ... She had fallen into a state of shock that had not ended until she wound up weeping in this very chair three hours later.

Yrene sighed through her nose. “I could return here one day to continue my studies. But—with all due respect, I *am* a full healer now.” And she could

venture wherever her gift called her.

Hafiza's white brows rose, stark against her brown skin. "And what of Prince Kashin?"

Yrene shifted in her seat. "What of him?"

"You were once good friends. He remains fond of you, and that is no small thing to ignore."

Yrene leveled a look few dared to direct toward the Healer on High. "Will he interfere with my plans to leave?"

"He is a prince, and has been denied nothing, save the crown he covets. He may find that your leaving is not something he will tolerate."

Dread sluiced through her, starting at her spine and ending curled deep in her gut. "I've given him no encouragement. I made my thoughts on that matter perfectly clear last year."

It had been a disaster. She'd gone over it again and again, the things she'd said, the moments between them—everything that had led up to that awful conversation in that large Darghan tent atop the windswept steppes.

It had started a few months after she'd arrived in Antica, when one of Kashin's favored servants had fallen ill. To her surprise, the prince himself had been at the man's bedside, and during the long hours Yrene worked, the conversation had flowed, and she'd found herself ... smiling. She'd cured the servant, and upon leaving that night, she'd been escorted by Kashin himself to the gates of the Torre. And in the months that followed, friendship had sprung up between them.

Perhaps freer, lighter than the friendship she also wound up forming with Hasar, who had taken a liking to Yrene after requiring some healing of her own. And while Yrene had struggled to find companions within the Torre thanks to her and her fellow students' conflicting hours, the prince and princess had become friends indeed. As had Hasar's lover, the sweet-faced Renia—who was as lovely inside as she was out.

A strange group they made, but ... Yrene had enjoyed their company, the dinners Kashin and Hasar invited her to, when Yrene knew she had no reason to really be there. Kashin often managed to find a way to sit next to her, or near enough to engage her in conversation. For months, things had been fine—better than fine. And then Hafiza had brought Yrene out to the steppes, the native home of the khagan's family, to oversee a grueling healing. With Kashin as their escort and guide.

The Healer on High now examined Yrene, frowning slightly. "Perhaps your lack of encouragement has made him more eager."

Yrene rubbed her eyebrows with her thumb and forefinger. "We've barely spoken since then." It was true. Though mostly due to Yrene avoiding him at the dinners to which Hasar and Renia still invited her.

"The prince does not seem like a man easily deterred—certainly not in matters of the heart."

She knew that. She'd liked that about Kashin. Until he'd wanted something she couldn't give him. Yrene groaned a bit. "Will I have to leave like a thief in the night, then?" Hasar would never forgive her, though she had no doubt Renia would try to soothe and rationalize it to the princess. If Hasar was pure flame, then Renia was flowing water.

"Should you decide to remain, you will not have to worry about such things at all."

Yrene straightened. "You would really use Kashin as a way to keep me here?"

Hafiza laughed, a crow of warmth. "No. But forgive an old woman for trying to use any avenue necessary to convince you."

Pride and guilt eddied in her chest. But Yrene said nothing—had no answer.

Returning to the northern continent ... She knew there was no one and nothing left there for her. Nothing but unforgiving war, and those who would need her help.

She did not even know where to *go*—where to sail, how to find those armies and their wounded. She'd traveled far and wide before, had evaded enemies bent on slaughtering her, and the thought of doing it all again ... She knew some would think her mad. Ungrateful for the offer Hafiza had laid before her. She'd thought those things of herself for a long while now.

Yet not a single day passed without Yrene gazing toward the sea at the foot of the city—gazing northward.

Yrene's attention indeed slid from the Healer on High to the windows behind her, to the distant, darkening horizon, as if it were a lodestone.

Hafiza said, a shade more gently, "There is no rush to decide. Wars take a long time."

"But I will need—"

"There is a task I would first have you do, Yrene."

Yrene stilled at that tone, the hint of command in it.

She glanced to the letter Hafiza had been reading when she'd entered. "What is it?"

"There is a guest at the palace—a special guest of the khagan. I would ask you to treat him. Before you decide whether now is the right time to leave these shores, or if it is better to remain."

Yrene angled her head. Rare—very rare for Hafiza to pass off a task from the khagan to someone else. "What is his ailment?" Common, standard words for healers receiving cases.

"He is a young man, age twenty-three. Healthy in every regard, in fit condition. But he suffered a grave injury to his spine earlier this summer that left him paralyzed from the hips downward. He cannot feel or move his legs, and has been in a wheeled chair since. I am bypassing the initial physicians' examination to appeal directly to you."

Yrene's mind churned. A complex, long process to heal that manner of injury. Spines were nearly as difficult as brains. Connected to them quite closely. With

that sort of healing, it wasn't a matter of letting her magic wash over them—that wasn't how it worked.

It was finding the right places and channels, in finding the correct amount of magic to wield. It was getting the brain to again send signals to the spine, down those broken pathways; it was replacing the damaged, smallest kernels of life within the body with new, fresh ones. And on top of it ... learning to walk again. Weeks. *Months*, perhaps.

“He is an active young man,” Hafiza said. “The injury is akin to the warrior you aided last winter on the steppes.”

She'd guessed as much already—it was likely why she'd been asked. Two months spent healing the horse-lord who'd taken a bad fall off his mount and injured his spine. It was not an uncommon injury among the Darghan, some of whom rode horses and some of whom soared on ruks, and they had long relied on the Torre's healers. Working on the warrior had been her first time putting her lessons on the subject into effect, precisely why Hafiza had accompanied her to the steppes. Yrene was fairly confident she could do another healing on her own this time, but it was the way Hafiza glanced down at the letter—just once—that made Yrene pause. Made her ask, “Who is he?”

“Lord Chaol Westfall.” Not a name from the khaganate. Hafiza added, holding Yrene's gaze, “He was the former Captain of the Guard and is now Hand to the new King of Adarlan.”

Silence.

Yrene was silent, in her head, her heart. Only the crying of the gulls sailing above the Torre and the shouts of vendors going home for the night in the streets beyond the compound's high walls filled the tower room.

“No.”

The word pushed out of Yrene on a breath.

Hafiza's slim mouth tightened.

“No,” Yrene said again. “I will not heal him.”

There was no softness, nothing motherly in Hafiza's face, as she said, "You took an oath upon entering these halls."

"No." It was all she could think to say.

"I am well aware how difficult it may be for you—"

Her hands started shaking. "No."

"Why?"

"You know why." The words were a strangled whisper. "Y-y-you know."

"If you see Adarlanian soldiers suffering on those battlefields, will you stomp right over them?"

It was the cruelest Hafiza had ever been to her.

Yrene rubbed the ring on her finger. "If he was Captain of the Guard for the last king, he—he worked for the man who—" The words spilled and stumbled out. "He took *orders* from him."

"And now works for Dorian Havilliard."

"Who indulged in his father's riches—the riches of *my* people. Even if Dorian Havilliard did not participate, the fact that he stood *back* while it happened ..." The pale stone walls pressed in, even the solid tower beneath them feeling unwieldy. "Do you know what the king's men *did* these years? What his armies, his soldiers, his guards *did*? And you ask me to heal a man who commanded them?"

"It is a reality of who you are—who *we* are. A choice all healers must make."

"And you have made it so often? In your peaceful kingdom?"

Hafiza's face darkened. Not with ire, but memory. "I was once asked to heal a man who was injured while evading capture. After he had committed a crime so unspeakable ... The guards told me what he'd done before I walked into his cell. They wanted him patched up so he could live to be put on trial. He'd undoubtedly be executed—they had victims willing to testify and proof aplenty. Eretia herself saw the latest victim. His last one. Gathered all the evidence she needed and stood in that court and condemned him with what she had seen."

Hafiza's throat bobbed. "They chained him down in that cell, and he was hurt enough that I knew ... I knew I could use my magic to make the internal bleeding worse. They'd never know. He'd be dead by morning, and no one would dare question me." She studied the vial of blue tonic. "It was the closest I have ever come to killing. I *wanted* to kill him for what he had done. The world would be better for it. I had my hands on his chest—I was ready to do it. But I remembered. I remembered that oath I had taken, and remembered that they had asked me to heal him so that he would live—so that justice might be found for his victims. And their families." She met Yrene's eyes. "It was not my death to dole out."

"What happened?" The words were a wobble.

"He tried to plead innocent. Even with what Eretia presented, with what that victim was willing to talk about. He was a monster through and through. They convicted him, and he was executed at sunrise the next day."

"Did you watch it?"

"I did not. I came back up here. But Eretia did. She stood at the front of the crowd and stayed until they hauled his corpse into a cart. She stayed for the victims who could not bear to watch. Then she returned here, and we both cried for a long, long while."

Yrene was quiet for a few breaths, enough that her hands steadied. "So I am to heal this man—so he may find justice elsewhere?"

"You do not know his story, Yrene. I suggest listening to it before contemplating such things."

Yrene shook her head. "There will be no justice for him—not if he served the old and new king. Not if he's cunning enough to remain in power. I know how Adarlan works."

Hafiza watched her for a long moment. "The day you walked into this room, so terribly thin and covered with the dust of a hundred roads ... I had never sensed such a gift. I looked into those beautiful eyes of yours, and I nearly

gasped at the uncut power in you.”

Disappointment. It was disappointment on the Healer on High’s face, in her voice.

“I thought to myself,” Hafiza went on, “*Where has this young woman been hiding? What god reared you, guided you to my doorstep?* Your dress was in tatters around your ankles, and yet you walked in, straight-backed as any noble lady. As if you were the heir to Kamala herself.”

Until Yrene had dumped the money on the desk and fallen apart moments later. She doubted the very first Healer on High had ever done such a thing.

“Even your family name: *Towers*. A hint at your foremothers’ long-ago association with the Torre, perhaps. I wondered in that moment if I had at last found *my* heir—my replacement.”

Yrene felt the words like a blow to the gut. Hafiza had never so much as hinted ...

Stay, the Healer on High had offered. To not only continue the training, but to also take up the mantle now laid before her.

But it had not been Yrene’s own ambition, to one day claim this room as her own. Not when her sights had always been set across the Narrow Sea. And even now ... it was an honor beyond words, yes. But one that rang hollow.

“I asked what you wanted to do with the knowledge I would give you,” Hafiza went on. “Do you remember what you said to me?”

Yrene did. She had not forgotten it for a moment. “I said I wanted to use it to do some good for the world. To do something with my useless, wasted life.”

The words had guided her these years—along with the note she carried every day, moving it from pocket to pocket, dress to dress. Words from a mysterious stranger, perhaps a god who had worn the skin of a battered young woman, whose gift of gold had gotten her here. Saved her.

“And so you shall, Yrene,” Hafiza said. “You shall one day return home, and you shall do good, you shall do *wonders*. But before you do, I would ask this of

you. Help that young man. You have done the healing before—you can do it again now.”

“Why can’t you?”

She’d never sounded so sullen, so ... ungrateful.

Hafiza gave her a small, sad smile. “It is not my own healing that is needed.”

Yrene knew the Healer on High did not mean the man’s healing, either. She swallowed against the thickness in her throat.

“It is a soul-wound, Yrene. And letting it fester these years ... I cannot blame you. But I will hold you accountable if you let it turn into something worse. And I will mourn you for it.”

Yrene’s lips wobbled, but she pressed them together, blinking back the burning in her eyes.

“You passed the tests, better than anyone who has ever climbed into this tower,” Hafiza said softly. “But let this be my personal test for you. The final one. So that when you decide to go, I may bid you farewell, send you off to war, and know ...” Hafiza put a hand on her chest. “Know that wherever the road takes you, however dark, you will be all right.”

Yrene swallowed the small sound that tried to come out of her and instead looked toward the city, its pale stones resplendent in the last light of the setting sun. Through the open windows behind the Healer on High, a night breeze laced with lavender and cloves flitted in, cooling her face and ruffling Hafiza’s cloud of white hair.

Yrene slid a hand into the pocket of her pale blue dress, her fingers wrapping around the familiar smoothness of the folded piece of parchment. She clutched it, as she had often done on the sailing over here, during those initial few weeks of uncertainty even after Hafiza had admitted her, during the long hours and hard days and moments that had nearly broken her while she trained.

A note, written by a stranger who had saved her life and granted her freedom in a matter of hours. Yrene had never learned her name, that young woman who

had worn her scars like some ladies wore their finest jewelry. The young woman who was a trained killer, but had purchased a healer's education.

So many things, so many good things, had come from that night. Yrene sometimes wondered if it had actually happened—might have believed she'd dreamed it if not for the note in her pocket, and the second object Yrene had never sold, even when the gold had thinned.

The ornate gold-and-ruby brooch, worth more than entire blocks of Antica.

Adarlan's colors. Yrene had never learned where the young woman had come from, who had bestowed the beating that had left lingering bruises on her pretty face, but she had spoken of Adarlan as Yrene did. As all the children who had lost everything to Adarlan did—those children with their kingdoms left in ash and blood and ruin.

Yrene ran a thumb over the note, the words inked there:

For wherever you need to go—and then some. The world needs more healers.

Yrene breathed in that first night breeze, the spices and brine it ushered into the Torre.

She looked back to Hafiza at last, the Healer on High's face calm. Patient.

Yrene would regret it, if she refused. Hafiza would yield, but Yrene knew that whether she left here, whether she somehow decided to remain, she would ... regret. Think back on this. Wonder if she had repaid the extraordinary kindness she'd been given rather poorly. Wonder what her mother would have thought of it.

And even if this man hailed from Adarlan, even if he'd done the bidding of that butcher ...

"I will meet with him. Assess him," Yrene conceded. Her voice only wobbled slightly. She clutched that piece of paper in her pocket. "And then decide if I will heal him."

Hafiza considered. "Fair enough, girl," she said quietly. "Fair enough."

Yrene blew out a shaking breath. “When do I see him?”

“Tomorrow,” Hafiza said, and Yrene winced. “The khagan has asked you to come to Lord Westfall’s chambers tomorrow.”

5

Chaol had barely slept. Partially due to the unrelenting heat, partially due to the fact that they were in a tentative ally's fraught household, full of potential spies and unknown dangers—perhaps even from Morath itself—and partially due to what had befallen Rifthold and all he held dear.

And partially due to the meeting that he was now minutes away from having.

Nesryn paced with uncharacteristic nerves through the sitting room that was to be his sickroom. Low-lying couches and clusters of cushions filled the space, the shining floors interrupted only by rugs of thickest and finest weaving—from the skilled hands of craftswomen in the west, Nesryn told him. Art and treasures from across the khagan's empire adorned the space, interspersed with potted palms sagging in the heat and sunlight trickling through the garden windows and doors.

Ten in the morning, the khagan's eldest daughter had declared to him at dinner last night. Princess Hasar—plain and yet fierce-eyed. A lovely young woman had sat at her side, the only person at whom Hasar smiled. Her lover or wife, judging by the frequent touching and long looks.

There had been enough of an edge to Hasar's wicked grin as she told Chaol when the healer would arrive that he'd been left to wonder who, precisely, they were sending.

He still did not know what to make of these people, this place. This city of high learning, this blend of so many cultures and history, peacefully dwelling

together ... Not at all like the raging and broken spirits dwelling in Adarlan's shadow, living in terror, distrusting one another, enduring its worst crimes.

They'd asked him about the butchering of the slaves in Calaculla and Endovier at dinner.

Or the oily one, Arghun, did. Had the prince been among Chaol's new recruits to the royal guard, he would have easily gotten him to fall in line thanks to a few well-timed shows of skill and sheer dominance. But here, he had no authority to bring the conniving, haughty prince to heel.

Not even when Arghun wanted to know why the former King of Adarlan had deemed it necessary to enslave his people. And then put them down like animals. Why the man had not looked to the southern continent for education on the horrors and stain of slavery—and avoided instituting it.

Chaol had offered curt answers that verged on impolite. Sartaq, the only one of them beyond Kashin whom Chaol was inclined to like, had finally tired of his elder brother's questioning and steered the conversation away. To what, Chaol had no idea. He'd been too busy fighting against the roaring in his ears over Arghun's razor-sharp inquiries. And then too busy monitoring every face—royal, vizier, or servant—who made an appearance in the khagan's great hall. No signs of black rings or collars; no strange behavior to remark on.

He'd given Kashin a subtle shake of his head at one point to tell him as much. The prince had pretended not to see, but the warning flared in his eyes: *Keep looking.*

So Chaol had, half paying attention to the meal unfolding before him, half monitoring every word and glance and breath of those around him.

Despite their youngest sister's death, the heirs made the meal lively, conversation flowing, mostly in languages Chaol did not know or recognize. Such a wealth of kingdoms in that hall, represented by viziers and servants and companions—the now-youngest princess, Duva, herself wedded to a dark-haired, sad-eyed prince from a faraway land who kept close to his pregnant wife

and spoke little to anyone around him. But whenever Duva smiled softly at him ... Chaol did not think the light that filled the prince's face was feigned. And wondered if the man's silence was not from reticence but perhaps not yet knowing enough of his wife's language to keep up.

Nesryn, however, had no such excuse. She'd been silent and haunted at dinner. He'd only learned that she'd bathed before it thanks to the shout and slamming door in her chambers, followed by a huffy-looking male servant scrambling out of her rooms. The man did not come back again, nor did a replacement arrive.

Kadja, the servant assigned to Chaol, had helped him dress for dinner, then undress for bed, and had brought breakfast this morning immediately upon his awakening.

The khagan certainly knew how to eat well.

Exquisitely spiced and simmered meats, so tender they fell right off the bone; herbed rice of various colors; flatbreads coated in butter and garlic; rich wines and liquors from the vineyards and distilleries across his empire. Chaol had passed on the latter, accepting only the ceremonial glass offered before the khagan made a half-hearted toast to his new guests. For a grieving father, it was a warmer welcome than Chaol had expected.

Yet Nesryn had a sip of her drink, barely a bite of her meal, and waited a scant minute until the feast was cleared before asking to return to their suite. He'd agreed—of course he'd agreed, but when they'd closed the suite doors and he'd asked if she wanted to talk, she had said no. She wanted to sleep and would see him in the morning.

He'd had the nerve to ask Nesryn if she wanted to share his room or hers.

The shutting of her door was emphasis enough.

So Kadja had helped him into bed, and he had tossed and turned, sweating and wishing he could kick off the sheets instead of having to throw them back. Even the cool breeze that drifted in through the cleverly crafted ventilation

system—the air hauled from wind-snaring towers amid the domes and spires to be cooled by canals beneath the palace, then scattered amongst the rooms and halls—had not offered any reprieve.

He and Nesryn had never been good at talking. They'd tried, usually with disastrous results.

They'd done everything out of order, and he'd cursed himself again and again for not making it right with her. Not trying to *be* better.

She'd barely looked at him these past ten minutes they'd been waiting for the healer to arrive. Her face was haggard, her shoulder-length hair limp. She hadn't put on her captain's uniform, but rather returned to her usual midnight-blue tunic and black pants. As if she couldn't stand to be in Adarlan's colors.

Kadja had dressed him again in his teal jacket, even going so far as to polish the buckles down the front. There was a quiet pride to her work, not at all like the timidity and fear of so many of the castle servants in Rifthold.

"She's late," Nesryn murmured. Indeed, the ornate wooden clock in the corner announced the healer was ten minutes late. "Should we call for someone to find out if she's coming?"

"Give her time."

Nesryn paused before him, frowning deeply. "We need to begin immediately. There is no time to waste."

Chaol took a breath. "I understand that you want to return home to your family—"

"I will not rush you. But even a day makes a difference."

He noted the lines of strain bracketing her mouth. He had no doubt twin ones marked his own. Forcing himself to stop contemplating and dreading where Dorian might now be had been an effort of pure will this morning. "Once the healer arrives, why don't you go track down your kin in the city? Perhaps they've heard from your family in Rifthold."

A slicing wave of her slender hand. "I can wait until you're done."

Chaol lifted his brows. “And pace the entire time?”

Nesryn sank onto the nearest sofa, the gold silk sighing beneath her slight weight. “I came here to help you—with this, and with our cause. I won’t run off for my own needs.”

“What if I give you an order?”

She only shook her head, her dark curtain of hair swaying with the movement.

And before he could give that exact order, a brisk knock thudded on the heavy wood door.

Nesryn shouted a word that he assumed meant *enter* in Halha, and he listened to the footsteps as they approached. One set—quiet and light.

The door to the sitting room drifted open beneath the press of a honey-colored hand.

It was her eyes that Chaol noticed first.

She likely stopped people dead in the street with those eyes, a vibrant golden brown that seemed lit from within. Her hair was a heavy fall of rich browns amid flashes of dark gold, curling slightly at the ends that brushed her narrow waist.

She moved with a nimble grace, her feet—clad in practical black slippers—swift and unfaltering as she crossed the room, either not noticing or caring about the ornate furnishings.

Young, perhaps a year or two older than twenty.

But those eyes ... they were far older than that.

She paused at the carved wooden chair across from the golden couch, Nesryn shooting to her feet. The healer—for there was no one else she could be, with that calm grace, those clear eyes, and that simple, pale blue muslin dress—glanced between them. She was a few inches shorter than Nesryn, built with similar delicacy, yet despite her slender frame ... He didn’t look long at the other features the healer had been generously blessed with.

“Are you from the Torre Cesme?” Nesryn asked in Chaol’s own tongue.

The healer only stared at him. Something like surprise and anger lighting those remarkable eyes.

She slid a hand into the pocket of her gown, and he waited for her to withdraw something, but it remained there. As if she was grasping an object within.

Not a doe ready to bolt, but a stag, weighing the options of fighting or fleeing, of standing its ground, lowering its head, and charging.

Chaol held her gaze, cool and steady. He'd taken on plenty of young bucks during the years of being captain—had gotten them all to heel.

Nesryn asked something in Halha, no doubt a repeat of her question.

A thin scar sliced across the healer's throat. Perhaps three inches long.

He knew what sort of weapon had given that scar. All the possibilities that burst into his head for why it might have happened were not pleasant ones.

Nesryn fell silent, watching them.

The healer only turned on her heel, walked to the desk near the windows, took a seat, and pulled a piece of parchment toward her from the neat stack in the corner.

Whoever these healers were, the khagan was right: they certainly did not answer to his throne. Or find it in themselves to be impressed with any manner of nobility and power.

She opened a drawer, found a glass pen, and held it poised over the paper.

"Name."

She did not have an accent—or, rather, the accent of these lands.

"Chaol Westfall."

"Age."

The accent. It was from—

"Fenharrow."

Her pen stalled. "Age."

"You're from Fenharrow?"

What are you doing here, so far from home?

She leveled a cool, unimpressed stare at him.

He swallowed and said, “Twenty-three.”

She scribbled something down. “Describe where the injury begins.”

Each word was clipped, her voice low.

Had it been an insult to be assigned his case? Had she other things to do when she was summoned here? He thought again of Hasar’s wicked smile the night before. Perhaps the princess knew that this woman was not praised for her bedside manner.

“What is your name?”

The question came from Nesryn, whose face was beginning to tighten.

The healer stilled as she took in Nesryn, blinking like she had not really noticed her. “You—are from here?”

“My father was,” Nesryn said. “He moved to Adarlan, wed my mother, and I now have family there—and here.” She impressively hid any trace of dread at the mention of them as she added coaxingly, “My name is Nesryn Faliq. I am the Captain of the Royal Guard of Adarlan.”

That surprise in the healer’s eyes turned wary. But she again gazed at him.

She knew who he was. The look conveyed it—the analysis. She knew he’d once held that title, and now was something else. So the name, the age ... the questions were bullshit. Or some bureaucratic nonsense. He doubted it was the latter.

A woman from Fenharrow, meeting with two members from Adarlan’s court ...

It didn’t take much to read her. What she saw. Where that mark on her throat might have come from.

“If you don’t want to be here,” Chaol said roughly, “then send someone else.”

Nesryn whirled on him.

The healer only held his stare. “There is no one else to do this.” The

unspoken words said the rest: *They sent their best.*

With that steady, self-assured posture, he didn't doubt it. She angled her pen again. "Describe where the injury begins."

A sharp knock on the sitting room door cut through the silence. He started, cursing himself for not having heard the approach.

But it was Princess Hasar, clad in green and gold and smirking like a cat. "Good morning, Lord Westfall. Captain Faliq." Her braided hair swaying with each swaggering step, Hasar strolled over to the healer, who looked up at her with an expression Chaol dared call exasperation, and leaned down to kiss her on either cheek. "You're not usually so grumpy, Yrene."

There—a name.

"I forgot my *kahve* this morning." The thick, spiced, bitter drink Chaol had choked down with his breakfast. An acquired taste, Nesryn had said when he'd asked about it later.

The princess took up a perch along the edge of the desk. "You didn't come to dinner last night. Kashin was sulking about it."

Yrene's shoulders tightened. "I had to prepare."

"Yrene Towers locking herself in the Torre to work? I might die of shock."

From the princess's tone, he filled in enough. The best healer in the Torre Cesme had become so thanks to that grueling work ethic.

Hasar looked him over. "Still in the chair?"

"Healing takes time," Yrene said mildly to the princess. Not an ounce of subservience or respect to the tone. "We were just beginning."

"So you agreed to do it, then?"

Yrene cut the princess a sharp glare. "We were assessing the lord's needs." She jerked her chin toward the doors. "Shall I find you when I'm done?"

Nesryn gave Chaol an impressed, wary glance. A healer dismissing a princess of the most powerful empire in the world.

Hasar leaned forward to ruffle Yrene's gold-brown hair. "If you weren't

gods-blessed, I'd carve out your tongue myself." The words were honeyed venom. Yrene only offered a faint, bemused smile before Hasar hopped off the desk and gave him a mocking incline of the head. "Don't worry, Lord Westfall. Yrene has healed injuries similar and far worse than your own. She'll have you back on your feet and able to do your master's bidding again in no time." With that lovely parting shot, which left Nesryn cold-eyed, the princess vanished.

They waited a good few moments to make sure they heard the outer door shut.

"Yrene Towers," was all Chaol said.

"What of it."

Gone was the faint amusement. Fine.

"The lack of feeling and movement begins at my hips."

Yrene's eyes shot right to them, dancing over him. "Are you capable of using your manhood?"

He tried not to flinch. Even Nesryn blinked at the frank question.

"Yes," he said tightly, fighting the heat rising in his cheeks.

She looked between them, assessing. "Have you used it to completion?"

He clenched his jaw. "How is that relevant?" And how had she gleaned what was between them?

Yrene only wrote something down.

"What are you writing?" he demanded, cursing the damned chair for keeping him from storming to rip the paper out of her hands.

"I'm writing a giant *no*."

Which she then underlined.

He growled, "I suppose you'll ask about my bathroom habits now?"

"It was next on my list."

"They are unchanged," he bit out. "Unless you need Nesryn to confirm."

Yrene merely turned to Nesryn, unruffled. "Have you seen him struggle with it?"

“Do *not* answer that,” he snarled at Nesryn.

Nesryn had the good wits to sink into a chair and remain quiet.

Yrene rose, setting down the pen, and came around the desk. The morning sunlight caught in her hair, bouncing off her head in a corona.

She knelt at his feet. “Shall you remove your boots or shall I?”

“I’ll do it.”

She sat back on her heels and watched him move. Another test. To discern how mobile and agile he was. The weight of his legs, having to constantly adjust their position ... Chaol gritted his teeth as he gripped his knee, lifting his foot off the wooden slat, and bent to remove his boot in a few sharp tugs. When he finished with the other one, he asked, “Pants, too?”

Chaol knew he should be kind, should beseech her to help him, and yet—

“After a drink or two, I think,” Yrene only said. Then looked over her shoulder to a bemused Nesryn. “Sorry,” she added—and sounded only slightly less sharp-tongued.

“Why are you apologizing to her?”

“I assume she has the misfortune of sharing your bed these days.”

It took his self-restraint to keep from going for her shoulders and shaking her soundly. “Have I *done* something to you?”

That seemed to give her pause. Yrene only yanked off his socks, throwing them atop where he’d discarded his boots. “No.”

A lie. He scented and tasted it.

But it focused her, and Chaol watched as Yrene picked up his foot in her slim hands. Watched, since he didn’t feel it—beyond the shift in his abdominal muscles. He couldn’t tell if she was squeezing or holding lightly, if her nails were digging in; not without looking. So he did.

A ring adorned her fourth finger—a wedding band. “Is your husband from here?” Or wife, he supposed.

“I’m not—” She blinked, frowning at the ring. She didn’t finish the sentence.

Not married, then. The silver ring was simple, the garnet no more than a droplet. Likely worn to keep men from bothering her, as he'd seen many women do in the streets of Rifthold.

"Can you feel this?" Yrene asked. She was touching each toe.

"No."

She did it on the other foot. "And this?"

"No."

He'd been through such examinations before—at the castle, and with Rowan.

"His initial injury," Nesryn cut in, as if remembering the prince as well, "was to the entire spine. A friend had some knowledge of healing and patched him up as best he could. He regained movement in his upper body, but not below the hips."

"How was it attained—the injury?"

Her hands were moving over his foot and ankle, tapping and testing. As if she'd indeed done this before, as Princess Hasar had claimed.

Chaol didn't immediately reply, sorting through those moments of terror and pain and rage.

Nesryn opened her mouth, but he cut her off. "Fighting. I received a blow to my back while fighting. A magical one."

Yrene's fingers were inching up his legs, patting and squeezing. He felt none of it. Her brows bunched in concentration. "Your friend must have been a gifted healer if you regained so much motion."

"He did what he could. Then told me to come here."

Her hands pushed and pressed on his thighs, and he watched with no small amount of growing horror as she slid them higher and higher. He was about to demand if she planned to ascertain for herself about the life in his *manhood*, but Yrene lifted her head and met his stare.

This close, her eyes were a golden flame. Not like the cold metal of Manon Blackbeak's, not laced with a century of violence and predator's instincts, but ...

like a long-burning flame on a winter's night. "I need to see your back," was all Yrene said. Then she peeled away. "Lie down on the nearest bed."

Before Chaol could remind her that it wasn't quite so easy to do that, Nesryn was instantly in motion, wheeling him into his room. Kadja had already made his bed, and left a bouquet of orange lilies on the table beside it. Yrene sniffed at the scent—as if it was unpleasant. He refrained from asking.

He waved off Nesryn when she tried to help him onto the bed. It was low enough that he could manage.

Yrene lingered in the doorway, observing while he braced one hand on the mattress, one on the arm of the chair, and in a powerful push, heaved himself into a sitting position on the bed. He unbuckled each of those newly polished buttons on his jacket, then peeled it off. Along with the white shirt beneath.

"Facedown, I assume?"

Yrene gave him a curt nod.

Gripping his knees, abdomen clenching, he pulled his legs onto the mattress as he lay flat on his back.

For a few heartbeats, spasms shook his legs. Not real, controlled motion, he'd realized after the first time it had happened weeks ago. He could still feel that crushing weight in his chest after he'd understood it was some effect of the injury—that it usually happened if he moved himself about a great deal.

"Spasms in the legs are common with such an injury," Yrene supplied, observing them fade away into stillness once again. "These may calm with time." She waved a hand to him in silent reminder to turn over onto his belly.

Chaol said nothing as he sat up to fold one ankle over the other, lay down again on his back, and then twisted over, his legs following suit.

Whether she was impressed that he'd picked up on the maneuverings so quickly, she didn't let on. Didn't even lift a brow.

Folding his hands under his chin, he peered over his shoulder and watched her approach, watched her motion Nesryn to sit when the woman began pacing

again.

He scanned Yrene for any sort of flickering magic. What it'd look like, he had not the faintest inkling. Dorian's had been ice and wind and flashing light; Aelin's had been raging, singing flame, but healing magic ... Was it something external, something tangible? Or something only his bones and blood might witness?

He'd once balked at those sorts of questions—might once have even balked at the idea of letting magic touch him. But the man who had done those things, feared those things ... He was glad to leave him in the shattered ruin of the glass castle.

Yrene stood over him for a moment, surveying his back.

Her hands were as warm as the morning sun when she laid them palm-down on the skin between his shoulder blades. "You were hit here," she observed quietly.

There was a mark. A faint, splattering paleness to his skin where the king's blow had hit. Dorian had shown him using a trick with two hand-mirrors before he'd left.

"Yes."

Her hands trailed along the groove of his spine. "It rippled down here, shredding and severing." The words were not for him—but as if she were speaking to herself, lost in some trance.

He fought against the memory of that pain, the numbness and oblivion it summoned.

"You can—tell that?" Nesryn asked.

"My gift tells me." Yrene's hand stalled along the middle of his back, pushing and prodding. "It was terrible power—what struck you."

"Yes," was all he said.

Her hands went lower, lower, until they shoved down the waist of his pants a few inches. He hissed through his teeth and glared over his bare shoulder. "A

little warning.”

Yrene ignored him and touched the lowest part of his back. He did not feel it.

She spider-walked her fingers up his spine as if counting the vertebrae. “Here?”

“I can feel you.”

She backtracked one step. “Here?”

“Nothing.”

Her face bunched, as if making a mental note of the location. She began on the outer edges of his back, creeping up, asking where he stopped feeling it. She took his neck and head in her hands, turning it this way and that, testing and assessing.

Finally, she ordered him to move. Not to rise, but to turn over again.

Chaol stared up at the arched, painted ceiling as Yrene poked and prodded his pectorals, the muscles of his abdomen, those along his ribs. She reached the vee of muscles leading beneath his pants, kept moving lower, and he demanded, “Really?”

Yrene shot him an incredulous look. “Is there something you’re particularly embarrassed for me to see?”

Oh, she certainly had some fight in her, this Yrene Towers from Fenharrow. Chaol held her stare, the challenge in it.

Yrene only snorted. “I had forgotten that men from the northern continent are so proper and guarded.”

“And here they are not?”

“No. Bodies are celebrated, not shamed into hiding. Men and women both.”

That would explain the servant who had no qualms about such things.

“They seemed plenty dressed at dinner.”

“Wait until the parties,” Yrene countered coolly. But she lifted her hands from the already-low waist of his pants. “If you have not noticed any problems externally or internally with your manhood, then I don’t need to look.”

He shoved against the feeling that he was again thirteen years old and trying to talk to a pretty girl for the first time and ground out, “Fine.”

Yrene withdrew a step and handed him his shirt. He sat up, arms and abdominal muscles straining, and slid it on.

“Well?” Nesryn asked, stalking close.

Yrene toyed with a heavy, loose curl. “I need to think. Talk to my superior.”

“I thought you were the best,” Nesryn said carefully.

“I am one of many who are skilled,” Yrene admitted. “But the Healer on High assigned me to this. I should like to speak to her first.”

“Is it bad?” Nesryn demanded. He was grateful she did—he didn’t have the nerve to.

Yrene only looked to him, her gaze frank and unafraid. “You know it is bad.”

“But can you help him?” Nesryn pushed, sharper this time.

“I have healed such injuries before. But this ... it remains to be seen,” Yrene said, meeting her gaze now.

“When—when will you know?”

“When I have had time to think.”

To decide, Chaol realized. She wanted to *decide* whether to help him.

He held Yrene’s stare again, letting her see that he, at least, understood. He was glad Nesryn had not entertained the idea. He had a feeling Yrene would be face-first against the wall if she did.

But for Nesryn ... the healers were beyond reproach. Holy as one of the gods here. Their ethic unquestionable.

“When will you return?” Nesryn asked.

Never, he almost answered.

Yrene slid her hands into her pockets. “I’ll send word,” was all she said, and left.

Nesryn stared after her, then rubbed her face.

Chaol said nothing.

But Nesryn straightened, then dashed out—to the sitting room. Rustling paper, and then—

Nesryn halted in the doorway to his room, brows crossed, Yrene’s paper in her hands.

She handed it to him. “What does this even mean?”

There were four names written on the paper, her handwriting messy.

Olgna.

Marte.

Rosana.

Josefin.

It was the final name that had been written down several times.

The final name that had been underlined, over and over.

Josefin. Josefin. Josefin.

“Perhaps they’re other healers in the Torre who could help,” he lied. “Perhaps she feared spies overhearing her suggest someone else.”

Nesryn’s mouth quirked to the side. “Let’s see what she says—when she returns. At least we know Hasar can track her down if need be.” Or Kashin, whose very name had set the healer on edge. Not that he’d force Yrene to work on him, but ... it was useful information.

Chaol studied the paper again. The fervent underlining of that final name.

As if Yrene had needed to remind herself while here. In his presence. As if she needed whoever they were to know that she remembered them.

He had met another talented young healer from Fenharrow. His king had loved her enough to consider fleeing with her, to seek a better life for them. Chaol knew what had gone on in Fenharrow during their youth. Knew what Sorscha had endured there—and what she’d endured in Rifthold.

He’d ridden through Fenharrow’s scarred grasslands over the years. Had seen the burned or abandoned stone cottages, their thatched roofs long since gone. Owners either enslaved, dead, or fled elsewhere. Far, far away.

No, Chaol realized as he held that piece of paper, Yrene Towers would not be returning.

6

She'd known his age, but Yrene had still not expected the former captain to look so ... young.

She hadn't done the math until she'd walked into that room and seen his handsome face, a mix of caution and hope written across the hardened, broad features.

It was that hope that had made her see red. Had made her ache to give him a matching scar to the slender one slicing across his cheek.

She'd been unprofessional in the most horrific sense. Never—*never* had she been so rude and unkind toward any of her patients.

Mercifully, Hasar had arrived, cooling her head slightly. But touching the man, thinking of ways to *help* him ...

She had not meant to write the list of the last four generations of Towers women. Had not meant to write her mother's name over and over while pretending to record his information. It had not helped with the overwhelming roaring in her head.

Sweating and dusty, Yrene burst into Hafiza's office nearly an hour later, the trek from the palace through the clogged, narrow streets, then the endless steps up here, taking an eternity.

She'd been late—that had been her first truly unprofessional moment. She'd never been late to an appointment. Yet right at ten, she'd found herself in an alcove of the hallway outside his bedroom, hands over her face, struggling to

breathe.

He hadn't been the brute she'd expected.

He'd spoken well, more lord than soldier. Though his body had most certainly belonged to the latter. She had patched up and healed enough of the khagan's favored warriors to know the feel of muscle beneath her fingers. The scars covering Lord Westfall's tan skin spoke volumes about how the muscles had been earned the hard way. And now aided him in maneuvering through the world with the chair.

And the injury to his spine ...

As Yrene halted at the threshold of the Healer on High's office, Hafiza looked up from where she sat beside a sniffing acolyte.

"I need a word," Yrene said tightly, one hand gripping the doorjamb.

"You shall have one when we are done," Hafiza simply replied, handing a handkerchief to the weepy girl.

Some male healers existed, but the majority of those who received Silba's gift were female. And this girl, likely no more than fourteen ... Yrene had been laboring on her cousin's farm at that age. *Dreaming* of being here. Certainly not crying to anyone about her sorry lot in life.

But Yrene walked out, shutting the door behind her, and waited against the wall on the narrow landing.

There were two other doors up here: one locked that led into Hafiza's personal workshop, and a door that led into the Healer on High's bedroom; the former carved with an owl taking flight, the latter with an owl at rest. Silba's symbol. It was everywhere in the tower—owls carved and embossed in the stone and wood, sometimes in unexpected places and with silly little expressions, as if some long-ago acolyte had etched them as a secret joke. But the owl on the Healer on High's private workshop ...

Even though it perched atop a gnarled branch of iron that flowed across the door itself, wings flared wide as it prepared to leap into the skies, it seemed ...

alert. Aware of all who passed that door, who perhaps gazed too long in the direction of the workshop. None but Hafiza possessed the key to it, handed down by her predecessor. Ancient, half-forgotten knowledge and devices lay within, the acolytes whispered—unnatural things that were better locked up than set loose in the world.

Yrene always laughed at their hushed words, but didn't tell them she and a few select others had been granted the pleasure of joining Hafiza in that workshop, which, save for the sheer *age* of some of the tools and furniture, held nothing worth gossiping about. But the mystery of the Healer on High's workshop persisted, as it had likely done for centuries—yet another well-loved myth of the Torre, passed on from acolyte to acolyte.

Yrene fanned her face, still out of breath from the climb and the heat. She leaned her head back against the cool stone, and again felt for the scrap of paper in her pocket. She wondered if the lord had noticed how often she'd grabbed that stranger's note. If he'd thought she was reaching for a weapon. He'd seen everything, been aware of her every breath.

A man trained for it. He had to be, if he'd served the dead king. Just as Nesryn Faliq, a child of this continent, now served the king of a territory that had not treated outsiders very well at all.

Yrene could not make sense of it. There was some romantic bond, she knew from both the tension and comfort between them. But to what degree ... It didn't matter. Save for the emotional healing the lord would need as well. A man not used to voicing his feelings, his fears and hopes and hurts—that much was obvious.

The door to Hafiza's office opened at last, and the acolyte emerged, smiling apologetically at Yrene, red-nosed and glassy-eyed.

Yrene sighed through her nose and offered a smile back. She was not the person who had just barged into the office. No, even busy as she was, Yrene had always taken time for the acolytes, the homesick ones especially.

No one had sat beside her in the mess hall below during those initial days.

Yrene still remembered those lonely meals. Remembered that she'd broken after two days and began taking her food to the vast healers' library belowground, hiding from the stiff-backed librarians who forbade such things, with only the occasional mercurial Baast Cat and carved owl for company.

Yrene had returned to the mess hall once her lessons had garnered enough acquaintances to make the prospect of finding a place to sit less daunting, spotting familiar and smiling faces giving her enough courage to leave the library and its enigmatic cats behind for anything but research.

Yrene touched the acolyte on the shoulder and whispered, "Cook made almond cookies this morning. I smelled them on the way out. Tell her I want six, but take four of those for yourself." She winked at the girl. "Leave the other two for me at my room."

The girl beamed, nodding. Cook was perhaps Yrene's first friend in the Torre. She'd spied Yrene eating alone and began sneaking extra treats onto her tray. Leaving them in her room. Even in her favorite secret spot in the library. Yrene had repaid Cook last year by saving her granddaughter from an insidious lung sickness that had crept up on her. Cook still got weepy whenever they ran into each other, and Yrene had made it a point to stop by the girl's house once a month to check on her.

When she left, she'd have to ask someone to look after the girl. Cleaving herself from this life she'd built ... It would be no easy task. And come with no small amount of guilt.

Yrene watched the still-sniffing acolyte hop down the wide spiral stairs, then took a deep breath and strode into Hafiza's office.

"Will the young lord walk again?" Hafiza asked by way of greeting, white brows high on her forehead.

Yrene slid into her usual chair, the seat still warm from the girl who'd just vacated it.

“He will. The injury is nearly twin to the one I healed last winter. But it will be tricky.”

“In regard to the healing, or you?”

Yrene blushed. “I behaved ... poorly.”

“That was to be expected.”

Yrene wiped the sweat from her brow. “I’m embarrassed to tell you how badly.”

“Then don’t. Do better the next time, and we’ll consider this another lesson.”

Yrene sagged in her chair, stretching her aching legs on the worn carpet. No matter how Hafiza’s servants begged, she refused to change the red-and-green rug. It had been good enough for the last five of her predecessors, and it was good enough for her.

Yrene leaned her head against the soft back of the chair, staring at the cloudless day beyond the open windows. “I think I can heal him,” she said, more to herself than Hafiza. “If he cooperates, I could get him walking again.”

“And will he cooperate?”

“I was not the only one who behaved poorly,” she said. “Though he’s from Adarlan—it could be his nature.”

Hafiza huffed a laugh. “When do you return to him?”

Yrene hesitated.

“You *will* return, won’t you?” Hafiza pushed.

Yrene picked at the sun-blached threads of the chair’s arm. “It was hard—hard to look at him, hear his accent, and ...” She stilled her hand. “But you are right. I shall ... try. If only so Adarlan may never hold it against me.”

“Do you expect them to?”

“He has powerful friends who might remember. His companion is the *new* Captain of the Guard. Her family hails from here, yet she serves them.”

“And what does that tell you?”

Always a lesson, always a test. “It tells me ...” Yrene blew out a breath. “It

tells me I don't know as much as I assumed." She straightened. "But it also doesn't forgive them of any sins."

Yet she had met plenty of bad people in her life. Lived among them, served them, in Innish. She had taken one look at Lord Westfall's brown eyes and had known, deep down, he was not one of them. Neither was his companion.

And with his age ... He had been a boy when so many of those atrocities had been committed. He still could have played some part, and plenty more had been done in recent years—enough to make her ill at the thought—but ...

"The injury to his spine," Yrene said. "He claims some foul magic did it."

Her magic had recoiled against the splattered mark. Curved away.

"Oh?"

She shivered. "I've never ... I've never felt *anything* like that. As if it was rotted, yet empty. Cold as the longest winter night."

"I shall have to take your word on that one."

Yrene snorted, grateful for the dry humor. Indeed, Hafiza had never so much as seen snow. With Antica's year-round warm climate, the closest they'd gotten to winter these two years was perhaps a crust of frost sparkling over the lavender and lemon trees one morning.

"It was ..." Yrene brushed off the memory of the echo still held within that scar. "It was not any magic-wound I had encountered before."

"Will it impact the healing of his spine?"

"I don't know. I haven't tried to probe with my power yet, but ... I'll let you know."

"I'm at your disposal."

"Even if this is my final test?"

"A good healer," Hafiza said with a smile, "knows when to ask for help."

Yrene nodded absently. And when she sailed back home, to war and bloodshed, who would she turn to then?

"I'll go back," Yrene said at last. "Tomorrow. I want to look into spinal

injuries and paralysis in the library tonight.”

“I’ll let Cook know where to find you.”

Yrene gave Hafiza a wry grin. “Nothing escapes you, does it?”

Hafiza’s knowing look wasn’t comforting.



The healer didn’t return that day. Nesryn waited for another hour, then two, Chaol filling his time with reading in the sitting room, before she finally declared she was going to see her family.

It had been years since she’d seen her aunt and uncle and their children. She prayed they were still in the house where she’d last visited.

She’d barely slept. Had barely been able to think or feel things like hunger or exhaustion thanks to the thoughts wreaking havoc within her.

The healer with her lack of answers hadn’t soothed her.

And with no formal meeting scheduled with the khagan or his children today

...

“I can entertain myself, you know,” Chaol said, setting his book on his lap as Nesryn again looked to the foyer door. “I’d join you, if I could.”

“You soon will be able to,” she promised. The healer had seemed skilled enough, despite her refusal to even give them a shred of hope.

If the woman couldn’t help them, then Nesryn would find another. And another. Even if she had to beg the Healer on High to help.

“Go, Nesryn,” Chaol ordered. “You’ll get no peace until you do.”

She rubbed her neck, then rose from her spot on the golden couch and strode over to him. Braced her hands on either arm of his chair, currently positioned by the open garden doors. She brought her face close to his, closer than it’d been in days. His own eyes seemed ... brighter, somehow. A smidge better than yesterday. “I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

He gave her a quiet smile. “Take your time. See your family.” He had not

seen his mother or brother in years, he'd told her. His father ... Chaol did not talk about his father.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "we could get an answer for the healer."

He blinked at her.

She murmured, "About the completion."

That fast, the light winked out from his eyes.

She withdrew quickly. He'd stopped her on the boat, when she'd practically leaped atop him. And seeing him without his shirt earlier, those muscles rippling along his back, his stomach ... She'd almost begged the healer to let *her* do the inspecting.

Pathetic. Though she'd never been particularly good at avoiding her *cravings*. She'd started sleeping with him that summer because she didn't see the point in resisting where her interest tugged her. Even if she hadn't cared for him, not as she did now.

Nesryn slid a hand through her hair. "I'll be back by dinner."

Chaol waved her off, and was already reading his book again when she left the room.

They had made no promises, she reminded herself. She knew his tendencies drove him to want to do right by her, to honor her, and this summer, when that castle had collapsed and she'd thought him dead ... She had never known such fear. She had never prayed as she had in those moments—until Aelin's flame spared her from death, and Nesryn had prayed that she had spared him, too.

Nesryn shut out the thoughts of those days as she strode through the palace halls, vaguely remembering where to find the gates to the city proper. What she'd thought she wanted, what was most important—or had been. Until the khagan had uttered the news.

She had left her family. She should have been there. To protect the children, protect her aging father, her fierce and laughing sister.

"Captain Faliq."

Nesryn halted at the pleasant voice, at the title she was still barely accustomed to answering. She was standing at one of the palace crossroads, the path ahead to take her to the front gates if she kept going straight. She had marked every exit they'd passed on the way in.

And at the end of the hallway that bisected hers was Sartaq.

Gone were the fine clothes of yesterday. The prince now wore close-fitting leathers, the shoulders capped with simple yet sturdy armor, reinforced at the wrists, knees, and shins. No breastplate. His long black hair had been braided back, a thin strap of leather tying it off.

She bowed deeply. Lower than she would have for the other children of the khagan. But for a rumored Heir apparent, who might one day be Adarlan's ally —

If they survived.

"You were in a hurry," Sartaq said, noting the hall she'd been striding down.

"I—I have family in the city. I was going to see them." She added halfheartedly, "Unless Your Highness has need of me."

A wry smile graced his face. And she realized she'd replied in her own tongue. *Their* tongue. "I'm headed for a ride on Kadara. My ruk," he clarified, falling into his language as well.

"I know," she said. "I've heard the stories."

"Even in Adarlan?" He lifted a brow. A warrior and a charmer. A dangerous combination, though she could not recall any mention of a spouse. Indeed, no ring marked his finger.

"Even in Adarlan," Nesryn said, though she did not mention that the average person on the street might not know such tales. But in her household ... Oh, yes. The Winged Prince, they called him.

"May I escort you? The streets are a maze, even to me."

It was a generous offer, an honor. "I would not keep you from the skies." If only because she did not know how to talk to such men—born and bred to

power, used to fine ladies and scheming politicians. Though his ruk riders, legend claimed, could come from anywhere.

“Kadara is accustomed to waiting,” Sartaq said. “At least let me lead you to the gates. There is a new guard out today, and I will tell them to mark your face so you may be let back in.”

Because with her clothes, her unadorned hair ... Indeed, the guards might not permit her past. Which would have been ... mortifying. “Thank you,” she said, and fell into step beside him.

They were silent as they passed white banners streaming from one of the open windows. Chaol had told her yesterday of Kashin’s worry that their youngest sister’s death had been through foul play—that one of Perrington’s agents might be responsible. It was enough to plant a seed of dread in her. To make her mark each face she encountered, peer into every shadow.

Keeping a smooth pace beside him, Nesryn glanced at Sartaq as those banners flitted by. The prince, however, nodded to a few bowing men and women in the gold robes of viziers.

Nesryn found herself asking, “Are there truly thirty-six of them?”

“We have a fascination with the number, so yes.” He snorted, the sound most un-princely. “My father debated halving them, but feared the gods’ wrath more than political repercussions.”

It felt like a breath of crisp autumn air, to hear and speak her own tongue. To have it be the norm and not be gawked at. She’d always felt so when coming here.

“Did Lord Westfall meet with the healer?”

There was no harm in the truth, she decided, so Nesryn said, “Yes. Yrene Towers.”

“Ah. The famed Golden Lady.”

“Oh?”

“She is striking, no?”

Nesryn smiled slightly. “You favor her, I see.”

Sartaq chuckled. “Oh, I wouldn’t dare. My brother Kashin would not be pleased.”

“They have an attachment?” Hasar had hinted at as much.

“They are friends—or were. I haven’t seen them talk in months, but who knows what happened? Though I suppose I’m no better than the court gossips for telling you.”

“It’s still useful to know, if we are working with her.”

“Was her assessment of Lord Westfall a positive one?”

Nesryn shrugged. “She was hesitant to confirm.”

“Many healers will do that. They don’t like to give hope and take it away.” He flicked his braid over a shoulder. “Though I will also tell you that Yrene herself healed one of Kashin’s Darghan riders last winter of a very similar injury. And the healers have long repaired such wounds amongst our people’s horse-tribes and my own rukhin. They will know what to do.”

Nesryn swallowed the hope that blossomed as brightness flared ahead—the open doors to the main courtyard and palace gates. “How long have you been a ruk rider, Prince?”

“I thought you’d heard the stories.” Humor danced in his face.

“Only gossip. I prefer the truth.”

Sartaq’s dark eyes settled on her, their unwavering focus enough to make her glad not to be on the receiving end of it too often. Not for fear, but ... it was unsettling, to have the weight of that gaze wholly upon you. It was an eagle’s gaze—a ruk’s gaze. Keen and piercing.

“I was twelve when my father brought us all to the mountain aerie. And when I snuck away and climbed onto the captain’s own ruk, soaring into the skies and requiring them to chase me down ... My father told me that if I had splattered on the rocks, I would have deserved to die for my stupidity. As punishment, he ordered me to live amongst the rukhin until I could prove I wasn’t a complete

fool—a lifetime, he suggested.”

Nesryn quietly laughed, and blinked against the sunshine as they emerged into the grand courtyard. Ornate arches and pillars had been carved with flora and fauna, the palace rising up behind them like a leviathan.

“Thankfully, I did not die of stupidity, and instead came to love the riding, their lifestyle. They gave me hell because I was a prince, but I proved my mettle soon enough. Kadara hatched when I was fifteen, and I raised her myself. I have had no other mount since.” Pride and affection brightened those onyx eyes.

And yet Nesryn and Chaol would ask him, beg him, to take that beloved mount into battle against wyverns many times the weight and with infinitely more brute strength. With venom in their tails. Her stomach roiled.

They reached the towering main gates, a small door cut into the enormous slabs of studded bronze, left open to allow access to pedestrians scurrying on errands to and from the palace. Nesryn remained still while Sartaq introduced her to the heavily armed guards on duty, ordering them to grant her unrestricted access. The sun glinted on the hilts of the swords crossed over their backs as the guards bowed their acquiescence, each with a fist over his heart.

She’d seen how Chaol could barely look at them—the palace guards and those at the docks.

Sartaq led her through the small door, the bronze of the gate nearly a foot thick, and onto the broad, cobblestoned avenue that sloped into the labyrinth of city streets. Fine houses and more guards lined the surrounding streets, residences of the wealthy who wished to dwell in the palace’s shadow. But the street itself was crammed with people about their business or leisure, even some travelers who climbed all the way up here to gawk at the palace, and now tried to peer through the small door through which Nesryn and Sartaq had walked for a glimpse to the courtyard beyond. None seemed to recognize the prince beside her—though she knew the guards on the street and stationed at the gates monitored every breath and word.

One glance at Sartaq, and she had no doubt the prince was also well aware of his surroundings while he stood beyond the gates, as if he were an ordinary man. She studied the crowded streets ahead, listening to the clamor. It would take an hour on foot to reach her family's house across the city, but even longer in a carriage or on horseback thanks to the clogged traffic.

“Are you sure you don't need an escort?”

A half smile tugged on Nesryn's mouth as she found him watching her sidelong. “I can handle myself, Prince, but I thank you for the honor.”

Sartaq looked her over, a quick warrior's assessment. Indeed, he was a man who had little to fear when stepping beyond the palace walls. “If you ever have the time or interest, you should come for a ride. The air up there is open—not like the dust and brine down here.”

Open enough where listening ears might not hear them.

Nesryn bowed deeply. “I should like that very much.”

She felt the prince still watching while she strode down the sunny avenue, dodging carts and conveyances fighting for passage. But she didn't dare look back. She wasn't entirely sure why.

Manon Blackbeak landed in Morath more than ready to start slitting throats.

Everything had gone to shit.

Everything.

She'd ended that Yellowlegs bitch and her wyvern, saved the sapphire-eyed king, and watched the Fae Prince slaughter those four other Yellowlegs sentinels.

Five. Five Yellowlegs witches now lay dead, either by her hand or through her inaction. Five members of Iskra's coven.

In the end, she'd barely participated in Rifthold's destruction, leaving it to the others. But she'd again donned her crowned helm, then ordered Abraxos to sail to the highest spire of the stone castle and roar his victory—and command.

Even at the distant white walls of the city, ripping apart the guards and fleeing folk, the wyverns had paused at his order to stand down. Not one coven disobeyed.

The Thirteen had found her moments later. She didn't tell them what had happened, but both Sorrel and Asterin stared closely at her: the former to inspect for any cuts or wounds received during the "attack" Manon had claimed occurred, the latter because she had been with Manon that day they'd flown to Rifthold and painted a message to the Queen of Terrasen in Valg blood.

With the Thirteen perched on the castle towers, some draped along them like cats or serpents, Manon had waited for Iskra Yellowlegs.

As Manon now stalked down the dim, reeking halls of Morath, that crowned helm tucked into the crook of her arm, Asterin and Sorrel on her heels, she went over that conversation again.

Iskra had landed on the only space left: a lower bit of roofing below Manon. The positioning had been intentional.

Iskra's brown hair had come untangled from her tight braid, and her haughty face was splattered with human blood as she'd snarled at Manon, "*This was my victory.*"

Her face veiled in shadow beneath the helm, Manon had said, "The city is mine."

“Rifthold was *mine* to take—you were only to oversee.” A flash of iron teeth. On the spire to Manon’s right, Asterin growled in warning. Iskra cast her dark eyes on the blond sentinel and snarled again. “Get your pack of bitches out of my city.”

Manon sized up Fendir, Iskra’s bull. “You’ve left your mark enough. Your work is noted.”

Iskra trembled with rage. Not from the words.

The wind had shifted, blowing toward Iskra.

Blowing Manon’s scent at her.

“Who?” Iskra seethed. “*Who of mine did you butcher?*”

Manon had not yielded, had not allowed one flicker of regret or worry to shine through. “Why should I know any of your names? She attacked me as I closed in on my prey, wanting to get the king for herself and willing to strike an heir for it. She deserved her punishment. Especially because my prey slipped away while I dealt with her.”

Liar liar liar.

Manon bared her iron teeth, the only bit of her face visible beneath that crowned helm. “Four others lie dead inside the castle—at the hand of the Fae Prince who came to rescue the king while *I* dealt with your unruly bitch. Consider yourself lucky, Iskra Yellowlegs, that I do not take that loss out of your hide as well.”

Iskra’s tan face had gone pale. She surveyed Manon, all of the Thirteen assembled. Then she said, “Do what you want with the city. It’s yours.” A flash of a smile as she lifted her hand and pointed at Manon. The Thirteen tensed around her, arrows silently drawn and aimed at the Yellowlegs heir. “But *you*, Wing Leader...” That smile grew and she reined her wyvern, preparing to take to the skies. “You are a liar, *Witch Killer.*”

Then she was gone.

Soaring not for the city, but the skies.

Within minutes, she’d vanished from sight—sailing toward Morath.

Toward Manon’s grandmother.

Manon now glanced at Asterin, then at Sorrel, as they slowed to a stop before turning the corner that would lead to Erawan’s council chamber. Where she knew Iskra, and her grandmother, and the other Matrons would be waiting. Indeed, a glance around the corner revealed the Thirds and Fourths of several covens on guard, eyeing one another as suspiciously as the blank-faced men posted beside the double doors.

Manon said to her Second and Third, “This will be messy.”

Sorrel said quietly, “We’ll deal with it.”

Manon clenched the helmet a bit harder. “If it goes poorly, you are to take the Thirteen and leave.”

Asterin breathed, “You cannot go in there, Manon, accepting defeat. Deny it until your last breath.” Whether Sorrel had realized Manon had killed that witch to save their enemy, she didn’t let on. Asterin demanded, “Where would we even go?”

Manon said, “I don’t know or care. But when I am dead, the Thirteen will be targeted by anyone with a score to settle.” A very, very long list. She held her Second’s stare. “You get them out. At any cost.”

They glanced at each other. Sorrel said, “We will do as you ask, Wing Leader.”

Manon waited—waited for any objection from her Second, but Asterin’s dark eyes were bright as she bowed her head and murmured her agreement.

A knot in Manon’s chest loosened, and she rolled her shoulders once before turning away. But Asterin gripped her hand. “Be careful.”

Manon debated snapping to not be a spineless fool, but ... she’d seen what her grandmother was capable of. It was carved into Asterin’s flesh.

She would not go into this looking guilty, looking like a liar. No—she’d make Iskra crawl by the end.

So Manon took a solid breath before she resumed her usual storming pace, red cape flapping behind her on a phantom wind.

Everyone stared as they approached. But that was to be expected.

Manon didn’t deign to acknowledge the Thirds and Fourths assembled, though she took them in through her peripheral vision. Two young ones from Iskra’s coven. Six old ones, iron teeth flecked with rust, from the covens of the Matrons. And—

There were two other young sentinels in the hall, braided bands of dyed blue leather upon their brows.

Petrah Blueblood had come.

If the heirs and their Matrons were all assembled...

She did not have room for fear in her husk of a heart.

Manon flung open the doors, Asterin on her heels, Sorrel falling back to join the others in the hall.

Ten witches turned toward Manon as she entered. Erawan was nowhere in sight.

And though her grandmother was in the center of where they all stood in the room, her own Second against the stone wall behind Manon, lined up with the four other Seconds gathered, Manon's attention went to the golden-haired heir.

To Petrah.

She had not seen the Blueblood heir since the day of the War Games, when Manon had saved her life from a sure-kill fall. Saved her life, but was unable to save the life of Petrah's wyvern—whose throat had been ripped to shreds by Iskra's bull.

The Blueblood heir stood beside her mother, Cresseida, both of them tall and thin. A crown of iron stars sat upon the Matron's pale brow, the face below unreadable.

Unlike Petrah's. Caution—warning shone in her deep blue eyes. She wore her riding leathers, a cloak of midnight blue hanging from bronze clasps at her shoulders, her golden braid snaking over her chest. Petrah had always been odd, head in the clouds, but that was the way of the Bluebloods. *Mystics, fanatics, zealots* were among the pleasanter terms used to describe them and their worship of the Three-Faced Goddess.

But there was a hollowness in Petrah's face that had not been there months ago. Rumor had claimed that losing her wyvern had broken the heir—that she had not gotten out of bed for weeks.

Witches did not mourn, because witches did not love enough to allow it to break them. Even if Asterin, now taking up her place by the Blackbeak Matron's Second, had proved otherwise.

Petrah nodded, a slight dip of the chin—more than a mere acknowledgment of an heir to an heir. Manon turned toward her grandmother before anyone could notice.

Her grandmother stood in her voluminous black robes, her dark hair plaited over the crown of her head. Like the crown her grandmother sought for them—for her and Manon. *High Queens of the Wastes*, she'd once promised Manon. Even if it meant selling out every witch in this room.

Manon bowed to her grandmother, to the other two Matrons assembled.

Iskra snarled from beside the Yellowlegs Matron, an ancient, bent-backed crone with bits of flesh still in her teeth from lunch. Manon fixed the heir with a cool stare as she straightened.

“Three stand gathered,” her grandmother began, and every bone in Manon's body went stiff. “Three Matrons, to honor the three faces of our Mother.” Maiden, Mother, Crone. It was why the Yellowlegs Matron was always ancient,

why the Blackbeak was always a witch in her prime, and why Cresseida, as the Blueblood Matron, still looked young and fresh.

But Manon did not care about that. Not when the words were being spoken.

“The Crone’s Sickle hangs above us,” Cresseida intoned. “Let it be the Mother’s blade of justice.”

This was not a meeting.

This was a trial.

Iskra began smiling.

As if a thread wove between them, Manon could feel Asterin straightening behind her, feel her Second readying for the worst.

“Blood calls for blood,” the Yellowlegs crone rasped. “We shall decide how much is owed.”

Manon kept still, not daring to show one inch of fear, of trepidation.

Witch trials were brutal, exact. Usually, problems were settled with the three blows to face, ribs, and stomach. Rarely, only in the gravest circumstances, did the three Matrons gather to mete out judgment.

Manon’s grandmother said, “You stand accused, Manon Blackbeak, of cutting down a Yellowlegs sentinel with no provocation beyond your own pride.”

Iskra’s eyes positively burned.

“And, as the sentinel was a part of the Yellowlegs’ heir’s own coven, it is also a crime against Iskra.” Her grandmother’s face was tight with rage—not for what Manon had done, but for getting caught. “Through either your own neglect or ill-planning, the lives of four other coven members were ended. Their blood, too, stains your hands.” Her grandmother’s iron teeth shone in the candlelight. “Do you deny these charges?”

Manon kept her back straight, looked each of them in the eye. “I do not deny that I killed Iskra’s sentinel when she tried to claim my rightful prize. I do not deny that the other four were slaughtered by the Fae Prince. But I do deny any wrongdoing on my part.”

Iskra hissed. “You can smell Zelta’s blood on her—smell the fear and *pain*.”

Manon sneered, “You smell that, Yellowlegs, because your sentinel had a coward’s heart and attacked another sister-in-arms. When she realized she would not win our fight, it was already too late for her.”

Iskra’s face contorted with fury. “*Liar—*”

“Tell us, Blackbeak Heir,” Cresseida said, “what happened in Rifthold three days past.”

So Manon did.

And for the first time in her century of miserable existence, she lied to her elders. She wove a fine tapestry of falsehoods, *believing* the stories she told them. As she finished, she gestured to Iskra Yellowlegs. “It’s common knowledge the Yellowlegs heir has long coveted my position. Perhaps she rushed back here to fling accusations at me so she might steal my place as Wing Leader, just as her sentinel tried to steal my prey.”

Iskra bristled but kept her mouth shut. Petrah took a step forward, however, and spoke. “I have questions for the Blackbeak heir, if it would not be an impertinence.”

Manon’s grandmother looked like she’d rather have her own nails ripped out, but the other two nodded.

Manon straightened, bracing herself for whatever Petrah thought she was doing.

Petrah’s blue eyes were calm as she met Manon’s stare. “Would you consider me your enemy or rival?”

“I consider you an ally when the occasion demands it, but always a rival, yes.” The first true thing Manon had said.

“And yet you saved me from sure death at the War Games. Why?”

The other Matrons glanced at one another, faces unreadable.

Manon lifted her chin. “Because Keelie fought for you as she died. I would not allow her death to be wasted. I could offer a fellow warrior nothing less.”

At the sound of her dead wyvern’s name, pain flickered across Petrah’s face. “You remember her name?”

Manon knew it wasn’t an intended question. But she nodded all the same.

Petrah faced the Matrons. “That day, Iskra Yellowlegs nearly killed me, and her bull slaughtered my mare.”

“We have dealt with that,” Iskra cut in, teeth flashing, “and dismissed it as accidental—”

Petrah held up a hand. “I am not finished, Iskra Yellowlegs.”

Nothing but brutal steel in those words as she addressed the other heir. A small part of Manon was glad not to be on the receiving end of it.

Iskra saw the unfinished business that waited in that tone and backed down.

Petrah lowered her hand. “Manon Blackbeak had the chance to let me die that day. The easier choice would have been to let me die, and she would not be standing accused as she is now. But she risked her life, and the life of her mount, to spare me from death.”

A life debt—that was what lay between them. Did Petrah think to fill it by speaking in her favor now? Manon reined in her sneer.

Petrah went on, “I do not comprehend why Manon Blackbeak would save me only to later turn on her Yellowlegs sisters. You crowned her Wing Leader for her obedience, discipline, and brutality—do not let the anger of Iskra Yellowlegs sully the qualities you saw in her then, and which still shine forth today. Do not lose your Wing Leader over a misunderstanding.”

The Matrons again glanced among them as Petrah bowed, backing into her place at her mother’s right. But the three witches continued that unspoken discussion waging between them. Until Manon’s grandmother stepped forward, the other two falling back—yielding the decision to her. Manon almost sagged in relief.

She’d corner Petrah the next time the heir was foolish enough to be out alone, get her to admit why she’d spoken in Manon’s favor.

Her grandmother’s black-and-gold gaze was hard. Unforgiving.

“Petrah Blueblood has spoken true.”

That tense, tight string between Manon and Asterin loosened, too.

“It would be a waste to lose our obedient, *faithful* Wing Leader.”

Manon had been beaten before. She could endure her grandmother’s fists again.

“Why should the heir of the Blackbeak Witch-Clan yield her life for that of a mere sentinel? Wing Leader or not, it is still the word of heir against heir in this matter. But the blood has still been shed. And blood must be paid.”

Manon again gripped her helm. Her grandmother smiled a little.

“The blood shed must be equal,” her grandmother intoned. Her attention flicked over Manon’s shoulder. “So you, Granddaughter, will not die for this. But one of your Thirteen will.”

For the first time in a long, long while, Manon knew what fear, what human helplessness, tasted like as her grandmother said, triumph lighting her ancient eyes, “Your Second, Asterin Blackbeak, shall pay the blood debt between our clans. She dies at sunrise tomorrow.”

7

Chaol waited until Nesryn had been gone for a good thirty minutes before he summoned Kadja. She'd been waiting in the exterior hallway and slipped inside his suite mere moments after he'd called her name. Lingered in the foyer, he watched the serving girl approach, her steps light and swift, her eyes downcast as she awaited his order.

"I have a favor to ask you," he said slowly and clearly, cursing himself for not learning Halha during the years Dorian had studied it.

A dip of the chin was her only answer.

"I need you to go down to the docks, to wherever information comes in, to see if there's any news about the attack on Rifthold." Kadja had been in the throne room yesterday—she'd undoubtedly heard about it. And he'd debated asking Nesryn to do some searching while she was out, but if the news was grim ... he didn't want her learning it alone. Bearing it alone, all the way back up to the palace. "Do you think you could do that?"

Kadja lifted her eyes at last, though she kept her head low. "Yes," she said simply.

He knew she was likely answering to one of the royals or viziers in this palace. But his asking for more information, while certainly a detail to mark, wasn't any threat to his cause. And if they deemed it weak or stupid to be concerned for his country, they could go to hell.

"Good," Chaol said, the chair beneath him groaning as he wheeled it forward

a foot and tried not to scowl at the sound, at his silent body. “And there is another favor I would ask of you.”



Just because Nesryn was occupied with her family didn't mean he had to be idle.

But as Kadja deposited him in Arghun's chambers, he wondered if he should have waited for Nesryn's return to have this meeting.

The eldest prince's entry room was as large as Chaol's entire suite. It was a long, oval space, the far end opening into a courtyard adorned with a sparkling fountain and patrolled by a pair of white peacocks. He watched them sweep by, the mass of their snowy feathers trailing over the slate tiles, their delicate crowns bobbing with each step.

“They are beautiful, are they not?”

A sealed set of carved doors to the left had opened, revealing the slim-faced, cold-eyed prince, his attention on the birds.

“Stunning,” Chaol admitted, hating the way he had to angle his head upward to look the man in the eye. Had he been standing, he'd be a good four inches taller, able to use his size to his advantage during this meeting. Had he been standing—

He didn't let himself continue down that path. Not now.

“They are my prized pair,” Arghun said, his use of Chaol's home tongue utterly fluent. “My country home is full of their offspring.”

Chaol searched for an answer, something Dorian or Aelin might have easily supplied, but found nothing. Absolutely *nothing* that didn't sound inane and insincere. So he said, “I'm sure it's beautiful.”

Arghun's mouth tugged upward. “If you ignore their screaming at certain points of the year.”

Chaol clenched his jaw. His people were *dying* in Rifthold, if not already dead, and yet bandying words about screeching, preening birds ... *this* was what

he was to do?

He debated it, whether to parry more or get to the point, but Arghun said, “I suppose you are here to ask what I know regarding your city.” The prince’s cool glance finally landed on him, and Chaol held the look. This—the staring contest—was something he could do. He’d had plenty, with unruly guard and courtier alike.

“You supplied your father with the information. I want to know who gave you the details of the attack.”

Amusement lit up the prince’s dark brown eyes. “A blunt man.”

“My people are suffering. I would like to know as much as I can.”

“Well,” Arghun said, picking at a piece of lint clinging to the golden embroidery along his emerald tunic, “in the spirit of honesty, I can tell you absolutely nothing.”

Chaol blinked—once, and slowly.

Arghun went on, extending a hand toward the outer doors, “There are far too many eyes watching, Lord Westfall, and my being seen with you sends a message, for better or worse, regardless of what we discuss. So while I appreciate your visit, I will ask you to leave.” The servants waiting at the door came forward, presumably to wheel him away.

And the sight of one of them reaching their hands toward the back of his chair ...

Chaol bared his teeth at the servant, stopping him dead. “Don’t.”

Whether the man spoke his language, he clearly understood the expression on his face.

Chaol twisted back to the prince. “You really want to play this game?”

“It is no game,” Arghun said simply, striding toward the office where he’d been ensconced. “The information is correct. My spies do not invent stories to entertain. Good day to you.”

And then the double doors to the prince’s office were sealed.

Chaol debated banging on those doors until Arghun started talking, perhaps pounding his fist into the prince's face, too, but ... the two servants behind him were waiting. Watching.

He'd met enough courtiers in Rifthold to sense when someone was lying. Even if those senses had failed him so spectacularly these past few months. With Aelin. With the others. With ... everything.

But he didn't think Arghun was lying. About any of it.

Rifthold had been sacked. Dorian remained missing. His people's fate unknown.

He didn't fight the servant again when the man stepped up to escort him back to his room. And that might have enraged him more than anything.



Nesryn did not return for dinner.

Chaol did not let the khagan, his children, or the thirty-six hawk-eyed viziers get a whiff of the worry that wracked him with every passing minute that she did not emerge from one of the hallways to join them in the great hall. She had been gone hours with no word.

Even Kadja had returned, an hour before dinner, and one look at her carefully calm face told him everything: she'd learned nothing new at the docks about the attack on Rifthold, either. She only confirmed what Arghun claimed: the captains and merchants had spoken to credible sources who'd either sailed past Rifthold or barely escaped. The attack had indeed happened, with no accurate number on the lives lost or the status of the city. All trade from the southern continent was halted—at least to Rifthold and anywhere north of it that required passing near the city. No word had come at all of Dorian's fate.

It pressed on him, weighing him further, but that soon became secondary, once he'd finished dressing for dinner and found Nesryn had not arrived. He eventually yielded and let Kadja bring him to the banquet in the khagan's great

hall, but when long minutes passed and Nesryn still did not return, it was an effort to remain unaffected.

Anything could have happened to her. Anything. Especially if Kashin's theory regarding his late sister was correct. If Morath's agents were already here, he had little doubt that as soon as they learned of his and Nesryn's arrival, they'd begun hunting them.

He should have considered it before she'd gone out today. Should have thought beyond his own damn problems. But demanding a guard be sent out to search for her would only tell any potential enemies what he valued most. Where to strike.

So Chaol fought to get his food down, barely able to focus on conversation with the people beside him. On his right: Duva, pregnant and serene, asking about the music and dancing now favored in his lands; on his left: Arghun, who didn't mention his visit that afternoon, and instead prodded him about trade routes old and proposed. Chaol made up half the answers, and the prince smiled—as if well aware of it.

Still, Nesryn didn't appear.

Though Yrene did.

Halfway through the meal, she entered, in a slightly finer yet still simple gown of amethyst that set her golden-brown skin glowing. Hasar and her lover rose to greet the healer, clasping Yrene's hands and kissing her cheeks, and the princess kicked out the vizier seated on her left to make room for her.

Yrene bowed to the khagan, who waved her off without more than a glance, then to the royalty assembled. Arghun did not bother to acknowledge her existence; Duva beamed at Yrene, her quiet husband offering a more subdued smile. Only Sartaq bowed his head, while the final sibling, Kashin, offered her a close-lipped smile that didn't meet his eyes.

But Kashin's gaze lingered long enough while Yrene took her seat beside Hasar that Chaol remembered what the princess had teased Yrene about earlier

that day.

But Yrene did not return the prince's smile, only offering a distant nod in return, and claimed the seat Hasar had conquered for her. She fell into conversation with Hasar and Renia, accepting the meat Renia piled on her plate, the princess's lover fussing that Yrene looked too tired, too skinny, too pale. Yrene accepted every morsel offered with a bemused smile and nod of thanks. Deliberately not looking anywhere near Kashin. Or Chaol, for that matter.

"I heard," a male voice to Chaol's right said in his own language, "that Yrene has been assigned to you, Lord Westfall."

He was not at all surprised to find that Kashin had leaned forward to speak to him.

And not at all surprised to see the thinly veiled warning in the male's gaze. Chaol had seen it often enough: *Territory claimed*.

Whether Yrene welcomed it or not.

Chaol supposed it was a mark in her favor that she did not seem to pay the prince much heed. Though he could only wonder why. Kashin was the handsomest of the siblings, and Chaol had witnessed women literally falling over themselves for Dorian's attention during those years in the castle. Kashin had a self-satisfied look to him that he'd often glimpsed on Dorian's face.

Once—long ago. A different lifetime ago. Before an assassin and a collar and everything.

The guards stationed throughout the great hall somehow turned looming, as if they were kindled flames that now tugged at his gaze. He refused to even glance toward the nearest one, which he'd marked out of habit, standing twenty feet to the side of the high table. Right where he'd once stood, before another king, another court.

"She has," was all Chaol could manage to say.

"Yrene is our most skilled healer—save for the Healer on High," Kashin went on, glancing at the woman who still paid him no heed and indeed seemed

to fall deeper into conversation with Renia as if to emphasize it.

“So I have heard.” *Certainly the sharpest-tongued.*

“She received the highest marks anyone has ever attained on her formal examinations,” Kashin continued while Yrene ignored him, something like hurt flickering across the prince’s face.

“See how he trips over himself,” Arghun muttered over Duva, her husband, *and* Chaol to say to Sartaq. Duva swatted at Arghun’s arm, snapping at him for interrupting her fork’s path to her mouth.

Kashin did not appear to hear or care for his elder brother’s disapproval. And to his credit, Sartaq didn’t, either, choosing instead to turn to a golden-robed vizier while Kashin said to Chaol, “Unheard of marks for anyone, let alone a healer who has been here for just over two years.”

Another seedling of information. Yrene had not spent long in Antica, then.

Chaol found Yrene watching him beneath lowered brows. A warning not to drag her into the conversation.

He weighed the merits of either option: the petty revenge for her taunting earlier, or ...

She was helping him. Or was debating it, at least. He’d be stupid to alienate her further.

So he said to Kashin, “I hear you usually dwell down in Balruhn and look after the terrestrial armies.”

Kashin straightened. “I do. For most of the year, I make my home there and oversee the training of our troops. If I’m not there, then I’m out on the steppes with our mother-people—the horse-lords.”

“Thank the gods,” Hasar muttered from across the table, earning a warning look from Sartaq. Hasar only rolled her eyes and whispered something in her lover’s ear that made Renia laugh, a bright, silvery sound.

Yrene was still watching him, though, an ember of what he could have sworn was annoyance in her face—as if Chaol’s mere presence at this table was enough

to set her clenching her jaw—while Kashin began explaining his various routines in his city on the southwestern coast, and the contrasting life amongst the horse-tribes on the steppes.

Chaol shot Yrene back an equally displeased look the moment Kashin paused to sip his wine, and then launched question after question to the prince regarding his life. Helpful information, he realized, about their army.

He was not the only one who realized it. Arghun cut in while his brother was midsentence about the forges they had constructed near their northern climes, “Let us not discuss business at dinner, brother.”

Kashin shut his mouth, ever the trained soldier.

And somehow Chaol knew—that fast—that Kashin was not being considered for the throne. Not when he obeyed his eldest brother like any common warrior. He seemed decent, though. A better alternative than the sneering, aloof Arghun, or the wolflike Hasar.

It did not entirely explain Yrene’s utter need to distance herself from Kashin. Not that it was any of his business, or of any interest to him. Certainly not when Yrene’s mouth tightened if she so much as turned her head in Chaol’s direction.

He might have called her out on it, might have demanded if this meant she’d decided *not* to treat him. But if Kashin favored her, Yrene’s subtle rejections or not, it surely wouldn’t be a wise move to get into it with her at this table.

Footsteps sounded from behind, but it was only a vizier’s husband, come to murmur something in her ear before vanishing.

Not Nesryn.

Chaol studied the dishes strewn over the table, calculating the remaining courses. With the feasting, last night’s meal had gone on for ages. Not one dessert delicacy had been brought out yet.

He looked again to the exits, skipping over the guards stationed there, searching for her.

Facing the table again, Chaol found Yrene observing him. Wariness,

displeasure still darkened those golden eyes, but ... warning, too.

She knew who he looked for. Whose absence gnawed at him.

To his shock, she subtly shook her head. *Don't reveal it*, she seemed to say. *Don't ask them to look for her*.

He knew it already but gave Yrene a terse nod back and continued on.

Kashin attempted to engage Yrene in conversation, but each time he was promptly and politely shut down with simple answers.

Perhaps the healer's disdain toward Chaol that morning was simply her nature, rather than hatred born of Adarlan's conquest. Or perhaps she just hated men. It was hard not to look toward the faint scar across her throat.

Chaol managed to wait until dessert arrived before feigning exhaustion and leaving the table. Kadja was already there, waiting by the farthest pillars of the hall with the other servants, and said nothing as she wheeled that chair away, every rattle making him grate his teeth.

Yrene didn't say a word of parting, or offer a promise of returning the next day. She didn't so much as look in his direction.

But Nesryn was not in the room when he returned. And if he searched for her, if he drew attention to the threat, to their closeness and how any enemy might wield it against them ...

So he waited. Listened to the garden fountain, the singing of the nightingale perched in a fig tree within it, listened to the steady count of the clock on the sitting room mantel.

Eleven. Twelve. He told Kadja to go to sleep—that he'd care for himself and get himself in bed. She did not leave, only took up a place against the painted foyer wall to wait.

It was nearly one when the door opened.

Nesryn slipped in. He knew it, simply because he'd learned her sounds of moving.

She saw the candles in the sitting room and strode in.

Not a mark on her. Only—light. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brighter than they'd been this morning. "I'm sorry I missed dinner," was all she said.

His reply was low, guttural. "Do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

She halted, hair swaying with the movement. "I was not aware I had to send word of my comings and goings. You told me to go."

"You went into a foreign city and did not come back when you said you would." Every word was biting, slicing.

"It is not a foreign city—not to me."

He slammed his palm onto the arm of the chair. "One of the princesses was murdered a few weeks ago. A *princess*. In her own palace—the seat of the most powerful empire in the world."

She crossed her arms. "We don't know if it was murder. Kashin seems to be the only one who thinks so."

It was utterly beside the point. Even if he'd barely remembered to study his dinner companions tonight for any sign of the Valg's presence. He said too quietly, "I couldn't even go looking for you. I didn't *dare* tell them that you were missing."

She blinked, slow and long. "My family was glad to see me, in case you were wondering. And they received a brief letter from my father yesterday. They got out." She began unbuttoning her jacket. "They could be anywhere."

"I'm glad to hear it," Chaol said through his teeth. Though he knew that *not* knowing where her family was would eat at her as much as the terror of the past day of not knowing whether they lived. He said as calmly as he could, "This thing between us doesn't work if you don't tell me where you are, or if your plans change."

"I was at their house, eating dinner. I lost track of time. They begged me to stay with them."

"You know better than to not send word. Not after the shit we've been through."

“I have nothing to fear in this city—this place.”

She said it with enough bite that he knew she meant that in Rifthold ... in Rifthold she did.

He hated that she felt that way. Hated it and yet: “Isn’t that what we are fighting for? So that our own lands might be so safe one day?”

Her face shuttered. “Yes.”

She finished unbuttoning her jacket, peeling it off to reveal the shirt beneath, and slung it over a shoulder. “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She didn’t wait for his farewell before she strode into her room and shut the door.

Chaol sat for long minutes in the sitting room, waiting for her to emerge. And when he finally let Kadja bring him into his room and help change him into his bedclothes, after she blew out the candles and left on silent feet, he waited for his door to open.

But Nesryn did not come in. And he could not go to her—not without dragging poor Kadja from wherever she slept, listening for any sound that she might be needed.

He was still waiting for Nesryn when sleep claimed him.

Without Evangeline slowing them down, Aelin, Aedion, and Lysandra traveled with little rest as they hauled ass for the coast.

Aelin remained in her Fae form to keep up with Aedion, who she begrudgingly admitted was by far the better rider, while Lysandra shifted in and out of various bird shapes to scout the land ahead for any danger. Rowan had been instructing her on how to do it, what things to note and what to avoid or get a closer look at, while they'd been on the road these weeks. But Lysandra found little to report from the skies, and Aelin and Aedion encountered few dangers on the ground as they crossed the valleys and plains of Terrasen's lowlands.

So little remained of the once-rich territory.

Aelin tried not to dwell on it too much—on the threadbare estates, the abandoned farms, the gaunt-faced people whenever they ventured into town, cloaked and disguised, for desperately needed supplies. Though she had faced darkness and emerged full of light, a voice whispered in her head, *You did this, you did this, you did this.*

That voice often sounded like Weylan Darrow's icy tones.

Aelin left gold pieces in her wake—tucked under a mug of watery tea offered to her and Aedion on a stormy morning; dropped in the bread box of a farmer who'd given them slices and a bit of meat for Lysandra in falcon form; slipped into the coin drawer of an innkeeper who had offered them a free extra bowl of stew upon seeing how swiftly they devoured their lunches.

But that gold didn't ease the cracking in her heart—that hideous voice that haunted her waking and dreaming thoughts.

By the time they reached the ancient port town of Ilium a week later, she'd stopped leaving gold behind.

It'd started to feel more like a bribe. Not to her people, who had no inkling she'd been among them, but to her own conscience.

The green flatlands eventually yielded to rocky, arid coastline miles before the white-walled town rose between the thrashing turquoise sea and the broad mouth of the Florine River snaking inland, all the way to Orynth. The town of

Ilium was as ancient as Terrasen itself, and would likely have already been forgotten by traders and history were it not for the crumbling temple at the northeastern edge of the city, drawing enough pilgrims to keep it thriving.

The Temple of the Stone, it was called, had been built around the very rock where Brannon had first placed his foot upon the continent before sailing up the Florine to its source at the base of the Staghorns. How the Little Folk had known how to render the temple for her, she had no idea.

Ilium's stout, sprawling temple had been erected on a pale cliff with commanding views of the storm-worn, pretty town behind it and the endless ocean beyond—so blue that it reminded Aelin of the tranquil waters of the South.

Waters where Rowan and Dorian should now be headed, if they were lucky. Aelin tried not to dwell on that, either. Without the Fae Prince at her side, there was a horrible, endless silence.

Almost as quiet as the white walls of the town—and the people inside. Hooded and armed to the teeth beneath their heavy cloaks, Aelin and Aedion rode through the open gates, no more than two cautious pilgrims on their way to the temple. Disguised for secrecy—and for the little fact that Ilium was now under Adarlanian occupation.

Lysandra had brought the news that morning after flying ahead, lingering in human form only long enough to inform them.

“We should have gone north to Eldrys,” Aedion murmured as they rode past a cluster of hard-faced sentries in Adarlanian armor, the soldiers only glancing their way to note the sharp-eyed, sharper-beaked falcon perched on Aelin's shoulder. None marked the shield hidden amongst Aedion's saddlebags, carefully veiled by the folds of his cloak. Or the swords they'd both concealed as well. Damaris remained where she'd stored it these weeks on the road: strapped beneath the heavy bags containing the ancient spellbooks she'd *borrowed* from Dorian's royal library in Rifthold. “We can still turn around.”

Aelin shot him a glare beneath the shadows of her hood. “If you think for one moment I'm leaving this city in Adarlan's hands, you can go to hell.” Lysandra clicked her beak in agreement.

The Little Folk had not been wrong to send the message to come here, their rendering of the temple near-perfect. Through whatever magic they possessed, they had foreseen the news long before it ever reached Aelin on the road: Rifthold had indeed fallen, its king vanished and the city sacked by witches. Emboldened by this, and by the rumor that *she* was not taking back her throne

but rather running as well, the Lord of Meah, Roland Havilliard's father and one of the most powerful lords in Adarlan, had marched his garrison of troops just over the border into Terrasen. And claimed this port for himself.

"Fifty soldiers are camped here," Aedion warned her and Lysandra.

The shifter only puffed out her feathers as if to say, *So?*

His jaw clenched. "Believe me, I want a piece of them, too. But—"

"I am not hiding in my own kingdom," Aelin cut in. "And I am not going to leave without sending a reminder of who this land belongs to."

Aedion kept quiet as they rounded a corner, aiming for the small seaside inn Lysandra had also scouted that morning. On the other side of the city from the temple.

The temple the soldiers had the *nerve* to use as their barracks.

"Is this about sending a message to Adarlan, or to Darrow?" Aedion asked at last.

"It is about freeing my people, who have dealt with these Adarlanian pieces of shit for too long," Aelin snapped, reining her mare in to a halt before the inn courtyard. Lysandra's talons dug into her shoulder in silent agreement. Mere feet beyond the weatherworn courtyard wall, the sea gleamed sapphire-bright. "We move at nightfall."

Aedion remained quiet, his face partially hidden as the inn's owner scuttled out and they secured a room for the night. Aelin let her cousin brood a bit, wrangling her magic under control. She hadn't released any of it this morning, wanting it to be at full force for what they were to do tonight, but the strain now tugged at her, an itch with no relief, an edge she could not dull.

Only when they were ensconced in their tiny, two-bed chamber, Lysandra perched on the windowsill, did Aedion say, "Aelin, you know I'll help—you know I want these bastards out of here. But the people of Ilium have lived here for centuries, aware that in war, they are the first to be attacked."

And these soldiers could easily return as soon as they left, he didn't need to add.

Lysandra pecked the window—a quiet request. Aelin strode over, shoved open the window to let the sea breeze flit in. "Symbols have power, Aedion," she said, watching the shifter fan her speckled wings. She'd read books and books on it during that ridiculous competition in Rifthold.

He snorted. "I know. Believe me—I've wielded them to my advantage as often as I can." He patted the bone pommel of the Sword of Orynth for emphasis. "Come to think of it, I said the same exact thing once to Dorian and

Chaol.” He shook his head at the memory.

Aelin just leaned against the windowsill. “Ilium used to be the stronghold of the Mycenians.”

“The Mycenians are nothing more than a myth—they were banished three hundred years ago. If you’re looking for a symbol, they’re fairly outdated—and divisive.”

She knew that. The Mycenians had once ruled Ilium not as nobility, but crime lords. And during some long-ago war, their lethal fleet had been so crucial in winning that they’d been turned legitimate by whatever king ruled at the time. Until they had been exiled centuries later for their refusal to come to Terrasen’s aid in another war.

She met Lysandra’s green-eyed stare as the shifter lowered her wings, sufficiently cooled. She’d been distant on the road this week, preferring feathers or fur to skin. Perhaps because some piece of her heart now rode for Orynth with Ren and Murtaugh. Aelin stroked her friend’s silken head. “The Mycenians abandoned Terrasen so they would not die in a war they did not believe in.”

“And they disbanded and vanished soon after that, never to be seen again,” Aedion countered. “What’s your point? You think liberating Ilium will summon them again? They’re long gone, Aelin, their sea dragons with them.”

Indeed, there was no sign anywhere in this city of the legendary fleet and warriors who had sailed to wars across distant, violent seas, who had defended these borders with their own blood spilled upon the waves beyond the windows. And the blood of their sea dragons, both allies and weapons. Only when the last of the dragons had died, heartsick to be banished from Terrasen’s waters, had the Mycenians truly been lost. And only when the sea dragons returned would the Mycenians, too, come home. Or so their ancient prophecies claimed.

Aedion began removing the extra blades hidden in their saddlebags, save for Damaris, and strapped them on, one by one. He double-checked that Rowan’s knife was securely buckled at his side before he said to Aelin and Lysandra, still by the window, “I know you two are of the opinion that we males are here to provide you with a pretty view and meals, but I *am* a general of Terrasen. We need to find a real army—not spend our time chasing ghosts. If we don’t get a host to the North by mid-fall, the winter storms will keep it away by land and sea.”

“If you’re so versed in symbols wielding such power, Aedion,” she said, “then you know why Ilium is vital. We can’t allow Adarlan to hold it. For a dozen reasons.” She was certain her cousin had already calculated all of them.

“So take back the town,” Aedion challenged. “But we need to sail by dawn.” Her cousin’s eyes narrowed. “The temple. It’s also that they took the temple, isn’t it?”

“That temple is my birthright,” Aelin said. “I cannot allow that insult to go unchecked.” She rolled her shoulders. Revealing her plans, explaining herself ... It would take some getting used to. But she’d promised she’d try to be more ... open about her plotting. And for this matter, at least, she could be. “Both for Adarlan and for Darrow. Not if I am to one day reclaim my throne.”

Aedion considered. Then snorted, a hint of a smile on his face. “An undisputed queen of not just blood, but also of legends.” His face remained contemplative. “You would be the undisputed queen if you got the kingsflame to bloom again.”

“Too bad Lysandra can only shift herself and not things,” Aelin muttered. Lysandra clicked her beak in agreement, puffing her feathers.

“They say the kingsflame bloomed once during Orlon’s reign,” Aedion mused. “Just one blossom, found in Oakwald.”

“I know,” Aelin said quietly. “He kept it pressed within glass on his desk.” She still remembered that small red-and-orange flower, so simple in its make, but so vibrant it had always snatched her breath away. It had bloomed in fields and across mountains throughout the kingdom the day Brannon set foot on this continent. And for centuries afterward, if a solitary blossom was ever found, the current sovereign was deemed blessed, the kingdom truly at peace.

Before the flower was found in Orlon’s second decade of kingship, the last one had been spotted ninety-five years earlier. Aelin swallowed hard. “Did Adarlan—”

“Darrow has it,” Aedion said. “It was the only thing of Orlon’s he managed to grab before the soldiers took the palace.”

Aelin nodded, her magic flickering in answer. Even the Sword of Orynth had fallen into Adarlan’s hands—until Aedion had won it back. Yes, her cousin understood perhaps more than anyone else the power a single symbol could wield. How the loss or reclaiming of one could shatter or rally an army, a people.

Enough—it was *enough* destruction and pain inflicted on her kingdom.

“Come on,” she said to Lysandra and Aedion, heading for the door. “We’d better eat before we raise hell.”

It had been a long while since Dorian had seen so many stars.

Far behind them, smoke still stained the sky, the plumes illuminated by the crescent moon overhead. At least the screams had faded miles ago. Along with the thump of mighty wings.

Seated behind him in the one-masted skiff, Prince Rowan Whitethorn gazed over the calm black expanse of the sea. They'd sail south, pushed by the prince's own magic, to the Dead Islands. The Fae warrior had gotten them quickly to the coast, where he'd had no qualms about stealing this boat while its owner was focused on the panicking city to the west. And all the while, Dorian had been silent, useless. As he had been while his city was destroyed, his people murdered.

"You should eat," Rowan said from the other end of the small boat.

Dorian glanced toward the sack of supplies Rowan had also stolen. Bread, cheese, apples, dried fish ... Dorian's stomach turned.

"You were impaled by a poisoned barb," Rowan said, his voice no louder than the waves lapping against their boat as the swift wind pushed them from behind. "Your magic was drained keeping you alive and walking. You need to eat, or else it won't replenish." A pause. "Didn't Aelin warn you about that?"

Dorian swallowed. "No. She didn't really have the time to teach me about magic." He looked toward the back of the boat, where Rowan sat with a hand braced on the rudder. The sight of those pointed ears was still a shock, even months after meeting the male. And that silver hair—

Not like Manon's hair, which was the pure white of moonlight on snow.

He wondered what had become of the Wing Leader—who had killed for him, spared him.

Not spared him. Rescued him.

He wasn't a fool. He knew she'd done it for whatever reasons were useful to her. She was as alien to him as the warrior sitting at the other end of the boat—more so.

And yet, that darkness, that violence and stark, honest way of looking at the

world ... There would be no secrets with her. No lies.

“You need to eat to keep up your strength,” Rowan went on. “Your magic feeds on your energy—feeds on *you*. The more rested you are, the greater the strength. More important, the greater the control. Your power is both part of you and its own entity. If left to its own devices, it will consume you, wield *you* like a tool.” A flash of teeth as Rowan smiled. “A certain person we know likes to siphon off her power, use it on frivolous things to keep its edge dull.” Dorian could feel Rowan’s stare pin him like a physical blow. “The choice is yours how much you allow it into your life, how to use it—but go any longer without mastering it, Majesty, and it will destroy you.”

A chill went down Dorian’s spine.

And maybe it was the open ocean, or the endless stars above them, but Dorian said, “It wasn’t enough. That day ... that day Sorscha died, it wasn’t enough to save her.” He spread his hands on his lap. “It only wishes to destroy.”

Silence fell, long enough that Dorian wondered if Rowan had fallen asleep. He hadn’t dared ask when the prince himself had last slept; he’d certainly eaten enough for a starved man.

“I was not there to save my mate when she was murdered, either,” Rowan said at last.

Dorian straightened. Aelin had told him plenty of the prince’s history, but not this. He supposed it wasn’t her secret, her sorrow to share. “I’m sorry,” Dorian said.

His magic had felt the bond between Aelin and Rowan—the bond that went deeper than blood, than their magic, and he’d assumed it was just that they were mates, and hadn’t announced it to anyone. But if Rowan already had a mate, and had lost her...

Rowan said, “You’re going to hate the world, Dorian. You are going to hate yourself. You will hate your magic, and you will hate any moment of peace or happiness. But I had the luxury of a kingdom at peace and no one depending upon me. You do not.”

Rowan shifted the rudder, adjusting their course farther out to sea as the coastline jutted to meet them, a rising wall of steep cliffs. He’d known they were traveling swiftly, but they had to be almost halfway to the southern border—and traveling far faster than he’d realized under the cover of darkness.

Dorian said at last, “I am the sovereign of a broken kingdom. My people do not know who rules them. And now that I am fleeing...” He shook his head, exhaustion gnawing on his bones. “Have I yielded my kingdom to Erawan?”

What—what do I even *do* from here?”

The ship’s creaking and the rush of water were the only sounds. “Your people will have learned by now that you were not among the dead. It is upon you to tell them how to interpret it—if they are to see you as abandoning them, or if they are to see you as a man who is leaving to find help—to save them. You must make that clear.”

“By going to the Dead Islands.”

A nod. “Aelin, unsurprisingly, has a fraught history with the Pirate Lord. You don’t. It’s in your best interest to make him see you as an advantageous ally. Aedion told me the Dead Islands were once overrun by General Narrok and several of Erawan’s forces. Rolfe and his fleet fled—and though Rolfe is now once more ruler of Skull’s Bay, that disgrace might be your way in with him. Convince him you are not your father’s son—and that you’ll grant Rolfe and his pirates privileges.”

“You mean turn them into privateers.”

“You have gold, we have gold. If promising Rolfe money and free rein to loot Erawan’s ships will secure us an armada in the South, we’d be fools to shy from it.”

Dorian considered the prince’s words. “I’ve never met a pirate.”

“You met Aelin when she was still pretending to be Celaena,” Rowan said drily. “I can promise you Rolfe won’t be much worse.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

A huffed laugh. Silence fell between them again. At last, Rowan said, “I’m sorry—about Sorscha.”

Dorian shrugged, and hated himself for the gesture, as if it diminished what Sorscha had meant, how brave she’d been—how special. “You know,” he said, “sometimes I wish Chaol were here—to help me. And then sometimes I’m glad he’s not, so he wouldn’t be at risk again. I’m glad he’s in Antica with Nesryn.” He studied the prince, the lethal lines of his body, the predatory stillness with which he sat, even as he manned their boat. “Could you—could you teach me about magic? Not everything, I mean, but ... what you can, whenever we can.”

Rowan considered for a moment, and then said, “I have known many kings in my life, Dorian Havilliard. And it was a rare man indeed who asked for help when he needed it, who would put aside pride.”

Dorian was fairly certain his pride had been shredded under the claws of the Valg prince.

“I’ll teach you as much as I can before we arrive in Skull’s Bay,” Rowan

said. “We may find someone there who escaped the butchers—someone to instruct you more than I can.”

“You taught Aelin.”

Again, silence. Then, “Aelin is my heart. I taught her what I knew, and it worked because our magics understood each other deep down—just as our souls did. You are ... different. Your magic is something I have rarely encountered. You need someone who grasps it, or at least how to train you in it. But I can teach you control; I can teach you about spiraling down into your power, and taking care of yourself.”

Dorian nodded his thanks. “The first time you met Aelin, did you know ... ?”

A snort. “No. Gods, no. We wanted to kill each other.” The amusement flickered. “She was ... in a very dark place. We both were. But we led each other out of it. Found a way—together.”

For a heartbeat, Dorian could only stare. As if reading his mind, Rowan said, “You will find your way, too, Dorian. You’ll find your way out.”

He didn’t have the right words to convey what was in his heart, so he sighed up at the starry, endless sky. “To Skull’s Bay, then.”

Rowan’s smile was a slash of white in the darkness. “To Skull’s Bay.”

8

Yrene made sure to be on time the next morning. She hadn't sent word ahead, but she was willing to gamble that Lord Westfall and the new captain would be waiting at ten. Though from the glares he threw her way last night, she wondered if he doubted she'd return at all.

Let him think what he wanted.

She debated waiting until eleven, since Hasar and Renia had dragged her out drinking—or rather, Yrene had watched them drink, sipping at her own glass of wine—and she hadn't crawled into her room in the Torre until nearly two. Hasar had offered her a suite at the palace for the night, but given the fact that they'd narrowly escaped Kashin joining them at the quiet, elegant taproom in the bustling Rose Quarter, Yrene was not inclined to risk running into him again.

Honestly, whenever the khagan ordered his children back to their various outposts, it would not be soon enough. They'd lingered after Tumelun's death—which Hasar had still refused to even mention. Yrene had barely known the youngest princess, the girl having spent most of her time with Kashin among the Darghan on the steppes and the walled cities scattered around them. But in those initial days after Tumelun's body had been found, after Hafiza herself had confirmed that the girl had jumped from the balcony, Yrene had the urge to seek out Kashin. To offer her sympathies, yes, but also to just see how he was doing.

Yrene knew him well enough to understand that despite the easy, unruffled manner he presented to the world, the disciplined soldier who obeyed his father's

every order and fearlessly commanded his terrestrial armies ... beneath that smiling face lay a churning sea of grief. Wondering what he could have done differently.

Things had indeed turned awkward and awful between Yrene and Kashin, but ... she still cared. Yet she had not reached out to him. Had not wanted to open that door she'd spent months trying to shut.

She'd hated herself for it, thought about it at least once a day. Especially when she spied the white banners flapping throughout the city, the palace. At dinner last night, she'd done her best not to crumple up with shame as she ignored him, suffered through his praise, the pride still in his words when he spoke of her.

Fool, Eretia had called her more than once, after Yrene had confessed during a particularly grueling healing what had occurred on the steppes last winter. Yrene knew it was true—but she ... well, she had other plans for herself. Dreams she would not, could not, defer or yield entirely. So once Kashin, once the other royals, returned to their ruling posts ... it would be easier again. Better.

She only wished Lord Westfall's own return to his hateful kingdom didn't rely so heavily upon her assistance.

Biting back a scowl, Yrene squared her shoulders and knocked on the suite doors, the lovely-faced servant answering before the sound had even finished echoing in the hall.

There were so many of them in the palace that Yrene had learned the names of just a few, but she'd seen this one before, had marked her beauty. Enough that Yrene nodded in recognition and strode in.

Servants were paid handsomely, and treated well enough that competition was fierce to land a spot in the palace—especially when positions tended to remain within families, and any openings went to those within them. The khagan and his court treated their servants as people, with rights and laws to protect them.

Unlike Adarlan, where so many lived and died in shackles. Unlike the enslaved in Calaculla and Endovier, never allowed to see the sun or breathe fresh air, entire families torn asunder.

She had heard of the massacres in the mines this spring. The butchering. It was enough that any neutral expression vanished from her face by the time she reached the lavish sitting room. She didn't know what their business was with the khagan, but he certainly looked after his guests.

Lord Westfall and the young captain were sitting precisely where they'd been the previous morning. Neither looked happy.

Indeed, neither was really glancing at the other.

Well, at least none of them would bother to pretend to be pleasant today.

The lord was already sizing Yrene up, no doubt marking the blue dress she'd worn yesterday, the same shoes.

Yrene owned four dresses, the purple one she'd worn to dinner last night being the finest. Hasar had always promised to procure finer clothes for her to wear, but the princess never remembered the next day. Not that Yrene particularly cared. If she received the clothes, she'd feel obligated to visit the palace more than she already did, and ... Yes, there were some lonely nights when she wondered what the hell she was thinking by pushing away Kashin, when she reminded herself that most girls in the world would kill and claw their way to an open palace invitation, but she would not stay here for much longer. There was no point.

"Good morning," said the new captain—Nesryn Faliq.

The woman seemed more focused. Settled. And yet this new tension between her and Lord Westfall ...

Not her business. Only if it interfered with her healing.

"I spoke to my superior." A lie, though she technically *had* spoken to Hafiza.

"And?"

Not one word from the lord so far. Shadows were smudged beneath his

brown eyes, his tan skin paler than yesterday. If he was surprised she'd returned, he revealed nothing.

Yrene scooped the upper portions of her hair and tied it back with a small wooden comb, leaving the bottom half down. Her preferred style for working. "And I should like to get you walking again, Lord Westfall."

No emotion flickered in the lord's eyes. Nesryn, however, loosed a shuddering breath and leaned back against the deep cushions of the golden sofa. "How likely is it that you will succeed?"

"I have healed spinal injuries before. Though it was a rider who took a bad fall off his horse—not a wound in battle. Certainly not one from magic. I shall do my best, but I make no guarantees."

Lord Westfall said nothing, didn't so much as shift in his chair.

Say something, she demanded, meeting his cold and weary stare.

His eyes slid to her throat, to the scar she had not let Eretia heal when she'd offered last year.

"Will it be hours every day that you work on him?" Nesryn's words were steady, almost flat, and yet ... The woman was not a creature who took well to a cage. Even a gilded one such as this.

"I would recommend," Yrene said to Nesryn over a shoulder, "that if you have other duties or tasks to attend to, Captain, these hours would be a good time for that. I shall send word if you are needed."

"What about moving him around?"

The lord's eyes flashed at that.

And though Yrene was predisposed to chuck them both to the ruks, she noted the lord's simmering outrage and self-loathing at the words and found herself saying, "I can handle most of it, but I believe Lord Westfall is more than capable of transporting himself."

Something like wary gratitude shot across his face. But he just said to Nesryn, "And I can ask my own damn questions."

Guilt flashed across Nesryn's face, even as she stiffened. But she nodded, biting her lip, before she murmured to Chaol, "I had some invitations yesterday." Understanding lit his eyes. "I plan to see about them."

Smart—not to speak too clearly of her movements.

Chaol nodded gravely. "Send a message this time."

Yrene had noted his worry at dinner last night when the captain had not appeared. A man unused to having the people he cared for out of his sight, and now limited in how he might look for them himself. She tucked away the information for later.

Nesryn bid her farewells, perhaps more tersely to the lord, and then was gone.

Yrene waited until she heard the door shut. "She was wise to not speak aloud of her plans."

"Why."

His first words to Yrene so far.

She jerked her chin toward the open doors to the foyer. "The walls have ears and mouths. And all the servants are paid by the khagan's children. Or viziers."

"I thought the khagan paid them all."

"Oh, he does," Yrene said, going to the small satchel she'd left by the door. "But his children and viziers buy the servants' loyalty through other means. Favors and comforts and status in exchange for information. I'd be careful with whoever was assigned to you."

Docile as the servant girl who'd let Yrene in might seem, she knew even the smallest snakes could contain the most lethal venom.

"Do you know who ... owns them?" He said that word—*owns*—as if it tasted foul.

Yrene said simply, "No." She rooted through the satchel, pulling out twin vials of amber liquid, a stub of white chalk, and some towels. He followed every movement. "Do you own any slaves in Adarlan?" She kept the question mild,

uninterested. Idle chatter while she readied.

“No. Never.”

She set a black leather journal upon the table before lifting a brow. “Not one?”

“I believe in paying people for their work, as you do here. And I believe in a human being’s intrinsic right to freedom.”

“I’m surprised your king let you live if that is how you feel.”

“I kept such opinions to myself.”

“A wiser move. Better to save your hide through silence than speaking for the thousands enslaved.”

He went still at that. “The labor camps and slave trade have been shut down. It was one of the first decrees that my king made. I was there with him when he drafted the document.”

“New decrees for a new era, I suppose?” The words were sharper than the set of knives she carried with her—for surgery, for scraping away rotting flesh.

He held her gaze unflinchingly. “Dorian Havilliard is not his father. It was him I served these years.”

“And yet you were the former king’s honored Captain of the Guard. I’m surprised the khagan’s children aren’t clamoring to hear your secrets about how you played both so well.”

His hands clenched on the arms of the chair. “There are choices in my past,” he said tightly, “that I have come to regret. But I can only move on—and attempt to fix them. Fight to make sure they do not occur again.” He jerked his chin toward the supplies she’d set down. “Which I cannot do while in this chair.”

“You certainly could do such things from that chair,” she said tartly, and meant it. He didn’t respond. Fine. If he did not wish to talk about this ... she certainly didn’t wish to, either. Yrene jerked *her* chin toward the long, deep golden sofa. “Get on that. Shirt off and facedown.”

“Why not the bed?”

“Captain Faliq was here yesterday. I would not enter your bedroom without her present.”

“She is not my ...” He trailed off. “It would not be an issue.”

“And yet you saw last night how it might present an issue for me.”

“With—”

“Yes.” She cut him off with a sharp look toward the door. “The couch will do.”

She had seen the look Kashin had given the captain at dinner. She’d wanted to slide off her chair and hide beneath the table.

“You have no interest where that is concerned?” he said, wheeling himself the few feet to the couch, then unbuttoning his jacket.

“I have no plans to seek such a life for myself.” Not when the risks were so high.

Execution of herself, her husband, and their children if Kashin should challenge the new khagan, if he should stake a claim on the throne. Being rendered infertile by Hafiza at best—once the new khagan had produced enough heirs to ensure the continuation of the bloodline.

Kashin had waved away those concerns that night on the steppes, had refused to understand the insurmountable wall they would always present.

But Chaol nodded, likely well aware of the costs of wedding into the bloodline if your spouse was not the Heir selected. As Kashin would never be—not with Sartaq, Arghun, or Hasar likely to be chosen.

Yrene added before Chaol could inquire further, “And it is none of your concern.”

He looked her over slowly. Not in the way that men sometimes did, that Kashin did, but ... as if he was sizing up an opponent.

Yrene crossed her arms, distributing her weight evenly between her feet, just as she had been taught and now instructed others to do. A steady, defensive stance. Ready to take on anyone.

Even lords from Adarlan. He seemed to note that stance, and his jaw clenched.

“Shirt,” she repeated.

With a simmering glare, he reached over his head and shucked off his shirt, setting it neatly atop where he’d folded his jacket over the rolled arm of the sofa. Then he removed his boots and socks with swift, brutal tugs.

“Pants this time,” she told him. “Leave the undershorts.”

His hands went to his belt, and hesitated.

He could not remove the pants without some degree of help—at least in the chair.

She didn’t let a flicker of pity show in her face as she waved a hand toward the couch. “Get on, and I’ll unclothe you myself.”

He hesitated again. Yrene put her hands on her hips. “While I wish I could say you were my sole patient today,” she lied, “I *do* have other appointments to keep. The couch, if you will.”

A muscle beat in his jaw, but he braced one hand on the couch, another on the edge of the chair, and lifted himself.

The strength in the movement alone was worthy of some admiration.

So easily, the muscles in his arms and back and chest hoisted him upward and over. As if he’d been doing it his entire life.

“You’ve kept up your exercising since ... how long has it been since the injury?”

“It happened on Midsummer.” His voice was flat—hollow as he lifted his legs up onto the couch with him, grunting at the weight. “And yes. I was not idle before it happened, and I don’t see the point of being so now.”

This man was stone—rock. The injury had cracked him a bit, but not sundered him. She wondered if he knew it.

“Good,” she simply said. “Exercising—both your upper body *and* your legs—will be a vital part of this.”

He peered at his legs as those faint spasms rocked them. “Exercising my legs?”

“I will explain in a moment,” she said, motioning him to turn over.

He obeyed with another reproachful glare, but set himself facedown.

Yrene took a few breaths to survey the length of him. He was large enough that he nearly took up the entire couch. Well over six feet. If he stood again, he’d tower over her.

She strode to his feet and tugged his pants down in short, perfunctory bursts. His undershorts hid enough, though she could certainly see the shape of his firm backside through the thin material. But his thighs ... She’d felt the muscle still in them yesterday, but studying them now ...

They were starting to atrophy. They already lacked the healthy vitality of the rest of him, the rippling muscle beneath that tan skin seeming looser—thinner.

She laid a hand on the back of one thigh, feeling the muscle beneath the crisp hairs.

Her magic seeped from her skin into his, searching and sweeping through blood and bone.

Yes—the disuse was beginning to wear on him.

Yrene withdrew her hand and found him watching, hand angled on the throw pillow he’d dragged beneath his chin. “They’re breaking down, aren’t they?”

She kept her face set in a mask of stone. “Atrophied limbs may regain their full strength. But yes. We shall have to focus on ways to keep them as strong as we can, to exercise them throughout this process, so that when you stand”—she made sure he heard the slight emphasis on *when*—“you will have as much support as possible in your legs.”

“So it will not just be healing, but training as well.”

“You said you liked to be kept active. There are many exercises we can do with a spinal injury that will get blood and strength flowing to your legs, which will aid in the healing process. I will oversee you.”

She avoided the alternative words—*help you*.

Lord Chaol Westfall was not a man who desired *help* from people. From anyone.

She took a few steps up the length of his body, to peer at his spine. At that pale, strange mark just beneath his nape. At that first prominent knob of his spine.

Even now, the invisible power that swirled along her palms seemed to recoil into her.

“What manner of magic gave that to you?”

“Does it matter?”

Yrene hovered her hand over it, but did not let her magic brush it. She ground her teeth. “It would help me to know what havoc it might have wreaked upon your nerves and bones.”

He didn’t answer. Typical Adarlanian bullishness.

Yrene pushed, “Was it fire—”

“Not fire.”

A magic-given injury. It had to have happened ... Midsummer, he’d said. The day rumors claimed that magic had returned to the northern continent. That it had been freed by Aelin Galathynius.

“Were you fighting against the magic-wielders who returned that day?”

“I was not.” Clipped, sharp words.

And she looked into his eyes—his hard stare. Really looked.

Whatever had occurred, it had been horrible. Enough to leave such shadows and reticence.

She had healed people who’d endured horrors. Who could not reply to the questions she asked. And he might have served that butcher, but ... Yrene tried not to grimace as she realized what lay ahead, what Hafiza had likely guessed at before assigning her to him: healers often did not just repair wounds, but also the trauma that went along with them. Not through magic, but ... talking. Walking

alongside the patient as they traveled those hard, dark paths.

And to do so with *him* ... Yrene shoved the thought aside. Later. She'd think of it later.

Closing her eyes, Yrene unspooled her magic into a gentle, probing thread, and laid a palm on that splattered star atop his spine.

The cold slammed into her, spikes of it firing through her blood and bones.

Yrene reeled back as if she'd been given a physical blow.

Cold and dark and anger and agony—

She clenched her jaw, fighting past this echo in the bone, sending that thread-thin probe of power a little farther into the dark.

The pain would have been unbearable when it hit him.

Yrene pushed back against the cold—the cold and the lack and the oily, unworldly *wrongness* of it.

No magic of this world, some part of her whispered. Nothing that was natural or good. Nothing she knew, nothing she had ever dealt with.

Her magic screamed to draw back that probe, move away—

“Yrene.” His words were far away while the wind and blackness and *emptiness* of it roared around her—

And then that echo of nothingness ... it seemed to awaken.

Cold filled her, burned along her limbs, creeping wider, encircling.

Yrene flung out her magic in a blind flare, the light pure as sea-foam.

The blackness retreated, a spider scuttling into a shadowed corner. Just enough—just enough that she yanked back her hand, yanked back *herself*, and found Chaol gaping at her.

Her hands trembled as she gazed down at them. As she gazed at that splotch of paleness on his tan skin. That *presence* ... She coiled her magic deep within herself, willing it to warm her own bones and blood, to steady herself. Even as she steadied it, too—some internal, invisible hand stroking her power, soothing it.

Yrene rasped, “Tell me what that is.” For she had seen or felt or learned *nothing* like that.

“Is it inside me?” That was fear—genuine fear in his eyes.

Oh, he knew. Knew what manner of power had dealt this wound, what might be lurking within it. Knew enough about it to be afraid. If such a power existed in Adarlan ...

Yrene swallowed. “I think ... I think it’s only—only the echo of something bigger. Like a tattoo or a brand. It is not living, and yet ...” She flexed her fingers. If a mere probing of the darkness with her magic had triggered such a response, then a full-on onslaught ... “Tell me what that is. If I am going to be dealing with ... with *that*, I need to know. Everything you can tell me.”

“I can’t.”

Yrene opened her mouth. But the lord flicked his gaze toward the open door. Her warning to him silently echoed. “Then we shall try to work around it,” she declared. “Sit up. I want to inspect your neck.”

He obeyed, and she observed him while his heavily muscled abdomen eased him upright, then he carefully swung his feet and legs to the floor. Good. That he had not just this much mobility, but the steady, calm patience to work with his body ... Good.

Yrene kept that to herself while she strode on still-wobbly knees to the desk where she’d left the vials of amber fluid—massage oils pressed from rosemary and lavender from estates just beyond Antica’s walls, and eucalyptus from the far south.

She selected the eucalyptus, the crisp, smothering scent coiling around her as she pried off the stopper from the vial and took up a place beside him on the couch. Soothing, that scent. For both of them.

Seated together on that couch, he indeed towered over her—the muscled mass of him enough to make her understand why he’d been so adept at his position. Being perched beside him was different, somehow, than standing above

him, touching him. Sitting beside a Lord of Adarlan ...

Yrene didn't let the thought settle as she pooled a small amount of the oil into her palm and rubbed her hands together to warm it. He inhaled deeply, as if taking the scent into his lungs, and Yrene didn't bother to speak as she laid her hands upon his nape.

Broad, sweeping strokes around and down the broad column of his neck. Over his shoulders.

He let out a deep groan as she passed over a knot between his neck and shoulder, the sound of it reverberating into her palms, then stiffened. "Sorry."

She ignored the apology, digging her thumbs into the area. Another noise rumbled out of him. Perhaps it made her cruel not to comment on his slight embarrassment, not to dismiss it. But Yrene just leaned in, sliding her palms down his back, giving a wide berth to that horrid mark.

She reined her magic in tightly, not letting her power brush up against it again.

"Tell me what you know," she murmured in his ear, her cheek close enough to scrape the faint stubble coating his jaw. "Now."

He waited a moment, listening for anyone nearby. And as Yrene's hands stroked over his neck, kneading muscles that were knotted enough to make her cringe, Lord Westfall began whispering.



To Yrene Towers's credit, her hands did not falter once while Chaol murmured in her ear about horrors even a dark god could not conjure.

Wyrdgates and Wyrdstone and Wyrdhounds. The Valg and Erawan and his princes and collars. Even to him, it sounded no more than a bedtime story, something his mother might have once whispered during those long winter nights in Anielle, the wild winds howling around the stone keep.

He did not tell her of the keys. Of the king who had been enslaved for two

decades. Of Dorian's own enslavement. He did not tell her who had attacked him, or Perrington's true identity. Only the power the Valg wielded, the threat they posed. That they sided with Perrington.

"So this—agent of these ... demons. It was his power that hit you here," Yrene mused in a near-whisper, hand hovering over the spot on his spine. She didn't dare touch it, had avoided that area completely while she'd massaged him, as if dreading contact with that dark echo again. She indeed now moved her hand over to his left shoulder and resumed her glorious kneading. He barely kept in his groan at the tension she eased from his aching back and shoulders, his upper arms, his neck and lower head.

He hadn't known how knotted they were—how hard he'd worked himself in training.

"Yes," he said at last, his voice still low. "It meant to kill me, but ... I was spared."

"By what?" The fear had long faded from her voice; no tremor lingered in her hands. But little warmth had replaced them, either.

Chaol angled his head, letting her work a muscle so tight it had him grinding his teeth. "A talisman that guarded me against such evil—and a stroke of luck." Of mercy, from a king who had tried to pull that final punch. Not just as a kindness to him, but to Dorian.

Yrene's miraculous hands stilled. She pulled back, searching his face. "Aelin Galathynius destroyed the glass castle. That was why she did it—why she took Rifthold, too. To defeat them?"

And where were you? was her unspoken demand.

"Yes." And he found himself adding into her ear, his words little more than a rumble, "She, Nesryn, and I worked together. With many others."

Who he had not heard from, had no idea where they were. Off fighting, scrambling to save their lands, their future, while he was here. Unable to so much as even get a private audience with a prince, let alone the khagan.

Yrene considered. “Those are the horrors allying with Perrington,” she said softly. “What the armies will be fighting.”

Fear returned to blanch her face, but he offered what truth he could. “Yes.”

“And you—you will be fighting them?”

He gave her a bitter smile. “If you and I can figure this out.” *If you can do the impossible.*

But she did not return the amusement. Yrene only scooted back on the sofa, assessing him, wary and distant. For a moment, he thought she’d say something, ask him something, but she only shook her head. “I have much to look into. Before I dare go any further.” She gestured to his back, and he realized that he was still sitting in his undershorts.

He bit down on the urge to reach for his clothes. “Is there a risk—to you?” If there was—

“I don’t know. I ... I truly have never encountered anything like this before. I should like to look into it, before I begin treating you and compose an exercise regimen. I need to do some research in the Torre library tonight.”

“Of course.” If this damned injury got them both hurt in the process, he’d refuse. He didn’t know what the hell he’d do, but he’d refuse to let her touch him. And for the risk, the effort ... “You never mentioned your fee. For your help.”

It had to be exorbitant. If they’d sent their best, if she had such skill—

Yrene’s brows furrowed. “If you are so inclined, any donation may be made to help the upkeep of the Torre and its staff, but there is no price, no expectation.”

“Why?”

Her hand slid into her pocket as she rose. “I was given this gift by Silba. It is not right to charge for what was granted for free.”

Silba—Goddess of Healing.

He had known one other young woman who was gods-blessed. No wonder

they both possessed such unbanked fire in their eyes.

Yrene took her vial of that lovely-smelling oil and began packing up her bag.

“Why did you decide to come back to help me?”

Yrene paused, her slim body going rigid. Then she turned to him.

A wind drifted in from the garden, blowing the strands of her hair, still half-up, over her chest and shoulder. “I thought you and Captain Faliq would use my refusal against me one day.”

“We don’t plan to live here forever.” No matter what else she’d implied.

Yrene shrugged. “Neither do I.”

She packed up the rest of her bag and headed for the door.

He stopped her with his next question. “You plan to return?” *To Fenharrow? To hell?*

Yrene looked to the door, to the servants listening, waiting, in the foyer beyond. “Yes.”

She wished not just to return to Fenharrow, but also to help in the *war*. For in this war healers would be needed. Desperately. No wonder she had paled at the horrors he had whispered into her ear. Not only for what they would face, but what might come to kill her, too.

And though her face remained wan, as she noted his raised brows, she added, “It is the right thing to do. With all I have been granted—all the kindness thrown my way.”

He debated warning her to stay, to remain here, safe and protected. But he noted the wariness in her eyes as she awaited his answer. Others, he realized, had likely already cautioned against her leaving. Perhaps made her doubt herself, just a bit.

So Chaol instead said, “Captain Faliq and I are not the sort of people who would hold a grudge against you—try to punish you for it.”

“You served a man who did such things.” *And likely acted on his behalf.*

“Would you believe me if I told you that he left his dirty work to others

beyond my command, and I was often not told?”

Her expression told him enough. She reached for the doorknob.

“I knew,” he said quietly. “That he had done and was doing unspeakable things. I knew that forces had tried to fight against him when I was a boy, and he had smashed them to bits. I—to become captain, I had to yield certain ... privileges. Assets. I did so willingly, because my focus was on protecting the future. On Dorian. Even as boys, I knew he was not his father’s son. I knew a better future lay with him, if I could make sure Dorian lived long enough. If he not only lived, but also survived—emotionally. If he had an ally, a true friend, in that court of vipers. Neither of us was old enough, strong enough to challenge his father. We saw what happened to those who whispered of rebellion. I knew that if I, if *he* set one foot out of line, his father would kill him, heir or no. So I craved the stability, the safety of the status quo.”

Yrene’s face had not altered, not softened or hardened. “What happened?”

He reached for his shirt at last. Fitting, he thought, that he’d laid some part of himself bare while sitting here mostly naked. “We met someone. Who set us all down a path I fought against until it cost me and others much. Too much. So you may look at me with resentment, Yrene Towers, and I will not blame you for it. But believe me when I say that there is no one in Erilea who loathes me more than I do myself.”

“For the path you found yourself forced down?”

He slung his shirt over his head and reached for his pants. “For fighting that path to begin with—for the mistakes I made in doing so.”

“And what path do you walk now? How shall the Hand of Adarlan shape its future?”

No one had asked him. Not even Dorian.

“I am still learning—still ... deciding,” he admitted. “But it begins with wiping Perrington and the Valg from our homeland.”

She caught the word—*our*. She chewed on her lip, as if tasting it in her

mouth. “What happened on Midsummer, exactly?” He’d been vague. Had not told her of the attack, the days and months leading to it, the aftermath.

That chamber flashed in his mind—a head rolling across the marble, Dorian screaming. Blending with another moment, of Dorian standing beside his father, face cold as death and crueler than any level of Hellas’s realm. “I told you what happened,” he simply said.

Yrene studied him, toying with the strap of her heavy leather satchel. “Facing the emotional consequences of your injury will be a part of this process.”

“I don’t need to face anything. I know what happened before, during, and after.”

Yrene stood perfectly still, those too-old eyes utterly unfazed. “We’ll see about that.”

The challenge hanging in the air between them, dread pooling in his stomach, the words curdled in Chaol’s mouth as she turned on her heel and left.

9

Two hours later, her head leaning against the lip of the tub carved into the stone floor of the enormous cavern beneath the Torre, Yrene stared into the darkness lurking high above.

The Womb was nearly empty in the midafternoon. Her only company was the trickle of the natural hot spring waters flowing through the dozen tubs built into the cave floor, and the drip of water from jagged stalactites landing upon the countless bells strung on chains between the pillars of pale stone that rose up from the ancient rock.

Candles had been tucked into natural alcoves, or had been clumped at either end of each sunken tub, gilding the sulfurous steam and setting the owls carved into every wall and slick pillar in flickering relief.

A plush cloth cushioning her head against the unforgiving stone lip of the tub, Yrene breathed in the Womb's thick air, watching it rise and vanish into the clear, crisp darkness squatting far overhead. All around her echoed high-pitched, sweet ringing, occasionally interrupted by solitary clear notes.

No one in the Torre knew who had first brought the various bells of silver and glass and bronze down to the open chamber of Silba's Womb. Some bells had been there so long they were crusted with mineral deposits, their ringing as water dropped from the stalactites now no more than a faint *plunk*. But it was tradition—one Yrene herself had participated in—for each new acolyte to bring a bell of her choosing. To have her name and date of entry into the Torre engraved on it,

and to then find a place for it, before she first immersed herself in the bubbling waters of the Womb floor. The bell to hang for eternity, offering music and guidance to all healers who came afterward; the voices of their beloved sisters forever singing to them.

And considering how many healers had passed through the Torre halls, considering the number of bells, large and small, that now hung throughout the space ... The entire chamber, nearly the size of the khagan's great hall, was full of the echoing, layered ringing. A steady hum that filled Yrene's head, her bones, as she soaked in the delicious heat.

Some ancient architect had discovered the hot springs far beneath the Torre and constructed a network of tubs built into the floor so that the water flowed between them, a constant stream of warmth and movement. Yrene held her hand against one of the vents in the side of the tub, letting the water ripple through her fingers on its way to the vent on the other end, to pass back into the stream itself—and into the slumbering heart of the earth.

Yrene took another deep breath, brushing back the damp hair clinging to her brow. She'd washed before entering the tub, as all were required to do in one of the small antechambers outside the Womb, to clean away the dust and blood and stains of the world above. An acolyte had been waiting with a lightweight robe of lavender—Silba's color—for Yrene to wear into the Womb proper, where she'd discarded it beside the pool and stepped in, naked save for her mother's ring.

In the curling steam, Yrene lifted her hand before her and studied the ring, the way the light bent along the gold and smoldered in the garnet. All around, bells rang and hummed and sang, blending with the trickling water until she was adrift in a stream of living sound.

Water—Silba's element. To bathe in the sacred waters here, untouched by the world above, was to enter Silba's very lifeblood. Yrene knew she was not the only healer who had taken the waters and felt as if she were indeed nestled in the

warmth of Silba's womb. As if this space had been made for them alone.

And the darkness above her ... it was different from what she had spied in Lord Westfall's body. The opposite of that blackness. The darkness above her was that of creation, of rest, of unformed thought.

Yrene stared into it, into the womb of Silba herself. And could have sworn she felt something staring back. Listening, while she thought through all Lord Westfall had told her.

Things out of ancient nightmares. Things from another realm. Demons. Dark magics. Poised to unleash themselves upon her homeland. Even in the soothing, warm waters, Yrene's blood chilled.

On those northern, far-off battlefields, she had expected to treat stab wounds and arrows and shattered bones. Expected to treat any of the diseases that ran rampant in army camps, especially during the colder months.

Not wounds from creatures that destroyed soul as well as body. That used talons and teeth and poison. The maleficent power coiled around the injury to his spine ... It was not some fractured bone or tangled-up nerves. Well, it technically *was*, but that fell magic was tied to it. Bound to it.

She still could not shake the oily feel, the sense that something inside it had stirred. Awoken.

The ringing of the bells flowed and ebbed, lulling her mind to rest, to open.

She'd go to the library tonight. See if there was any information regarding all the lord had claimed, if perhaps someone before her had any thoughts on magically granted injuries.

Yet it would not be an injury that solely relied upon her to heal.

She'd suggested as much before leaving. But to battle that thing within him ... *How?*

Yrene mouthed the word into the steam and dark, into the ringing, bubbling quiet.

She could still see her probe of magic recoiling, still feel its repulsion from

that demon-born power. The opposite of what she was, what her magic was. In the darkness hovering overhead, she could see it all. In the darkness far above, tucked into Silba's earthly womb ... it beckoned.

As if to say, *You must enter where you fear to tread.*

Yrene swallowed. To delve into that festering pit of power that had latched itself onto the lord's back ...

You must enter, the sweet darkness whispered, the water singing along with it while it flowed around and past her. As if she were swimming in Silba's veins.

You must enter, it murmured again, the darkness above seeming to spread, to inch closer.

Yrene let it. And let herself stare deeper, move deeper, into that dark.

To fight that festering force within the lord, to risk it for some test of Hafiza's, to risk it for a son of Adarlan when her own people were being attacked or battling in that distant war and every day delayed her ... *I can't.*

You won't, the lovely darkness challenged.

Yrene balked. She had promised Hafiza to remain, to heal him, but what she'd felt today ... It could take an untold amount of time. If she could even find a way to help him. She'd promised to heal him, and though some injuries required the healer to walk the road with their patient, *this* injury of his—

The darkness seemed to recede.

I can't, Yrene insisted.

It did not answer again. Distantly, as if she were now far away, a bell rang, clear and pure.

Yrene blinked at the sound, the world tumbling into focus. Her limbs and breath returning, as if she'd drifted above them.

She peered at the darkness—finding only smooth, veiling black. Hollow and empty, as if it had been vacated. There, and gone. As if she had repelled it, disappointed it.

Yrene's head spun slightly as she sat up, stretching limbs that had gone a bit

stiff, even in the mineral-rich water. How long had she soaked?

She rubbed at her slick arms, heart thundering as she scanned the darkness, as if it might still have another answer for what she must do, what lay before her. An alternative.

None came.

A sound shuffled through the cavern, distinctly not ringing or trickling or lapping. A quiet, shuddering intake of breath.

Yrene turned, water dripping off the errant strands of hair that had escaped the knot atop her head, and found another healer had entered the Womb at some point, claiming a tub on the opposite end of the parallel rows flanking either side of the chamber. With the drifting veils of steam, it was nearly impossible to identify her, though Yrene certainly didn't know the name of every healer in the Torre.

The sound rasped through the Womb again, and Yrene sat up farther, hands bracing on the cool, dark floor as she stood from the water. Steam curled off her skin as she reached for the thin robe and tied it around her, the fabric clinging to her soaked body.

The Womb's protocol was well established. It was a place for solitude, for silence. Healers entered the waters to reconnect with Silba, to center themselves. Some sought guidance; some sought absolution; some sought to release a hard day's worth of emotions they could not show before patients, perhaps could not show before anyone.

And though Yrene knew the healer across the Womb was entitled to her space, though she was prepared to leave and grant the healer privacy to weep ...

The woman's shoulders shook. Another muffled sob.

On near-silent feet, Yrene approached the healer in the tub. Saw the rivulets down her young face—her light brown skin and gold-kissed umber hair nearly identical to Yrene's own. Saw the bleakness in the woman's tawny eyes as she gazed at the darkness high above, tears dripping off her slender jaw and into the

rippling water.

There were some wounds that could not be healed. Some illnesses that even the healers' power could not stop, if rooted too deeply. If they had come too late. If they did not mark the right signs.

The healer did not look at her as Yrene silently sat beside her tub, curling her knees to her chest before she picked up the healer's hand and interlaced their fingers.

So Yrene sat there, holding the healer's hand while she silently wept, the drifting steam full of the clear, sweet ringing of those bells.

After untold minutes, the woman in the tub murmured, "She was three years old."

Yrene squeezed the healer's damp hand. There were no words to comfort, to soothe.

"I wish ..." The woman's voice broke, her entire body shaking, candlelight jumping along her beige skin. "Sometimes I wish this gift had never been given to me."

Yrene stilled at the words.

The woman at last turned her head, scanning Yrene's face, a flicker of recognition in her eyes. "Do you ever feel that way?" A raw, unguarded question.

No. She hadn't. Not once. Not even when the smoke of her mother's immolation had stung her eyes and she knew she could do nothing to save her. She had never once hated the gift she'd been given, because in all those years, she had never been alone thanks to it. Even with magic gone in her homeland, Yrene had still felt it, like a warm hand clasping her shoulder. A reminder of who she was, where she had come from, a living tether to countless generations of Towers women who had walked this path before her.

The healer searched Yrene's eyes for the answer she wanted. The answer Yrene could not give. So Yrene just squeezed the woman's hand again and

stared into the darkness.

You must enter where you fear to tread.

Yrene knew what she had to do. And wished she didn't.



“Well? Has Yrene healed you yet?”

Seated at the high table in the khagan's great hall, Chaol turned to where Princess Hasar sat several seats down. A cooling breeze that smelled of oncoming rain flowed through the open windows to rustle the white death-banners hanging from their upper frames.

Kashin and Sartaq glanced their way—the latter giving his sister a disapproving frown.

“Talented as Yrene may be,” Chaol said carefully, aware that many listened even without acknowledging them, “we are only in the initial stages of what will likely be a long process. She left this afternoon to do some research at the Torre library.”

Hasar's lips curled into a poisoned smile. “How fortunate for you, that we shall have the pleasure of your company for a while yet.”

As if he'd willingly stay here for a moment longer.

But Nesryn answered, still glowing from hours again spent with her family that afternoon, “Any chance for our two lands to build bonds is a fortunate one.”

“Indeed,” was all Hasar said, and went back to picking at the chilled tomato-and-okra dish on her plate. Her lover was nowhere to be seen—but neither was Yrene. The healer's fear earlier ... he'd been able to almost taste it in the air. But sheer will had steadied her—will and temper, Chaol supposed. He wondered which would win out in the end.

Indeed, some small part of him hoped Yrene would stay away, if only to avoid what she so heavily implied they'd also be doing: *talking*. Discussing things. Himself.

He'd make it clear to her tomorrow that he could heal just fine without it.

For long minutes, Chaol remained in silence, marking those at the table, the servants flitting by. The guards at the windows and archways.

The minced lamb turned leaden in his stomach at the sight of their uniforms, at how they stood so tall and proud. How many meals had he himself been positioned by the doors, or out in the courtyard, monitoring his king? How many times had he laid into his men for slouching, for chattering amongst themselves, and reassigned them to lesser watches?

One of the khagan's guards noticed his stare and gave a curt nod.

Chaol looked away quickly, his palms clammy. But he forced himself to keep observing the faces around him, what they wore and how they moved and smiled.

No sign—none—of any wicked force, whether dispatched from Morath or elsewhere. No sign beyond those white banners to honor their fallen princess.

Aelin had claimed the Valg had a reek to them, and he'd seen their blood run black from mortal veins more times than he cared to count, but short of demanding everyone in this hall cut open their hands ...

It actually wasn't a bad idea—if he could get an audience with the khagan to convince him to order it. To mark whoever fled, or made excuses.

An audience with the khagan to convince him of the danger, and perhaps make *some* progress with this alliance. So that the princes and princesses sitting around him might never wear a Valg collar. Their loved ones never know what it was to look into their faces and see nothing but ancient cruelty smirking back.

Chaol took a steadying breath and leaned forward, to where the khagan dined a few seats down, immersed in conversation with a vizier and Princess Duva.

The khagan's now-youngest seemed to watch more than participate, and though her pretty face was softened with a sweet smile, her eyes missed nothing. It was only when the vizier paused for a sip of wine and Duva turned toward her quiet husband on her left that Chaol cleared his throat and said to the khagan, "I

would thank you again, Great Khagan, for offering the services of your healers.”

The khagan slid weary, hard eyes toward him. “They are no more my healers than they are yours, Lord Westfall.” He returned to the vizier, who frowned at Chaol for interrupting.

But Chaol said, “I was hoping to perhaps be granted the honor of a meeting with you in private.”

Nesryn dug her elbow into his in warning as silence rippled down the table. Chaol refused to take his stare from anywhere but the man before him.

The khagan only said, “You may discuss such things with my Chief Vizier, who maintains my daily schedule.” A jerk of the chin toward a shrewd-eyed man monitoring from down the table. One glance at the Chief Vizier’s thin smile told Chaol the meeting wasn’t going to happen. “My focus remains on assisting my wife through her mourning.” The gleam of sorrow in the khagan’s eyes wasn’t feigned. Indeed, there was no sign of the khagan’s wife at the table, not even a place left out for her.

Distant thunder grumbled in the thick silence that followed. Not the time or the place to insist. A man grieving for a lost child ... He’d be a fool to push. And coarse beyond measure.

Chaol dipped his chin. “Forgive me for intruding in this difficult time.” He ignored the smirk twisting Arghun’s face while the prince observed from his father’s side. Duva, at least, offered him a sympathetic smile-wince, as if to say, *You are not the first to be shut down. Give him time.*

Chaol gave the princess a shallow nod before returning to his own plate. If the khagan was set on ignoring him, grief or no ... perhaps there were other avenues to convey information.

Other ways to gain support.

He glanced to Nesryn. She’d informed him when she’d returned before dinner that she’d had no luck seeking out Sartaq this morning. And now, with the prince seated across from them, sipping from his wine, Chaol found himself

casually asking, "I heard that your legendary ruk, Kadara, is here, Prince."

"Ghastly beast," Hasar muttered halfheartedly into her okra, earning a half smile from Sartaq.

"Hasar is still sore that Kadara tried to eat her when they first met," Sartaq confided.

Hasar rolled her eyes, though a glimmer of amusement shone there.

Kashin supplied from a few seats down, "You could hear her screeching from the harbor."

To Chaol's surprise, Nesryn asked, "The princess or the ruk?"

Sartaq laughed, a startled, bright sound, his cool eyes lighting. Hasar only gave Nesryn a warning look before turning to the vizier beside her.

Kashin grinned at Nesryn and whispered, "Both."

A chuckle escaped Chaol's throat, though he reined it in at Hasar's glare. Nesryn smiled, inclining her head in good-willed apology to the princess.

Yet Sartaq watched them closely over the rim of his golden goblet. Chaol asked, "Are you able to fly Kadara much while you're here?"

Sartaq didn't miss a beat as he nodded. "As often as I can, usually near dawn. I was in the skies right after breakfast today, and returned just in time for dinner, thankfully."

Hasar muttered to Nesryn without breaking from the vizier commanding her attention, "He's never missed a meal in his life."

Kashin barked a laugh that had even the khagan down the table glancing their way, Arghun scowling with disapproval. When had the royals last laughed since their sister's passing? From the khagan's tight face, perhaps a while.

But Sartaq tossed his long braid over a shoulder before patting the flat, firm stomach beneath his fine clothes. "Why do you think I come home so often, sister, if not for the good food?"

"To plot and scheme?" Hasar asked sweetly.

Sartaq's smile turned subdued. "If only I had time for such things."

A shadow seemed to pass over Sartaq's face—and Chaol marked where the prince's gaze drifted. The white banners still streamed from the windows set high in the walls of the hall, now caught in what was surely the heralding wind of a thunderstorm. A man who perhaps wished he'd possessed extra time for more vital parts of his life.

Nesryn asked a touch softly, "You fly every day, then, Prince?"

Sartaq dragged his stare from his youngest sister's death-banners to assess Nesryn. More warrior than courtier, yet he nodded—in answer to an unspoken request. "I do, Captain."

When Sartaq turned to respond to a question from Duva, Chaol exchanged a glance with Nesryn—all he needed to convey his order.

Be in the aerie at dawn. Find out where he stands in this war.

10

A summer storm galloped in off the Narrow Sea just before midnight.

Even tucked into the sprawling library at the base of the Torre, Yrene felt every shudder of thunder. Occasional flashes of lightning sliced down the narrow corridors of the stacks and halls, chased by wind that crept through the cracks in the pale stone, guttering the candles in its wake. Most were shielded within glass lanterns, the books and scrolls too precious to risk open flame. But the wind found them in there, too—and set the glass lanterns hanging from the arched ceilings swinging and groaning.

Seated at an oak desk built into an alcove far from the brighter lights and busier areas of the library, Yrene watched the metal lantern dangling from the arch above her sway in that storm wind. Stars and crescent moons had been cut from its sides and filled with colored glass that cast splotches of blue and red and green on the stone wall before her. The splotches bobbed and dipped, a living sea of color.

Thunder cracked, so loud she flinched, the ancient chair beneath her creaking in objection.

A few feminine yelps answered it, then giggles.

Acolytes—studying late for their examinations next week.

Yrene huffed a laugh, mostly at herself, and shook her head as she focused again upon the texts Nousha had dug up for her hours ago.

Yrene and the Head Librarian had never been close, and Yrene was certainly

not inclined to seek out the woman if she spotted her in the mess hall, but ... Nousha was fluent in fifteen languages, some of them dead, and had trained at the famed Parvani Library on the western coast, nestled amid the lush and spice-rich lands outside Balruhn.

The City of Libraries, they called Balruhn. If the Torre Cesme was the domain of healers, the Parvani was the domain of knowledge. Even the great road that linked Balruhn to the mighty Sister-Road, the main artery through the continent that flowed from Antica all the way to Tigana, had been named for it: the Scholars' Road.

Yrene didn't know what had brought Nousha here all those decades ago, or what the Torre had offered her to stay, but she was an invaluable resource. And for all of her unsmiling nature, Nousha had always found Yrene the information she needed, no matter how outlandish the request.

Tonight, the woman had not looked pleased when Yrene had approached her in the mess hall, apologies falling from her lips for interrupting the librarian's meal. Yrene might have waited until the morning, but she had lessons tomorrow, and Lord Westfall after that.

Nousha had met Yrene here after finishing her meal, and had listened, long fingers folded in front of her flowing gray robes, to Yrene's story—and needs:

Information. Any she could find.

Wounds from demons. Wounds from dark magic. Wounds from unnatural sources. Wounds that left echoes but did not appear to continue to wreak havoc upon the victim. Wounds that left marks but no scar tissue.

Nousha had found them. Stack after stack of books and bundles of scrolls. She'd piled them on the desk in silence. Some were in Halha. Some in Yrene's own tongue. Some in Eyllwe. Some were ...

Yrene scratched her head at the scroll she'd weighted with the smooth onyx stones from the jar set on each library desk.

Even Nousha had admitted she did not recognize the strange markings—

runes of some sort. From where, she had no inkling, either, only that the scrolls had been wedged beside the Eyllwe tomes in a level of the library so deep beneath the ground that Yrene had never ventured there.

Yrene ran a finger over the marking before her, tracing its straight lines and curving arcs.

The parchment was old enough that Nousha had threatened to flay Yrene alive if she got any food, water, or drink on it. When Yrene had asked just how old, Nousha had shook her head.

A hundred years? Yrene had asked.

Nousha had shrugged and said that judging by the location, the type of parchment, and ink pigment, it was over ten times that.

Yrene cringed at the paper she was so flagrantly touching, and eased the weighting stones off the corners. None of the books in her own language had yielded anything valuable—more old wives' warnings about ill-wishers and spirits of air and rot.

Nothing like what Lord Westfall had described.

A faint, distant *click* echoed from the gloom to her right, and Yrene lifted her head, scanning the darkness, ready to leap onto her chair at the first sign of a scurrying mouse.

It seemed even the library's beloved Baast Cats—thirty-six females, no more, no less—could not keep out all vermin, despite their warrior-goddess namesake.

Yrene again scanned the gloom to her right, cringing, wishing she could summon one of the beryl-eyed cats to go hunting.

But no one summoned a Baast Cat. No one. They appeared when and where they willed, and not a moment before.

The Baast Cats had dwelled in the Torre library for as long as it had existed, yet none knew where they had come from, or how they were replaced when age claimed them. Each was as individual as any human, save for those beryl-colored eyes they each bore, and the fact that all were just as prone to curl up in

a lap as they were to shun company altogether. Some of the healers, old and young alike, swore the cats could step through pools of shadow to appear on another level of the library; some swore the cats had been caught pawing through the pages of open books—*reading*.

Well, it'd certainly be helpful if they bothered to read less and hunt *more*. But the cats answered to no one and nothing, except, perhaps, their namesake, or whatever god had found a quiet home in the library, within Silba's shadow. To offend one Baast Cat was to insult them all, and even though Yrene loved most animals—with the exception of some insects—she had been sure to treat the cats kindly, occasionally leaving morsels of food, or providing a belly rub or ear scratch whenever they deigned to command them.

But there was no sign of those green eyes glinting in the dark, or of a scurrying mouse fleeing their path, so Yrene loosed a breath and set aside the ancient scroll, carefully placing it at the edge of the desk before pulling an Eyllwe tome toward her.

The book was bound in black leather, heavy as a doorstep. She knew a little of the Eyllwe language thanks to living so close to its border with a mother who spoke it fluently—certainly not from the father who had hailed from there.

None of the Towers women had ever married, preferring either lovers who left them with a present that arrived nine months later or who perhaps stayed a year or two before moving on. Yrene had never known her father, never learned anything about who he was other than a traveler who had stopped at her mother's cottage for the night, seeking shelter from a wild storm that swept over the grassy plain.

Yrene traced her fingers over the gilt title, sounding out the words in the language she had not spoken or heard in years.

"The ... The ..." She tapped her finger on the title. She should have asked Nousha. The librarian had already promised to translate some other texts that had caught her eye, but ... Yrene sighed again. "The ..." Poem. Ode. Lyric

—“*Song*,” she breathed. “*The Song of ...*” Start. Onset—“*Beginning*.”

The Song of Beginning.

The demons—the Valg—were ancient, Lord Westfall had said. They had waited an eternity to strike. Part of near-forgotten myths; little more than bedside stories.

Yrene flipped open the cover, and cringed at the unfamiliar tangle of writing within the table of contents. The type itself was old, the book not even printed on a press. Handwritten. With some word variations that had long since died out.

Lightning flashed again, and Yrene rubbed at her temple as she leafed through the musty, yellow-lined pages.

A history book. That’s all it was.

Her eye snagged on a page, and she paused, backtracking until the illustration reappeared.

It had been done in sparing colors: blacks, whites, reds, and the occasional yellow.

All painted by a master’s hand, no doubt an illustration of whatever was written beneath it.

The illustration revealed a barren crag, an army of soldiers in dark armor kneeling before it.

Kneeling before what was *atop* the crag.

A towering gate. No wall flanking it, no keep behind it. As if someone had built the gateway of black stone out of thin air.

There were no doors within the archway. Only swirling black *nothing*. Beams of it shot from the void, some foul corruption of the sun, falling upon the soldiers kneeling before it.

She squinted at the figures in the foreground. Their bodies were human, but the hands clutching their swords ... Clawed. Twisted.

“Valg,” Yrene whispered.

Thunder cracked in answer.

Yrene scowled at the swaying lantern as the reverberations from the thunderhead rumbled beneath her feet, up her legs.

She flipped through the pages until the next illustration appeared. Three figures stood before the same gate, the drawing too distant to make out any features beyond their male bodies, tall and powerful.

She ran a finger over the caption below and translated:

Orcus. Mantyx. Erawan.

Three Valg Kings.

Wielders of the Keys.

Yrene chewed on her bottom lip. Lord Westfall had not mentioned such things.

But if there was a gate ... then it would need a key to open. Or several.

If the book was correct.

Midnight chimed in the great clock of the library's main atrium.

Yrene riffled through the pages, to another illustration. It was divided into three panels.

Everything the lord had said—she had believed him, of course, but ... it was true. If the wound wasn't proof enough, these texts offered no other alternative.

For there in the first panel, tied down upon an altar of dark stone ... a desperate young man strained to free himself from the approach of a crowned dark figure. Something swirled around the figure's hand—some asp of black mist and wicked thought. No real creature.

The second panel ... Yrene cringed from it.

For there was that young man, eyes wide in supplication and terror, mouth forced open as that creature of black mist slithered down his throat.

But it was the last panel that made her blood chill.

Lightning flashed again, illumining the final illustration.

The young man's face had gone still. Unfeeling. His eyes ... Yrene glanced between the previous drawing and the final one. His eyes had been silver in the

first two.

In the final one ... they had gone black. Passable as human eyes, but the silver had been wiped away by unholy obsidian.

Not dead. For they had shown him rising, chains removed. Not a threat.

No—whatever they had put inside him ...

Thunder groaned again, and more shrieks and giggles followed. Along with the slam and clatter of the acolytes leaving for the night.

Yrene surveyed the book before her, the other stacks Nousha had laid out.

Lord Westfall had described collars and rings to hold the Valg demons within a human host. But even after they were removed, he'd said, they could linger. They were merely implantation devices, and if they remained on too long, feeding off their host ...

Yrene shook her head. The man in the drawing had not been enslaved—he'd been infested. The magic had come from someone *with* that sort of power. Power from the demon host within.

A clash of lightning, then thunder immediately on its heels.

And then another *click* sounded—faint and hollow—from the dim stacks to her right. Closer now than that earlier one had been.

Yrene glanced again toward the gloom, the hair on her arms rising.

Not a movement of a mouse. Or even the scrape of feline claws on stone or bookshelf.

She had never once feared for her safety, not from the moment she had set foot within these walls, but Yrene found herself going still as she stared into that gloom to her right. Then slowly looked over her shoulder.

The shelf-lined corridor was a straight shot toward a larger hallway, which would, in three minutes' walk, take her back to the bright, constantly monitored main atrium. Five minutes at most.

Only shadows and leather and dust surrounded her, the light bobbing and tilting with the swaying lanterns.

Healing magic offered no defenses. She'd discovered such things the hard way.

But during that year at the White Pig Inn, she'd learned to listen. Learned to read a room, to *sense* when the air had shifted. Men could unleash storms, too.

The grumbling echo of the thunder faded, and only silence remained in its wake.

Silence, and the creaking of the ancient lanterns in the wind. No other click issued.

Foolish—foolish to read such things so late. And during a storm.

Yrene swallowed. Librarians preferred the books remain within the library proper, but ...

She slammed shut *The Song of Beginning*, shoving it into her bag. Most of the books she'd already deemed useless, but there were perhaps six more, a mixture of Eyllwe and other tongues. Yrene shoved those into her bag, too. And gently placed the scrolls into the pockets of her cloak, tucked out of view.

All while keeping one eye over her shoulder—on the hall behind her, the stacks to her right.

You wouldn't owe me anything if you'd used some common sense. The young stranger had snapped that at her that fateful night—after she'd saved Yrene's life. The words had lingered, biting deep. As had the other lessons she'd been taught by that girl.

And though Yrene knew she'd laugh at herself in the morning, though maybe it *was* one of the Baast Cats stalking something in the shadows, Yrene decided to listen to that tug of fear, that trickle down her spine.

Though she could have cut down dark stacks to reach the main hallway faster, she kept to the lights, her shoulders back and head high. Just as the girl had told her. *Look like you'd put up a fight—be more trouble than you're worth.*

Her heart pounded so wildly she could feel it in her arms, her throat. But Yrene made her mouth a hard line, her eyes bright and cold. Looking as furious

as she'd ever been, her pace clipped and swift. As if she had forgotten something or someone had failed to retrieve a book for her.

Closer and closer, she neared the intersection of that broad, main hallway. To where the acolytes would be trudging up to bed in their cozy dormitory.

She cleared her throat, readying to scream.

Not rape, not theft—not something that cowards would rather hide from. Yell fire, the stranger had instructed her. A threat to all. If you are attacked, yell about a fire.

Yrene had repeated the instructions so many times these past two and a half years. To so many women. Just as the stranger had ordered her to. Yrene had not thought she'd ever again need to recite them for herself.

Yrene hurried her steps, jaw angled. She had no weapons save for a small knife she used for cleaning out wounds or cutting bandages—currently in the bottom of her bag.

But that satchel, laden with books ... She wrapped the leather straps around her wrist, getting a good grip on it.

A well-placed swing would knock someone to the ground.

Closer and closer to the safety of that hallway—

From the corner of her eye, she saw it. Sensed it.

Someone in the next stack over. Walking parallel to her.

She didn't dare look. Acknowledge it.

Yrene's eyes burned, even as she fought the terror that clawed its way up her body.

Glimpses of shadows and darkness. Stalking her. Hunting her.

Quickening its pace to grab her—cut her off at that hallway and snatch her into the dark.

Common sense. Common sense.

Running—it would know. It would know she was aware. It might strike. Whoever it was.

Common sense.

A hundred feet left until the hallway, shadows pooling between the dim lanterns, the lights now precious islands in a sea of darkness.

She could have sworn fingers lightly thudded as they trailed over the books on the other side of the shelf.

So Yrene lifted her chin further and smiled, laughing brightly as she looked ahead to the hallway. “Maddya! What are you doing here so late?”

She hurried her pace, especially as whoever it was slowed in surprise. Hesitation.

Yrene’s foot slammed into something soft—soft and yet hard—and she bit down her yelp—

She hadn’t seen the healer curled on her side in the shadows along the shelf.

Yrene bent, hands grappling for the woman’s thin arms, her build slender enough that when she turned her over—

The footsteps began once more just as she turned the healer over. As she swallowed the scream that tried to shatter out of her.

Light brown cheeks turned to hollowed husks, eyes stained purple beneath, lips pale and cracked. A simple healer’s gown that had likely fit her that morning now hung loose, her slim form now emaciated, as if something had sucked the life from her—

She knew that face, gaunt as it was. Knew the golden-brown hair, nearly the twin to her own. The healer from the Womb, the very one she’d comforted only hours earlier—

Yrene’s fingers shook as she fumbled for a pulse, the skin leathery and dry.

Nothing. And her magic ... There was no life for it to swirl toward. No life at all.

The footsteps on the other side of the stack neared. Yrene stood on trembling knees, taking a steadying breath as she forced herself to walk again. Forced herself to leave that dead healer in the dark. Forced herself to lift her bag as if

nothing had happened, as if showing the satchel to someone ahead.

But with the angle of the stacks—the person didn't know that.

“Just finishing up my reading for the night,” she called to her invisible salvation ahead. She sent up a silent prayer of thanks to Silba that her voice held steady and merry. “Cook is expecting me for a last cup of tea. Want to join?”

Making it seem like someone was expecting her: another trick she'd picked up.

Yrene cleared five more steps before she realized whoever it was had again halted.

Buying her ruse.

Yrene dashed the last few feet to the hallway, spotted a cluster of acolytes just emerging from another haze of stacks, and hurtled flat out toward them.

Their eyes widened at Yrene's approach, and all she whispered was, “Go.”

The three girls, barely more than fourteen, caught the tears of terror in her eyes, the sure whiteness of her face, and did not look behind Yrene. They did not disobey.

They were in her class. She'd trained them for months now.

They saw the straps of her satchel wrapped around her fist and closed ranks around her. Smiled broadly, nothing at all wrong. “Come to Cook's to get tea,” Yrene told them, fighting to keep her scream from shattering out of her. Dead. A healer was *dead*—“She is expecting me.”

And will raise the alarm if I do not arrive.

To their credit, those girls did not tremble, did not show one lick of dread as they walked down the main hall. As they neared the atrium, with its roaring fire and thirty-six chandeliers and thirty-six couches and chairs.

A sleek black Baast Cat was lounging in one of those embroidered chairs by the fire. And as they neared, she leaped up, hissing as fiercely as her feline-headed namesake. Not at Yrene or the girls ... No, those beryl-colored eyes were narrowed at the library *behind* them.

One of the girls tightened her grip on Yrene's arm. But not one of them left Yrene's side as she approached the massive desk of the Head Librarian and her Heir. Behind them, the Baast Cat held her ground—held the line—as the Heir Librarian, on duty for the night, looked up from her book at the commotion.

Yrene murmured to the middle-aged woman in gray robes, “A healer has been gravely attacked in the stacks off the main hall. Get everyone out and call for the royal guard. *Now.*”

The woman did not ask questions. Did not falter or shake. She only nodded before she reached for the bell bolted onto the desk's edge.

The librarian rang it thrice. To an outsider, it was no more than a final call.

But to those who lived here, who knew the library was open day and night ...

First ring: Listen.

Second: Listen *now*.

The Heir Librarian rang it a third time, loud and clear, the pealing echoing down into the library, into every dark corner and hallway.

Third ring: *Get out*.

Yrene had once asked, when Eretia had explained the warning bell her first day here, after she had taken a vow never to repeat its meaning to an outsider. They all had. And Yrene had asked why it was needed, who had installed it.

Long ago, before the khaganate had conquered Antica, this city had passed from hand to hand, victim to a dozen conquests and rulers. Some invading armies had been kind. A few had not.

Tunnels still existed beneath the library that they had used to evade them—long since boarded up.

But the warning bell to those within remained. And for a thousand years, the Torre had kept it. Occasionally had drills with it. Just in case. If it should ever happen.

The third ring echoed off stone and leather and wood. And Yrene could have sworn she heard the sound of countless heads popping up from where they bent

over desks. Heard the sound of chairs shoved back and books dropped.

Run, she begged. Keep to the lights.

But Yrene and the others lingered in silence, counting the seconds. The minutes. The Baast Cat quieted her hissing and monitored the hall beyond the atrium, black tail slashing over the chair cushion. One of the girls beside Yrene sprinted off to the guards by the Torre gates. Who had likely heard that bell pealing and were already running toward them.

Yrene was shaking by the time quick steps and rustling clothing drew near. She and the Heir Librarian marked each face that emerged—each wide-eyed face that hurried out of the library.

Acolytes, healers, librarians. No one out of place. The Baast Cat seemed to be checking them all, too—those beryl eyes seeing things perhaps beyond Yrene's comprehension.

Armor and stomping steps, and Yrene clamped down on the weeping relief at the approach of half a dozen Torre guards now stalking through the open library doors, the acolyte at their heels.

The acolyte and her two companions remained with Yrene while she explained. While the guards called for reinforcements, while the Heir Librarian summoned Nousha, Eretia, and Hafiza. The three girls remained, two holding Yrene's trembling hands.

They did not let go.

Clothed in battle-black from head to toe, Aedion Ashryver kept to the shadows of the street across from the temple and watched his cousin scale the building beside him.

They'd already secured passage on a ship for tomorrow morning, along with another messenger ship to sail to Wendlyn, bearing letters beseeching the Ashryvers for aid and signed by both Aelin and Aedion himself. Because what they'd learned today...

He'd been to Ilium enough times over the past decade to know his way around. Usually, he and his Bane had camped outside the town walls and enjoyed themselves so thoroughly at the taverns that he'd wound up puking in his own helmet the next morning. A far cry from the stunned silence as he and Aelin had walked down the pale, dusty streets, disguised and unsociable.

In all those visits to the town, he'd never imagined traversing these streets with his queen—or that her face would be so grave as she took in the frightened, unhappy people, the scars of war.

No flowers thrown in their path, no trumpets singing their return. Just the crash of the sea, the howl of the wind, and the beating sun overhead. And the rage rippling off Aelin at the sight of the soldiers stationed around the town...

All strangers were watched enough that they'd had to be careful about securing their ship. To the town, the world, they'd be boarding the *Summer Lady* at midmorning, heading north to Suria. But they would instead be sneaking onto the *Wind-Singer* just before sunrise to sail south come dawn. They'd paid in gold for the captain's silence.

And for his information. They had been about to leave the man's cabin when he'd said, "My brother is a merchant. He specializes in goods from distant lands. He brought me news last week that ships were spotted rallying along the western coast of the Fae territory."

Aelin had asked, "To sail here?" at the same time Aedion had demanded, "How many ships?"

"Fifty—all warships," the captain had said, looking them over carefully. No

doubt assuming they were agents of one of the many crowns at play in this war. “An army of Fae warriors camped on the beach beyond. They seemed to be waiting for the order to sail.”

The news would likely spread fast. Panic the people. Aedion had made a note to send warning to his Second to brace the Bane for it—and counter any wild rumors.

Aelin’s face had gone a bit bloodless, and he’d braced a steadying hand between her shoulder blades. But she had only stood straighter at his touch and asked the captain, “Did your brother get the sense that Queen Maeve has allied with Morath, or that she is coming to assist Terrasen?”

“Neither,” the captain had cut in. “He was only sailing past, though if the armada was out like that, I doubt it was secret. We know nothing else—perhaps the ships were for another war.”

His queen’s face yielded nothing in the dimness of her hood. Aedion made his do the same.

Except her face had remained like that the entire walk back, and in the hours since, when they’d honed their weapons and then slipped back onto the streets under cover of darkness. If Maeve was indeed rallying an army to stand against them...

Aelin paused atop the roof, Goldryn’s bright hilt wrapped in cloth to hide its gleaming, and Aedion glanced between her shadowy figure and the Adarlan watch patrolling the temple walls mere feet below.

But his cousin turned her head toward the nearby ocean, as if she could see all the way to Maeve and her awaiting fleet. If the immortal bitch allied with Morath ... Surely Maeve would not be so stupid. Perhaps the two dark rulers would destroy each other in their bid for power. And likely destroy this continent in the process.

But a Dark King and a Dark Queen united against the Fire-Bringer...

They had to act quickly. Cut off one snake’s head before dealing with the other.

Cloth on skin hissed, and Aedion glanced at where Lysandra waited behind him, on the lookout for Aelin’s signal. She was in her traveling clothes—a bit worn and dirty. She’d been reading an ancient-looking book all afternoon. *Forgotten Creatures of the Deep* or whatever it had been called. A smile tugged at his lips as he wondered whether she’d borrowed or stolen the title.

The lady looked to where Aelin still stood on the roof, no more than a shadow. Lysandra cleared her throat a bit and said too softly for anyone to hear,

either the queen or the soldiers across the street, “She’s accepted Darrow’s decree too calmly.”

“I’d hardly call any of this calm.” But he knew what the shifter meant. Since Rowan had gone, since word of Rifthold’s fall had arrived, Aelin had been half present. Distant.

Lysandra’s pale green eyes pinned him to the spot. “It’s the calm before the storm, Aedion.”

Every one of his predatory instincts perked.

Lysandra’s eyes again drifted to Aelin’s lithe figure. “A storm is coming. A great storm.”

Not the forces lurking in Morath, not Darrow plotting in Orynth or Maeve assembling her armada—but the woman on that roof, hands braced on the edge as she crouched down.

“You’re not frightened of ... ?” He couldn’t say the rest. He’d somehow grown accustomed to having the shifter guard Aelin’s back—had found the idea mighty appealing. Rowan at her right, Aedion at her left, Lysandra at her back: nothing and no one would get to their queen.

“No—no, never,” Lysandra said. Something eased in his chest. “But the more I think about it, the more ... the more it seems like this was all planned, laid out long ago. Erawan had decades before Aelin was born to strike—decades during which no one with her powers, or Dorian’s powers, existed to challenge him. Yet, as fate or fortune would have it, he moves now. At a time when a Fire-Bringer walks the earth.”

“What are you getting at?” He’d considered all this before, during those long watches on the road. It was all horrifying, impossible, but—so much of their lives defied logic or normalcy. The shifter next to him proved that.

“Morath is unleashing its horrors,” Lysandra said. “Maeve stirs across the sea. Two goddesses walk hand in hand with Aelin. More than that, Mala and Deanna have watched over her the entirety of her life. But perhaps it wasn’t watching. Perhaps it was ... shaping. So they might one day unleash her, too. And I wonder if the gods have weighed the costs of that storm. And deemed the casualties worth it.”

A chill snaked down his spine.

Lysandra went on, so quietly that Aedion wondered if she feared not the queen hearing, but those gods. “We have yet to see the full extent of Erawan’s darkness. And I think we have yet to see the full extent of Aelin’s fire.”

“She’s not some unwitting pawn.” He’d defy the gods, find a way to

slaughter them, if they threatened Aelin, if they deemed these lands a worthy sacrifice to defeat the Dark King.

“Is it really *that* hard for you to just agree with me for once?”

“I never *disagree*.”

“You always have an answer to everything.” She shook her head. “It’s insufferable.”

Aedion grinned. “Good to know I’m finally getting under your skin. Or is it skins?”

That staggeringly beautiful face turned positively wicked. “Careful, Aedion. I bite.”

Aedion leaned in a bit closer. He knew there were lines with Lysandra—knew there were boundaries he wouldn’t cross, wouldn’t push at. Not after what she’d endured since childhood, not after she’d regained her freedom. Not after what he’d been through, too.

Even if he hadn’t yet told Aelin about it. How could he? How could he explain what had been done to him, what he’d been forced to do in those early years of conquest?

But flirting with Lysandra was harmless—for both him and the shifter. And gods, it was good to talk to her for more than a minute between forms. So he snapped his teeth at her and said, “Good thing I know how to make women purr.”

She laughed softly, but the sound died as she looked toward their queen again, the sea breeze shifting her dark silken hair. “Any minute now,” she warned him.

Aedion didn’t give a shit what Darrow thought, what he sneered about. Lysandra had saved his life—had fought for their queen and put everything on the line, including her ward, to rescue him from execution and reunite him with Aelin. He’d seen how often the shifter’s eyes had darted behind them the first few days—as if she could see Evangeline with Murtaugh and Ren. He knew even now part of her remained with the girl, just as part of Aelin remained with Rowan. He wondered if he’d ever feel it—that degree of love.

For Aelin, yes—but ... it was a part of him, as his limbs were a part of him. It had never been a choice, as Lysandra’s selflessness with that little girl had been, as Rowan and Aelin had chosen each other. Perhaps it was stupid to consider, given what he’d been trained to do and what awaited them in Morath, but ... He’d never tell her this in a thousand years, but looking at Aelin and Rowan, he sometimes envied them.

He didn't even want to think about what else Darrow had implied—that a union between Wendlyn and Terrasen *had* been attempted over ten years ago, with marriage between him and Aelin the asking price, only to be rejected by their kin across the sea.

He loved his cousin, but the thought of touching her like that made his stomach turn. He had a feeling she returned the sentiment.

She hadn't shown him the letter she'd written to Wendlyn. It hadn't occurred to him until now to ask to see it. Aedion stared up at the lone figure before the vast, dark sea.

And realized he didn't want to know.

He was a general, a warrior honed by blood and rage and loss; he had seen and done things that still drew him from his sleep, night after night, but ... He did not want to know. Not yet.

Lysandra said, "We should leave before dawn. I don't like the smell of this place."

He inclined his head toward the fifty soldiers camped inside the temple walls. "Obviously."

But before she could speak, blue flames sparked at Aelin's fingertips. The signal.

Lysandra shifted into a ghost leopard, and Aedion faded into the shadows as she loosed a roar that set the nearby homes tumbling awake. People spilled out of their doors just as the soldiers threw open the gates to the temple to see what the commotion was about.

Aelin was off the roof in a few nimble maneuvers, landing with feline grace as the soldiers shoved into the street, weapons out and eyes wide.

Those eyes grew wider as Lysandra slunk up beside Aelin, snarling. As Aedion fell into step on her other side. Together, they pulled off their hoods. Someone gasped behind them.

Not at their golden hair, their faces. But at the hand wreathed in blue flame as Aelin lifted it above her head and said to the soldiers pointing crossbows at them, "Get the hell out of my temple."

The soldiers blinked. One of the townsfolk behind them began weeping as a crown of fire appeared atop Aelin's hair. As the cloth smothering Goldryn burned away and the ruby glowed bloodred.

Aedion smiled at the Adarlanian bastards, unhooked his shield from across his back, and said, "My lady gives you a choice: leave now ... or never leave at all."

The soldiers exchanged glances. The flame around Aelin's head burned brighter, a beacon in the dark. *Symbols have power indeed.*

There she was, crowned in flame, a bastion against the gathered night. So Aedion drew the Sword of Orynth from its sheath along his spine. Someone cried out at the sight of that ancient, mighty blade.

More and more soldiers filled the open temple courtyard beyond the gate. And some dropped their weapons outright, lifting their hands. Backing away.

"You bleeding cowards," a soldier snarled, shoving to the front. A commander, from the decorations on his red-and-gold uniform. Human. No black rings on any of them. His lip curled as he beheld Aedion, the shield and sword he held angled and ready for bloodletting. "The Wolf of the North." The sneer deepened. "And the fire-breathing bitch herself."

Aelin, to her credit, only looked bored. And she said one last time to the human soldiers gathered there, shifting on their feet, "Live or die; it's your choice. But make it now."

"Don't listen to the bitch," the commander snapped. "Simple parlor tricks, Lord Meah said."

But five more soldiers dropped their weapons and ran. Outright sprinted into the streets. "Anyone else?" Aelin asked softly.

Thirty-five soldiers remained, weapons out, faces hard. Aedion had fought against and alongside such men. Aelin looked to him in question. Aedion nodded. The commander had his claws in them—they would only retreat when the man did.

"Come on, then. Let's see what you have to offer," the commander taunted. "I've got a lovely farmer's daughter I want to finish—"

As if she were blowing out a candle, Aelin exhaled a breath toward the man.

First the commander went quiet. As if every thought, every feeling had halted. Then his body seemed to stiffen, like he'd been turned to stone.

And for a heartbeat, Aedion thought the man *had* been turned to stone as his skin, his Adarlanian uniform, turned varying shades of gray.

But as the sea breeze brushed past, and the man simply *fell* apart into nothing but ashes, Aedion realized with no small amount of shock what she had done.

She'd burned him alive. From the inside out. Someone screamed.

Aelin merely said, "I warned you." A few soldiers now bolted.

But most held their ground, hate and disgust shining in their eyes at the magic, at his queen—at him.

And Aedion smiled like the wolf he was as he lifted the Sword of Orynth and

unleashed himself upon the line of soldiers raising weapons on the left, Lysandra lunging to the right with a guttural snarl, and Aelin rained down flames of gold and ruby upon the world.



They took back the temple in twenty minutes.

It was only ten before they had control of it, the soldiers either dead or, if they'd surrendered, hauled to the town dungeon by the men and women who had joined the fight. The other ten minutes were spent scouring the place for any ambushers. But they found only their trappings and refuse, and the sight of the temple in such disrepair, the sacred walls carved with the names of Adarlanian brutes, the ancient urns of never-ending fire extinguished or used for chamber pots...

Aelin had let them all see when she sent a razing fire through the place, gobbling up any trace of those soldiers, removing years of dirt and dust and gull droppings to reveal the glorious, ancient carvings beneath, etched into every pillar and step and wall.

The temple complex comprised three buildings around a massive courtyard: the archives, the residence for the long-dead priestesses, and the temple proper, where the ancient Rock was held. It was in the archives, the most defensible area by far, that she left Aedion and Lysandra to find anything suitable for bedding, a wall of flame now encompassing the entire site.

Aedion's eyes still shone with the thrill of battle when she claimed she wanted a moment alone by the Rock. He'd fought beautifully—and she'd made sure to leave some men alive for him to take down. She was not the only symbol here tonight, not the only one watched.

And as for the shifter who had ripped into those soldiers with such feral savagery ... Aelin left her again in falcon form, perched on a rotting beam in the cavernous archives, staring at the enormous rendering of a sea dragon carved into the floor, at last revealed by that razing fire. One of many similar carvings throughout, the heritage of a people long since exiled.

From every space inside the temple, the crashing of waves on the shore far below whispered or roared. There was nothing to absorb the sound, to soften it. Great, sprawling rooms and courtyards where there should have been altars and statues and gardens of reflection were wholly empty, the smoke of her fire still lingering.

Good. Fire could destroy—but also cleanse.

She crept across the darkened temple-complex grounds to where the innermost, holiest of sanctuaries sprawled to the lip of the sea. Golden light leaked onto the rocky ground before the inner sanctum's steps—light from the now-eternally-burning vats of flame to honor Brannon's gift.

Still clothed in black, Aelin was little more than a shadow as she dimmed those fires to sleepy, murmuring embers and entered the heart of the temple.

A great sea wall had been built to push back the wrath of storms from the stone itself, but even then, the space was damp, the air thick with brine.

Aelin cleared the massive antechamber and strode between the two fat pillars that framed the inner sanctuary. At its far end, open to the wrath of the sea beyond, arose the massive black Rock.

It was smooth as glass, no doubt from the reverent hands that had touched it over the millennia, and perhaps as big as a farmer's market wagon. It jutted upward, overhanging the sea, and starlight bounced off its pocked surface as Aelin extinguished every flame but the sole white candle fluttering in the center of the Rock.

The temple carvings revealed no Wyrdmarks or further messages from the Little Folk. Just swirls and stags.

She'd have to do this the old-fashioned way, then.

Aelin mounted the small stairs that allowed pilgrims to gaze upon the sacred Rock—then stepped onto it.

The sea seemed to pause.

Aelin tugged the Wyrddkey from her jacket, letting it rest between her breasts as she took a seat on the overhanging lip of the stone and peered out into the night-veiled sea.

And waited.

The sliver of crescent moon was beginning to descend when a deep male voice said behind her, “You look younger than I thought.”

Aelin stared at the sea, even as her stomach tightened. “But just as good-looking, right?”

She did not hear any footsteps, but the voice was definitely closer as he said, “At least my daughter was right about your humility.”

“Funny, she never implied you had a sense of humor.”

A whisper of wind to her right, then long, muscled legs beneath ancient armor appeared beside hers, sandaled feet dangling into the surf. She finally dared to turn her head, finding that armor continued to a powerful male body and a broad-boned, handsome face. He might have fooled anyone into thinking he was flesh and blood—were it not for the pale glimmer of blue light along his edges.

Aelin bowed her head slightly to Brannon.

A half smile was his only acknowledgment, his red-gold hair shifting in the moonlight. “A brutal but efficient battle,” he said.

She shrugged. “I was told to come to this temple. I found it occupied. So I unoccupied it. You’re welcome.”

His lips twitched toward a smile. “I cannot stay long.”

“But you’re going to manage to cram in as many cryptic warnings as you can, right?”

Brannon’s brows rose, his brandy-colored eyes crinkling with amusement. “I had my friends send you a message to come for a reason, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it.” She wouldn’t have risked reclaiming the temple otherwise. “But first tell me about Maeve.” She’d had enough of waiting until

they dumped their message into her lap. She had her own gods-damned questions.

Brannon's mouth tightened. "Specify what you need to know."

"Can she be killed?"

The king's head whipped toward her. "She is old, Heir of Terrasen. She was old when I was a child. Her plans are far-reaching—"

"I know, I know. But will she die if I shove a blade into her heart? Cut off her head?"

A pause. "I don't know."

"What?"

Brannon shook his head. "I don't know. All Fae may be killed, yet she has outlived even our extended life spans, and her power ... no one really understands her power."

"But you journeyed with her to get the keys back—"

"I do not know. But she long feared my flame. And yours."

"She's not Valg, is she?"

A low laugh. "No. As cold as one, but no." Brannon's edges began to blur a bit.

But he saw the question in her eyes and nodded for her to go on.

Aelin swallowed, her jaw clenching a bit as she forced out a breath. "Does the power ever get easier to handle?"

Brannon's gaze softened a fraction. "Yes and no. How it impacts your relationships with those around you becomes harder than managing the power—yet is tied to it as well. Magic is no easy gift in any form, yet fire ... We burn not just within our magic, but also in our very souls. For better or worse." His attention flicked to Goldryn, peeking over her shoulder, and he laughed in quiet surprise. "Is the beast in the cave dead?"

"No, but he told me that he misses you and you should pay him a visit. He's lonely out there."

Brannon chuckled again. "We would have had fun together, you and I."

"I'm starting to wish they'd sent you to deal with me instead of your daughter. The sense of humor must skip a generation."

Perhaps it was the wrong thing to say. For that sense of humor instantly faded from that beautiful tan face, those brandy eyes going cold and hard. Brannon gripped her hand, but his fingers went through hers—right down to the stone itself. "The Lock, Heir of Terrasen. I summoned you here for it. In the Stone Marshes, there lies a sunken city—the Lock is hidden there. It is needed to

bind the keys back into the broken Wyrddgate. It is the *only* way to get them back into that gate and seal it permanently. My daughter begs you—”

“What Lock—”

“Find the Lock.”

“*Where* in the Stone Marshes? It’s not exactly a small—”

Brannon was gone.

Aelin scowled and shoved the Amulet of Orynth back into her shirt. “Of course there’s a gods-damned lock,” she muttered.

She groaned a bit as she eased to her feet, and frowned at the night-dark sea crashing mere yards away. At the ancient queen across it, readying her armada.

Aelin stuck out her tongue.

“Well, if Maeve wasn’t already poised to attack, that’ll certainly set her off,” Aedion drawled from the shadows of a nearby pillar.

Aelin stiffened, hissing.

Her cousin grinned at her, his teeth moon white. “You think I didn’t know you had something else up your sleeve for why we took back this temple? Or that this spring in Rifthold taught me nothing about your tendency to be planning a few things at once?”

She rolled her eyes, stepping off the sacred stone and stomping down the stairs. “I assume you heard everything.”

“Brannon even winked at me before he vanished.”

She clenched her jaw.

Aedion leaned his shoulder against the carved pillar. “A Lock, eh? And when, precisely, were you going to inform us about this new shift in direction?”

She stalked up to him. “When I rutting felt like it, that’s when. And it’s not a shift in direction—not yet. Allies remain our goal, not cryptic commands from dead royals.”

Aedion just smiled. A ripple in the murky shadows of the temple snagged her attention, and Aelin heaved a sigh. “You two are honestly insufferable.”

Lysandra flapped onto the top of a nearby statue and clicked her beak rather saucily.

Aedion slid an arm around Aelin’s shoulders, guiding her back toward the ramshackle residence within the compound. “New court, new traditions, you said. Even for *you*. Starting with fewer schemes and secrets that take years off my life every time you do a grand reveal. Though I certainly enjoyed that new trick with the ash. Very artistic.”

Aelin jabbed him in the side. “Do *not*—”

The words halted as footsteps crunched on the dry earth from the nearby courtyard. The wind drifted by, carrying a scent they knew too well.

Valg. A powerful one, if he'd walked through her wall of flame.

Aelin drew Goldryn as Aedion's own blade whined softly, the Sword of Orynth gleaming like freshly forged steel in the moonlight. Lysandra remained aloft, ducking deeper into the shadows.

"Sold out or shit-poor luck?" Aedion murmured.

"Likely both," Aelin muttered back as the figure appeared through two pillars.

He was stocky, slightly overweight—not at all the impossible beauty that the Valg princes preferred when inhabiting a human body. But the inhuman reek, even with that collar on his wide neck ... So much stronger than usual.

Of course, Brannon couldn't have been bothered to warn her.

The Valg stepped into the light of the sacred braziers.

The thoughts eddied from her head as she saw his face.

And Aelin knew that Aedion had been right: her actions tonight *had* sent a message. An outright declaration of her location. Erawan had been waiting for this meeting far longer than a few hours. And the Valg king knew both sides of her history.

For it was the Chief Overseer of Endovier who now grinned at them.



She still dreamt of him.

Of that ruddy, common face leering at her, at the other women in Endovier. Of his laughter when she was stripped to the waist and whipped in the open, then left to hang from her shackles in the bitter cold or blazing sun. Of his smile as she was shoved into those lightless pits; the grin still stretching wide when they removed her from them days or weeks later.

Goldryn's hilt became slimy in her hand. Flame instantly burned along the fingers of her other. She cursed Lorcan for stealing back the golden ring, for taking away that one bit of immunity, of redemption.

Aedion was glancing between them, reading the recognition in her eyes.

The Overseer of Endovier sneered at her, "Aren't you going to introduce us, slave?"

The utter stillness that crept over her cousin's face told her enough about what he'd pieced together—along with the glance at the faint scars on her wrists

where shackles had been.

Aedion slid a step between them, no doubt reading every sound and shadow and scent to see if the man was alone, estimating how hard and long they'd have to fight their way out of here. Lysandra flapped to another pillar, poised to shift and pounce at a single word.

Aelin tried to rally the swagger that had shielded and bluffed her way out of everything. But all she saw was the man dragging those women behind the buildings; all she heard was the slam of that iron grate over her lightless pit; all she smelled were the salt and the blood and the unwashed bodies; all she felt was the burning, wet slide of blood down her ravaged back—

I will not be afraid; I will not be afraid—

“Have they run out of pretty boys in the kingdoms for you to wear?” Aedion drawled, buying them time to figure out the odds.

“Come a bit closer,” the overseer smirked, “and we’ll see if you make a better fit, General.”

Aedion let out a low chuckle, the Sword of Orynth lifting a bit higher. “I don’t think you’d walk away from it.”

And it was the sight of that blade, her father’s blade, the blade of her people...

Aelin lifted her chin, and the flames encircling her left hand flickered brighter.

The overseer’s watery blue eyes slid to hers, narrowing with amusement. “Too bad you didn’t have that little gift when I put you in those pits. Or when I painted the earth with your blood.”

A low snarl was Aedion’s answer.

But Aelin made herself smile. “It’s late. I just trounced your soldiers. Let’s get this chat out of the way so I can have some rest.”

The overseer’s lip curled. “You’ll learn proper manners soon enough, girl. All of you will.”

The amulet between her breasts seemed to grumble, a flicker of raw, ancient power.

Aelin ignored it, shutting out any thought of it. If the Valg, if Erawan, got one whiff that she possessed what he so desperately sought—

The overseer again opened his mouth. She attacked.

Fire blasted him into the nearest wall, surging down his throat, through his ears, up his nose. Flame that did not burn, flame that was mere light, blindingly white—

The overseer roared, thrashing as her magic swept into him, melded with him.

But there was nothing inside to grab on to. No darkness to burn out, no remaining ember to breathe life into. Only—

Aelin reeled back, magic vanishing and knees buckling as if struck. Her head gave a throb, and nausea roiled in her gut. She knew that feeling—that taste.

Iron. As if the man's core was made of it. And that oily, hideous aftertaste ... Wyrystone.

The demon inside the overseer let out a choked laugh. "What are collars and rings compared to a solid heart? A heart of iron and Wyrystone, to replace the coward's heart beating within."

"Why," she breathed.

"I was planted here to demonstrate what is waiting should you and your court visit Morath."

Aelin slammed her fire into him, scouring his insides, striking that core of pure darkness inside. Again, again, again. The overseer kept roaring, but Aelin kept attacking, until—

She vomited all over the stones between them. Aedion hauled her upright.

Aelin lifted her head. She'd burned off his clothes, but not touched the skin.

And there—pulsing against his ribs as if it were a fist punching through—was his heart.

It slammed into his skin, stretching bone and flesh.

Aelin flinched back. Aedion threw a hand in her path as the overseer arched in agony, his mouth open in a silent scream.

Lysandra flapped down from the rafters, shifting into leopard form at their side and snarling.

Again, that fist struck from inside. And then bones snapped, punching outward, ripping through muscle and skin as if his chest cavity were the petals of a blooming flower. There was nothing inside. No blood, no organs.

Only a mighty, ageless darkness—and two flickering golden embers at its core.

Not embers. Eyes. Simmering with ancient malice. They narrowed in acknowledgment and pleasure.

It took every ounce of her fire to steel her spine, to tilt her head at a jaunty angle and drawl, "At least you know how to make a good entrance, Erawan."

The overseer spoke, but the voice was not his. And the voice was not Perrington's.

It was a new voice, an old voice, a voice from a different world and lifetime, a voice that fed on screams and blood and pain. Her magic thrashed against the sound, and even Aedion swore softly, still trying to herd her behind him.

But Aelin stood fast against the darkness peering at them from the man's cracked chest. And she knew that even if his body hadn't been irreparably broken, there was nothing left inside him to save anyway. Nothing worth saving to begin with.

She flexed her fingers at her sides, rallying her magic against the darkness that coiled and swirled inside the man's shattered chest.

Erawan said, "I would think gratitude is in order, Heir of Brannon."

She flicked her brows up, tasting smoke in her mouth. *Easy*, she murmured to her magic. Careful—she'd have to be so careful he did not see the amulet around her neck, sense the presence of the final Wyrdkey inside. With the first two already in his possession, if Erawan suspected that the third key was in this temple, and that his utter dominance over this land and all others was close enough to grab ... She had to keep him distracted.

So Aelin snorted. "Why should I thank you, exactly?"

The embers of eyes slid upward, as if surveying the hollow body of the overseer. "For this small warning present. For ridding the world of one more bit of vermin."

And for making you realize how fruitless standing against me will be, that voice whispered right into her skull.

She slammed fire outward in a blind maneuver, stumbling back into Aedion at the caress in that hideous, beautiful voice. From her cousin's pale face, she knew he'd heard it, too, felt its violating touch.

Erawan chuckled. "I'm surprised you tried to save him first. Given what he did to you at Endovier. My prince could scarcely stand to be inside his mind, it was already so vile. Do you find pleasure in deciding who shall be saved and

who is beyond it? So easy, to become a little, burning god.”

Nausea, true and cold, struck her.

But it was Aedion who smirked, “I’d think you’d have better things to do, Erawan, than taunt us in the dead hours of the morning. Or is this all just a way to make yourself feel better about Dorian Havilliard slipping through your nets?”

The darkness hissed. Aedion squeezed her shoulder in silent warning. End it now. Before Erawan might strike. Before he could sense that the Wyrdkey he sought was mere feet away.

So Aelin inclined her head to the force staring at them through flesh and bone. “I suggest you rest and gather your strength, Erawan,” she purred, winking at him with every shred of bravado left in her. “You’re going to need it.”

A low laugh as flames started to flicker in her eyes, heating her blood with welcome, delicious warmth. “Indeed. Especially considering the plans I have for the would-be King of Adarlan.”

Aelin’s heart stopped.

“Perhaps you should have told your lover to disguise himself before he snatched Dorian Havilliard out of Rifthold.” Those eyes narrowed to slits. “What was his name ... Oh, yes,” Erawan breathed, as if someone had whispered it to him. “Prince Rowan Whitethorn of Doranelle. What a prize he shall be.”

Aelin plummeted down into fire and darkness, refusing to yield one inch to the terror creeping over her.

Erawan crooned, “My hunters are already tracking them. And I am going to hurt them, Aelin Galathynius. I am going to hone them into my most loyal generals. Starting with your Fae Prince—”

A battering ram of hottest blue slammed into that pit in the man’s chest cavity, into those burning eyes.

Aelin kept her magic focused on that chest, on the bones and flesh melting away, leaving only that heart of iron and Wyrdstone untouched. Her magic flowed around it like a stream surging past a rock, burning his body, that *thing* inside him—

“Don’t bother saving any part of him,” Aedion snarled softly.

Her magic roaring out of her, Aelin glanced over a shoulder. Lysandra was now in human form beside Aedion, teeth gritted at the overseer—

The look cost her.

She heard Aedion’s shout before she felt Erawan’s punch of darkness crash into her chest.

Felt the air snap against her as she was hurled back, felt her body bark

against the stone wall before the agony of that darkness really sank in. Her breath stalled, her blood halted—

Get up get up get up.

Erawan laughed softly as Aedion was instantly at her side, dragging her to her feet as her mind, her body tried to reorder itself—

Aelin threw out her power again, letting Aedion believe she allowed him to hold her upright simply because she forgot to step away, not because her knees were shaking so violently she wasn't sure she *could* stand.

But her hand remained steady, at least, as she extended it.

The temple around them shuddered at the force of the power she hurled out of herself. Dust and kernels of debris trickled from the ceiling high above; columns swayed like drunken friends.

Aedion's and Lysandra's faces glowed in the blue light of her flame, their features wide-eyed but set with solid determination—and wrath. She leaned farther into Aedion as her magic roared from her, his grip tightening at her waist.

Each heartbeat was a lifetime; each breath ached.

But the overseer's body at last ripped apart under her power—the dark shields around it yielding to her.

And some small part of her realized that it only did so when Erawan deigned to leave, those amused, ember-like eyes guttering into nothing.

When the man's body was only ashes, Aelin reeled back her magic, cocooned her heart in it. She gripped Aedion's arm, trying not to breathe too loudly, lest he hear the rasp of her battered lungs, realize how hard that single plume of darkness had hit.

A heavy *thud* echoed through the silent temple as the lump of iron and Wyrdstone fell.

That was the cost—Erawan's plan. To realize that the only mercy she might offer her court would be death.

If they were ever captured ... he'd make her watch as they were all carved apart and filled with his power. Make her look into their faces when he'd finished, and find no trace of their souls within. Then he'd get to work on her.

And Rowan and Dorian ... If Erawan was hunting them at this very moment, if he learned that they were in Skull's Bay, and how hard he'd actually struck her

—

Aelin's flames banked to a quiet ember, and she finally found enough strength in her legs to push away from Aedion's grip.

"We need to be on that ship before dawn, Aelin," he said. "If Erawan wasn't

bluffing...”

Aelin only nodded. They had to get to Skull’s Bay as fast as the winds and currents could carry them.

But as she turned toward the archway out of the temple, heading for the archives, she glanced at her chest—utterly untouched, though Erawan’s power had hit her like a hurled spear.

He’d missed. By three inches, Erawan had narrowly missed hitting the amulet. And possibly sensing the Wyrdkey inside it.

Yet the blow still reverberated against her bones in brutal ripples.

A reminder that she might be the heir of fire ... but Erawan was King of the Darkness.

11

Yrene was late.

Chaol had come to expect her at ten, though she had given no indication of when she might arrive. Nesryn had left well before he'd awoken to seek out Sartaq and his ruk, leaving him here to bathe and ... wait.

And wait.

An hour in, Chaol began going through what exercises he could manage on his own, unable to stand the silence, the heavy heat, the endless trickle of water from the fountain outside. The thoughts that kept sliding back to Dorian, wondering where his king was now headed.

She'd mentioned exercises—some involving his legs, however she'd manage to accomplish that—but if Yrene didn't bother to arrive on time, then he certainly wouldn't bother to wait for her.

His arms were trembling by the time the clock on the sideboard chimed noon, little silver bells atop the carved wood piece filling the space with clear, bright ringing. Sweat slid down his chest, his spine, his face as he managed to haul himself into his chair, arms trembling with the effort. He was about to call for Kadja to bring him a jug of water and a cool cloth when Yrene appeared.

In the sitting room, he listened as she entered the main door, then halted.

She said to Kadja, waiting in the foyer, "I have a matter of discretion that I need you to personally oversee."

Obedient silence.

“Lord Westfall requires a tonic for a rash developing on his legs. Likely from some oil you dumped into his bath.” The words were calm, yet edged. He frowned down at his legs. He’d seen no such thing this morning, but he certainly couldn’t sense an itch or burning. “I need willow bark, honey, and mint. The kitchens will have them. Tell no one why. I don’t want word getting around.”

Silence again—then a door closing.

He watched the open doors to the sitting room, listening to *her* listen to Kadja leaving. Then her heavy sigh. Yrene emerged a moment later.

She looked like hell.

“What’s wrong?”

The words were out before he could consider the fact that he had no right to ask such things.

But Yrene’s golden-brown face was ashen, her eyes smudged with purple, her hair limp.

She only said, “You exercised.”

Chaol glanced down at his sweat-soaked shirt. “It seemed as good a way to pass the time as anything else.” Each of her steps toward the desk was slow—heavy. He repeated, “What’s wrong?”

But she reached the desk and kept her back to him. He ground his teeth, debating wheeling the chair over just so he could see her face, as he might have once stormed over to see—to push into her space until she told him what the hell had happened.

Yrene just set her satchel on the desk with a thud. “If you wish to exercise, perhaps a better place for it would be the barracks.” A wry look at the carpet. “Rather than sweating all over the khagan’s priceless rugs.”

His hands clenched at his sides. “No,” was all he said. All he *could* say.

She lifted a brow. “You were Captain of the Guard, weren’t you? Perhaps training with the palace guard will be beneficial to—”

“No.”

She peered over her shoulder, those golden eyes sizing him up. He didn't balk, even as the still-shredded thing in his chest seemed to twist and rend itself further.

He had no doubt she marked it, no doubt she'd tucked away that bit of information. Some small part of him hated her for it, hated himself for revealing that wound through his obstinance, but Yrene only turned from the desk and strode toward him, face unreadable.

"I apologize if rumor now gets out that you have an unfortunate rash on your legs." That usual, sure-footed grace had been replaced by trudging feet. "If Kadja is as smart as I think she is, she'll worry that the rash being a result of *her* ministrations would get her in trouble and not tell anyone. Or at least realize that if word gets out, we'll know *she* was the only one told of it."

Fine. She still didn't want to answer his question. So he instead asked, "Why did you want Kadja gone?"

Yrene slumped onto the golden sofa and rubbed her temples. "Because someone killed a healer in the library last night—and then hunted me, too."

Chaol went still. "What?"

He glanced to the windows, the open garden doors, the exits. Nothing but heat and gurgling water and birdsong.

"I was reading—about what you told me," Yrene said, the freckles on her face so stark against her wan skin. "And I felt someone approaching."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I didn't see them. The healer ... I found her as I fled." Her throat bobbed. "We cleared the library from top to bottom once she was ... retrieved, but found no one." She shook her head, jaw tight.

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it. Not just for the loss of life, but also for what seemed like the loss of a long-held peace and serenity. But he asked, because he could no more stop himself from getting answers, from assessing the risks, than he could halt his own breathing, "What manner of injuries?" Half of

him didn't want to know.

Yrene leaned back against the sofa cushions, the down stuffing sighing as she stared at the gilded ceiling. "I'd seen her before in passing. She was young, a little older than me. And when I found her on the floor, she looked like a long-desiccated corpse. No blood, no sign of injury. Just ... drained."

His heart stumbled at the too-familiar description. Valg. He'd bet all he had left, he'd bet everything on it. "And whoever did this just left her body there?"

A nod. Her hands shook as she dragged them through her hair, closing her eyes. "I think they realized they'd attacked the wrong person—and moved away quickly."

"Why?"

She turned her head, opening her eyes. Exhaustion lay there. And utter fear. "She looks—*looked* like me," Yrene rasped. "Our builds, our coloring. Whoever it was ... I think they were looking for *me*."

"Why?" he asked again, scrambling to sort through all she'd said.

"Because what I was reading last night, about the potential source of the power that injured you ... I left some books about it on the table. And when the guards searched the area, the books were gone." She swallowed again. "Who knew you were coming here?"

Chaol's blood chilled despite the heat.

"We did not make it a secret." It was instinct to rest his hand on a sword that was not there—a sword he had chucked in the Avery months ago. "It wasn't announced, but anyone could have learned. Long before we set foot here."

It was happening again. Here. A Valg demon had come to Antica—an underling at best, a prince at worst. It could be either.

The attack Yrene had described fit Aelin's account of the remains she and Rowan had found from the Valg prince's victims in Wendlyn. People teeming with life turned to husks as if the Valg drank their very souls.

He found himself saying quietly, "Prince Kashin suspects Tumelun was

killed.”

Yrene sat up, any lingering color draining from her face. “Tumelun’s body was not drained. Hafiza—the Healer on High herself declared it was a suicide.”

There was, of course, a chance the two deaths weren’t connected, a chance that Kashin was wrong about Tumelun. Part of Chaol prayed it was so. But even if they were unrelated, what had happened last night—

“You need to warn the khagan,” Yrene said, seeming to read his mind.

He nodded. “Of course. Of course I will.” Damned as the entire situation was ... Perhaps it was the in he’d been waiting for with the khagan. But he studied her haggard face, the fear there. “I’m sorry—to have brought you into this. Has security been increased around the Torre?”

“Yes.” A breathy push of sound. She scrubbed at her face.

“And you? Did you come here under guard?”

She threw him a frown. “In plain daylight? In the middle of the city?”

Chaol crossed his arms. “I would put nothing past the Valg.”

She waved a hand. “I won’t be heading alone into any dark corridors anytime soon. None of us in the Torre will. Guards have been called in—stationed down every hall, in every few feet of the library. I don’t even know where Hafiza summoned them from.”

Valg underlings could take bodies of anyone they wished, but their princes were vain enough that Chaol doubted they’d bother to take the form of a lowly guard. Not when they preferred beautiful young men.

A collar and a dead, cold smile flashed before his eyes.

Chaol blew out a breath. “I am truly sorry—about that healer.” Especially if his being here had somehow triggered this attack, if they pursued Yrene only because of her helping him. He added, “You should be on your guard. Constantly.”

She ignored the warning and scanned the room, the carpets, and the lush palms. “The girls—the young acolytes ... They’re frightened.”

And you?

Before, he would have volunteered to stand watch, to guard her door, to organize the soldiers because he *knew* how these things operated. But he was no captain, and he doubted the khagan or his men would be inclined to listen to a foreign lord, anyway.

But he couldn't stop himself, that part of him, as he asked, "What can I do to help?"

Yrene's eyes shifted toward him, assessing. Weighing. Not him, but he had the feeling it was something inside herself. So he kept still, kept his gaze steady, while she looked inward. While she at last took a breath and said, "I teach a class. Once a week. After last night, they were all too tired, so I let them sleep instead. Tonight, we have a vigil for the healer who—who died. But tomorrow ..." She chewed on her lip, again debating for a heartbeat before she added, "I should like you to come."

"What sort of class?"

Yrene toyed with a heavy curl. "There is no tuition for students here—but we pay our way in other forms. Some help with the cooking, the laundry, the cleaning. But when I came, Hafiza ... I told her I was good at all those things. I'd done them for—a while. She asked me what else I knew beyond healing, and I told her ..." She bit her lip. "Someone once taught me self-defense. What to do against attackers. Usually the male kind."

It was an effort not to look at the scar across her throat. Not to wonder if she had learned it after—or if even that had not been enough.

Yrene sighed through her nose. "I told Hafiza that I knew a little about it, and that ... I had made a promise to someone, to the person who taught *me*, to show and teach it to as many women as possible. So I have. Once a week, I teach the acolytes, along with any older students, healers, servants, or librarians who would like to know."

This delicate, gentle-handed woman ... He supposed he'd learned that

strength could be hidden beneath the most unlikely faces.

“The girls are deeply shaken. There hasn’t been an intruder in the Torre for a great while. I think it would go a long way if you were to join me tomorrow—to teach what you know.”

For a long moment, he stared at her. Blinked.

“You realize I’m in this chair.”

“And? Your mouth still works.” Tart, crisp words.

He blinked again. “They might not find me the most reassuring instructor—”

“No, they’ll likely be swooning and sighing over you so much they’ll *forget* to be afraid.”

His third and final blink made her smile slightly. Grimly. He wondered what that smile would look like if she ever was truly amused—happy.

“The scar adds a touch of mystery,” she said, cutting him off before he could remember the slice down his cheek.

He studied her as she rose from the sofa to stride back to the desk and unpack her bag. “You would truly like me to be there tomorrow?”

“We’ll have to figure out how to *get* you there, but it should not be so difficult.”

“Stuffing me into a carriage will be fine.”

She stiffened, glancing over her shoulder. “Save that anger for *our* training, Lord Westfall.” She fished out a vial of oil and set it on the table. “And you will not be taking a carriage.”

“A litter carried by servants, then?” He’d sooner crawl.

“A horse. Ever heard of one?”

He clenched the arms of his chair. “You need legs to ride.”

“So it’s a good thing you still have both of them.” She went back to studying whatever vials were in that bag. “I spoke to my superior this morning. She has seen similarly injured people ride until they could meet with us—with special straps and braces. They are fashioning them for you in the workshops as we

speak.”

He let those words sink in. “So you assumed I would come with you tomorrow.”

Yrene turned at last, satchel in her hand now. “I assumed you would wish to ride regardless.”

He could only stare while she approached, vial in hand. Only a prim sort of irritation on her face. Better than the stark fear. He asked, voice a bit raw, “You think such a thing is possible?”

“I do. I’ll arrive at dawn, so we have enough time to figure it out. The lesson begins at nine.”

To ride—even if he could not walk, *riding* ... “Please do not give me this hope and let it crumble,” he said hoarsely.

Yrene set the satchel and vial down on the low-lying table before the sofa and motioned him to move closer. “Good healers don’t do such things, Lord Westfall.”

He hadn’t bothered with a jacket today, and had left his belt in the bedroom. Sliding his sweat-soaked shirt over his head, he made quick work of unbuttoning the tops of his pants. “It’s Chaol,” he said after a moment. “My name—it’s Chaol. Not Lord Westfall.” He grunted as he hoisted himself from the chair onto the sofa. “Lord Westfall is my father.”

“Well, you’re a lord, too.”

“Just Chaol.”

“Lord Chaol.”

He shot her a look as he positioned his legs. She did not reach to help, to adjust. “Here I was, thinking you still resented me.”

“If you help my girls tomorrow, I’ll reconsider.”

From the gleam in those golden eyes, he very much doubted that, but a half smile tugged on his mouth. “Another massage today?” *Please*, he nearly added. His muscles already ached from his exercising, and moving so much between

bed and sofa and chair and bath—

“No.” Yrene gestured for him to lie facedown on the sofa. “I’m going to begin today.”

“You found information on it?”

“No,” she repeated, tugging off his pants with that cool, swift efficiency. “But after last night ... I do not want to delay.”

“I will—I can ...” He ground his teeth. “We’ll find a way to protect you while you research.” He hated the words, felt them curl like rancid milk on his tongue, along his throat.

“I think they know that,” she said quietly, and dabbed spots of oil along his spine. “I’m not sure if it’s the information, though. That they want to keep me from finding.”

His gut tightened, even as she ran soothing hands down his back. They lingered near that splotch at its apex. “What do you think they want, then?”

He already suspected, but he wanted to hear her say it—wanted to know if she thought the same, understood the risks as much as he did.

“I wonder,” she said at last, “if it was not just what I was researching, but also that I’m healing *you*.”

He craned his head to look at her as the words settled between them. She only stared at that mark on his spine, her tired face drawn. He doubted she’d slept. “If you’re too tired—”

“I am not.”

He clenched his jaw. “You can nap here. I’ll look after you.” Useless as it would be. “Then work on me later—”

“I will work on you now. I am not going to let them scare me away.”

Her voice did not tremble or waver.

She added, more quietly but no less fiercely, “I once lived in fear of other people. I let other people walk all over me just because I was too afraid of the consequences for refusing. I did not know *how* to refuse.” Her hand pushed

down on his spine in a silent order to rest his head again. “The day I reached these shores, I cast aside that girl. And I will be damned if I let her reemerge. Or let someone tell *me* what to do with my life, my choices again.”

The hair on his arms rose at the simmering wrath in her voice. A woman made of steel and crackling embers. Heat indeed flared beneath her palm as she slid it up the column of his spine, toward that splotch of white.

“Let’s see if it enjoys being pushed around for a change,” she breathed.

Yrene laid her hand directly atop the scar. Chaol opened his mouth to speak

But a scream came out instead.

12

Burning, razor-sharp pain sliced down his back in brutal claws.

Chaol arched, bellowing in agony.

Yrene's hand was instantly gone, and a crashing sounded.

Chaol panted, gasping, as he pushed up onto his elbows to find Yrene sitting on the low-lying table, her vial of oil overturned and leaking across the wood. She gaped at his back, at where her hand had been.

He had no words—none beyond the echoing pain.

Yrene lifted her hands before her face as if she had never seen them before.

She turned them this way and that.

“It doesn't just dislike my magic,” she breathed.

His arms buckled, so he lay down again on the cushions, holding her stare as Yrene declared, “It *hates* my magic.”

“You said it was an echo—not connected to the injury.”

“Maybe I was wrong.”

“Rowan healed me with none of those problems.”

Her brows knotted at the name, and he silently cursed himself for revealing that piece of his history in this palace of ears and mouths. “Were you conscious?”

He considered. “No. I was—nearly dead.”

She noticed the spilled oil then and cursed softly—mildly, compared to some other filthy mouths he'd had the distinct pleasure of being around.

Yrene lunged for her satchel, but he moved faster, grabbing his sweat-damp shirt from where he'd laid it on the sofa arm and chucking it over the spreading puddle before it could drip onto the surely priceless rug.

Yrene studied the shirt, then his outstretched arm, now nearly across her lap. "Either your lack of consciousness during that initial healing kept you from feeling this sort of pain, or perhaps whatever this is had not ... settled."

His throat clogged. "You think I'm possessed?" By that *thing* that had dwelled inside the king, that had done such unspeakable things—

"No. But pain can feel *alive*. Maybe this is no different. And maybe it does not want to let go."

"Is my spine even injured?" He barely managed to ask the question.

"It is," she said, and some part of his chest caved in. "I sensed the broken bits—the tangled and severed nerves. But to heal those things, to get them communicating with your brain again ... I need to get past that echo. Or beat it into submission enough to have space to work on you." Her lips pressed into a grim line. "This shadow, this thing that haunts you—your body. It will fight me every step of the way, fight to convince *you* to tell me to stop. Through pain." Her eyes were clear—stark. "Do you understand what I am telling you?"

His voice was low, rough. "That if you are to succeed, I will have to endure that sort of pain. Repeatedly."

"I have herbs that can make you sleep, but with an injury like this ... I think I won't be the only one who has to fight back against it. And if you are unconscious ... I fear what it might try to do to you if you're trapped there. In your dreamscape—your psyche." Her face seemed to pale further.

Chaol slid his hand from where it still rested atop his shirt-turned-mop and squeezed her hand. "Do what you have to."

"It will hurt. Like that. Constantly. Worse, likely. I will have to work my way down, vertebra by vertebra, before I even reach the base of your spine. Fighting it and healing you at the same time."

His hand tightened on hers, so small compared to his. “Do what you have to,” he repeated.

“And you,” she said quietly. “You will have to fight it as well.”

He stilled at that.

Yrene went on, “If these things feed upon us by nature ... If they feed, and yet you are healthy ...” She gestured to his body. “Then it must be feeding upon something else. Something within you.”

“I sense nothing.”

She studied their joined hands—then slid her fingers away. Not as violent as dropping his hand, but the withdrawal was pointed enough. “Perhaps we should discuss it.”

“Discuss what.”

She brushed her hair over a shoulder. “What happened—whatever it is that you feed this thing.”

Sweat coated his palms. “There is nothing to discuss.”

Yrene stared at him for a long moment. It was all he could do not to shrink from that frank gaze. “From what I’ve gleaned, there is quite a bit to discuss regarding the past few months. It seems as if it’s been a ... tumultuous time for you recently. You yourself said yesterday that there is no one who loathes you more than yourself.”

To say the least. “And you’re suddenly so eager to hear about it?”

She didn’t so much as flinch. “If that is what is required for you to heal and be gone.”

His brows rose. “Well, then. It finally comes out.”

Yrene’s face was an unreadable mask that could have given Dorian a run for his money. “I assume you do not wish to be here forever, what with war breaking loose in *our* homeland, as you called it.”

“Is it not our homeland?”

Silently, Yrene rose to grab her satchel. “I have no interest in sharing

anything with Adarlan.”

He understood. He really did. Perhaps it was why he still had not told her who, exactly, that lingering darkness belonged to.

“And you,” Yrene went on, “are avoiding the topic at hand.” She rooted through her satchel. “You’ll have to talk about what happened sooner or later.”

“With all due respect, it’s none of your business.”

Her eyes flicked to him at that. “You would be surprised by how closely the healing of physical wounds is tied to the healing of emotional ones.”

“I’ve faced what happened.”

“Then what is that thing in your spine feeding on?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t care.

She fished something out of the satchel at last, and when she strode back toward him, his stomach tightened at what she held.

A bit. Crafted from dark, fresh leather. Unused.

She offered it to him without hesitation. How many times had she handed one over to patients, to heal injuries far worse than his?

“Now would be the time to tell me to stop,” Yrene said, face grim. “In case you’d rather discuss what happened these past few months.”

Chaol only lay on his stomach and slid the bit into his mouth.



Nesryn had watched the sunrise from the skies.

She’d found Prince Sartaq waiting in his aerie in the hour before dawn. The minaret was open to the elements at its uppermost level, and behind the leather-clad prince ... Nesryn had braced a hand on the archway to the stairwell, still breathless from the climb.

Kadara was beautiful.

Each of the ruk’s golden feathers shone like burnished metal, the white of her breast bright as fresh snow. And her gold eyes had sized Nesryn up immediately.

Before Sartaq even turned from where he'd been buckling on the saddle across her broad back.

"Captain Faliq," the prince had said by way of greeting. "You're up early."

Casual words for any listening ears.

"The storm last night kept me from sleep. I hope I am not disturbing you."

"On the contrary." In the dim light, his mouth quirked in a smile. "I was about to go for a ride—to let this fat hog hunt for her breakfast for once."

Kadara puffed her feathers in indignation, clicking her enormous beak—fully capable of taking a man's head off in one snip. No wonder Princess Hasar remained wary of the bird.

Sartaq chuckled, patting her feathers. "Care to join?"

With the words, Nesryn suddenly had a sense of how very, very high the minaret was. And how Kadara would likely fly above it. With nothing to keep her from death but the rider and saddle now set in place.

But to ride a ruk ...

Even better, to ride a ruk with a prince who might have information for them

...

"I am not particularly skilled with heights, but it would be my honor, Prince."

It had been a matter of a few minutes. Sartaq had ordered her to switch from her midnight-blue jacket to the spare leather one folded in a chest of drawers shoved against the far wall. He'd politely turned his back when she changed pants as well. Since her hair fell only to her shoulders, she had difficulty braiding it back, but the prince had fished into his own pockets and supplied her with a leather thong to pull it back into a knot.

Always carry a spare, he told her. Or else she'd be combing her hair for weeks.

He'd mounted the keen-eyed ruk first, Kadara lowering herself like some oversized hen to the floor. He climbed her side in two fluid movements, then reached down a hand for Nesryn. She gingerly laid her palm against Kadara's

ribs, marveling at the cool feathers smooth as finest silk.

Nesryn waited for the ruk to shift about and glare while Sartaq hauled her into the saddle in front of him, but the prince's mount remained docile. Patient.

Sartaq had buckled and harnessed them both into the saddle, triple-checking the leather straps. Then he clicked his tongue once, and—

Nesryn knew it wasn't polite to squeeze a prince's arms so hard the bone was likely to break. But she did so anyway as Kadara spread her shining golden wings and leaped out.

Leaped *down*.

Her stomach shot straight up her throat. Her eyes watered and blurred.

Wind tore at her, trying to rip her from that saddle, and she clenched with her thighs so tightly they ached, while she gripped Sartaq's arms, holding the reins, so hard he chuckled in her ear.

But the pale buildings of Antica loomed up, near-blue in the early dawn, rushing to meet them as Kadara dove and dove, a star falling from the heavens—

Then flared those wings wide and shot upward.

Nesryn was glad she had forgone breakfast. For surely it would have come spewing out of her mouth at what the motion did to her stomach.

Within the span of a few beats, Kadara banked right—toward the horizon just turning pink.

The sprawl of Antica spread before them, smaller and smaller as they rose into the skies. Until it was no more than a cobblestoned road beneath them, spreading into every direction. Until she could spy the olive groves and wheat fields just outside the city. The country estates and small towns speckled about. The rippling dunes of the northern desert to her left. The sparkling, snaking band of rivers turning golden in the rising sun that crested over the mountains to her right.

Sartaq did not speak. Did not point out landmarks. Not even the pale line of the Sister-Road that ran toward the southern horizon.

No, in the rising light, he let Kadara have her head. The ruk took them floating higher still, the air turning crisp—the awakening blue sky brightening with each mighty flap of her wings.

Open. So open.

Not at all like the endless sea, the tedious waves and cramped ship.

This was ... this was *breath*. This was ...

She could not look fast enough, drink it all in. How small everything was, how lovely and pristine. A land claimed by a conquering nation, yet loved and nurtured.

Her land. Her home.

The sun and the scrub and the undulating grasslands that beckoned in the distance. The lush jungles and rice fields to the west; the pale sand dunes of the desert to the northeast. More than she could see in a lifetime—farther than Kadara could fly in a single day. An entire world, this land. The entire world contained here.

She could not understand why her father had left.

Why he had stayed, when such darkness had crept into Adarlan. Why he had kept them in that festering city where she so rarely looked up at the sky, or felt a breeze that did not reek of the briny Avery or the rubbish rotting in the streets.

“You are quiet,” the prince said, and it was more question than statement.

Nesryn admitted in Halha, “I don’t have words to describe it.”

She felt Sartaq smile near her shoulder. “That was what I felt—that first ride. And every ride since.”

“I understand why you stayed at the camp those years ago. Why you are eager to return.”

A beat of quiet. “Am I so easy to read?”

“How could you *not* wish to return?”

“Some consider my father’s palace to be the finest in the world.”

“It is.”

His silence was question enough.

“Rifthold’s palace was nothing so fine—so lovely and a part of the land.”

Sartaq hummed, the sound reverberating into her back. Then he said quietly, “The death of my sister has been hard upon my mother. It is for her that I remain.”

Nesryn winced a bit. “I’m so very sorry.”

Only the rushing wind spoke for a time.

Then Sartaq said, “You said *was*. Regarding Rifthold’s royal palace. Why?”

“You heard what befell it—the glass portions.”

“Ah.” Another beat of quiet. “Shattered by the Queen of Terrasen. Your ... ally.”

“My friend.”

He craned his body around hers to peer at her face. “Is she truly?”

“She is a good woman,” Nesryn said, and meant it. “Difficult, yes, but ... some might say the same of any royalty.”

“Apparently, she found the former King of Adarlan so difficult that she killed him.”

Careful words.

“The man was a monster—and a threat to all. His Second, Perrington, remains that way. She did Erilea a favor.”

Sartaq angled the reins as Kadara began a slow, steady descent toward a sparkling river valley. “She is truly that powerful?”

Nesryn debated the merits of the truth or downplaying Aelin’s might. “She and Dorian both possess considerable magic. But I would say it is their intelligence that is the stronger weapon. Brute power is useless without it.”

“It’s dangerous without it.”

“Yes,” Nesryn agreed, swallowing. “Are ...” She had not been trained in the mazelike way of speaking at court. “Is there such a threat within your court that warranted us needing to speak in the skies?”

He could very well be the threat posed, she reminded herself.

“You have dined with my siblings. You see how they are. If I were to arrange a meeting with you, it would send a message to them. That I am willing to hear your suit—perhaps press it to our father. They would consider the risks and benefits of undermining me. Or whether it would make them look better to try to join ... my side.”

“And are you? Willing to hear us out?”

Sartaq didn't answer for a long moment, only the screaming wind filling the quiet.

“I would listen. To you and Lord Westfall. I would hear what you know, what has happened to you both. I do not hold as much sway with my father as others, but he knows the ruk riders are loyal to me.”

“I thought—”

“That I was his favorite?” A low, bitter laugh. “I perhaps stand a chance at being named Heir, but the khagan does not select his Heir based on whom he loves best. Even so, that particular honor goes to Duva and Kashin.”

Sweet-faced Duva, she could understand, but—“Kashin?”

“He is loyal to my father to a fault. He has never schemed, never backstabbed. I've done it—plotted and maneuvered against them all to get what I want. But Kashin ... He may command the land armies and the horse-lords, he may be brutal when required, but with my father, he is guileless. There has never been a more loving or loyal son. When our father dies ... I worry. What the others will do to Kashin if he does not submit, or worse: what his death will do to Kashin himself.”

She dared ask, “What would you do to him?” *Destroy him, if he will not swear fealty?*

“It remains to be seen what sort of threat or alliance he could pose. Only Duva and Arghun are married, and Arghun has yet to sire offspring. Though Kashin, if he has his way, would likely sweep that young healer off her feet.”

Yrene. “Strange that she has no interest in him.”

“A mark in her favor. It is not easy to love a khagan’s offspring.”

The green grasses, still dewy beneath the fresh sun, rippled as Kadara swept toward a swift-moving river. With those enormous talons of hers, she could easily snatch up fistfuls of fish.

But it was not the prey Kadara sought as she flew over the river, seeking something—

“Someone broke into the Torre’s library last night,” Sartaq said as he monitored the ruk’s hunt over the dark blue waters. Mist off the surface kissed Nesryn’s face, but the chill at his words went far deeper. “They killed a healer—through some vile power that rendered her into a husk. We have never seen its like in Antica.”

Nesryn’s stomach turned over. With that description—“Who? Why?”

“Yrene Towers sounded the alarm. We searched for hours and found no trace, beyond missing books from where she had been studying, and where it stalked her. Yrene was rattled, but fine.”

Researching—Chaol had informed her last night that Yrene had planned to do some research regarding wounds from magic, from demons.

Sartaq asked casually, “Do you know what Yrene might have been looking into that posed such dark interest and theft of her books?”

Nesryn considered. It could be a trick—his revealing something personal from his family, his life, to lull her into telling him secrets. Nesryn and Chaol had not yielded any information of the keys, the Valg, or Erawan to the khagan or his children. They had been waiting to do so—to assess whom to trust. For if their enemies heard that they were hunting for the keys to seal the Wyrddgate ...

“No,” she lied. “But perhaps they are unannounced enemies of ours who wish to scare her and the other healers out of helping the captain. I mean—Lord Westfall.”

Silence. She thought he’d push her on it, waited for it as Kadara skimmed

closer to the river's surface, as if closing in on some prey. "It must be strange, to bear a new title, with the former owner right beside you."

"I was only captain for a few weeks before we left. I suppose I shall have to learn when I return."

"If Yrene is successful. Among other possible victories."

Like bringing that army with them.

"Yes," was all she managed to say.

Kadara dove, a sharp, swift motion that had Sartaq tightening his arms around her, bracing her thighs with his own.

She let him guide her, keeping them upright in the saddle as Kadara dipped into the water, thrashed, and sent something hurling onto the riverbank. A heartbeat later, she was upon it, talons and beak spearing and slashing. The thing beneath her fought, twisting and whipping—

A crunch. Then silence.

The ruk calmed, feathers puffing, then smoothing against the blood now splattered along her breast and neck. Some had splashed onto Nesryn's boots as well.

"Be careful, Captain Faliq," Sartaq said as Nesryn got a good look at the creature the ruk now feasted upon.

It was enormous, nearly fifteen feet, covered in scales thick as armor. Like the marsh beasts of Eyllwe, but bulkier—fatter from the cattle it no doubt dragged into the water along these rivers.

"There is beauty in my father's lands," the prince went on while Kadara ripped into that monstrous carcass, "but there is much lurking beneath the surface, too."

Manon Blackbeak watched the black skies above Morath bleed to rotted gray on the last morning of Asterin's life.

She had not slept the entirety of the night; had not eaten or drank; had done nothing but sharpen Wind-Cleaver in the frigid openness of the wyvern's aerie. Over and over, she had honed the blade, leaning against Abraxos's warm side, until her fingers were too stiff with cold to grip sword or stone.

Her grandmother had ordered Asterin locked in the deepest bowels of the Keep's dungeon, so heavily guarded that escape was impossible. Or rescue.

Manon had toyed with the idea for the first few hours after the sentence had been given. But to rescue Asterin would be to betray her Matron, her Clan. Her mistake—it was *her* own mistake, her own damned choices, that had led to this.

And if she stepped out of line again, the rest of the Thirteen would be put down. She was lucky she hadn't been stripped of her title as Wing Leader. At least she could still lead her people, protect them. Better than allowing someone like Iskra to take command.

The Ferian Gap legion's assault on Rifthold under Iskra's command had been sloppy, chaotic—not the systematic, careful sacking Manon would have planned had they asked her. It made no difference now whether the city was in full or half ruin. It didn't alter Asterin's fate.

So there was little to be done, other than to sharpen her ancient blade and memorize the Words of Request. Manon would have to utter them at the right moment. This last gift, she could give her cousin. Her only gift.

Not the long, slow torture and beheading that was typical of a witch execution.

But the swift mercy of Manon's own blade.

Boots scuffed on stone and crunched the hay littering the aerie floor. Manon knew that step—knew it as well as Asterin's own gait. "What," she said to Sorrel without looking behind her.

"Dawn approaches," her Third said.

Soon to be Second. Vesta would become Third, and ... and maybe Asterin

would at last see that hunter of hers, see the stillborn witchling they'd had together.

Never again would Asterin ride the winds; never again would Asterin soar on the back of her sky-blue mare. Manon's eyes slid to the wyvern across the aerie—shifting on her two legs, awake when the others were not.

As if she could sense her mistress's doom beckoning with each passing moment.

What would become of the mare when Asterin was gone?

Manon rose to her feet, Abraxos nudging the backs of her thighs with his snout. She reached down, brushing his scaly head. She didn't know who it was meant to comfort. Her crimson cape, as bloody and filthy as the rest of her, was still clasped at her collarbone.

The Thirteen would become twelve.

Manon met Sorrel's gaze. But her Third's attention was on Wind-Cleaver, bare in Manon's hand.

Her Third said, "You mean to make the Words of Request."

Manon tried to speak. But she could not open her mouth. So she only nodded.

Sorrel stared toward the open archway beyond Abraxos. "I wish she had the chance to see the Wastes. Just once."

Manon forced herself to lift her chin. "We do not wish. We do not hope," she said to her soon-to-be Second. Sorrel's eyes snapped to her, something like hurt flashing there. Manon took the inner blow. She said, "We will move on, adapt."

Sorrel said quietly, but not weakly, "She goes to her death to keep your secrets."

It was the closest Sorrel had ever come to outright challenge. To resentment.

Manon sheathed Wind-Cleaver at her side and strode for the stairwell, unable to meet Abraxos's curious stare. "Then she will have served me well as Second, and will be remembered for it."

Sorrel said nothing.

So Manon descended into the gloom of Morath to kill her cousin.



The execution was not to be held in the dungeon.

Rather, her grandmother had selected a broad veranda overlooking one of the endless drops into the ravine curled around Morath. Witches were crowded onto

the balcony, practically thrumming with bloodlust.

The Matrons stood before the gathered group, Cresseida and the Yellowlegs Matron flanked by each of their heirs, all facing the open doors through which Manon and the Thirteen exited the Keep proper.

Manon did not hear the murmur of the crowd; did not hear the roaring wind ripping between the high turrets; did not hear the strike of hammers in the forges of the valley below.

Not when her attention went to Asterin, on her knees before the Matrons. She, too, was facing Manon, still in her riding leathers, her golden hair limp and knotted, flecked with blood. She lifted her face—

“It was only fair,” Manon’s grandmother drawled, the crowd silencing, “for Iskra Yellowlegs to also avenge the four sentinels slaughtered on your watch. Three blows apiece for each of the sentinels killed.”

Twelve blows total. But from the cuts and bruises on Asterin’s face, the split lip, from the way she cradled her body as she bent over her knees ... It had been far more than that.

Slowly, Manon looked at Iskra. Cuts marred her knuckles—still raw from the beating she’d given Asterin in the dungeon.

While Manon had been upstairs, brooding.

Manon opened her mouth, her rage a living thing thrashing in her gut, her blood. But Asterin spoke instead.

“Be glad to know, Manon,” her Second rasped with a faint, cocky smile, “that she had to chain me up to beat me.”

Iskra’s eyes flashed. “You still screamed, bitch, when I whipped you.”

“Enough,” Manon’s grandmother cut in, waving a hand.

Manon barely heard the order.

They had *whipped* her sentinel like some underling, like some mortal beast—Someone snarled, low and vicious, to her right.

The breath went out of her as she found Sorrel—unmovable rock, unfeeling stone—baring her teeth at Iskra, at those assembled here.

Manon’s grandmother stepped forward, brimming with displeasure. Behind Manon, the Thirteen were a silent, unbreakable wall.

Asterin began scanning their faces, and Manon realized her Second understood that it was the last time she’d do so.

“Blood shall be paid with blood,” Manon’s grandmother and the Yellowlegs Matron said in unison, reciting from their eldest rituals. Manon steeled her spine, waiting for the right moment. “Any witch who wishes to extract blood in the

name of Zelta Yellowlegs may come forward.”

Iron nails slid out from the hands of the entire Yellowlegs coven.

Asterin only stared at the Thirteen, her bloody face unmoved, eyes clear.

The Yellowlegs Matron said, “Form the line.”

Manon pounced.

“I invoke the right of execution.”

Everyone froze.

Manon’s grandmother’s face went pale with rage. But the other two Matrons, even Yellowlegs, just waited.

Manon said, head high, “I claim the right to my Second’s head. Blood shall be paid with blood—but at my sword’s edge. She is mine, and so shall her death be mine.”

For the first time, Asterin’s mouth tightened, eyes gleaming. Yes, she understood the only gift Manon could give her, the only honor left.

It was Cresseida Blueblood who cut in before the other two Matrons could speak. “For saving my daughter’s life, Wing Leader, it shall be granted.”

The Yellowlegs Matron whipped her head to Cresseida, a retort on her lips, but it was too late. The words had been spoken, and the rules were to be obeyed at any cost.

The Crochan’s red cape fluttering behind her in the wind, Manon dared a look at her grandmother. Only hatred glowed in those ancient eyes—hatred, and a flicker of satisfaction that Asterin would be ended after decades of being deemed an unfit Second.

But at least this death was now hers to give.

And in the east, slipping over the mountains like molten gold, the sun began to rise.

A hundred years she’d had with Asterin. She’d always thought they’d have a hundred more.

Manon said softly to Sorrel, “Turn her around. My Second shall see the dawn one last time.”

Sorrel obediently stepped forward, pivoting Asterin to face the High Witches, the crowd by the rail—and the rare sunrise piercing through Morath’s gloom.

Blood soaked through the back of her Second’s leathers.

And yet Asterin knelt, shoulders square and head high, as she looked not at the dawn—but at Manon herself while she stalked around her Second to take a place a few feet before the Matrons.

“Sometime before breakfast, Manon,” her grandmother said from a few feet behind.

Manon drew Wind-Cleaver, the blade singing softly as it slid free of its sheath.

The sunlight gilded the balcony as Asterin whispered, so softly that only Manon could hear, “Bring my body back to the cabin.”

Something in Manon’s chest broke—broke so violently that she wondered if it was possible for no one to have heard it.

Manon lifted her sword.

All it would take was one word from Asterin, and she could save her own hide. Spill Manon’s secrets, her betrayals, and she’d walk free. Yet her Second uttered no other word.

And Manon understood in that moment that there were forces greater than obedience, and discipline, and brutality. Understood that she had not been born soulless; she had not been born without a heart.

For there were both, begging her not to swing that blade.

Manon looked to the Thirteen, standing around Asterin in a half circle.

One by one, they lifted two fingers to their brows.

A murmur went through the crowd. The gesture not to honor a High Witch.

But a Witch-Queen.

There had not been a Queen of Witches in five hundred years, either among the Crochans or the Iron-teeth. Not one.

Forgiveness shone in the faces of her Thirteen. Forgiveness and understanding and loyalty that was not blind obedience, but forged in pain and battle, in shared victory and defeat. Forged in hope for a better life—a better world.

At last, Manon found Asterin’s gaze, tears now rolling down her Second’s face. Not from fear or pain, but in farewell. A hundred years—and yet Manon wished she’d had more time.

For a heartbeat, she thought of that sky-blue mare in the aerie, the wyvern that would wait and wait for a rider who would never return. Thought of a green rocky land spreading to the western sea.

Hand trembling, Asterin pressed her fingers to her brow and extended them. “Bring our people home, Manon,” she breathed.

Manon angled Wind-Cleaver, readying for the strike.

The Blackbeak Matron snapped, “Be done with it, Manon.”

Manon met Sorrel’s eyes, then Asterin’s. And Manon gave the Thirteen her

final order.

“Run.”

Then Manon Blackbeak whirled and brought Wind-Cleaver down upon her grandmother.

Manon saw only the flash of her grandmother’s rusted iron teeth, the glimmer of her iron nails as she raised them to ward against the sword—but too late.

Manon slashed Wind-Cleaver down, a blow that would have cut most men in half.

Yet her grandmother darted back fast enough that the sword sliced down her torso, ripping fabric and skin as it cut between her breasts in a shallow line. Blue blood sprayed, but the Matron was moving, blocking Manon’s next blow with her iron nails—iron so hard that Wind-Cleaver bounced off.

Manon did not look to see if the Thirteen obeyed. But Asterin was roaring; roaring and shouting to *stop*. The cries grew more distant, then echoed, as if she were now inside the hall, being dragged away.

No sounds of pursuit—as if the onlookers were too stunned. Good.

Iskra and Petrah had swords out, iron teeth down as they stepped between their Matrons and Manon, herding their two High Witches away.

The Blackbeak Matron’s coven lunged forward, only to be halted by a hand. “Stay back,” her grandmother commanded, panting as Manon circled her. Blue blood leaked down her grandmother’s front. An inch closer, and she’d have been dead.

Dead.

Her grandmother bared her rusted teeth. “She’s mine.” She jerked her chin at Manon. “We do this the ancient way.”

Manon’s stomach roiled, but she sheathed her sword.

A flick of her wrists had her nails out, and a snap of her jaw had her teeth descending.

“Let’s see how good you are, Wing Leader,” her grandmother hissed, and attacked.

Manon had never seen her grandmother fight, never trained with her.

And some small part of Manon wondered if it was because her grandmother did not want others to know how skilled she was.

Manon could hardly move fast enough to avoid the nails ripping into her

face, her neck, her gut, yielding step after step after step.

She only had to do this long enough to buy the Thirteen time to get to the skies.

Her grandmother slashed for her cheek, and Manon blocked the blow with an elbow, slamming the joint down hard into her grandmother's forearm. The witch barked in pain, and Manon spun out of reach, circling again.

"It is not so easy to strike now is it, Manon Blackbeak?" her grandmother panted as they surveyed each other. No one around them dared move; the Thirteen had vanished—every last one of them. She almost sagged with relief. Now to keep her grandmother occupied long enough to avoid her giving the onlookers the order to pursue. "So much easier with a blade, the weapon of those cowardly humans," her grandmother seethed. "With the teeth, the nails ... You have to *mean* it."

They lunged for each other, some fundamental part of her cracking with every slash and swipe and block. They darted apart again.

"As pathetic as your mother," her grandmother spat. "Perhaps you'll die like her, too—with my teeth at your throat."

Her mother, whom she'd killed coming out of, who had died birthing her—

"For years, I tried to train her weakness out of you." Her grandmother spat blue blood onto the stones. "For the good of the Iron-teeth, I made you into a force of nature, a warrior equal to none. And this is how you repay me—"

Manon didn't let the words unnerve her. She went for the throat, only to feint and slash.

Her grandmother barked in pain—genuine *pain*—as Manon's claws shredded her shoulder.

Blood showered her hand, flesh clinging to her nails—

Manon staggered back, bile burning her throat.

She saw the blow coming, but still didn't have time to stop it as her grandmother's right hand slashed across her belly.

Leather, cloth, and skin ripped. Manon screamed.

Blood, hot and blue, rushed out of her before her grandmother had darted back.

Manon shoved a hand against her abdomen, pushing against the shredded skin. Blood dribbled through her fingers, splattering onto the stones.

High above, a wyvern roared.

Abraxos.

The Blackbeak Matron laughed, flicking Manon's blood off her nails. "I'm

going to dice your wyvern into tiny pieces and feed him to the hounds.”

Despite the agony in her belly, Manon’s vision honed. “Not if I kill you first.”

Her grandmother chuckled, still circling, assessing. “You are stripped of your title as Wing Leader. You are stripped of your title as heir.” Step after step, closer and closer, an adder looping around its prey. “From this day, you are Manon Witch Killer, Manon Kin Slayer.”

The words pelted her like stones. Manon backed toward the balcony rail, pushing against the wound in her stomach to keep the blood in. The crowd parted like water around them. Just a little longer—just another minute or two.

Her grandmother paused, blinking toward the open doors, as if realizing the Thirteen had vanished. Manon attacked again before she could give the order to pursue.

Swipe, lunge, slash, duck—they moved in a whirlwind of iron and blood and leather.

But as Manon twisted away, the wounds in her stomach gave more, and she stumbled.

Her grandmother didn’t miss a beat. She struck.

Not with her nails or teeth, but with her foot.

The kick to Manon’s stomach set her screaming, a roar again answered by Abraxos, locked high above. Soon to die, as she would. She prayed the Thirteen would spare him, let him join them wherever they would flee.

Manon slammed into the stone rail of the balcony and crumpled to the black tiles. Blue blood leaked from her, staining the thighs of her pants.

Her grandmother slowly approached, panting.

Manon grabbed the balcony rail, hauling herself to her feet one last time.

“Do you want to know a secret, Kin Slayer?” her grandmother breathed.

Manon slumped against the balcony rail, the drop below endless and a relief. They’d take her to the dungeons—either use her for Erawan’s breeding, or torture her until she begged for death. Maybe both.

Her grandmother spoke so softly that even Manon could barely hear over her own gasps for air. “As your mother labored to push you out, she confessed who your father was. She said you ... *you* would be the one who broke the curse, who saved us. She said your father was a rare-born Crochan Prince. And she said that your mixed blood would be the key.” Her grandmother lifted her nails to her mouth and licked off Manon’s blue blood.

No.

No.

“So you have been a Kin Slayer your whole life,” her grandmother purred. “Hunting down those Crochans—your *relatives*. When you were a witchling, your father searched the lands for you. He never stopped loving your mother. *Loving her*,” she spat. “And loving you. So I killed him.”

Manon gazed at the drop below, the death that beckoned.

“His despair was delicious when I told him what I’d done to her. What I would make you into. Not a child of peace—but war.”

Made.

Made.

Made.

Manon’s iron nails chipped on the dark stone of the balcony rail. And then her grandmother said the words that broke her.

“Do you know why that Crochan was spying in the Ferian Gap this spring? She had been sent to find *you*. After a hundred and sixteen years of searching, they had finally learned the identity of their dead prince’s lost child.”

Her grandmother’s smile was hideous in its absolute triumph. Manon willed strength to her arms, to her legs.

“Her name was Rhiannon, after the last Crochan Queen. And she was your half sister. She confessed it to me upon our tables. She thought it’d save her life. And when she saw what you had become, she chose to let the knowledge die with her.”

“I am a Blackbeak,” Manon rasped, blood choking her words.

Her grandmother took a step, smiling as she crooned, “You are a Crochan. The last of their royal bloodline with the death of your sister at your own hand. You are a Crochan *Queen*.”

Absolute silence from the witches gathered.

Her grandmother reached for her. “And you’re going to die like one by the time I’m finished with you.”

Manon didn’t let her grandmother’s nails touch her.

A boom sounded nearby.

Manon used the strength she’d gathered in her arms, her legs, to hurl herself onto the stone ledge of the balcony.

And roll off it into the open air.



Air and rock and wind and blood—

Manon slammed into a warm, leathery hide, screaming as pain from her wounds blacked out her vision.

Above, somewhere far away, her grandmother was shrieking orders—

Manon dug her nails into the leathery hide, burying her claws deep. Beneath her, a bark of discomfort she recognized. Abraxos.

But she held firm, and he embraced the pain as he banked to the side, swerving out of Morath's shadow—

She felt them around her.

Manon managed to open her eyes, flicking the clear lid against the wind into place.

Edda and Briar, her Shadows, were now flanking her. She knew they'd been there, waiting in the shadows with their wyverns, had heard every one of those damning last words. "The others have flown ahead. We were sent to retrieve you," Edda, the eldest of the sisters, shouted over the roar of the wind. "Your wound—"

"It's shallow," Manon snapped, forcing the pain aside to focus on the task at hand. She was on Abraxos's neck, the saddle a few feet behind her. One by one, every breath an agony, she released her nails from his skin and slid toward the saddle. He evened out his flight, offering smooth air to buckle herself into the harness.

Blood leaked from the gouges in her belly—soon the saddle was slick with it.

Behind them, several roars set the mountains trembling.

"We can't let them get to the others," Manon managed to say.

Briar, black hair streaming behind her, swept in closer. "Six Yellowlegs on our tail. From Iskra's personal coven. Closing in fast."

With a score to settle, they'd no doubt been given free rein to slaughter them.

Manon surveyed the peaks and ravines of the mountains around them.

"Two apiece," she ordered. The Shadows' black wyverns were enormous—skilled at stealth, but devastating in a fight. "Edda, you drive two to the west; Briar, you slam the other two to the east. Leave the last two to me."

No sign of the rest of the Thirteen in the gray clouds or mountains.

Good—they had gotten away. It was enough.

"You kill them, then you find the others," Manon ordered, an arm draped over her wound.

"But, Wing Leader—"

The title almost sapped her will. But Manon barked, “*That’s an order.*”

The Shadows bowed their heads. Then, as if sharing one mind, one heart, they banked to either direction, peeling away from Manon like petals in the wind.

Bloodhounds on a scent, four Yellowlegs split from their group to deal with each Shadow.

The two in the center flew faster, harder, spreading apart to close in on Manon. Her vision blurred.

Not a good sign—not a good sign at all.

She breathed to Abraxos, “Let’s make it a final stand worthy of song.”

He bellowed in answer.

The Yellowlegs swept near enough for Manon to count their weapons. A battle cry shattered from the one to her right.

Manon dug her left heel into Abraxos’s side.

Like a shooting star, he blasted down toward the peaks of the ashy mountains. The Yellowlegs dove with them.

Manon aimed for a ravine running through the spine of the mountain range, her vision flashing black and white and foggy. A chill crept into her bones.

The walls of the ravine closed around them like the maw of a mighty beast, and she pulled on the reins once.

Abraxos flung out his wings and coasted along the side of the ravine before catching a current and leveling out, flapping like hell through the heart of the crevasse, pillars of stone jutting from the floor like lances.

The Yellowlegs, too ensnared in their bloodlust, their wyverns too large and bulky, balked at the ravine—at the sharp turn—

A boom and a screech, and the whole ravine shuddered.

Manon swallowed her bark of agony to peer behind. One of the wyverns had panicked, too big for the space, and slammed into a stone column. Broken bone and blood rained down.

But the other wyvern had managed to bank, and now sailed toward them, wings so wide they nearly grazed either side of the ravine.

Manon panted through her bloody teeth, “*Fly, Abraxos.*”

And her gentle, warrior-hearted mount flew.

Manon focused on keeping to the saddle, on keeping the arm pressed against her wound to hold the blood in, keep that lethal cold away. She’d gotten enough injuries to know her grandmother had struck deep and true.

The ravine swerved right, and Abraxos took the turn with expert skill. She

prayed for the boom and roar of the pursuing wyvern to hit the walls, but none came.

But Manon knew these deadly canyons. She'd flown this path countless times on the endless, inane patrols these months. The Yellowlegs, sequestered in the Ferian Gap, did not.

"To the very end, Abraxos," she said. His roar was his only confirmation.

One shot. She'd have one shot. Then she could gladly die, knowing the Thirteen wouldn't be pursued. Not today, at least.

Turn after turn, Abraxos hurtled through the ravine, snapping his own tail against the rock to send debris flying into the Yellowlegs sentinel.

The rider dodged the rocks, her wyvern bobbing on the wind. Closer—Manon needed her closer. She tugged on Abraxos's reins, and he checked his speed.

Turn after turn after turn, black rock flashing by, blurring like her own fading vision.

The Yellowlegs was near enough to throw a dagger.

Manon looked over a shoulder with her failing eyesight in time to see her do just that.

Not one dagger—but two, metal gleaming in the dim canyon light.

Manon braced herself for the impact of metal in flesh and bone.

Abraxos took the final turn as the sentinel hurled her daggers at Manon. A towering, impenetrable wall of black stone arose, mere feet away.

But Abraxos soared up, catching the updraft and sailing out of the heart of the ravine, so close Manon could touch the dead-end wall.

The two daggers struck the rock where Manon had been moments before.

And the Yellowlegs sentinel, on her bulky, heavy wyvern, did as well.

Rock groaned as wyvern and rider splattered against it. And fell to the ravine floor.

Panting, her breath a wet, bloody rasp, Manon patted Abraxos's side. Even the motion was feeble. "Good," she managed to say.

Mountains became small again. Oakwald spread before her. Trees—the cover of trees might hide her ... "Oak ...," she rasped.

Manon didn't finish the command before the Darkness swept in to claim her.

13

Yrene panted, her legs sprawled before her on the rug, her back resting against the couch on which Lord Chaol now gasped for breath as well.

Her mouth was dry as sand, her limbs trembling so violently that she could barely keep her hands limp in her lap.

A spitting sound and a little thump told her he'd removed the bit.

He'd roared around it. His bellowing had been almost as bad as the magic itself.

It was a void. It was a new, dark hell.

Her magic had been a pulsing star that flared against the wall that the darkness had crafted between the top of his spine and the rest of it. She knew—knew without testing—that if she bypassed it, jumped right to the base of his spine ... it would find her there, too.

But she had pushed. Pushed and pushed, until she was sobbing for breath.

Still, that wall did not move.

It only seemed to laugh, quietly and sibilantly, the sound laced with ancient ice and malice.

She'd hurled her magic against the wall, letting its swarm of burning white lights attack in wave after wave, but—nothing.

And only at the end, when her magic could find no crack, no crevice to slide into ... Only when she made to pull back did that dark wall seem to transform.

To morph into something ... Other.

Yrene's magic had turned brittle before it. Any spark of defiance in the wake of that healer's death had cooled. And she could not see, did not dare to look at what she felt gathering there, what filled the dark with voices, as if they were echoing down a long hall.

But it had loomed, and she had slid a glance over her shoulder.

The dark wall was alive. Swimming with images, one after another. As if she were looking through someone's eyes. She knew on instinct they did not belong to Lord Chaol.

A fortress of dark stone jutted up amid ash-colored, barren mountains, its towers sharp as lances, its edges and parapets hard and slicing. Beyond it, coating the vales and plains amid the mountains, an army rippled away into the distance, more campfires than she could count.

And she knew the name for this place, the assembled host. Heard the name thunder through her mind as if it were the beat of a hammer on anvil.

Morath.

She'd pulled out. Had yanked herself back to the light and heavy heat.

Morath—whether it was some true memory, left by whatever power had struck him; whether it was something the darkness conjured from her own darkest terrors ...

Not real. At least not in this room, with its streaming sunlight and chattering fountain in the garden beyond. But if it was indeed a true portrayal of the armies that Lord Chaol had mentioned yesterday ...

That was what she would face. The victims of that host, possibly even the soldiers within it, should things go very wrong.

That was what awaited her back home.

Not now—she would not think about this now, with him here. Fretting about it, reminding him of what he must face, what might be sweeping down upon his friends as they sat here ... Not helpful. To either of them.

So Yrene sat there on the rug, forcing her trembling to abate with each deep

breath she inhaled through her nose and out her mouth, letting her magic settle and refill within her as she calmed her mind. Letting Lord Chaol pant on the couch behind her, neither of them saying a word.

No, this would not be a usual healing.

But perhaps delaying her return, remaining here to heal him for however long it took ... There might be others like him on those battlefields—suffering from similar injuries. Learning to face this now, however harrowing ... Yes, this delay might turn fruitful. If she could stomach, if she could endure, that darkness again. Find some way to shatter it.

Go where you fear to tread.

Indeed.

Her eyes drifted closed. At some point, the servant girl had come back with the ingredients Yrene had invented. Had taken one look at them and vanished.

It had been hours ago. Days ago.

Hunger was a tight knot in her belly—a strangely mortal feeling compared to the hours spent attacking that blackness, only half aware of the hand she'd placed on his back, of the screaming that came from him every time her magic shoved against that wall.

He had not once asked her to stop. Had not begged for reprieve.

Shaking fingers brushed her shoulder. “Are ... you ...” Each of his words was a burnt rasp. She'd have to get him peppermint tea with honey. She should call to the servant—if she could remember to speak. Muster the voice herself. “... all right?”

Yrene cracked her eyelids open as his hand settled on her shoulder. Not from any affection or concern, but because she had a feeling that the exhaustion lay so heavily upon him that he couldn't move it again.

And she was drained enough that she couldn't muster the strength to brush off that touch, as she'd done earlier. “I should ask *you* if you're all right,” she managed to say, voice raw. “Anything?”

“No.” The sheer lack of emotion behind the word told her enough of his thoughts, his disappointment. He paused for a few heartbeats before he repeated, “No.”

She closed her eyes again. This could take weeks. Months. Especially if she did not find some way to shove back that wall of darkness.

She tried and failed to move her legs. “I should get you—”

“Rest.”

The hand tightened on her shoulder.

“Rest,” he said again.

“You’re done for the day,” she said. “No additional exercise—”

“I mean—you. *Rest.*” Each word was labored.

Yrene dragged her stare toward the large clock in the corner. Blinked once. Twice.

Five.

They had been here for *five* hours—

He had endured it all that time. Five *hours* of this agony—

The thought alone had her drawing up her legs. Groaning as she braced a hand on the low-lying table and rallied her strength, pushing up, up, until she was standing. Weaving on her feet, but—standing.

His arms slid beneath him, the muscles of his bare back rippling as he tried to push himself up. “Don’t,” she said.

He did so anyway. The considerable muscles in his arms and chest did not fail him as he shoved upward, until he was sitting. Staring at her, glassy-eyed.

Yrene rasped, “You need—tea.”

“Kadja.”

The name was little more than a push of breath.

The servant immediately appeared. Too quickly.

Yrene studied her closely as the girl slipped in. She’d been listening. Waiting.

Yrene did not bother to smile as she said, “Peppermint tea. Lots of honey.”

Chaol added, “Two of them.”

Yrene gave him a look, but sank onto the couch beside him. The cushions were slightly damp—with his sweat, she realized as she saw it gleaming on the contours of his bronzed chest.

She shut her eyes—just for a moment.

She didn’t realize it was far longer than that until Kadja was setting two delicate teacups before them, a small iron kettle steaming in the center of the table. The woman poured generous amounts of honey into both, and Yrene’s mouth was too dry, tongue too heavy, to bother telling her to stop or she’d make them ill from the sweetness.

The servant stirred both in silence, then handed the first cup to Chaol.

He merely passed it to Yrene.

She was too tired to object as she wrapped her hands around it, trying to rally the strength to raise it to her lips.

He seemed to sense it.

He told Kadja to leave his cup on the table. Told her to go.

Yrene watched as through a distant window while Chaol took her cup and lifted it to her lips.

She debated shoving his hand out of her face.

Yes, she’d work with him; no, he was not the monster she’d initially suspected he’d be, not in the way she’d seen men be; but letting him this close, letting him *tend* to her like this ...

“You can either drink it,” he said, his voice a low growl, “or we can sit like this for the next few hours.”

She slid her eyes to him. Found his stare to be level—clear, despite the exhaustion.

She said nothing.

“So, that’s the line,” Chaol murmured, more to himself than her. “You can stomach helping me, but I can’t return the favor. Or can’t do anything that steps

beyond your idea of what—who I am.”

He was more astute than most people likely gave him credit for.

She had a feeling the hardness in his rich brown eyes was mirrored in her own.

“Drink.” Pure command laced his voice—a man used to being obeyed, to giving orders. “Resent me all you want, but drink the damn thing.”

And it was the faint kernel of worry in his eyes ...

A man used to being obeyed, yes, but a man also inclined to care for others. Look after them. Driven to do it by a compulsion he couldn't leash, couldn't train out of him. Couldn't have broken out of him.

Yrene parted her lips, a silent yielding.

Gently, he set the porcelain teacup against her mouth and tipped it for her.

She sipped once. He murmured in encouragement. She did so again.

So tired. She had never been so tired in her *life*—

Chaol pushed the cup against her mouth a third time, and she drank a full gulp.

Enough. He needed it more than she did—

He sensed she was likely to bark at him, withdrew the cup from her mouth, and merely sipped it. One gulp. Two.

He drained it and grabbed the other one, offering her the first sips again before he took the dregs.

Insufferable man.

Yrene must have said as much, because a half smile kicked up on one side of his face. “You're not the first to call me that,” he said, his voice smoother. Less hoarse.

“I won't be the last, I'm sure,” she muttered.

Chaol simply gave her that half smile again and stretched to refill both cups. He added the honey himself—less than Kadja had. The right amount. He stirred them, his hands steady.

“I can do it,” Yrene tried to say.

“So can I,” was all he said.

She managed to hold the cup this time. He made sure she was well onto drinking hers before he lifted his own to his lips.

“I should go.” The thought of getting out of the palace, let alone the trek to the Torre, then the walk up the stairs to her rooms ...

“Rest. Eat—you must be starving.”

She eyed him. “You’re not?” He’d exercised heavily before she’d arrived; he had to be famished from that alone.

“I am. But I don’t think I can wait for dinner.” He added, “You could join me.”

It was one thing to heal him, work with him, let him serve her tea. But to dine with him, the man who had served that butcher, the man who had worked for him while that dark army was amassed down in Morath ... There it was. That smoke in her nose, the crackle of flame and screaming.

Yrene leaned forward to set her cup on the table. Then stood. Every movement was stiff, sore. “I need to return to the Torre,” she said, knees wobbling. “The vigil is at sundown.” Still a good hour from now, thankfully.

He noted her swaying and reached for her, but she stepped out of his range. “I’ll leave the supplies.” Because the thought of lugging that heavy bag back ...

“Let me arrange a carriage for you.”

“I can ask at the front gate,” she said. If someone was hunting her, she’d opt for the safety of a carriage.

She had to grip the furniture as she passed to keep upright. The distance to the door seemed eternal.

“Yrene.”

She could barely stand at the door, but she paused to look back.

“The lesson tomorrow.” The focus had already returned to those brown eyes. “Where do you want me to meet you?”

She debated calling it off. Wondered what she'd been thinking, asking him of all people to come.

But ... five hours. Five hours of agony, and he had not broken.

Perhaps it was for that alone that she had declined dinner. If he had not broken, then she would not break—not in seeing him as anything but what he was. What he'd served.

“I'll meet you in the main courtyard at sunrise.”

Mustering the strength to walk was an effort, but she did it. Put one foot in front of the other.

Left him alone in that room, still staring after her.

Five hours of agony, and she'd known it had not all been physical.

She had sensed, shoving against that wall, that the darkness had also showed him things on the other side of it.

Glimmers had sometimes shivered past her. Nothing she could make out, but they felt ... they had *felt* like memories. Nightmares. Perhaps both.

Yet he had not asked her to stop.

And part of Yrene wondered, as she trudged through the palace, if Lord Chaol had not asked her to stop not just because he'd learned how to manage pain, but also because he somehow felt he deserved it.



Everything hurt.

Chaol did not let himself think about what he had seen. What had flashed through his mind as that pain had wracked him, burned and flayed and shattered him. What—and who he'd seen. The body on the bed. The collar on a throat. The head that had rolled.

He could not escape them. Not while Yrene had worked.

So the pain had ripped through him, so he had seen it, over and over.

So he had roared and screamed and bellowed.

She'd stopped only when she'd slid to the floor.

He'd been left hollow. Void.

She still had not wanted to spend more than a moment necessary with him.

He didn't blame her.

Not that it mattered. Though he reminded himself that she'd asked him to help tomorrow.

In whatever way he could.

Chaol ate his meal where Yrene had left him, still in his undershorts. Kadja didn't seem to notice or care, and he was too aching and tired to bother with modesty.

Aelin would likely have laughed to see him now. The man who had stumbled out of her room after she'd declared that her cycle had arrived. Now sitting in this fine room, mostly naked and not giving a shit about it.

Nesryn returned before sundown, her face flushed and hair windblown. One look at her tentative smile told him enough. At least she'd been somewhat successful with Sartaq. Perhaps she'd manage to do what it seemed he himself was failing to: raising a host to bring back home.

He'd meant to speak to the khagan today—about the threat last night's attack had posed. Meant to, and yet it was now late enough to prevent arranging such a meeting.

He barely heard Nesryn as she whispered about Sartaq's possible sympathy. Her ride on his magnificent ruk. Exhaustion weighed on him so heavily he could hardly keep his eyes open, even while he pictured those ruks squaring off against Ironteeth witches and wyverns, even while he debated who might survive such battles.

But he managed to give the order that curdled on his tongue: *Go hunting, Nesryn.*

If one of Erawan's Valg minions had indeed come to Antica, time was not on their side. Every step, every request might be reported back to Erawan. And if

they were pursuing Yrene, either for reading up on the Valg or for healing the Hand of the King of Adarlan ... He didn't trust anyone here enough to ask them to do this. Anyone other than Nesryn.

Nesryn had nodded at his request. Had understood why he'd nearly spat it out. To let her go into danger, to *hunt* that sort of danger ...

But she'd done it before in Rifthold. She reminded him of that—gently. Sleep beckoned, turning his body foreign and heavy, but he managed to make his final request: *Be careful.*

Chaol didn't resist when she helped him into the chair, then wheeled him into his room. He tried and failed to lift himself into bed, and was only vaguely aware of her and Kadja hauling him onto it like a slab of meat.

Yrene—she never did such things. Never wheeled him when he could do so himself. Constantly told him to move himself instead.

He wondered why. Was too damn tired to wonder why.

Nesryn said she would make his apologies at dinner, and went to change. He wondered if the servants heard the whine of the whetstone against her blades from her bedroom door.

He was asleep before she left, the clock in the sitting room distantly chiming seven.



No one paid Nesryn much heed at dinner that night. And no one paid her any heed later, when she donned her fighting knives, sword, and bow and quiver, and slipped into the city streets.

Not even the khagan's wife.

As Nesryn stalked by a large stone garden on her way out of the palace, a glimmer of white caught her eye—and sent her ducking behind one of the pillars flanking the courtyard.

Within a heartbeat, she removed her hand from the long knife at her side.

Clad in white silk, her long curtain of dark hair unbound, the Grand Empress strolled, silent and grave as a wraith, down a walkway wending through the rock formations of the garden. Only moonlight filled the space—moonlight and shadow, as the empress strode alone and unnoticed, her simple gown flowing behind her as if on a phantom wind.

White for grief—for death.

The Grand Empress's face was unadorned, her coloring far paler than that of her children. No joy limned her features; no life. No interest in either.

Nesryn lingered in the shadows of the pillar, watching the woman drift farther away, as if she were wandering the paths of some dreamscape. Or perhaps some empty, barren hell.

Nesryn wondered if it was at all similar to the ones she herself had walked during those initial months after her mother's passing. Wondered if the days also bled together for the Grand Empress, if food was ash on her tongue and sleep was both craved and elusive.

Only when the khagan's wife strode behind a large boulder, vanishing from sight, did Nesryn continue on, her steps a little heavier.

Antica under the full moon was a wash of blues and silvers, interrupted by the golden glow of lanterns hanging from public dining rooms and the carts of vendors selling *kahve* and treats. A few performers plucked out melodies on lutes and drums, a few gifted enough to make Nesryn wish she could pause, but stealth and speed were her allies tonight.

She stalked through the shadows, sorting through the sounds of the city.

Various temples were interspersed amongst the main thoroughfares: some crafted of marble pillars, some beneath peaked wooden roofs and painted columns, some mere courtyards filled with pools or rock gardens or sleeping animals. Thirty-six gods watched over this city—and there were thrice as many temples to them scattered throughout.

And with each one Nesryn passed, she wondered if those gods were peering

out from the pillars or behind the carved rocks; if they watched from the eaves of that sloped roof, or from behind the spotted cat's eyes where it lay half awake on the temple steps.

She beseeched all of them to make her feet swift and silent, to guide her where she needed to go while she prowled the streets.

If a Valg agent had come to this continent—or worse, a possible Valg prince ... Nesryn scanned the rooftops and the gargantuan pillar of the Torre. It gleamed bone white in the moonlight, a beacon watching over this city, the healers within.

Chaol and Yrene had made no progress today, but—it was fine. Nesryn reminded herself, again and again, that it was fine. These things took a while, even if Yrene ... It was clear she had some personal reservations regarding Chaol's heritage. His former role in the empire.

Nesryn paused near an alley entrance while a band of young revelers staggered past, singing bawdy songs that would surely make her aunt scold them. And later hum along herself.

As she monitored the alley, the bordering, flat rooftops, Nesryn's attention snagged on a rough carving in the earthen brick wall. An owl at rest, its wings tucked in, those unearthly large eyes wide and eternally unblinking. Perhaps no more than vandalism, yet she brushed a gloved hand over it, tracing the lines etched into the building's side.

Antica's owls. They were everywhere in this city, tribute to the goddess worshipped perhaps more than any other of the thirty-six. No chief god ruled the southern continent, yet Silba ... Nesryn again studied the mighty tower, shining brighter than the palace on the opposite end of the city. Silba reigned unchallenged here. For anyone to break into that Torre, to *kill* one of the healers, they had to be desperate. Or utterly insane.

Or a Valg demon, with no fear of the gods—only of their master's wrath if they should fail.

But if she were a Valg in this city, where to hide? Where to lurk?

Canals ran beneath some of the homes, but it was not like the vast sewer network of Rifthold. Yet perhaps if she studied the Torre's walls ...

Nesryn aimed for the gleaming tower, the Torre looming with each nearing step. She paused in the shadows beside one of the homes across the street from the solid wall that enclosed the Torre's entire compound.

Torches flickered along brackets in the pale wall, guards stationed every few feet. And atop it. Royal guards, judging from their colors, and Torre guards in their cornflower blue and yellow—so many that none would get by without notice. Nesryn studied the iron gates, now sealed for the night.

“Were they open last night, is the answer no guard wants to yield.”

Nesryn whirled, her knife angled low and up.

Prince Sartaq leaned against the building wall a few feet behind her, his gaze on the looming Torre. Twin swords peeked above his broad shoulders, and long knives hung from his belt. He'd changed from the finery of dinner back into his flying leathers—again reinforced with steel at the shoulders, silver gauntlets at his wrists, and a black scarf at his neck. No, not scarf—but a cloth to pull over his mouth and nose when the heavy hood of his cloak was on. To remain anonymous, unmarked.

She sheathed her knife. “Were you following me?”

The prince flicked his dark, calm eyes to her. “You didn't exactly try to be inconspicuous when you left through the front gate, armed to the teeth.”

Nesryn turned toward the Torre walls. “I have no reason to hide what I'm doing.”

“You think whoever attacked the healers is just going to be strolling around?” His boots were barely a scrape against the ancient stones as he approached her side.

“I thought to investigate how they might have gotten in. Get a better sense of the layout and where they'd likely find appealing to hide.”

A pause. “You sound as if you know your prey intimately.” *And didn’t think to mention this to me during our ride this morning*, was the unspoken rest.

Nesryn glanced sidelong at Sartaq. “I wish I could say otherwise, but I do. If the attack was made by whom we suspect ... I spent much of this spring and summer hunting their kind in Rifthold.”

Sartaq watched the wall for a long minute. He said quietly, “How bad was it?”

Nesryn swallowed as the images flickered: the bodies and the sewers and the glass castle exploding, a wall of death flying for her—

“Captain Faliq.”

A gentle prod. A softer tone than she’d expect from a warrior-prince.

“What did your spies tell you?”

Sartaq’s jaw tightened, shadows crossing his face before he said, “They reported that Rifthold was full of terrors. People who were not *people*. Beasts from Vanth’s darkest dreams.”

Vanth—Goddess of the Dead. Her presence in this city predated even Silba’s healers, her worshippers a secretive sect that even the khagan and his predecessors feared and respected, despite her rituals being wholly different from the Eternal Sky to which the khagan and the Darghan believed they returned. Nesryn had walked swiftly past Vanth’s dark-stoned temple earlier, the entrance marked only by a set of onyx steps descending into a subterranean chamber lit with bone-white candles.

“I can see that none of this sounds outlandish to you,” said Sartaq.

“A year ago, it might have.”

Sartaq’s gaze swept over her weapons. “So you truly faced such horrors, then.”

“Yes,” Nesryn admitted. “For whatever good it did, considering the city is now held by them.” The words came out as bitterly as they felt.

Sartaq considered. “Most would have fled, rather than face them at all.”

She didn't feel like confirming or denying such a statement, no doubt meant to console her. A kind effort from a man who did not need to do such things. She found herself saying, "I—I saw your mother earlier. Walking alone through a garden."

Sartaq's eyes shuttered. "Oh?"

A careful question.

Nesryn wondered if she perhaps should have held her tongue, but she continued, "I only mention it in case ... in case it is something you might need, might want to know."

"Was there a guard? A handmaiden with her?"

"None that I saw."

That was indeed worry tightening his face as he leaned against the wall of the building. "Thank you for the report."

It was not her place to ask about it—not for anyone, and certainly not for the most powerful family in the world. But Nesryn said quietly, "My mother died when I was thirteen." She gazed up at the near-glowing Torre. "The old king ... you know what he did to those with magic. To healers gifted with it. So there was no one who could save my mother from the wasting sickness that crept up on her. The healer we managed to find admitted to us that it was likely from a growth inside my mother's breast. That she might have been able to cure her before magic vanished. Before it was forbidden."

She had never told anyone outside of her family this story. Wasn't sure why she was really telling him now, but she went on, "My father wanted to get her on a boat to sail here. Was desperate to. But war had broken out up and down our lands. Ships were conscripted into Adarlan's service, and she was too sick to risk a land journey all the way down to Eyllwe to try to cross there. My father combed through every map, every trade route. By the time he found a merchant who would sail with them—just the two of them—to Antica ... My mother was so sick she could not be moved. She would not have made it here, even if they'd

gotten on the boat.”

Sartaq watched her, face unreadable, while she spoke.

Nesryn slid her hands into her pockets. “So she stayed. And we were all there when she ... when it was over.” That old grief wrapped around her, burning her eyes. “It took me a few years to feel right again,” she said after a moment. “Two years before I started noticing things like the sun on my face, or the taste of food—started enjoying them again. My father ... he held us together. My sister and I. If he mourned, he did not let us see it. He filled our house with as much joy as he could.”

She fell silent, unsure how to explain what she’d meant by starting down this road.

Sartaq said at last, “Where are they now? After the attack on Rifthold?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, blowing out a breath. “They got out, but ... I don’t know where they fled, or if they will be able to make it here, with so many horrors filling the world.”

Sartaq fell quiet for a long minute, and Nesryn spent every second of it wishing she’d just kept her mouth shut. Then the prince said, “I will send word—discreetly.” He pushed off the wall. “For my spies to keep an eye out for the Faliq family, and to aid them, should they pass their way, in any form they can to safer harbors.”

Her chest tightened to the point of pain, but she managed to say, “Thank you.” It was a generous offer. More than generous.

Sartaq added, “I am sorry—for your loss. As long ago as it was. I ... As a warrior, I grew up walking hand-in-hand with Death. And yet this one ... It has been harder to endure than others. And my mother’s grief perhaps even harder to face than my own.” He shook his head, the moonlight dancing on his black hair, and said with forced lightness, “Why do you think I was so eager to run out after you into the night?”

Nesryn, despite herself, offered him a slight smile in return.

Sartaq lifted a brow. “Though it would help to know what, exactly, I’m supposed to be looking for.”

Nesryn debated what to tell him—debated his very presence here.

He gave a low, soft laugh when her hesitation went on a moment too long. “You think I’m the one who attacked that healer? After I was the one who told you about it this morning?”

Nesryn bowed her head. “I mean no disrespect.” Even if she’d seen another prince enslaved this spring—had fired an arrow at a queen to keep him alive. “Your spies were correct. Rifthold was ... I would not wish to see Antica suffer through anything similar.”

“And you’re convinced the attack at the Torre was just the start?”

“I’m out here, aren’t I?”

Silence.

Nesryn added, “If anyone, familiar or foreign, offers you a black ring or collars, if you see anyone with something like it ... Do not hesitate. Not for a heartbeat. Strike fast, and true. Beheading is the only thing that keeps them down. The person within them is gone. Don’t try to save them—or it will be you who winds up enslaved as well.”

Sartaq’s attention drifted to the sword at her side, the bow and quiver strapped to her back. He said quietly, “Tell me everything that you know.”

“I can’t.”

The refusal alone could end her life, but Sartaq nodded thoughtfully. “Tell me what you can, then.”

So she did. Standing in the shadows beyond the Torre walls, she explained everything she could, save for the keys and gates, and Dorian’s enslavement, as well as that of the former king.

When she’d finished, Sartaq’s face had not changed, though he rubbed at his jaw. “When did you plan to tell my father this?”

“As soon as he’d grant us a private meeting.”

Sartaq swore, low and creative. “With my sister’s death ... It’s been harder for him than he’ll admit to return to our usual rhythms. He will not take my counsel. Or anyone else’s.”

It was the worry in the prince’s tone—and sorrow—that made Nesryn say, “I’m sorry.”

Sartaq shook his head. “I must think on what you told me. There are places within this continent, near my people’s homeland ...” He rubbed at his neck. “When I was a boy, they told stories at the aeries of similar horrors.” He said, more to himself than her, “Perhaps it is time I paid my hearth-mother a visit. To hear her stories again. And how that ancient threat was dealt with, long ago. Especially if it is now stirring once more.”

A record of the Valg ... here? Her family had never told her any such tales, but then her own people had hailed from distant reaches of the continent. If the ruk riders had somehow either known of the Valg or even faced them ...

Footsteps scuffed on the street beyond, and they pressed into the walls of the alley, hands on their sword hilts. But it was only a drunk stumbling home for the night, saluting the Torre guards along the wall as he passed, earning a few laughing grins in return.

“Are there canals beneath here—nearby sewers that might connect to the Torre?” Her question was little more than a push of air.

“I don’t know,” Sartaq admitted with equal quiet. He smiled grimly as he pointed toward an ancient grate in the sloped stones of the alley. “But it would be my honor to accompany you in discovering one.”

14

Yrene didn't care if someone came to murder her in her sleep.

By the time the solemn, candlelit vigil in the Torre courtyard had finished, by the time Yrene crawled to her room near the top of the Torre, two acolytes propping her between them after she'd collapsed at the base of the stairs, she didn't care about anything.

Cook brought her dinner in bed. Yrene managed a bite before she passed out.

She awoke past midnight with her fork on her chest and spiced, slow-cooked chicken staining her favorite blue gown.

She groaned, but felt slightly more alive. Enough so that she sat up in the near-darkness of her tower room, and rose only to see to her needs and haul her tiny desk in front of the door. She stacked books and any spare objects she could find atop it, checked the locks twice, and stumbled back into bed, still fully clothed.

She awoke at sunrise.

Precisely when she said she'd meet Lord Chaol.

Cursing, Yrene hauled away the desk, the books, undid the locks, and flung herself down the tower stairs.

She'd ordered the brace for his horse to be brought directly to the castle courtyard, and she'd left her supplies at his room yesterday, so there was nothing for her to take beyond her own frantic self as she hurtled down the endless spiral of the Torre, scowling at the carved owls passing silent judgment while she flew

by doors now beginning to open to reveal sleepy-faced healers and acolytes blinking blearily at her.

Yrene thanked Silba for the restorative powers of deep, dreamless sleep as she sprinted across the complex grounds, past the lavender-lined pathways, through the just-opened gates.

Antica was stirring, the streets mercifully quiet as she raced for the palace perched on its other side. She arrived in the courtyard thirty minutes late, gasping for breath, sweat pooling in every possible crevice of her body.

Lord Westfall had started without her.

Gulping down air, Yrene lingered by the towering bronze gates, the shadows still lying thick with the sun so low on the horizon, and watched the unfolding mounting.

As she'd specified, the patient-looking roan mare was on the shorter side—the perfect height for him to reach the saddle horn with an upraised hand. Which he was currently doing, Yrene noted with no small degree of satisfaction. But the rest ...

Well, it seemed he'd decided *not* to use the wooden ramp that she'd also ordered crafted in lieu of a stepped mounting block. The mounting ramp now sat by the still-shadowed horse pens against the eastern wall of the courtyard—as if he'd outright refused to even go near it, and instead had them bring over the horse. To mount the mare on his own.

It didn't surprise her one bit.

Chaol did not look at any of the guards clustered around him—at least, more than was necessary. With their backs to her, she could only identify one or two by name, but—

One stepped in silently to let Chaol brace his other hand on his armor-clad shoulder as the lord pushed himself upright in a mighty heave. The mare stood patiently while his right hand gripped the saddle horn to balance himself—

She stepped forward just as Lord Westfall pushed off the guard's shoulder

and into the saddle, the guard stepping in close as he did it. It left him sitting sidesaddle, but Chaol still did not give the guard much thanks beyond a tight nod.

Instead, he silently studied the saddle before him, assessing how he was to get one leg over the other side of the horse. Color stained his cheeks, his jaw a tight line. The guards lingered, and he stiffened, tighter and tighter—

But then he moved again, leaning back in the saddle and hauling his right leg over the horn. The guard who'd helped him lunged to support his back, another darting from the other side to keep him from tumbling off, but Chaol's torso remained solid. Unwavering.

His muscle control was extraordinary. A man who had trained that body to obey him no matter what, even now.

And—he was in the saddle.

Chaol murmured something to the guards that had them backing off as he leaned to either side to buckle the straps of the brace around his legs. It had been set into the saddle—the fit perfect based on the estimations she'd given the woman in the workshop—designed to stabilize his legs, replacing where his thighs would have clamped to keep him steady. Just until he became used to riding. He might very well not need them at all, but ... it was better to be safe for this first ride.

Yrene wiped her sweaty forehead and approached, offering a word of thanks to the guards, who now filtered back to their posts. The one who'd directly helped Lord Westfall turned in her direction, and Yrene gave him a broad smile as she said in Halha, “Good morning, Shen.”

The young guard returned her smile as he continued toward the small stables in the far shadows of the courtyard, winking at her as he passed by. “Morning, Yrene.”

She found Chaol sitting upright in the saddle when she faced ahead once more—that stiff posture and clenched jaw gone as he watched her approach.

Yrene straightened her dress, realizing just as she reached him that she still wore yesterday's clothes. Now with a giant red splotch on her chest.

Chaol took in the stain, then her hair—oh, gods, her *hair*—and only said, “Good morning.”

Yrene swallowed, still panting from her run. “I’m sorry I’m late.” Up close, the brace indeed blended in enough for most people not to notice. Especially with the way he carried himself.

He sat tall and proud on that horse, shoulders squared, hair still wet from his morning bath. Yrene swallowed again and inclined her head toward the unused mounting ramp across the courtyard. “That was also meant for your use, you know.”

He lifted his brows. “I doubt there will be one readily available on a battlefield,” he said, mouth twisting to the side. “So I might as well learn to mount on my own.”

Indeed. But even with the crisp golden dawn around them, what she’d glimpsed within his wound, the army they might both face, flashed before her, stretching the long shadows—

Motion caught her eye, snapping Yrene to alertness as Shen led a small white mare from those same shadows. Saddled and ready for her. She frowned at her dress.

“If I’m riding,” Chaol said simply, “so are you.” Perhaps *that* was what he’d muttered to the guards before they’d dispersed.

Yrene blurted, “I’m not—it’s been a while since I rode one.”

“If I can let four men help me onto this damned horse,” he said simply, the color still blooming in his cheeks, “then you can get on one, too.”

From the tone, she knew it must have been—embarrassing. She’d *seen* the expression on his face just now. But he’d done it. Gritted his teeth and done it.

And with the guards helping him ... She knew there were multiple reasons why he could barely glance at them. That it was not just the lone reminder of

what he'd once been that made him tense up in their presence, refuse to even consider training with them.

But that was not a conversation to be had now—not here, and not with the light starting to return to his eyes.

So Yrene hitched up her hem and let Shen help her onto the horse.

The skirts of her dress hiked up enough to reveal most of her legs, but she'd seen far more revealed here. In this very courtyard. Neither Shen nor any other guards so much as glanced her way. She turned to Chaol to order him to go ahead, but found his eyes on her.

On the leg exposed from ankle to mid thigh, paler than most of her golden-brown skin. She darkened easily in the sun, but it had been months since she'd gone swimming and basked in any sunlight.

Chaol noticed her attention and snapped his eyes up to hers. "You have a good seat," he told her, as clinically as she often remarked on the status of her patients' bodies.

Yrene gave him an exasperated look before nodding her thanks to Shen and nudging her horse into a walk. Chaol snapped the reins and did the same.

She kept one eye on him as they rode toward the courtyard gates.

The brace held. The saddle held.

He was peering down at it—then at the gates, at the city awakening beyond them, the tower jutting high above it all as if it were a hand raised in bold welcome.

Sunlight broke through the open archway, gilding them both, but Yrene could have sworn it was far more than the dawn that shone in the captain's brown eyes as they rode into the city.



It was not walking again, but it was better than the chair.

Better than better.

The brace was cumbersome, going against all his instincts as a rider, but ... it held him firm. Allowed him to guide Yrene through the gates, the healer clutching at the pommel every now and then, forgetting the reins entirely.

Well, he'd found one thing she wasn't so self-assured at.

The thought brought a small smile to his lips. Especially as she kept adjusting her skirts. For all she'd chided him about his modesty, flashing her legs had given her pause.

Men in the streets—workers and peddlers and city guards—looked twice. Looked their fill.

Until they noticed his stare and averted their eyes.

And Chaol made sure they did.

Just as he'd made sure the guards in the courtyard had kept their attention polite the moment she'd run in, huffing and puffing, sun-kissed and flushed. Even with the stain on her clothes, even wearing yesterday's dress and coated in a faint sheen of sweat.

It had been mortifying to be helped into the saddle like unruly baggage after he'd refused the mounting ramp—mortifying to see those guards in their pristine uniforms, the armor on their shoulders and hilts of their swords glinting in the early morning sunlight, all watching him fumble about. But he'd dealt with it. And then he found himself forgetting that entirely at the appreciative glances the guards gave her. No lady, beautiful or plain, young or old, deserved to be gawked at. And Yrene ...

Chaol kept his mare close beside hers. Met the stare of any man who glanced their way as they rode toward the towering spire of the Torre, the stones pale as cream in the morning light. Every single man swiftly found somewhere else to gape. Some even looked apologetic.

Whether Yrene noticed, he had no clue. She was too busy lunging for the saddle horn at any unexpected movements of the horse, too busy wincing as the mare increased her pace up a particularly steep street, causing her to sway and

slide back in her saddle.

“Lean forward,” he instructed her. “Balance your weight.” He did the same—as much as the brace allowed.

Their horses slowly plowed up the streets, heads bobbing as they worked.

Yrene gave him a sharp glare. “I *do* know those things.”

He lifted his brows in a look that said, *Could have fooled me.*

She scowled, but faced ahead. Leaned forward, as he’d instructed her.

He’d been sleeping like the dead when Nesryn returned late last night—but she’d roused him long enough to say she hadn’t discovered anything in regard to potential Valg in the city. No sewers connected to the Torre, and with the heavy guard at the walls, no one was getting in that way. He’d managed to hold on to consciousness long enough to thank her, and hear her promise to keep hunting today.

But this cloudless, bright day ... definitely not the Valg’s preferred darkness. Aelin had told him how the Valg princes could summon darkness for themselves—darkness that struck down any living creature in its path, draining them dry. But even one Valg in this city, regardless of whether they were a prince or an ordinary grunt ...

Chaol pushed the thought from his mind, frowning up at the mammoth structure that grew more imposing with each street they crossed.

“Towers,” he mused, glancing toward Yrene. “Is it coincidence you bear that name, or did your ancestors once hail from the Torre?”

Her knuckles were white as she gripped the pommel, as if turning to look at him would send her toppling off. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “My—it was knowledge that I never learned.”

He considered the words, the way she squinted at the bright pillar of the tower ahead rather than meet his stare. A child of Fenharrow. He didn’t dare ask why she might not know the answer. Where her family was.

Instead, he jerked his chin to the ring on her finger. “Does the fake wedding

band really work?”

She examined the ancient, scuffed ring. “I wish I could say otherwise, but it does.”

“You encounter that behavior here?” *In this wondrous city?*

“Very, very rarely.” She wriggled her fingers before settling them around the saddle’s pommel again. “But it’s an old habit from home.”

For a heartbeat, he recalled an assassin in a bloody white gown, collapsing at the entrance to the barracks. Recalled the poisoned blade the man had sliced her with—and had used with countless others.

“I’m glad,” he said after a moment. “That you don’t need to fear such things here.” Even the guards, for all their ogling, had been respectful. She’d even addressed one by name—and his returned warmth had been genuine.

Yrene clenched the saddle horn again. “The khagan holds all people accountable to the rule of the law, whether they’re servants or princes.”

It shouldn’t have been such a novel concept, yet ... Chaol blinked. “Truly?”

Yrene shrugged. “As far as I have heard and observed. Lords cannot buy their way out of crimes committed, nor rely on their family names to bail them out. And would-be criminals in the streets see the exacting hand of justice and rarely dare to tempt it.” A pause. “Did you ...”

He knew what she’d balked at asking. “I was ordered to release or look the other way for nobility who had committed crimes. At least, the ones who were of value in court and in the king’s armies.”

She studied the pommel before her. “And your new king?”

“He is different.”

If he was alive. If he had made it out of Rifthold. Chaol forced himself to add, “Dorian has long studied and admired the khaganate. Perhaps he’ll put some of its policies into effect.”

A long, assessing glance now. “Do you think the khagan will ally with you?”

He hadn’t told her that, but it was fairly obvious why he’d come, he

supposed. “I can only hope.”

“Would his forces make that much of a difference against ... the powers you mentioned?”

Chaol repeated, “I can only hope.” He couldn’t bring himself to voice the truth—that their armies were few and scattered, if they existed at all. Compared to the gathering might of Morath ...

“What happened these months?” A quiet, careful question.

“Trying to trick me into talking?”

“I want to know.”

“It’s nothing worth telling.” His story wasn’t worth telling at all. Not a single part of it.

She fell silent, the clapping of their horses’ hooves the only sound for a block. Then, “You will need to talk about it. At some point. I ... beheld glimpses of it within you yesterday.”

“Isn’t that enough?” The question was sharp as the knife at his side.

“Not if it is what the thing inside you feeds on. Not if claiming ownership of it might help.”

“And you’re so certain of this?” He should mind his tongue, he knew that, but—

Yrene straightened in her saddle. “The trauma of any injury requires some internal reflection during the healing and aftermath.”

“I don’t want it. Need it. I just want to stand—to walk again.”

She shook her head.

He charged on, “And what about you, then? How about we make a deal: you tell me all your deep, dark secrets, Yrene Towers, and I’ll tell you mine.”

Indignation lit those remarkable eyes as she glared at him. He glared right back.

Finally, Yrene snorted, smiling faintly. “You’re as stubborn as an ass.”

“I’ve been called worse,” he countered, the beginnings of a smile tugging on

his mouth.

“I’m not surprised.”

Chaol chuckled, catching the makings of a grin on her face before she ducked her head to hide it. As if sharing one with a son of Adarlan were such a crime.

Still, he eyed her for a long moment—the humor lingering on her face, the heavy, softly curling hair that was occasionally caught in the morning breeze off the sea. And found himself still smiling as something coiled tight in his chest began to loosen.

They rode the rest of the way to the Torre in silence, and Chaol tipped his head back as they neared, walking down a broad, sunny avenue that sloped upward to the hilltop complex.

The Torre was even more dominating up close.

It was broad, more of a keep than anything, but still rounded. Buildings flanked its sides, connected on lower levels. All enclosed by towering white walls, the iron gates—fashioned to look like an owl spreading its wings—thrown wide to reveal lavender bushes and flower beds lining the sand-colored gravel walkways. Not flower beds. Herb beds.

The smells of them opening to the morning sun filled his nose: basil and mint and sage and more of that lavender. Even their horses, hooves crunching on the walkways, seemed to sigh as they approached.

Guards in what he assumed were Torre colors—cornflower blue and yellow—let them pass without question, and Yrene bowed her head in thanks. They did not look at her legs. Did not either dare or have the inclination to disrespect. Chaol glanced away from them before he could meet their questioning stares.

Yrene took the lead, guiding them through an archway and into the complex courtyard. Windows of the three-story building wrapped around the courtyard gleamed with the light of the rising sun, but inside the courtyard itself ...

Beyond the murmur of awakening Antica outside the compound, beyond the hooves of their horses on the pale gravel, there was only the gurgle of twin

fountains anchored against parallel walls of the courtyard—their spouts shaped like screeching owl beaks, spewing water into deep basins below. Pale pink and purple flowers lined the walls between lemon trees, the beds tidy but left to grow as the plants willed.

It was one of the more serene places he had ever laid eyes on. And watching them approach ... Two dozen women in dresses of every color—though most of the simple make Yrene favored.

They stood in neat rows on the gravel, some barely more than children, some well into their prime. A few were elderly.

Including one woman, dark-skinned and white-haired, who strode from the front of the line and smiled broadly at Yrene. It was not a face that had ever held any beauty, but there was a light in the woman's eyes—a kindness and serenity that made Chaol blink in wonder.

All the others watched her, as if she were the axis around which they were ordered. Even Yrene, who smiled at the woman as she dismounted, looking grateful to be off the mare. One of the guards who had trailed them in came to retrieve the horse, but hesitated as Chaol remained astride.

Chaol ignored the man as Yrene finger-combed her tangled hair and spoke to the ancient woman in his tongue. "I take it the good crowd this morning is thanks to you?" Light words—perhaps an attempt at normalcy, considering what had happened in the library.

The old woman smiled—such warmth. She was brighter than the sun peeking above the compound walls. "The girls heard a rumor of a handsome lord coming to teach. I was practically trampled in the stampede down the stairs."

She cast a wry grin to three red-faced girls, no older than fifteen, who looked guiltily at their shoes. And then shot looks at him beneath their lashes that were anything but.

Chaol stifled a laugh.

Yrene turned to him, assessing the brace and the saddle as the crunch of

approaching wheels on gravel filled the courtyard.

The amusement faded. Dismounting in front of these women ...

Enough.

The word sounded through him.

If he could not endure it in front of a group of the world's best healers, then he would deserve to suffer. He had offered his help. He would give it.

For indeed, there were some younger girls in the back who were pale. Shifting on their feet. Nervous.

This sanctuary, this lovely place ... A shadow had crept over it.

He would do what he could to push it back.

"Lord Chaol Westfall," Yrene said to him, gesturing to the ancient woman, "may I present Hafiza, Healer on High of the Torre Cesme."

One of the blushing girls sighed at the sound of his name.

Yrene's eyes danced. But Chaol inclined his head to the old woman as she extended her hands up to him. The skin was leathery—as warm as her smile. She squeezed his fingers tightly. "As handsome as Yrene said."

"I said no such thing," Yrene hissed.

One of the girls giggled.

Yrene cut her a warning look, and Chaol lifted his brows before saying to Hafiza, "It is an honor and a pleasure, my lady."

"So dashing," one of the girls murmured behind him.

Wait until you see my dismount, he almost said.

Hafiza squeezed his hands once more and dropped them. She faced Yrene. Waiting.

Yrene only clapped her hands together and said to the girls assembled, "Lord Westfall has suffered a severe injury to his lower spine and finds walking difficult. Yesterday, Sindra in the workshop crafted this brace for him, based upon the designs from the horse-tribes in the steppes, who have long dealt with such injuries for their riders." She waved a hand to indicate his legs, the brace.

With every word, his shoulders stiffened. More and more.

“If you are faced with a patient in a similar situation,” Yrene went on, “the freedom of riding may be a pleasant alternative to a carriage or palanquin. Especially if they were used to a certain level of independence beforehand.” She added upon consideration, “Or even if they have faced mobility difficulties their entire lives—it may provide a positive option while you heal them.”

Little more than an experiment. Even the blushing girls had lost their smiles as they studied the brace. His legs.

Yrene asked them, “Who should like to assist Lord Westfall from his mount to his chair?”

A dozen hands shot up.

He tried to smile. Tried and failed.

Yrene pointed at a few, who rushed over. None looked up at him above the waist, or even bid him good morning.

Yrene lifted her voice as they crowded around her, making sure those assembled in the courtyard could also hear. “For patients completely immobilized, this may not be an option, but Lord Westfall retains the ability to move above his waist and can steer the horse with the reins. Balance and safety, of course, remain concerns, but another is that he retains use and sensation of his manhood—which also presents a few hiccups regarding the comfort of the brace itself.”

One of the younger girls let out a giggle at that, but most only nodded, looking directly at the area indicated, as if he had no clothes on whatsoever. Face heating, Chaol restrained the urge to cover himself.

Two young healers began unstrapping the brace, some examining the buckles and rods. Still they did not look him in the eye. As if he were some new toy—new lesson. Some oddity.

Yrene merely went on, “Mind you don’t jostle him too much when you—*careful.*”

He fought to keep his features distant, found himself missing the guards from the palace. Yrene gave the girls firm, solid directions as they tugged him down from the saddle.

He didn't try to help the acolytes, or fight them, when they pulled at his arms, someone going to steady his waist, the world tilting as they hauled him downward. But the weight of his body was too great, and he felt himself slide farther from the saddle, the drop to the ground looming, the sun a brand on his skin.

The girls grunted, someone going to the other side to help move his leg up and over the horse—or he thought so. He only knew it because he saw her head of curls just peek over the horse's side. She pushed, jutting his leg upward, and he hung there, three girls gritting their teeth while they tried to lower him, the others watching in observational silence—

One of the girls let out an *oomph* and lost her grip on his shoulder. The world plunged—

Strong, unfaltering hands caught him, his nose barely half a foot from the pale gravel as the other girls shuffled and grunted, trying to heft him up again. He'd come free of the horse, but his legs were now sprawled beneath him, as distant from him as the very top of the Torre, high above.

Roaring filled his head.

A sort of nakedness crept over him. Worse than sitting in his undershorts for hours. Worse than the bath with the servant.

Yrene, gripping his shoulder from where she'd just barely caught him in time, said to the healers, "That could have been better, girls. A great deal better, for many reasons." A sigh. "We can discuss what went wrong later, but for now, move him to the chair."

He could barely stand to hear her, listen to her, as he hung between those girls, most of whom were half his weight. Yrene stepped aside to let the girl who'd dropped him back into place, whistling sharply.

Wheels hissed on gravel from nearby. He didn't bother to look at the wheeled chair that an acolyte pushed closer. Didn't bother to speak as they settled him in it, the chair shuddering beneath his weight.

"*Careful.*" Yrene warned again.

The girls lingered, the rest of the courtyard still watching. Had it been seconds or minutes since this ordeal had begun? He clenched the arms of the chair as Yrene rattled off some directions and observations. Clenched the arms harder as one of the girls stooped to touch his booted feet, to *arrange* them for him.

Words rose up his throat, and he knew they'd burst from him, knew he could do little to stop his bellow to *back off* as that acolyte's fingers neared the dusty black leather—

Withered brown hands landed on the girl's wrist, halting her mere inches away.

Hafiza said calmly, "Let me."

The girls peeled back as Hafiza stooped to help him instead.

"Get the ladies ready, Yrene," Hafiza said over a slim shoulder, and Yrene obeyed, ushering them back into their lines.

The ancient woman's hands lingered on his boots—his feet, currently pointing in opposite directions. "Shall I do it, lord, or would you like to?"

Words failed him, and he wasn't certain he could use his hands without them shaking, so he gave the woman a nod of approval.

Hafiza straightened one foot, waiting until Yrene had walked a few steps away and begun giving stretching instructions to the ladies.

"This is a place for learning," Hafiza murmured. "Older students teach the younger." Even with her accent, he understood her perfectly. "It was Yrene's instinct, Lord Westfall, to show the girls what she did with the brace—to let them learn for themselves what it is to have a patient with similar difficulties. To receive this training, Yrene herself had to venture out onto the steppes. Many of

these girls might not have that opportunity. At least not for several years.”

Chaol met Hafiza’s eyes at last, finding the understanding in them more damning than being hauled off a horse by a group of girls half his weight.

“She means well, my Yrene.”

He didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure he had words.

Hafiza straightened his other foot. “There are many other scars, my lord. Beyond the one on her neck.”

He wanted to tell the old woman that he knew that too damn well.

But he shoved down that bareness, that simmering roar in his head.

He had made these ladies a promise to teach them, to help them.

Hafiza seemed to read that—sense it. She only patted his shoulder before she rose to her full height, groaning a bit, and walked back to the place left for her in line.

Yrene had turned toward him, stretching done, and scanned him. As if Hafiza’s lingering presence had indicated something she’d missed.

Her eyes settled on his, brows narrowing. *What’s wrong?*

He ignored the question within her look—ignored the bit of worry. Shoved whatever he felt down deep and rolled his chair toward her. Inch by inch. The gravel was not ideal, but he gritted his teeth. He’d given these ladies his word. He would not back down from it.

“Where did we leave off the last lesson?” Yrene asked a girl in the front.

“Eye gouge,” she said with a broad smile.

Chaol nearly choked.

“Right,” Yrene said, rubbing her hands together. “Someone demonstrate for me.”

He watched in silence as hands shot up, and Yrene selected one—a smaller-boned girl. Yrene took up the stance of attacker, grabbing the girl from the front with surprising intensity.

But the girl’s slim hands went right to Yrene’s face, thumbs to the corners of

her eyes.

Chaol started from his chair—or would have, had the girl not pulled back.

“And next?” Yrene merely asked.

“Hook in my thumbs like this”—the girl made the motion in the air between them for all to see—“and *pop*.”

Some of the girls laughed quietly at the accompanying *pop* the girl made with her mouth.

Aelin would have been beside herself with glee.

“Good,” Yrene said, and the girl strode back to her place in line. Yrene turned to him, that worry again flashing as she beheld whatever was in his eyes, and said, “This is our third lesson of this quarter. We have covered front-based attacks only so far. I usually have the guards come in as willing victims”—some snickers at that—“but today I would like for you to tell us what *you* think ladies, young and old, strong and frail, could do against any sort of attack. Your list of top maneuvers and tips, if you’d be so kind.”

He’d trained young men ready to shed blood—not heal people.

But defense was the first lesson he’d been taught, and had taught those young guards.

Before they’d wound up hanging from the castle gates.

Ress’s battered, unseeing face flashed into his mind.

What good had it done any of them when it mattered?

Not one. Not one of that core group he’d trusted and trained, worked with for years ... not one had survived. Brullo, his mentor and predecessor, had taught him all he knew—and what had it earned any of them? Anyone he’d encountered, he’d touched ... they’d suffered. The lives he’d sworn to protect—

The sun turned bleaching, the gurgle of the twin fountains a distant melody.

What good had *any* of it done for his city, his people, when it was sacked?

He looked up to find the lines of women watching him, curiosity on their faces.

Waiting.

There had been a moment, when he had hurled his sword into the Avery. When he had been unable to bear its weight at his side, in his hand, and had chucked it and everything the Captain of the Guard had been, had meant, into the dark, eddying waters.

He'd been sinking and drowning since. Long before his spine.

He wasn't certain if he'd even tried to swim. Not since that sword had gone into the river. Not since he'd left Dorian in that room with his father and told his friend—his brother—that he loved him, and knew it was good-bye. He'd ... left. In every sense of the word.

Chaol forced himself to take a breath. To try.

Yrene stepped up to his side as his silence stretched on, again looking so puzzled and concerned. As if she could not figure out why—*why* he might have been the least bit ... He shoved the thought down. And the others.

Shoved them down to the silt-thick bottom of the Avery, where that eagle-pommeled sword now lay, forgotten and rusting.

Chaol lifted his chin, looking each girl and woman and crone in the face. Healers and servants and librarians and cooks, Yrene had said.

“When an attacker comes at you,” he said at last, “they will likely try to move you somewhere else. *Never* let them do it. If you do, wherever they take you will be the last place you see.” He'd gone to enough murder sites in Rifthold, read and looked into enough cases, to know the truth in that. “If they try to move you from your current location, you make that your battleground.”

“We know that,” one of the blushing girls said. “That was Yrene's first lesson.”

Yrene nodded gravely at him. He again did not let himself look at her neck.

“Stomping on the instep?” He could barely manage a word to Yrene.

“First lesson also,” the same girl replied instead of Yrene.

“What about how debilitating it is to receive a blow to the groin?”

Nods all around. Yrene certainly knew her fair share of maneuvers.

Chaol smiled grimly. “What about ways to get a man my size or larger flipped onto their backs in less than two moves?”

Some of the girls smiled as they shook their heads. It wasn’t reassuring.

15

Yrene felt the anger simmering off Chaol as if it were heat rippling from a kettle.

Not at the girls and women. They adored him. Grinned and laughed, even as they concentrated on his thorough, precise lesson, even as the events in the library hung over them, the Torre, like a gray shroud. There had been many tears last night at the vigil—and a few red eyes still in the halls this morning as she'd hurtled past.

Mercifully, there had been no sign of either when Lord Chaol called in three guards to volunteer their bodies for the girls to flip into the gravel. Over and over.

The men agreed, perhaps because they knew that any injuries would be fussed over and patched up by the greatest healers outside Doranelle.

Chaol even returned their smiles, ladies and, to her shock, guards alike.

But Yrene ... she received none of them. Not one.

Chaol's face only went hard, eyes glinting with frost, whenever she stepped in to ask a question or watch him walk an acolyte through the motions. He was commanding, his unrelenting focus missing nothing. If they had so much as one foot in the wrong position, he caught it before they moved an inch.

The hour-long lesson ended with each one of them flipping a guard onto his back. The poor men limped off, smiling broadly. Mostly because Hafiza promised them a cask of ale each—and her strongest healing tonic. Which was better than any alcohol.

The women dispersed as the bells chimed ten, some to lessons, some to chores, some to patients. A few of the sillier girls lingered, batting their eyelashes toward Lord Westfall, one even looking inclined to perch in his lap before Hafiza drily reminded her of a pile of laundry with her name on it.

Before the Healer on High hobbled after the acolyte, Hafiza merely gave Yrene what she could have sworn was a warning, knowing look.

“Well,” Yrene said to Chaol when they were again alone—despite the gaggle of girls peering out one of the Torre windows. They noticed Yrene’s stare and snapped their heads back in, slamming the window with riotous giggles.

Silba save her from teenage girls.

She’d never been one—not like that. Not so carefree. She hadn’t even kissed a man until last autumn. Certainly had never giggled over one. She wished she had; wished for a lot of things that had ended with that pyre and those torches.

“That went better than expected,” Yrene said to Chaol, who was frowning up at the looming Torre. “I’m sure they’ll be begging me next week for you to return. If you’re interested, I suppose.”

He said nothing.

She swallowed. “I would like to try again today, if you’re up for it. Would you prefer I find a room here, or shall we ride back to the palace?”

He met her stare then. His eyes were dark. “The palace.”

Her stomach twisted at the icy tone. “All right,” was all she managed to say, and walked off in search of the guards and their horses.

They rode back in silence. They’d been quiet during portions of the ride over, but this was ... pointed. Heavy.

Yrene wracked her memory for what she might have said during the lesson—what she might have forgotten. Perhaps seeing the guards so active had reminded him of what he did not currently have. Perhaps just seeing the guards themselves had set him down this path.

She mused over it as they returned to the palace, while he was aided by Shen

and another guard into the awaiting chair. He offered only a tight smile in thanks.

Lord Chaol looked up at her over a shoulder, the morning heat rising enough to make the courtyard stifling. “Are you going to push it, or shall I?”

Yrene blinked.

“You can move it yourself just fine,” she said, her proverbial heels digging in at that tone.

“Perhaps you should ask one of your acolytes to do it. Or five of them. Or whatever number you deem fit to deal with an Adarlanian lord.”

She blinked again. Slowly. And didn’t give him any warning as she strode off at a clip. Not bothering to wait to see if he followed, or how fast he did.

The columns and halls and gardens of the palace passed in a blur. Yrene was so intent on reaching his rooms that she barely noticed someone had called her name.

It wasn’t until it was repeated a second time that she recognized it—and cringed.

By the time she turned, Kashin—clad in armor and sweating enough to reveal he’d likely been exercising with the palace guards—had reached her side.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said, his brown eyes immediately going to her chest. No—to the stain still on her dress. Kashin’s brows lifted. “If you want to send that to the laundry, I’m sure Hasar can lend you some clothes while it is cleaned.”

She’d forgotten she was still in it—the stained, wrinkled dress. Hadn’t really felt like she was quite as much of a mess until now. Hadn’t felt like a barnyard animal.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll manage.”

She took a step away, but Kashin said, “I heard about the assailant in the library. I arranged for additional guards to arrive at the Torre after sundown every night and stay until dawn. No one will get in without our notice.”

It was generous—kind. As he had always been with her. “Thank you.”

His face remained grave as he swallowed. Yrene braced herself for the words he’d voice, but Kashin only said, “Please be careful. I know you made your thoughts clear, but—”

“Kashin.”

“—it doesn’t change the fact that we are, or were, friends, Yrene.”

Yrene made herself meet his eyes. Made herself say, “Lord Westfall mentioned your ... thoughts about Tumelun.”

For a moment, Kashin glanced to the white banners streaming from the nearby window. She opened her mouth, perhaps to finally offer her condolences, to try to mend this thing that had fractured between them, but the prince said, “Then you understand how dire this threat may be.”

She nodded. “I do. And I will be careful.”

“Good,” he said simply. His face shifted into an easy smile, and for a heartbeat, Yrene wished she’d been able to feel anything beyond mere friendship. But it had never been that way with him, at least on her part. “How is the healing of Lord Westfall? Have you made progress?”

“Some,” she hedged. Insulting a prince, even one who was a former friend, by striding off was not wise, but the longer this conversation went on ... She took a breath. “I would like to stay and talk—”

“Then stay.” That smile broadened. Handsome—Kashin was truly a handsome man. If he had been anyone else, bore any other title—

She shook her head, offering a tight smile. “Lord Westfall is expecting me.”

“I heard you rode with him this morning to the Torre. Did he not come back with you?”

She tried to keep the pleading expression off her face as she bobbed a curtsy. “I have to go. Thank you again for the concern—and the guards, Prince.”

The title hung between them, peeling like a struck bell.

But Yrene walked on, feeling Kashin’s stare until she rounded a corner.

She leaned against the wall, closing her eyes and exhaling deeply. Fool. So many others would call her a fool and yet—

“I almost feel bad for the man.”

She opened her eyes to find Chaol, breathless and eyes still smoldering, wheeling himself around the corner.

“Of course,” he went on, “I was far back enough that I couldn’t hear you, but I certainly saw *his* face when he left.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yrene said blandly, and resumed walking toward his suite. Slower.

“Don’t check your pace on my account. You made impressive time.”

She sliced him a glare. “Did I *do* something to offend you today?”

His level stare revealed nothing, but his powerful arms kept working the wheels of his chair as he pushed himself along.

“Well?”

“Why do you shove away the prince? It seems like you two were once close.”

It was not the time or the place for this conversation. “That is none of your business.”

“Indulge me.”

“No.”

He easily kept pace with her as she increased her own. All the way to the doors to his suite.

Kadja was standing outside, and Yrene gave her an inane order—“I need dried thyme, lemon, and garlic”—that might have very well been one of her mother’s old recipes for fresh trout.

The servant vanished with a bow, and Yrene flung open the suite doors, holding one wide for him to pass.

“Just so you know,” Yrene hissed as she shut the doors loudly behind him, “your piss-poor attitude helps no one and nothing.”

Chaol slammed his chair to a halt in the middle of the foyer, and she winced

at what it must have done to his hands. He opened his mouth, but shut it.

Right as the door to the other bedroom opened and Nesryn emerged, hair wet and gleaming.

“I was wondering where you went,” she said to him, then gave Yrene a nod of greeting. “Early morning?”

It took Yrene a few heartbeats to reorder the room, the dynamic with Nesryn now in it. Yrene was not the primary ... person. She was the help, the secondary ... whatever.

Chaol shook out his hands—indeed red marks marred them—but said to Nesryn, “I went to the Torre to help the girls with a defense lesson.”

Nesryn looked at the chair.

“On horseback,” he said.

Nesryn’s eyes now shot to Yrene, bright and wide. “You—how?”

“A brace,” Yrene clarified. “We were just about to resume our second attempt at healing.”

“And you could truly ride?”

Yrene felt Chaol’s inward flinch—mostly because she flinched as well. At the disbelief.

“We didn’t try out anything more than a fast walk, but yes,” he said calmly. Evenly. Like he expected such questions from Nesryn. Had grown used to it. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll try a trot.”

Though without leverage from his legs, the bouncing ... Yrene went through her mental archives on groin injuries. But she stayed quiet.

“I’ll go with you,” Nesryn said, dark eyes lighting. “I can show you the city—perhaps my uncle’s home.”

Chaol only replied, “I would like that,” before Nesryn pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“I’m seeing them now for an hour or two,” said Nesryn. “Then meeting with—you know. I’ll be back this afternoon. And resume my ... duties afterward.”

Careful words. Yrene didn't blame her. Not with the weapons stacked on the desk in Nesryn's bedroom—barely visible through the ajar door. Knives, swords, multiple bows and quivers ... The captain had a small armory in her chamber.

Chaol just grunted his approval, smiling slightly as Nesryn strode for the suite doors. The captain paused in the threshold, her grin broader than any Yrene had seen before.

Hope. Full of hope.

Nesryn shut the door with a click.

Alone in the silence again, still feeling very much the intruder, Yrene crossed her arms. "Can I get you anything before we begin?"

He just wheeled forward—into his bedroom.

"I'd prefer the sitting room," she said, snatching her supply bag from where Kadja had set it on the foyer table. And likely rifled through it.

"I'd prefer to be in bed while in agony." He added over his broad shoulder, "And hopefully you won't pass out on the floor this time."

He easily moved himself from the chair onto the bed, then began unbuckling his jacket.

"Tell me," Yrene said, lingering in the doorway. "Tell me what I did to upset you."

He peeled off his jacket. "You mean beyond displaying me like some broken doll in front of your acolytes and having them haul me off that horse like a limp fish?"

She stiffened, pulling out the bit before dumping the supply bag on the floor. "Plenty of people help you here in the palace."

"Not as many as you'd think."

"The Torre is a place of learning, and people with your injury do not come often—not when we usually have to go to them. I was showing the acolytes things that might help with untold numbers of patients in the future."

"Yes, your prized, shattered horse. Look how well broken I am to you. How

docile.”

“I did not mean that, and you know it.”

He ripped off his shirt, nearly tearing it at the seams as he hauled it over his head. “Was it some sort of punishment? For serving the king? For being from Adarlan?”

“No.” That he believed she could be that cruel, that unprofessional—“It was precisely what I just said: I wanted to *show* them.”

“I didn’t want you to show them!”

Yrene straightened.

Chaol panted through his gritted teeth. “I didn’t want you to parade me around. To let them *handle* me.” His chest heaved, the lungs beneath those muscles working like bellows. “Do you have *any* idea what it is like? To go from *that*”—he waved a hand toward her, her body, her legs, her spine—“to *this*?”

Yrene had the sense of the ground sliding from beneath her. “I know it is hard —”

“It is. But you made it *harder* today. You make me sit here mostly naked in this room, and yet I have *never* felt more bare than I did this morning.” He blinked, as if surprised he’d vocalized it—surprised he’d admitted to it.

“I—I’m sorry.” It was all she could think to say.

His throat bobbed. “Everything I thought, everything I had planned and wanted ... It’s gone. All I have left is my king, and this ridiculous, slim scrap of hope that we survive this war and I can find a way to *make* something of it.”

“Of what?”

“Of *everything* that crumbled in my hands. *Everything.*”

His voice broke on the word.

Her eyes stung. Shame or sorrow, Yrene didn’t know.

And she didn’t want to know—what it was, or what had happened to him. What made that pain gutter in his eyes. She knew, she knew he had to face it, had to talk about it, but ...

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. She added stiffly, “I should have considered your feelings on the matter.”

He watched her for a long moment, then removed the belt from his waist. Then took off his boots. Socks.

“You can leave the pants on, if—if you want.”

He removed them. Then waited.

Still brimming with anger. Still gazing at her with such resentment in his eyes.

Yrene swallowed once. Twice. Perhaps she should have scrounged up breakfast.

But walking away, even for that ... Yrene had a feeling, one she couldn’t quite place, that if she walked away from him, if he saw her back turn ...

Healers and their patients required trust. A bond.

If she turned her back on him and left, she didn’t think that rift would be repaired.

So she motioned him to move to the center of the bed and turn onto his stomach while she took up a seat on the edge.

Yrene hovered a hand over his spine, the muscled groove cutting deep through it.

She hadn’t considered—his feelings. That he might have them. The things haunting him ...

His breathing was shallow, quick. Then he said, “Just to be clear: is your grudge against me, or Adarlan in general?”

He stared at the distant wall, the entrance to the bathing room blocked by that carved wood screen. Yrene held her hand steady, poised over his back, even as shame sluiced through her.

No, she had not been in her best form these past few days. Not even close.

That scar atop his spine was stark in the midmorning light, the shadow of her hand upon his skin like some sister-mark.

The thing that waited within that scar ... Her magic again recoiled at its proximity. She'd been too tired last night and too busy this morning to even think about facing it again. To contemplate what she might see, might battle—what he might endure, too.

But he'd been good to his word, had instructed the girls despite her foolish, callous missteps. She supposed that she could only return the favor by doing as she'd promised as well.

Yrene took a steadying breath. There was no preparing for it, she knew. There was no bracing breath steeling enough to make this any less harrowing. For either of them.

Yrene silently offered Chaol the leather bit.

He slid it through his teeth and clamped down lightly.

She stared at him, his body braced for pain, face unreadable as he angled it toward the door.

Yrene said quietly, "Soldiers from Adarlan burned my mother alive when I was eleven."

And before Chaol could answer, she laid her hand on the mark atop his spine.

16

There was only darkness, and pain.

He roared against it, distantly aware of the bit in his mouth, the rawness of his throat.

Burned alive burned alive burned alive

The void showed him fire. A woman with golden-brown hair and matching skin screaming in agony toward the heavens.

It showed him a broken body on a bloody bed. A head rolling across a marble floor.

You did this you did this you did this

It showed a woman with eyes of blue flame and hair of pure gold poised above him, dagger raised and angling to plunge into his heart.

He wished. He sometimes wished that she hadn't been stopped.

The scar on his face—from the nails she'd gouged into it when she first struck him ... It was that hateful wish he thought of when he looked in the mirror. The body on the bed and that cold room and that scream. The collar on a tan throat and a smile that did not belong to a beloved face. The heart he'd offered and had been left to drop on the wooden planks of the river docks. An assassin who had sailed away and a queen who had returned. A row of fine men hanging from the castle gates.

All held within that slim scar. What he could not forgive or forget.

The void showed it to him, again and again.

It lashed his body with red-hot, pronged whips. And showed him those things, over and over.

It showed him his mother. And his brother. And his father.

Everything he had left. What he'd failed. What he'd hated and what he'd become.

The lines between the last two had blurred.

And he had tried. He had tried these weeks, these months.

The void did not want to hear of that.

Black fire raced down his blood, his veins, trying to drown out those thoughts.

The burning rose left on a nightstand. The final embrace of his king.

He had tried. Tried to *hope*, and yet—

Women little more than children hauling him off a horse. Poking and prodding at him.

Pain struck, low and deep in his spine, and he couldn't breathe around it, couldn't out-scream it—

White light flared.

A flutter. Far in the distance.

Not the gold or red or blue of flame. But white like sunlight, clear and clean.

A flicker through the dark, arcing like lightning riding through the night ...

And then the pain converged again.

His father's eyes—his father's raging eyes when he announced he was leaving to join the guard. The fists. His mother's pleading. The anguish on her face the last time he'd seen her, as he'd ridden away from Anielle. The last time he'd seen his city, his home. His brother, small and cowering in their father's long shadow.

A brother he had traded for another. A brother he had left behind.

The darkness squeezed, crushing his bones to dust.

It would kill him.

It would kill him, this pain, this ... this endless, churning pit of *nothing*.

Perhaps it would be a mercy. He wasn't entirely certain his presence—his presence *beyond* made any sort of difference. Not enough to warrant trying. Coming back at all.

The darkness liked that. Seemed to thrive on that.

Even as it tightened the vise around his bones. Even as it boiled the blood in his veins and he bellowed and bellowed—

White light slammed into him. Blinding him.

Filling that void.

The darkness shrieked, surging back, then rising like a tidal wave around him

—

Only to bounce off a shell of that white light, wrapped around him, a rock against which the blackness broke.

A light in the abyss.

It was warm, and quiet, and kind. It did not balk at the dark.

As if it had dwelled in such darkness for a long, long time—and understood how it worked.

Chaol opened his eyes.

Yrene's hand had slipped from his spine.

She was already twisting away from him, lunging for his discarded shirt on the bedroom carpet.

He saw the blood before she could hide it.

Spitting out the bit, he gripped her wrist, his panting loud to his ears. "You're hurt."

Yrene wiped at her nose, her mouth, and her chin before she faced him.

It didn't hide the stains down her chest, soaking into the neckline of her dress.

Chaol surged upright. "Holy gods, Yrene—"

"I'm fine."

The words were stuffy, warped with the blood still sliding from her nose.

“Is—is that common?” He filled his lungs with air to call for someone to fetch *another* healer—

“Yes.”

“Liar.” He heard the falsehood in her pause. Saw it in her refusal to meet his stare. Chaol opened his mouth, but she laid her hand on his arm, lowering the bloodied shirt.

“I’m fine. I just need—rest.”

She appeared anything but, with blood staining and crusting her chin and mouth.

Yrene pressed his shirt again to her nose as a new trickle slid out. “At least,” she said around the fabric and blood, “the stain from earlier now matches my dress.”

A sorry attempt at humor, but he offered her a grim smile. “I thought it was part of the design.”

She gave him an exhausted but bemused glance. “Give me five minutes and I can go back in and—”

“Lie down. Right now.” He slid away a few feet on the mattress for emphasis.

Yrene surveyed the pillows, the bed large enough for four to sleep undisturbed beside one another. With a groan, she pressed the shirt to her face and slumped on the pillows, kicking off her slippers and curling her legs up. She tipped her head upward to stop the bleeding.

“What can I get you,” he said, watching her stare blankly at the ceiling. She’d done this—done this while helping him, likely because of whatever shitty mood he’d been in before—

Yrene only shook her head.

In silence, he watched her press the shirt to her nose. Watched blood bloom across it again and again. Until it slowed at last. Until it stopped.

Her nose, mouth, and chin were ruddy with the remnants, her eyes fogged with either pain or exhaustion. Perhaps both.

So he found himself asking, “How?”

She knew what he meant. Yrene dabbed at the blood on her chest. “I went in there, to the site of the scar, and it was the same as before. A wall that no strike of my magic could crumble. I think it showed me ...” Her fingers tightened on the shirt as she pressed it against the blood soaking her front.

“What?”

“Morath,” she breathed, and he could have sworn even the birds’ singing faltered in the garden. “It showed some memory, left behind in *you*. It showed me a great black fortress full of horrors. An army waiting in the mountains around it.”

His blood iced over as he realized whose memory it might belong to. “Real or—was it some manipulation against you?” The way his own memories had been wielded.

“I don’t know,” Yrene admitted. “But then I heard your screaming. Not out here, but ... in there.” She wiped at her nose again. “And I realized that attacking that solid wall was ... I think it was a distraction. A diversion. So I followed the sounds of your screaming. To you.” To that place deep within him. “It was so focused upon ripping you apart that it did not see me coming.” She shivered. “I don’t know if it did anything, but ... I couldn’t stand it. To watch and listen. I startled it when I leaped in, but I don’t know if it will be waiting the next time. If it will remember. There’s a ... sentience to it. Not a living thing, but as if a memory were set free in the world.”

Chaol nodded, and silence fell between them. She wiped at her nose again, his shirt now coated in blood, then set the fabric on the table beside the bed.

For uncounted minutes, sunshine drifted across the floor, wind rustling the palms.

Then Chaol said, “I’m sorry—about your mother.”

Thinking through the timeline ... It had likely occurred within a few months of Aelin’s own terror and loss.

So many of them—the children whom Adarlan had left such deep scars upon. If Adarlan had left them alive at all.

“She was everything good in the world,” Yrene said, curling onto her side to gaze at the garden windows beyond the foot of the bed. “She ... I made it out because she ...” Yrene did not say the rest.

“She did what any mother would do,” he finished for her.

A nod.

As healers, they had been some of the first victims. And continued to be executed long after magic had vanished. Adarlan had always ruthlessly hunted down the magically gifted healers. Their own townsfolk might have sold them out to Adarlan to make quick, cheap coin.

Chaol swallowed. After a heartbeat, he said, “I watched the King of Adarlan butcher the woman Dorian loved in front of me, and I could do nothing to stop it. To save her. And when the king went to kill me for planning to overthrow him ... Dorian stepped in. He took on his father and bought me time to run. And I ran—I ran because ... there was no one else to carry on the rebellion. To get word to the people who needed it. I let him take on his father and face the consequences, and I *fled*.”

She watched him in silence. “He is fine now, though.”

“I don’t know. He is free—he is alive. But is he fine? He suffered. Greatly. In ways I can’t begin to ...” His throat tightened to the point of pain. “It should have been me. I had always planned for it to be me instead.”

A tear slid over the bridge of her nose.

Chaol scooped it up with his finger before it could slide to the other side.

Yrene held his stare for a long moment, her tears turning those eyes near-radiant in the sun. He didn’t know how long had passed. How long it had taken for her to even attempt to cleave that darkness—just a little.

The door to the suite opened and closed, silently enough that he knew it was Kadja. But it drew Yrene’s stare away from him. Without it—there was a sense

of cold. A quiet and a cold.

Chaol clenched his fist, that tear seeping into his skin, to keep from turning her face toward his again. To read her eyes.

But her head whipped upward so fast she nearly knocked his nose.

The gold in Yrene's eyes flared.

"Chaol," she breathed, and he thought it might have been the first time she'd called him such.

But she looked down, dragging his stare with her.

Down his bare torso, his bare legs.

To his toes.

To his toes, slowly curling and uncurling. As if trying to remember the movement.

Elide Lochan kept quiet during the two days she and Lorcan trekked through the eastern edges of Oakwald, heading for the plains beyond.

She had not asked him the questions that seemed to matter the most, letting him think her a foolish girl, blinded by gratitude that he had saved her.

He'd quickly forgotten that though he'd carried her out, she'd saved herself. And he'd accepted her name—her *mother's* name—without question. If Vernon was on her trail ... It had been a fool's mistake, but there was no undoing it, not without raising Lorcan's suspicions.

So she kept her mouth shut, swallowed her questions. Like why he'd been hunting her. Or who his mistress was to command such a powerful warrior—why he wanted to get into Morath, why he kept touching some object beneath his dark jacket. And why he had looked so surprised—though he'd tried to hide it—when she'd mentioned Celaena Sardothien and Aelin Galathynius.

Elide had no doubt the warrior was keeping secrets of his own, and that despite his promise to protect her, the moment he got every answer he needed, that protection would end.

But she still slept soundly these last two nights—thanks to the belly full of meat courtesy of Lorcan's hunting. He'd scrounged up two rabbits, and when she'd devoured all of hers in minutes, he'd given her half of what was left of his. She hadn't bothered being polite by refusing.

It was midmorning by the time the light in the forest turned brighter, the air fresher. And then the roaring of mighty waters—the Acanthus.

Lorcan stalked ahead, and Elide could have sworn even the trees leaned away from him as he held up a hand in a silent motion to wait.

She obeyed, lingering in the gloom of the trees, praying he wouldn't make them return to the tangle of Oakwald, that she wouldn't be denied this step into the bright, wide-open world...

Lorcan motioned again—to come forward. All was clear.

Elide was silent as she stepped, blinking at the flood of sunshine, from the last line of trees to stand beside Lorcan on a high, rocky riverbank.

The river was enormous, shades of rushing gray and brown—the last of the ice melt from the mountains. So wide and wild that she knew she could not swim it, and that the crossing had to be somewhere else. But past the river, as if the water were a boundary between two worlds...

Hills and meadows of high emerald grasses swayed on the other side of the Acanthus, like a hissing sea under a cloudless blue sky, stretching away forever to the horizon.

“I can’t remember,” she murmured, the words barely audible over the roaring song of the river, “the last time I saw...” In Perranth, locked in that tower, she’d only had a view of the city, perhaps the lake if the day was clear enough. Then she’d been in that prison wagon, then in Morath, where it was only mountains and ash and armies. And during the flight with Manon and Abraxos, she had been too lost in terror and grief to notice anything at all. But now ... She could not remember the last time she’d seen sunlight dancing on a meadow, or little brown birds bobbing and swooping on the warm breeze over it.

“The road is about a mile upriver,” Lorcan said, his dark eyes unmoved by the Acanthus or the rippling grasses beyond. “If you want your plan to work, now would be the time to prepare.”

She cut him a glance. “You need the most work.” A flick of black brows. Elide clarified, “If this ruse is to succeed, you at least need to ... pretend to be human.”

Nothing about the man suggested his human heritage held sway.

“Hide more of your weapons,” she went on. “Leave only the sword.”

Even the mighty blade would be a dead giveaway that Lorcan was no ordinary traveler.

She fished an extra strap of leather out of her jacket pocket. “Tie back your hair. You’ll look less...” She trailed off at the faint amusement tinged with warning in his eyes. “Savage,” she made herself say, dangling the leather strap between them. Lorcan’s broad fingers closed around it, a frown on his lips as he obeyed. “And unbutton your jacket,” she said, rummaging through her mental catalog of traits she had noted seemed less threatening, less intimidating. Lorcan obeyed that order, too, and soon the dark gray shirt beneath his tight-fitting black jacket was showing, revealing the broad, muscled chest. It looked more inclined for solid labor than killing fields, at least.

“And you?” he said, brows still high.

Elide surveyed herself, and set down her pack. First, she removed the leather jacket, even though it left her feeling like a layer of skin had peeled off, then she

rolled up the sleeves of her white shirt. But without the tight leather, the full size of her breasts could be seen—marking her as a woman and not a slip of a girl that people assumed she was. She then took to her hair, ruffling it out of its braid and restyling it into a knot atop her head. A married woman's hairstyle, not the free-flowing locks or plait of youth.

She stuffed her jacket into her pack, standing up straight to face Lorcan.

His eyes traveled from her feet to her head, and he frowned again. "Bigger tits won't prove or hide anything."

Her cheeks heated. "Perhaps they'll keep men distracted just enough that they won't ask questions."

With that, she started upstream, trying not to think about the men who had touched and sneered in that cell. But if it got her safely across the river, she'd use her body to her advantage. Men would see what they wanted to: a pretty young woman who did not bristle at their attention, who spoke kindly and warmly. Someone trustworthy, someone sweet yet unremarkable.

Lorcan trailed, then caught up to walk beside her like an actual companion and not some promise-bound escort for the final half mile around the bend of the river.

Horses and wagons and shouts greeted them before the sight did.

But there it was: a broad if worn stone bridge, wagons and carts and riders lined up in droves on either side. And about two dozen guards in Adarlanian colors monitoring either bank, collecting tolls, and—

Checking wagons, inspecting every face and person.

The ilken had known about her limp.

Elide slowed, keeping close to Lorcan as they neared the two-story, derelict barracks on their side of the river. Down the road, flanked by the trees, a few equally sorry-looking buildings were a flurry of activity. An inn and a tavern. For travelers to wait out the lines with a drink or meal, or perhaps rent a room during inclement weather.

So many people—humans. No one appeared panicked or hurt or sickly. And the guards, despite their uniforms, moved like men while they searched the wagons passing the barracks that served as tollhouse and sleeping quarters.

She said quietly to Lorcan as they headed for the dirt road and the distant back of the line, "I don't know what magic you possess, but if you can make my limp less noticeable—"

Before she could finish, a force like a cool night wind pushed against her ankle and calf, then wrapped around it in a solid grip. A brace.

Her steps evened out, and she had to bite back her urge to gawk at the feeling of walking straight and sure. She didn't allow herself to enjoy it, savor it, not when it would likely only last until they cleared the bridge.

Merchants' wagons idled, crammed with goods from those who hadn't wanted to risk the Avery river to the north, their drivers tight-faced at the wait and impending inspections. Elide scanned the drivers, the merchants, the other travelers ... Each one of them made her instincts shout that they'd be betrayed the second they asked to ride or offered a coin to keep quiet.

To trawl the line would catch the eye of the guards, so Elide used every step to study it while seemingly heading toward the back. But she reached the end of the line empty-handed.

Lorcan, however, gave a pointed glance behind her—toward the tavern, whitewashed to no doubt hide the near-crumbling stones. "Let's get a bite before we wait," he said, loud enough for the wagon in front of them to hear and dismiss it.

She nodded. Someone else might be inside, and her stomach was grumbling. Except—

"I don't have any money," she murmured as they approached the pale wooden door. Lie. She had gold and silver from Manon. But she wasn't about to flash it in front of Lorcan, promise or no.

"I've got plenty," he said tightly, and she delicately cleared her throat.

He lifted his brows.

"You'll win us no allies looking like that," she said, and gave him a sweet little smile. "Walk in there looking like a warrior and you'll get noticed."

"And what am I to be, then?"

"Whatever we need you to be when the time comes. But ... don't glower."

He opened the door, and by the time her eyes adjusted to the glow of the wrought-iron chandeliers, Lorcan's face *had* changed. His eyes might never be warm, but a bland smile was on his face, his shoulders relaxed—as if he were slightly inconvenienced by the wait but eager for a good meal.

He almost looked human.

The tavern was packed, the noise so deafening that she could barely speak loudly enough to the nearest barmaid to order lunch. They squeezed between crammed tables, and Elide noticed that more than a few pairs of eyes went to her chest, then her face. And lingered.

She pushed against the crawling feeling and kept her steps unhurried as she aimed for a table tucked against the back wall that a weary-looking couple had

just vacated.

A boisterous party of eight was crammed around the table a few feet away, a middle-aged woman with a booming laugh instantly singling herself out as their leader. The others at the table—a beautiful, raven-haired woman; a barrel-chested bearded man whose hands were as large as dinner plates; and a few rough-looking people—all kept looking to the older woman, gauging her responses and listening carefully to what she had to say.

Elide slid into the worn wooden chair, Lorcan claiming the one across from her—his size earning him a look from the bearded man and the middle-aged woman at the table.

Elide weighed that look.

Assessment. Not for a fight; not for a threat. But in appreciation and calculation.

Elide wondered for a heartbeat if Anneith herself had nudged that other couple to move away—to free up this one table for them. For that very look.

Elide laid her hand out on the table, palm up, and gave Lorcan a sleepy smile she'd once seen a kitchen maid give a Morath cook. "Husband," she said sweetly, wriggling her fingers.

Lorcan's mouth tightened, but he took her hand—her fingers dwarfed in his.

His calluses scraped against her own. He noticed it at the same moment she did, sliding his hand to cup hers so he might inspect her palm. She closed her hand, rotating it to grip his again.

"Brother," Lorcan murmured so no one else could hear. "I am your brother."

"You are my husband," she said with equal quiet. "We have been married three months. Follow my lead."

He glanced around, not having noticed the assessing stare they'd been given. Doubt still danced in his eyes, along with a silent question.

She said simply, "Men will not fear the threat of a brother. I would still be unclaimed—still be open for ... invitations. I have seen how little respect men have for anything they think they are entitled to. So you are my husband," she hissed, "until I say otherwise."

A shadow flickered in Lorcan's eyes, along with another question. One she didn't want to and couldn't answer. His hand tightened on hers, demanding she look at him. She refused.

Their food arrived, mercifully, before Lorcan could ask it.

Stew—root vegetables and rabbit. She dug in, nearly melting the roof of her mouth at the first bite.

The group behind them began talking again, and she listened as she ate, selecting bits and pieces as if they were shells on a shore.

“Maybe we’ll offer them a performance and they’ll cut the toll fee in half.”
From the blond, bearded man.

“Unlikely,” the leader said. “Those pricks would charge *us* to perform. Worse, they enjoy our performance and demand we stay awhile. We can’t afford that wait. Not when other companies are already on the move. We don’t want to hit all the plains towns after everyone else.”

Elide almost choked on her stew. Anneith *must* have freed this table, then. Her plan had been to find a troupe or carnival to fall into, disguise themselves as workers, and this...

“We pay full price on that toll,” the beautiful woman said, “and we might get to that first town half starved and barely able to perform at all.”

Elide lifted her eyes to Lorcan’s—he gave a nod.

She took a sip of her stew, steeling herself, thinking of Asterin Blackbeak. Charming, confident, fearless. She’d always had her head at a jaunty angle, a looseness to her limbs, a hint of a smile on her lips. Elide took a breath, letting those memories sink into muscle and flesh and bone.

Then she pivoted in her chair, an arm draped around the back as she leaned toward their table and said with a grin, “Sorry to interrupt your meal, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.” They all turned toward her, brows high, the eyes of the leader going right to Elide’s face. She saw the assessment: young, pretty, unblemished by a hard life. Elide kept her own expression pleasant, willed her eyes to brighten. “Are you some sort of performing troupe?” She motioned to Lorcan with a tilt of her head. “My husband and I have been looking to fall in with one for weeks with no luck—everyone’s full.”

“So are we,” their leader said.

“Right,” Elide replied merrily. “But that toll is steep—for anyone. And if we were to be in business together, perhaps on a temporary basis...” Lorcan’s knee brushed hers in warning. She ignored him. “We’d be glad to chip in on the fee—make up any difference owed.”

The woman’s assessment turned wary. “We are a carnival indeed. But we have no need of new members.”

The bearded man and beautiful woman shot glances at the woman, reprimand in their eyes.

Elide shrugged. “All right, then. But in case you change your mind before

you depart, my husband”—a gesture to Lorcan, who was giving his best attempt at an easy smile—“is an expert sword-thrower. And in our previous troupe, he made good coin matching himself against men who sought to best him in feats of strength.”

The leader turned her keen eyes on Lorcan—on the height and muscles and posture.

Elide knew she'd guessed right on the vacancy they'd needed filled when the woman said to her, “And what did you do for them?”

“I worked as a fortune-teller—they called me their oracle.” A shrug. “Mostly just shadows and guesswork.” It'd have to be, considering the little fact that she couldn't read.

The woman remained unimpressed. “And what was your troupe's name?”

They likely knew them—knew every troupe that patrolled the plains.

She scanned her memory for anything helpful, anything—

Yellowlegs. The witches in Morath had once mentioned Baba Yellowlegs, who had traveled in a carnival to avoid detection, who had died in Rifthold this winter with no explanation.... Detail after detail, buried in the catacombs of her memory, poured out.

“We were in the Carnival of Mirrors,” Elide said. Recognition—surprise, respect—sparked in the leader's eyes. “Until Baba Yellowlegs, our owner, was killed in Rifthold this past winter. We left, and have been looking for work since.”

“Where did you come from, then?” the bearded man asked.

It was Lorcan who replied, “My family lives on the western side of the Fangs. We've spent the past few months with them—waited until the snows melted, since the pass was so treacherous. Strange things happening,” he added, “in the mountains these days.”

The company stilled.

“Indeed,” the raven-haired woman said. She looked to their leader. “They could help pay the toll, Molly. And since Saul left, that act has been empty...” Likely their sword-thrower.

“Like I said,” Elide chimed in with Asterin's pretty smile, “we'll be here for a little while, so if you change your minds ... let us know. If not...” She saluted with her dented spoon. “Safe travels.”

Something flashed in Molly's eyes, but the woman looked them over once more. “Safe travels,” she murmured.

Elide and Lorcan returned to their meal.

And when the barmaid came to take their money for it, Elide reached into her inner pocket and pulled out a silver coin.

The barmaid's eyes were wide, but it was the sharp eyes of Molly, of the others at that table, that Elide noted as the girl slipped away and brought back their change.

Lorcan kept silent as Elide left a generous tip on the table, but they both offered pleasant smiles to the troupe as they vacated their table and the tavern.

Elide went right to the back of the line, still keeping that smile on her face, her back straight.

Lorcan sidled up close, not at all noteworthy for the front they were putting on. "You have no money, do you?"

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Looks like I was mistaken."

A flash of white teeth as he smiled—genuinely this time. "Well, you'd better hope you and I have enough, Marion, because Molly's about to make you an offer."

Elide turned at the crunch of dirt beneath black boots and found Molly before them, the others lingering—some slipping around the corner of the tavern, to no doubt retrieve the wagons.

Molly's hard face was flushed—as if they'd been arguing. But she just clicked her tongue and said, "Temporary stint. If you're shit, you're out, and we won't pay back the money for the toll."

Elide smiled, not entirely faking it. "Marion and Lorcan, at your service, madam."



His wife. Gods above.

He was over five hundred years old—and this ... this girl, young woman, she-devil, whatever she was, had just bluffed and lied her way into a job. A sword-thrower indeed.

Lorcan lingered outside the tavern, Marion at his side. A small troupe—hence the lack of funds—and one that had seen better days, he realized as the two yellow-painted wagons clattered and wobbled into view, pulled by four nags.

Marion carefully observed Molly climb into the driver's seat beside the raven-haired beauty, who paid Lorcan absolutely no heed.

Well, having Marion as his gods-damned *wife* certainly put an end to

anything more than appreciation of the stunning woman.

It was an effort not to growl. He hadn't been with a woman in months now. And of course—*of course*—he'd have the time and interest in one ... only to be shackled by another one's lies.

His wife.

Not that Marion was hard on the eyes, he noted as she obeyed Molly's barked order to climb into the back of the second wagon. Some of the other party members followed on piss-poor horses.

Marion took the bearded man's extended hand and he easily hauled her into the wagon. Lorcan trailed, assessing everyone in the party, everyone in the makeshift little town. A number of men, and some women, had noticed Marion when she strode by.

The sweet face paired with sinful curves—and without the limp, with her hair out of her face ... She knew exactly what she was doing. Knew people would notice those things, think about those things, instead of the cunning mind and lies she fed them.

Lorcan ignored the hand the bearded man offered and jumped into the back of the wagon, reminding himself to sit close to Marion, to put an arm around her bony shoulders and look relieved and happy to have a troupe again.

Supplies filled the wagon, along with five other people who all smiled at Marion—and then quickly looked away from him.

Marion put a hand on his knee, and Lorcan avoided the urge to flinch. It had been a shock, earlier, to feel how rough those delicate hands were.

Not just a prisoner in Morath—but a slave.

The calluses were old and dense enough that she'd likely worked for years. Hard labor, from the looks of it—and with that ruined leg...

He tried not to think about that tang of fear and pain he'd sensed when she'd told him how little she believed in the kindness and decency of men. He didn't let his imagination delve too deep regarding why she might feel that way.

The wagon was hot, the air soaked with human sweat, hay, the shit of the horses lined up before them, the tang of iron from the weapons.

"Not much by way of belongings?" asked the bearded man—Nik, he'd called himself.

Shit. He'd forgotten humans traveled with baggage as if they were moving somewhere—

"We lost most of it on our trip out of the mountains. My *husband*," Marion said with charming annoyance, "insisted we ford a rushing stream. I'm lucky he

even bothered to help *me* out, since he certainly didn't go after our supplies."

A low chuckle from Nik. "I suspect he was more focused on saving you than on the packs."

Marion rolled her eyes, patting Lorcan's knee. He nearly cringed at every touch.

Even with his lovers, outside the bed itself, he didn't like casual, careless contact. Some found that intolerable. Some thought they could break him into a decent male who just wanted a home and a good female to work beside him. Not one of them had succeeded.

"I can save myself," Marion said brightly. "But his throwing swords, our cooking supplies, my *clothes*..." A shake of the head. "His act might be a bit lackluster until we can find somewhere to purchase more supplies."

Nik met Lorcan's eyes, holding them for longer than most men dared. What he did for the carnival, Lorcan wasn't sure. Sometime performer—but definitely security. Nik's smile faded a bit. "The land beyond the Fangs isn't kind. Your people must be hardy folk to live out there."

Lorcan nodded. "A rougher life," he said, "than I want for my wife."

"Life on the road isn't much better," Nik countered.

"Ah," Marion chimed in, "but isn't it? A life of open skies and roads, of wandering where the wind takes you, answering to no one and nothing? A life of freedom..." She shook her head. "What more could I ask than to live a life unchecked by cages?"

Lorcan knew the words were no lie. He had seen her face when they beheld the grassy plain.

"Spoken like someone who has spent long enough on the road," Nik said. "It always goes either way with our kind: you settle down and never travel again, or you wander forever."

"I want to see life—see the world," Marion said, her voice softening. "I want to see everything."

Lorcan wondered if Marion would even get to do that if he failed in his task, if the Wyrdkey he carried wound up in the wrong hands.

"Best not wander too far," Nik said, frowning. "Not with what happened in Rifthold—or what's brewing down in Morath."

"What happened in Rifthold?" Lorcan cut in, sharply enough that Marion squeezed his knee.

Nik idly scratched his wheat-colored beard. "Whole city's been sacked—overrun, they say, by flying terrors and demon-women as their riders. Witches, if

one is to believe the rumors. Ironteeth, straight out of legend.” A shudder.

Holy gods. The destruction would have been a sight to behold. Lorcan forced himself to listen, to concentrate and not begin calculating casualties and what it would mean for this war, as Nik continued, “No word on the young king. But the city belongs to the witches and their beasts. They say to travel north is to now face a death trap; to travel south is another death trap ... So”—a shrug—“we’ll head east. Maybe we can find a way to bypass whatever’s waiting in either direction. Maybe war will come and we’ll all scatter to the winds.” Nik looked him over. “Men like you and me might be conscripted.”

Lorcan bit back a dark chuckle. No one could force him into anything—save for one person, and she ... His chest tightened. It was best not to think of his queen.

“You think either side would do that? Force men to fight?” Marion’s words were breathless.

“Don’t know,” Nik said, the scent and sound of the river now overwhelming enough that Lorcan knew they were near the toll. He reached into his jacket for the money Molly had demanded. Far more than their fair share, but he didn’t care. These people could go to hell the moment they were safely hidden deep in the endless plains. “Duke Perrington’s forces might not even want us, if they’ve got witches and beasts on their side.”

And much worse, Lorcan wanted to say. Wyrdhounds and ilken and the gods knew what.

“But Aelin Galathynius,” Nik mused. Marion’s hand went limp on Lorcan’s knee. “Who knows what she will do. She has not called for aid, has not asked soldiers to come to her. Yet she held Rifthold in her grip—killed the king, destroyed his castle. But gave the city back.”

The bench beneath them groaned as Marion leaned forward. “What do you know of Aelin?”

“Rumors, here and there,” Nik said, shrugging. “They say she’s beautiful as sin—and colder than ice. They say she’s a tyrant, a coward, a whore. They say she’s gods-blessed—or gods-damned. Who knows? Nineteen seems awfully young to have such burdens ... Rumor claims her court is strong, though. A shape-shifter guards her back—and two warrior-princes flank her on either side.”

Lorcan thought of that shape-shifter, who had so unceremoniously vomited not once, but twice, all over him; thought of those two warrior-princes ... One of them Gavriel’s son.

“Will she save or damn us all?” Nik considered, now monitoring the snaking

line behind their wagon. “I don’t know if I much like the thought of everything resting in her hands, but ... if she wins, perhaps the land will get better—life will get better. And if she fails ... perhaps we all deserve to be damned anyway.”

“She will win,” Marion said with quiet strength. Nik’s brows rose.

Men shouted, and Lorcan said, “I’d save talk of her for another time.”

Boots crunched, and then uniformed men were peering into the back of the wagon. “Out,” one ordered. “Line up.” The man’s eyes snagged on Marion.

Lorcan’s arm tightened around her as an ugly, too-familiar light filled the soldier’s eyes.

Lorcan bit back his snarl as he said to her, “Come, wife.”

The soldier noticed him, then. The man backed away a step, a bit pale, then ordered the supplies be searched.

Lorcan jumped out first, bracing his hands on Marion’s waist as he helped her off the wagon. When she made to step away, he tugged her back against him, an arm across her abdomen. He met each soldier’s stare as they passed and wondered who was looking after the dark-haired beauty in the front.

A moment later, she and Molly came around. A dark, rimmed hat was slung over the beauty’s head, half of her light brown face obscured, her body concealed in a heavy coat that drew the eye away from any feminine curves. Even the cast of her mouth was unpleasant—as if the woman had slipped into another person’s skin entirely.

Still, Molly nudged the woman between Lorcan and Nik. Then took the money pouch from Lorcan’s free hand without so much as a thank-you.

The dark-haired beauty leaned forward to murmur to Marion, “Don’t look them in the eye, and don’t talk back.”

Marion nodded, chin dipping as she focused on the ground. Against him, he could feel her racing heart—wild, despite the calm submission written over every line of her body.

“And you,” the beauty hissed at him as the soldiers searched their wares—and took what they wanted. “Molly says if you get into a fight, you’re gone, and we’re not bailing you out of prison. So let them talk and laugh, but don’t interfere.”

Lorcan debated saying he could slaughter this entire garrison if he pleased, but nodded.

After five minutes, another order was shouted. Molly handed over Lorcan’s money and her own to pay the toll, plus more for “expedited passage.” Then they were all back in the wagon again, none of them daring to see what had been

pilfered. Marion was shaking slightly against where he kept her tucked into his side, but her face was blank, bored.

The guards hadn't so much as questioned them—hadn't asked after a woman with a limp.

The Acanthus roared beneath them as they crossed the bridge, wagon wheels clattering on ancient stones. Marion kept shaking.

Lorcan studied her face again—the hint of red along her high cheekbones, her tight mouth.

Not shaking from fear, he realized as he caught a whiff of her scent. A slight tang of it, perhaps, but mostly something red-hot, something wild and raging and —

Anger. It was boiling rage that made her shake. At the inspection, at the leering of the guards.

An idealist—that's what Marion was. Someone who wanted to fight for her queen, who believed, as Nik did, that this world could be better.

As they cleared the other side of the bridge, the soldiers letting them pass without fuss, as they meandered past the line on *that* side, and emerged onto the plains themselves, Lorcan wondered at that anger—at that belief in a better world.

He didn't feel like telling either Marion or Nik that their dream was a fool's one.

Marion relaxed enough to peer out the back of the wagon—at the grasses flanking the wide dirt road, at the blue sky, at the roaring river and the looming sprawl of Oakwald behind them. And for all her rage, a tentative sort of wonder grew in her dark eyes. He ignored it.

Lorcan had seen the worst and best in men for five hundred years.

There was no such thing as a better world—no such thing as a happy end.

Because there were no endings.

And there would be nothing waiting for them in this war, nothing waiting for an escaped slave girl, but a shallow grave.

Nesryn's cousins were off at school when she knocked on the outer door to her aunt and uncle's lovely home in the Runni Quarter. From the dusty street, all one could glimpse of the house beyond the high, thick walls was the carved oak gate, reinforced with scrolling iron.

But as it swung open under the hands of two guards who instantly beckoned her in, it revealed a shaded, broad courtyard of pale stone, flanked by pillars crawling with magenta bougainvillea, and a merry fountain inlaid with sea glass burbling in its center.

The house was typical of Antica—and of the Balruhni people from whom Nesryn and her family hailed. Long adjusted to desert climes, the entire building had been erected around sun and wind: outer windows never placed near the heat of the southern exposure, the breeze-catching narrow towers atop the building facing away from the sand-filled eastern wind to keep it from infiltrating the rooms it cooled. Her family was not fortunate enough to have a canal running beneath the house, as many of the wealthier in Antica did, but with the towering plants and carved wooden awnings, the shade kept the public lower levels around the courtyard cool enough during the day.

Indeed, Nesryn inhaled deeply as she strode through the pretty courtyard, her aunt greeting her halfway across with, "Have you eaten yet?"

She had, but Nesryn said, "I saved myself for your table, Aunt." It was a common Halha greeting amongst family—*no one* visited a house, especially in

the Faliq family, without eating. At least once.

Her aunt—still a full-figured beautiful woman whose four children had not slowed her down one bit—nodded in approval. “I told Brahim just this morning that our cook is better than the ones up at that palace.”

A snort of amusement from a level up, from the wood-screened window overlooking the courtyard. Her uncle’s study. One of the few common rooms on the usually private second level. “Careful, Zahida, or the khagan may hear you and haul dear old Cook to his palace.”

Her aunt rolled her eyes at the figure just barely visible through the ornate wood screen and looped her arm through Nesryn’s. “Snoop. Always eavesdropping on our conversations down here.”

Her uncle chuckled but made no further comment.

Nesryn grinned, letting her aunt lead her toward the spacious interior of the home, past the curvy-bodied statue of Inna, Goddess of Peaceful Households and the Balruhni people, her arms upraised in welcome and defense. “Perhaps the palace’s inferior cook is why the royals are so skinny.”

Her aunt huffed, patting her belly. “And no doubt why I’ve added so much padding these years.” She gave Nesryn a wink. “Perhaps I *should* get rid of old Cook, then.”

Nesryn kissed her aunt’s petal-soft cheek. “You are more beautiful now than you were when I was a child.” She meant it.

Her aunt waved her off but still beamed as they entered the dim, cool interiors of the house proper. Pillars upheld the high ceilings of the long hallway, the wood beams and furniture carved and fashioned after the lush flora and fauna of their distant, long-ago homeland. Her aunt led her deeper into the house than most guests would ever see, right to the second, smaller courtyard at the back. The one just for family, most of it occupied by a long table and deep-seated chairs beneath the shade of an overhanging awning. At this hour, the sun was on the opposite side of the house—precisely why her aunt had chosen it.

Her aunt guided her into a seat adjacent to the head of the table, the place of honor, and hurried off to inform the cook to bring out refreshments.

In the silence, Nesryn listened to the wind sighing through the jasmine crawling up the wall to the balcony hanging above. As serene a home as she'd ever seen—especially compared to the chaos of her family's house in Rifthold.

An ache tightened her chest, and Nesryn rubbed at it. They were alive; they had gotten out.

But it did not answer where they now were. Or what they might face on that continent full of so many terrors.

“Your father gets that same look when he's thinking too hard,” her uncle said from behind her.

Nesryn twisted in her chair, smiling faintly as Brahim Faliq entered the courtyard. Her uncle was shorter than her father, but slimmer—mostly thanks to *not* baking pastries for his livelihood. No, her uncle was still trim for a man of his age, his dark hair peppered with silver, both perhaps due to the merchant life that kept him so active.

But Brahim's face ... it was Sayed Faliq's face. Her father's face. With less than two years separating them, some had thought them twins while growing up. And it was the sight of that kind, still-handsome face that made Nesryn's throat tighten. “One of the few traits I inherited from him, it seems.”

Indeed, where Nesryn was quiet and prone to contemplation, her father's booming laugh had been as constant in their house as her sister's merry singing and giggling.

She felt her uncle studying her as he took the seat across from hers, leaving the head of the table for Zahida. Men and women governed the household together, their joint rule treated as law by their children. Nesryn had certainly fallen into line, though her sister ... She could still hear the screeching fights between her sister and father as Delara had grown older and longed for independence.

“For the Captain of the Royal Guard,” her uncle mused, “I am surprised you have the time to visit us so often.”

Her aunt bustled in, bearing a tray of chilled mint tea and glasses. “Hush. Don’t complain, Brahim, or she’ll stop coming.”

Nesryn smiled, glancing between them as her aunt gave them each a glass of the tea, set the tray on the table between them, and claimed the seat at the head of the table. “I thought to come by now—while the children are at school.”

Another of the khaganate’s many wonderful decrees: every child, no matter how poor or rich, had the right to attend school. Free of charge. As a result, nearly everyone in the empire was literate—far more than Nesryn could claim of Adarlan.

“And here I was,” her uncle said, smiling wryly, “hoping you’d be back to sing more for us. Since you left the other day, the children have been yowling your songs like alley cats. I haven’t the heart to tell them that their voices are not quite up to the same standard as their esteemed cousin’s.”

Nesryn chuckled, even as her face heated. She sang for very few—only her family. She’d never sung for Chaol or the others, or even mentioned that her voice was ... better than good. It wasn’t something that could easily be brought up in conversation, and the gods knew that the last several months had not been conducive to singing. But she’d found herself singing to her cousins the other night—one of the songs her father had taught her. A lullaby of Antica. By the end of it, her aunt and uncle had been gathered round, her aunt dabbing at her eyes, and ... well, now there was no going back with it, was there?

She’d likely be teased about it until she never opened her mouth again.

But if only she had come here just for singing. She sighed a bit, steeling herself.

In the silence, her aunt and uncle exchanged looks. Her aunt asked quietly, “What is it?”

Nesryn sipped from her tea, considering her words. Her aunt and uncle, at

least, gave her the gift of waiting for her to speak. Her sister would have been shaking her shoulders by now, demanding an answer. “There was an attack at the Torre the other night. A young healer was killed by an intruder. The murderer has not yet been found.”

No matter how she and Sartaq had combed through the few sewers and canals beneath Antica last night, they had not found a single path toward the Torre; nor any sign of a Valg’s nest. All they’d discovered were typical, awful city smells and rats scurrying underfoot.

Her uncle swore, earning a look from her aunt. But even her aunt rubbed at her chest before asking, “We’d heard the rumors, but ... You have now come to warn us?”

Nesryn nodded. “The attack lines up with the techniques of enemies in Adarlan. If they are here, in this city, I fear it may be in connection to my arrival.”

She had not dared tell her aunt and uncle too much. Not for lack of trust, but for fear of who might be listening. So they did not know of the Valg, or Erawan, or the keys.

They knew of her quest to raise an army, for that was no secret, but ... She did not risk telling them of Sartaq. That he and his rukhin might be the path toward winning support from the khagan, that his people might know something about the Valg that even they had not discovered in dealing with them. She did not even risk telling them she’d been on the prince’s ruk. Not that they’d really believe it. Well-off as her family might be, there was wealth, and then there was royalty.

Her uncle said, “Will they target our family—to get to you?”

Nesryn swallowed. “I don’t believe so, but I would put nothing past them. I—it is still unknown if this attack *was* in relation to my arrival, or if we are jumping to conclusions, but on the chance that it is true ... I came to warn you to hire more guards if you can.” She looked between them, laying her hands palm-

up on the table. “I am sorry to have brought this to your household.”

Another glance between her aunt and uncle, then each took her by the hand. “There is nothing to be sorry for,” her aunt said. Just as her uncle added, “Getting to see you so unexpectedly has been a blessing beyond measure.”

Her throat closed up. This—this was what Erawan was poised to destroy.

She’d find a way to raise that army. Either to rescue her family from war, or keep it from reaching these shores.

Her aunt declared, “We will hire more guards, have an escort for the children to and from school.” A nod to her husband. “And anywhere we go in this city.”

Nesryn’s uncle added, “And what of you? Traipsing about the city on your own.” Nesryn waved a hand, though their concern warmed her. She refrained from telling them she’d hunted Valg in Rifthold’s sewers for weeks, that she’d been stalking them through Antica’s sewers last night. And most certainly refrained from telling them just how involved she’d been in the glass castle’s demise. She had no wish to see her uncle keel over in his chair, or see her aunt’s thick, beautiful hair go white. “I can handle myself.”

Her aunt and uncle did not look so convinced, but they nodded all the same. Just as Cook emerged, smiling broadly at Nesryn, little dishes of chilled salads between her withered hands.

For long moments, Nesryn ate everything her aunt and uncle piled onto her plate, which was indeed as good as any food at the palace. By the time she was stuffed to the point of exploding, by the time she’d drained her tea to its dregs, her aunt said slyly to her, “I had hoped you’d be bringing a guest, you know.”

Nesryn snorted, brushing the hair from her face. “Lord Westfall is quite busy, Aunt.” But if Yrene had gotten him onto a horse this morning ... perhaps she’d indeed get him here tomorrow. Introduce him to her family—to the four children who filled this house with chaos and joy.

Her aunt sipped daintily from her tea. “Oh, I didn’t mean him.” A wry grin between Zahida and Brahim. “I meant Prince Sartaq.”

Nesryn was glad she'd finished her tea. "What of him?"

That sly smile didn't fade. "Rumor claims *someone*"—a pointed look at Nesryn—"was spotted riding with the prince at dawn yesterday. Atop his ruk."

Nesryn reined in her wince. "I ... was." She prayed no one had seen her with him last night—that word would not reach the Valg agent's ears they were being hunted.

Her uncle chuckled. "And you planned to tell us when? The children were beside themselves with excitement that their beloved cousin had ridden on Kadara herself."

"I did not want to brag." A pathetic excuse.

"Hmmm," was all her uncle replied, mischief dancing in his gaze.

But Nesryn's aunt gave her a knowing look, steel in her brown eyes, as if she, too, did not forget for one moment the family who remained in Adarlan and perhaps now tried to flee to these shores. Her aunt simply said, "The ruks will not fear wyverns."

Rowan Whitethorn just needed a place to rest. He didn't give a shit if it was a bed or a pile of hay or even beneath a horse in a stable. As long as it was quiet and there was a roof to keep out the driving veils of rain, he didn't care.

Skull's Bay was what he expected, and yet not. Ramshackle buildings, painted every color but mostly in cracking disrepair, were bustling as residents shuttered windows and hauled in clotheslines against the storm that had chased Rowan and Dorian into the harbor minutes ago.

Hooded and cloaked, no one had asked them any questions once Rowan had flipped a five-copper mark to the dockmaster. Enough to keep his mouth shut, but not enough to warrant any of the would-be thieves monitoring the docks to come after them.

Dorian had mentioned twice now that he wasn't sure how Rowan was still functioning. To be honest, Rowan wasn't, either. He'd allowed himself to doze only for hours at a time over the past few days. The burnout loomed—steadily fraying his grip on his magic, his focus.

When Rowan hadn't been wrangling the winds to propel their skiff through the vibrant warm waters of the Dead Islands' archipelago, he'd been soaring high above to monitor for approaching enemies. He'd seen none. Just turquoise ocean and white sands flecked with dark, volcanic stone. All of it ringing the dense emerald foliage crusting mountainous islands that spread as far as even a hawk's eye could see.

Thunder grumbled across Skull's Bay, and the turquoise sea beyond the harbor seemed to glow brighter, as if a distant lightning strike had lit up the entire ocean. Along the docks, a cobalt-painted tavern remained lightly guarded, even with the storm bearing down on them.

The Sea Dragon. Rolfe's own headquarters, named after his ship, from Aelin's reports. Rowan debated going right up to it, no more than two lost travelers seeking shelter from the storm.

But he and the young king had chosen another route, during the many hours he'd made good on his promise to teach Dorian about magic. They'd worked for

only minutes at a time—since it'd be no use if the king wrecked their little boat should his power slip its leash. So it had been exercises with ice: summoning a ball of frost to his palm, letting it melt. Over and over.

Even now, standing like a stone amid the stream of people hauling in wares from the storm's fury, the king was curling and relaxing his fingers, letting Rowan glean their bearings while he gazed across the horseshoe-shaped bay to the colossal chain stretched across its mouth—currently beneath the surface.

Ship-Breaker, the chain was called. Crusted with barnacles and draped in scarves of seaweed, it was connected to a watchtower on either side of the bay, where guards would raise and lower the chain to let ships out. Or keep ships in until they'd paid the hefty tolls. They'd been lucky that the chain had already been lowered in anticipation of the storm.

Since their plan for announcing themselves would be ... calm. Diplomatic.

Which it would need to be, given that the last time Aelin had set foot in Skull's Bay, two years ago, she'd wrecked that chain. And taken out one of the now-rebuilt watchtowers (Rolfe, it seemed, had added a sister-tower across the bay since then), plus half the town. And disabled the rudders on every ship in the harbor, including Rolfe's prized one, the *Sea Dragon*.

Rowan wasn't surprised, but seeing the *scope* of the hell she had unleashed ... Holy gods.

So Dorian's announcement of his arrival would be the opposite of *that*. They'd take rooms at a reputable inn and then request an audience with Rolfe. Proper and dignified.

Lightning flashed, and Rowan swiftly scanned the street ahead, a hand gripping his hood to keep the wind from revealing his Fae heritage.

An emerald-painted inn lay at the other end of the block, its gilded sign clacking in the wild wind. THE OCEAN ROSE.

The nicest inn in town, the dockmaster had claimed when they asked. Since they at least needed to appear like they could make good on the money they'd offer Rolfe.

And get some rest, if only for a few hours. Rowan stepped toward it, nearly sagging with relief, and looked over a shoulder to motion the king to follow.

But as if the gods themselves wanted to test him, a gust of rain-cooled wind sprayed into their faces, and some sense pricked in its wake. A shift in the air. Like a great pocket of power gathered close, beckoning.

The knife at his side was instantly in his soaked hand as he searched the rooftops, revealing only plumes of rain. Rowan quieted his mind, listening to the

city and storm around them.

Dorian swept his dripping hair out of his face, mouth open to speak—until he noted the knife. “You feel it, too.”

Rowan nodded, rain sliding down his nose. “What do you sense?”

The king’s raw power might pick up different feelings, different clues, than what his wind and ice and instinct could detect. But without the training, it might not be clear.

“It feels ... old.” Dorian winced, and said over the storm, “Feral. Ruthless. I can’t glean anything more.”

“Does it remind you of the Valg?”

If there was one person who’d know, it’d be the king before him.

“No,” Dorian said, gaze shuttering. “They were abhorrent to my magic. This thing out there ... It just makes my magic curious. Wary, but curious. But it’s concealed—somehow.”

Rowan sheathed his knife. “Then stay close and keep alert.”



Dorian had never been in such a place as Skull’s Bay.

Even with the heavy rain lashing them as they hunted the source of that power down the main street, he’d marveled at the blend of lawlessness and complete order of the island-city. It bowed to no king of royal blood—yet was ruled by a Pirate Lord who had clawed his way to power thanks to hands tattooed with a map of the world’s oceans.

A map, rumor claimed, that had revealed where enemies, treasure, and storms awaited him. The cost: his eternal soul.

Aelin had once confirmed that Rolfe was indeed soulless *and* indeed tattooed. As for the map ... She’d shrugged, saying Rolfe claimed it stopped moving when magic fell. Dorian wondered if that map now indicated that he and Rowan walked through his city—if it marked them as enemies.

Perhaps Aelin’s arrival would be known well before she set foot on this island.

Cloaked and hooded and thoroughly soaked, Dorian and Rowan made a wide circuit of the surrounding streets. People had quickly vanished, and the ships in the harbor rocked wildly with the waves lapping over the broad quay and onto the cobblestones. Palms thrashed and hissed, and not even gulls stirred.

His magic remained dormant, rumbling when he’d stiffen at a loud noise

from within the taverns, inns, homes, and shops they passed. At his side, Rowan plowed through the storm, the rain and wind seeming to part for him.

They reached the quay, Rolfe's massive prize ship looming out in the heaving waters, sails tied down against the storm.

At least Rolfe was here. At least that had gone right.

Dorian was so busy observing the ship that he nearly slammed into Rowan's back as the warrior-prince halted.

He staggered back, Rowan mercifully not commenting on it, then scanned the building that had snagged the prince's attention.

His magic perked up like a startled deer.

"I shouldn't even be surprised," Rowan grumbled, and the blue-painted sign clattered in the winds above the tavern entrance. THE SEA DRAGON.

Two guards stood halfway down the block—guards not for any uniform, but for the fact that they were standing in this storm, hands on their swords.

Rowan angled his head in a way that told Dorian the prince was likely contemplating whether it was worth it to chuck the men into the roiling harbor. But no one stopped them as Rowan gave Dorian a warning look and opened the door to the Pirate Lord's personal tavern. Golden light, spices, polished wood floors and walls greeted them.

It was empty, despite the storm. Utterly empty, save for the dozen or so tables.

Rowan shut the door behind Dorian, scanning the room, the small stairs in the back. From where they stood, Dorian could see the letters covering most of the tables.

Storm-Chaser. Lady Ann. Tiger-Star.

The sterns of ships. Every table was made from them.

They hadn't been taken from wrecks. No, this was a trophy room—a reminder to those who met with the Pirate Lord of how, exactly, he had gained his crown.

All the tables seemed centered around one in the back, bigger and more worn than the others. *Thresher*. The enormous slats were flecked with burn marks and gouges—but the lettering remained clear. As if Rolfe never wanted to forget what ship was used as his personal dining table.

But as for the man himself and that power they'd felt ... No sign of either.

A door behind the bar opened, and a slim, brown-haired young woman stepped out. Her apron marked her as the barmaid, but her shoulders were back, head high—gray eyes sharp and clear as she scanned them and remained

unimpressed. “He was wondering when you two would come snooping,” she said, her accent rich and thick—like Aedion’s.

Rowan said, “Oh?”

The barmaid jerked her delicate chin toward the narrow wood stairs in the back. “Captain wants to see you—in his office. One flight up, second door down.”

“Why.”

Even Dorian knew not to ignore that tone. But the girl just grabbed a glass, held it to the candlelight to inspect for smudges, and pulled a rag from her apron. Twin tattoos of roaring gray sea dragons snaked around her tan forearms, the beasts seeming to slither as her muscles shifted with the movement.

Their scales, he realized, matched her eyes perfectly as she flicked her stare over Dorian and Rowan once more and said coolly, “Don’t keep him waiting.”



Dorian murmured to Rowan as they ascended the creaky, dim stairs, “It could be a trap.”

“Possibly,” Rowan said with equal quiet. “But consider that we were allowed to come to him. If it was a trap, the smarter move would have been to catch us unawares.”

Dorian nodded, something in his chest easing. “And you—your magic is ... better?”

That hard face yielded nothing. “I’ll manage.” Not an answer.

Along the second-level hallway, four steely-eyed young men had been stationed, each armed with fine swords whose hilts were fashioned after attacking sea dragons—surely the mark of their captain. None bothered to speak as he and Rowan made for the indicated door.

The Fae Prince knocked once. A grunt was all they got in response.

Dorian didn’t know what he expected from the Lord of Pirates.

But a dark-haired man, a day past thirty if that, lounging on a red velvet chaise before the rain-splattered curve of windows was not it.

The Pirate Lord of Skull’s Bay did not turn from where he was sprawled on the chaise, piles of papers littering the worn cobalt rug beneath it. From the neat columns that Dorian could barely make out from where he and Rowan stood a few feet into the man’s office, the papers seemed crammed with tallies of goods or expenses—ill-gained or otherwise.

But Rolfe continued monitoring the ships tilting and bobbing in the harbor, the shadow of Ship-Breaker’s sagging chain cleaving the storm-tossed world beyond them.

Rolfe had likely learned of their arrival not due to any magic map, but from sitting here. Indeed, dark leather gloves adorned his hands—the material scarred and cracked with age. Not a hint of the legendary tattoos lurking beneath.

Rowan didn’t move; barely blinked as he took in the captain, the office. Dorian himself had been part of enough political maneuverings to know the uses of silence—the power in who spoke first. The power in making someone wait.

The rain drumming on the windows and the muffled dripping of their own soaked clothes on the threadbare carpet filled the quiet.

Captain Rolfe tapped a gloved finger on the arm of the chaise, watching the harbor for a heartbeat longer—as if to make sure the *Sea Dragon* still floated—and finally turned to them.

“Take off your hoods. I want to know who I’m talking to.”

Dorian stiffened at the command, but Rowan said, “Your barmaid implied that you know damn well who we are.”

A wry half smile tugged on Rolfe’s lips, the upper-left corner flecked with a small scar. Hopefully not from Aelin. “My barmaid talks too much.”

“Then why keep her?”

“Easy on the eyes—hard to come by around here,” Rolfe said, uncoiling to his feet. He was about Dorian’s height and clothed in simple but well-made black. An elegant rapier hung at his side, along with a matching parrying knife.

Rowan snorted, but to Dorian’s surprise, removed his hood.

Rolfe’s sea-green eyes flared—no doubt at the silver hair, pointed ears, and

slightly elongated canines. Or the tattoo. “A man who likes ink as much as I do,” Rolfe said with an appreciative nod. “I think you and I will get along just fine, Prince.”

“Male,” Rowan corrected. “Fae males are not human men.”

“Semantics,” Rolfe said, flicking his attention to Dorian. “So you’re the king everyone’s in such a tizzy over.”

Dorian finally tugged back his hood. “What of it?”

With that gloved hand, Rolfe pointed toward a paper-covered desk and two upholstered chairs before it. Like the man himself, it was elegant, but worn—either from age, use, or battles past. And those gloves ... To cover the maps inked there?

Rowan gave Dorian a nod to sit. The flames on the candles burning throughout guttered as they passed, and claimed their seats.

Rolfe edged around the stacks of papers on the floor and took up his spot at the desk. His carved, high-backed chair might very well have been a throne from some distant kingdom. “You seem remarkably calm for a king who’s just been declared a traitor to his crown and robbed of his throne.”

Dorian was glad he was in the process of sitting down.

Rowan lifted a brow. “According to whom?”

“According to the messengers who arrived yesterday,” Rolfe said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. “Duke Perrington—or should I call him King Perrington now?—issued a decree, signed by the majority of Adarlan’s lords and ladies, naming *you*, Majesty, an enemy to your kingdom, and claiming that he liberated Rifthold from *your* claws after you and the Queen of Terrasen slaughtered so many innocents this spring. It also claims that any ally”—a nod toward Rowan—“is an enemy. And that you will be crushed under his armies if you do not yield.”

Silence filled his head. Rolfe went on, perhaps a bit more gently, “Your brother has been named Perrington’s heir and Crown Prince.”

Oh gods. Hollin was a child, but still ... something had rotted in him, festered—

He had left them there. Rather than deal with his mother and brother, he’d told them to stay in those mountains. Where they were now as good as lambs surrounded by a pack of wolves.

He wished Chaol were with him. Wished for time to just ... *stop* so he might sort out all these fractured pieces of himself, put them into some kind of order, if not back together entirely.

Rolfe said, “From the look on your face, I’m guessing your arrival indeed has something to do with the fact that Rifthold now lies in ruin, its people fleeing wherever they can.”

Dorian shoved out the insidious thoughts and drawled, “I came to learn what side of the line you stand on, Captain, in regard to this conflict.”

Rolfe sat forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “You must be desperate indeed, then.” A glance at Rowan. “And is your queen equally desperate for my aid?”

“My queen,” Rowan said, “is not a part of this discussion.”

Rolfe only grinned at Dorian. “You wish to know what side of the line I stand on? I stand on the side that keeps the hell out of my territory.”

“Rumor has it,” Rowan countered smoothly, “that the easternmost part of this archipelago is no longer your territory at all.”

Rolfe held Rowan’s gaze. A heartbeat passed. Then another. A muscle flickered in Rolfe’s jaw.

Then he pulled off those gloves to reveal hands tattooed from fingertip to wrist. He turned them palm up, revealing a map of the archipelago, and what—

Dorian and Rowan leaned forward as the blue waters did indeed flow, little dots among it sailing by. And in the easternmost tip of the archipelago, curving out to sea...

Those waters were gray, the islands a ruddy brown. But nothing moved—no dots indicated ships. As if the map had frozen.

“They have magic that shields them—even from this,” Rolfe said. “I can’t get a count of their ships, or men, or beasts. Scouts never return. This winter, we’d hear roaring from the islands—some almost-human, some definitely not. Often, we’d spy ... things standing out on those rocks. Men, but not. We let it go unchecked for too long—and paid the price.”

“Beasts,” Dorian said. “What sort of beasts?”

A grim smile, scar stretching. “Ones to make you consider fleeing this continent, Majesty.”

The condescension snapped something loose in Dorian’s temper. “I have walked through more nightmares than you realize, Captain.”

Rolfe snorted, but his eyes went to that pale line across Dorian’s throat.

Rowan leaned back in his chair with lazy grace—the War Commander incarnate. “It must be a solid truce you hold, then, if you’re still camped here with minimal ships in your harbor.”

Rolfe simply tugged on his worn gloves. “My fleet does have to do a little

pirating every now and then, you know. Bills to pay and all that.”

“I’m sure. Especially when you employ four guards to watch your hallway.”

Dorian caught Rowan’s train of thought and said to the Fae Prince, “I didn’t scent the Valg in town.” No, whatever that power had been ... it had flickered into nothing now.

“That’s because,” Rolfe drawled, cutting them off, “we killed most of them.”

Wind rattled the windows, smearing the rain across them.

“And as for the four men in the hall—they are all that’s left of my crew. Thanks to the battle we had early this spring to reclaim this island after Perrington’s general stole it from us.”

Dorian swore low and viciously. The captain nodded.

“But I am again Pirate Lord of Skull’s Bay, and if the eastern islands are as far as Morath plans to go, then Perrington and his beasts can have them. The Dead End is barely more than caves and rock anyway.”

“What manner of beasts,” Dorian said again.

Rolfe’s pale green eyes darkened. “Sea-wyverns. Witches rule the skies with their wyverns—but these waters are now ruled by beasts bred for naval battle, foul corruptions of an ancient template. Imagine a creature half the size of a first-rate ship—faster than a racing dolphin—and the damage it can cause with tooth and claw and a poisoned tail big as a mast. Worse, if you kill one of their vicious offspring, the adults will hunt you to the ends of the earth.” Rolfe shrugged. “So you will find, Majesty, that I have no interest in disturbing the eastern islands if they do not disturb me any further. I have no interest in doing anything but continuing to profit from my endeavors.” He waved a vague hand to the papers scattered throughout.

Dorian held his tongue. The offer he’d been planning to make ... His coffers belonged to Morath now. He doubted privateers would volunteer based on credit.

Rowan gave him a look that said the same. Another route to win Rolfe to their cause, then. Dorian surveyed the office, the taste leaning toward finery and yet so little that was not worn. The half-wrecked town around them. The four surviving crew. The way Rolfe had looked at that band of white along his throat.

Rowan opened his mouth, but Dorian said, “They weren’t just killed, your crew. Some were taken, weren’t they?”

Rolfe’s sea-green eyes went cold.

Dorian pushed, “Captured, along with others, and taken into the Dead Islands. Used for information about how and where to strike you. The only way to free them when they were sent back to you, demons wearing their bodies, was

to behead them. Burn them.”

Rowan asked roughly, “Was it rings or collars they wore, Captain?”

Rolfe’s throat bobbed once. After a long moment, he said, “Rings. They said they’d been set free. But they weren’t the men who...” A shake of the head. “Demons,” he breathed, as if it explained something. “That’s what he put in them.”

So Rowan told him. Of the Valg, their princes, and of Erawan, the last Valg king.

Even Rolfe had the wits to look unnerved as Rowan concluded, “He has cast off the disguise as Perrington. He is only Erawan now—King Erawan, apparently.”

Rolfe’s eyes again drifted to Dorian’s neck, and it was an effort not to touch the scar there. “How did you survive it? We even cut the rings off—but my men ... they were gone.”

Dorian shook his head. “I don’t know.” No answer didn’t make Rolfe’s men sound ... lesser for not having survived. Maybe he’d been infested by a Valg prince who’d savored taking his time.

Rolfe shifted a piece of paper on his desk, reading it again for a heartbeat—as if it were a mere distraction while he thought. He said at last, “Wiping what’s left of them from the Dead Islands won’t do shit against the might of Morath.”

“No,” Rowan countered, “but if we hold the archipelago, we can use these islands to wage a battle from the seas while we strike from the land. We can use these islands to house fleets from other kingdoms, other continents.”

Dorian added, “My Hand is currently in the southern continent—in Antica itself. He will persuade them to send a fleet.” Chaol would do nothing less for him, for Adarlan.

“None will come,” Rolfe said. “They didn’t come ten years ago; they certainly won’t come now.” He surveyed Rowan and added with a small smirk, “Especially not with the latest news.”

This couldn’t end well, Dorian decided as Rowan asked flatly, “What news?”

Rolfe didn’t answer, instead watching the stormy bay, or whatever out there held his interest. A rough few months for the man, Dorian realized. Someone holding on to this place through sheer arrogance and will. And all those tables below, assembled from the wreckage of conquered ships ... How many enemies were circling, waiting for a shot at revenge?

Rowan opened his mouth, no doubt to demand an answer, when Rolfe thumped his booted foot thrice on the worn floorboards. An answering thump on

the wall sounded.

Silence fell. Given Rolfe's hatred for the Valg, Dorian doubted Morath was about to spring shut a trap, but ... he slid deep into his magic as footsteps thudded down the hall. From the tight cast of Rowan's tattooed face, he knew the prince was doing the same. Especially as Dorian felt his magic reach toward the Fae Prince's, as it had done that day with Aelin atop the glass castle.

Those footsteps paused outside the office door, and again, that pulse of foreign, mighty magic rose up. Rowan's hand slid into casual distance of the hunting knife at his thigh.

Dorian focused on his breathing, on hauling up lines and pieces of his magic. Ice bit into his palms as the office door opened.

Two golden-haired males appeared in the doorway.

Rowan's snarl reverberated through the floorboards and along Dorian's feet as he took in the muscle, the pointed ears, the gaping mouths that revealed elongated canines...

The two strangers, the source of that power ... They were Fae.

The one with night-dark eyes and an edged grin looked Rowan over and drawled, "I liked your hair longer."

A dagger embedding itself in the wall not an inch from the male's ear was Rowan's only answer.

Dorian didn't see the Fae Prince throw the dagger until the blade thudded into the wooden wall, its hilt still bobbing with the impact.

But the dark-eyed, bronze-skinned male—so handsome that Dorian blinked—smirked at the dagger shivering beside his head. “Was your aim that shitty when you cut your own hair?”

The other male beside him—tan, tawny-eyed, with a steady sort of quiet to him—lifted his broad, tattooed hands. “Rowan, put your blades down. We're not here for you.”

For there were already more weapons gripped in Rowan's hands. Dorian hadn't even heard him stand, let alone draw the sword, or the elegant hatchet in the other hand.

Dorian's magic writhed in his veins as it studied the two strangers. *Here you are*, it sang.

Alone with Rowan, his magic had become accustomed to the prince's staggering abyss of power, but the three of these males together, ancient and powerful and primal ... They were their own maelstrom. They could wreck this city without even trying. He wondered if Rolfe realized it.

The Pirate Lord said drily, “I take it you know each other.”

The solemn, golden-eyed one nodded, his pale clothes so like the ones Rowan favored: layered, efficient fabric, fit for battlefields. A band of black tattoos encircled the male's muscled neck. Dorian's stomach lurched. From a distance, it might very well have been another sort of black collar.

Rowan said tightly, “Gavriel and Fenrys used to ... work with me.”

Rolfe's sea-green eyes darted among them all, assessing, weighing.

Fenrys—Gavriel. Dorian knew those names. Rowan had mentioned them during their journey here ... Two members of Rowan's cadre.

Rowan explained to Dorian, “They are blood-sworn to Maeve. As I used to be.”

Meaning they were here under her orders. And if Maeve had sent not one, but *two* of her lieutenants to this continent, when Lorcan was already here...

Rowan said through his teeth but sheathed his weapons, “What is your business with Rolfe?”

Dorian released his magic into himself. It settled into his core like a bit of dropped ribbon.

Rolfe waved a hand to the two males. “They’re the bearer of the news I promised you—among other things.”

“And we were just sitting down to lunch,” Fenrys said, those dark eyes dancing. “Shall we?”

Fenrys didn’t wait for them as he ducked back into the hall and walked out.

The tattooed one—Gavriel—sighed quietly. “It’s a long tale, Rowan, and one you and the King of Adarlan”—a flick of tawny eyes in his direction—“must hear.” He gestured to the hall and said, utterly stone-faced, “You know how cranky Fenrys gets when he doesn’t eat.”

“I heard that,” called a deep male voice from the hall.

Dorian reined in his smile, watching Rowan for his reaction instead. But the Fae Prince only jerked his head at Gavriel in silent order to lead the way.

None of them, not even Rolfe, spoke as they descended into the main room. The barmaid was gone, only sparkling glasses behind the bar hinting that she’d been there. And, indeed digging into a steaming bowl of what smelled like fish stew, Fenrys now waited for them at a table in the back.

Gavriel slid into a seat beside the warrior, his mostly full bowl sloshing a bit as the table shifted, and said to Rowan when the prince halted halfway through the room, “Is...” The Fae warrior paused, as if weighing the words and how Rowan might react if the question was posed poorly. Dorian knew why the exact next moment. “Is Aelin Galathynius with you?”

Dorian didn’t know where to look: at the warriors now at the table, at Rowan beside him, or at Rolfe, brows raised as he leaned against the stair banister, with no idea that the queen was his great enemy.

Rowan shook his head once, a swift, cutting move. “My queen is not in our company.”

Fenrys flicked his brows up but continued devouring his meal, his gray jacket unbuttoned to reveal the muscled brown chest peeking through the vee of his white shirt. Gold embroidery swirled along the lapels of the jacket—the only sign of wealth among them.

Dorian didn’t quite know what had happened this past spring with Rowan’s cadre, but ... they obviously hadn’t parted on good terms. At least on Rowan’s end.

Gavriel rose to drag over two chairs—closest to the exit, Dorian noticed. Perhaps Gavriel was the one who kept the peace among the cadre.

Rowan didn't make a move for them. It was so easy to forget that the prince had centuries of handling foreign courts—had gone to war and back again. With these males.

Rowan didn't bother with diplomacy, however, as he said, "Tell me whatever the hell this news is."

Fenrys and Gavriel exchanged a look. The former just rolled his eyes and gestured with his spoon for Gavriel to speak.

"Maeve's armada sails for this continent."

Dorian was glad he didn't have anything in his stomach.

Rowan's words were guttural as he asked, "Is that bitch allying with Morath?" He cut what Dorian considered to be the definition of an icy stare at Rolfe. "Are *you* allying with her?"

"No," Gavriel said evenly.

Rolfe, to his credit, just shrugged. "I told you, I want no part in this war."

"Maeve isn't the sort to share power," Gavriel cut in calmly. "But before we left, she was readying her armada to leave—for Eyllwe."

Dorian whooshed out a breath. "Why Eyllwe? Is it possible she could be sending aid?"

From the look on Rowan's face, Dorian could tell the prince was already cataloging and marking, analyzing what he knew of his former queen, of Eyllwe, and how it tied to everything else.

Dorian tried to control his thundering heart, knowing they could likely hear its shift in rhythm.

Fenrys set down his spoon. "I doubt she's sending aid to anyone at all—at least not where this continent is concerned. And again, she didn't tell us her specific reasons."

"She always tells us," Rowan countered. "She's never contained information like that."

Fenrys's dark eyes flickered. "That was before you humiliated her by leaving her for Aelin of the Wildfire. And before Lorcan abandoned her as well. She trusts none of us now."

Eyllwe ... Maeve had to know how dear the kingdom was to Aelin. But to launch an armada ... There had to be something there, something worth her while. Dorian ran through every lesson he'd been taught, every book he'd read on the kingdom. But nothing sparked.

Rowan said, “Maeve cannot believe she can conquer Eyllwe—at least not for any extended period of time, not without drawing all her armies here, and leaving her realm undefended.”

But perhaps it’d spread Erawan thin, even if the cost of Maeve’s invasion would be steep...

“*Again,*” Fenrys drawled, “we don’t know details. We only told him”—a jerk of the chin toward where Rolfe still leaned against the banister with crossed arms—“as a courtesy warning—among other things.”

Dorian noted that Rowan didn’t ask if they’d have extended the courtesy to them had they not been here. Or what, exactly, those other *things* were. The prince said to Rolfe, “I need to dispatch messages. Immediately.”

Rolfe studied his gloved hands. “Why bother? Won’t the recipient arrive soon enough?”

“What?” Dorian braced himself at the simmering temper in Rowan’s tone.

Rolfe smiled. “Rumor has it Aelin Galathynius destroyed General Narrok and his lieutenants over in Wendlyn. And that she accomplished this with a Fae Prince at her side. Impressive.”

Rowan’s canines flashed. “And your point is, Captain?”

“I just wish to know whether Her Majesty, Queen of Fire, expects a grand parade when she arrives.”

Dorian doubted Rolfe would very much like her other title—Adarlan’s Assassin.

Rowan’s snarl was soft. “*Again,* she’s not coming here.”

“Oh? You mean to tell me that her lover goes to rescue the King of Adarlan, and instead of taking him north, he brings him *here*—and it doesn’t somehow mean I’m to soon play host to her?”

At the mention of *lover*, Rowan gave Fenrys a lethal stare. The beautiful male—really, there was no way to describe him other than that—just shrugged.

But Rowan said to Rolfe, “She asked me to bring King Dorian to persuade you to join our cause. But as you have no interest in any agenda but your own, it seems our trip was wasted. So we have no further use for you at this table, especially if you’re incapable of dispatching messengers.” Rowan flicked his eyes toward the stairs behind Rolfe. “You’re dismissed.”

Fenrys choked on a dark laugh, but Gavriel straightened as Rolfe hissed, “I don’t care who you are and what power you wield. You don’t give me orders in my territory.”

“You’d better get used to taking them,” Rowan said, his voice calm in that

way that made Dorian's every instinct prepare to run. "For if Morath wins this war, they will not be content to let you flounce about these islands, pretending to be king. They will lock you out of every port and river, deny you trade with cities that you have come to depend upon. Who shall your buyers be when there are none left to purchase your goods? I doubt Maeve will bother—or remember you."

Rolfe snapped, "If these islands are sacked, we will sail to others—and others. The seas are my haven—upon the waves, we will always be free."

"I'd hardly call squatting in your tavern in fear of Valg assassins free."

Rolfe's gloved hands flexed and unfurled, and Dorian wondered if he'd go for the rapier at his side. But then the Pirate Lord said to Fenrys and Gavriel, "We will meet here tomorrow at eleven." When his gaze shifted to Rowan, it hardened. "Send however many damn messages you want. You may stay until your queen arrives, which I have no doubt she *will*. At that time, I will hear what the legendary Aelin Galathynius has to say for herself. Until then, *get the hell out*." He jerked his chin toward Gavriel and Fenrys. "You can talk to the *princes* at their own damn lodgings." Rolfe stalked to the front door, yanking it open to reveal a wall of rain and the four young but hard-looking men lingering on the soaked quay. Their hands shot to their weapons, but Rolfe made no move to summon them. He only pointed out the door.

Rowan stared down the man for a moment, then said to his former companions, "Let's go."

They weren't stupid enough to argue.



This was bad. Undeniably bad.

Rowan's magic frayed apart as he worked to keep the shields around him and Dorian intact. But he didn't let Fenrys or Gavriel get a whiff of that exhaustion, didn't reveal one bit of the effort it took to hold the magic *and* concentrate.

Rolfe might very well be a lost cause against Erawan or Maeve—especially once he saw Aelin. If Aelin had been present during this conversation, Rowan had a feeling it would have ended with the *Sea Dragon*—both the inn and the ship anchored in the harbor—aflame. But those sea-wyverns ... And Maeve's armada ... He'd think about that later. But shit. Just—*shit*.

The no-nonsense innkeeper at the Ocean Rose asked no questions as Rowan purchased two rooms—the best the inn had to offer. Not when he laid a gold

piece on the counter. Two weeks' accommodations, plus all meals, plus stabling of their horses if they had them, and unlimited laundry, she'd offered with a knowing look at his clothes.

And whatever guests he wished, she added as Rowan whistled sharply, and Dorian, Fenrys, and Gavriel crossed the flagstone courtyard, hoods on as they edged around the burbling fountain. Rain pattered on the potted palms, rustling the magenta bougainvillea crawling up the walls toward the white-painted balconies, still shuttered against the storm.

Rowan asked the woman to send up what was likely enough food for eight people, then stalked for the polished stairs at the back of the dim dining room, the others falling in behind him. Fenrys, mercifully, kept his mouth shut until they reached Rowan's room, discarded their cloaks, and Rowan lit a few candles. The act alone left a hole in his chest.

Fenrys sank into one of the cushioned chairs before the dark fireplace, running a finger down the black-painted arm. "Such fine accommodations. Which of the royals is paying, then?"

Dorian, who had been about to claim the seat by the small desk before the shuttered windows, stiffened. Gavriel gave Fenrys a look that said, *Please no brawling*.

"Does it make a difference?" Rowan asked as he went wall to wall, lifting the framed pictures of lush flora for any spy holes or access points. Then he checked beneath the white-sheeted bed, its posts of twirled black wood kissed with the candlelight, trying not to consider that for all his resolutions ... she'd share this room with him. This bed.

The space was secure—serene, even, with the beat of the rain in the courtyard and on the roof, the smell of sweet fruit heavy in the air.

"Someone's got to have money to finance this war," Fenrys purred, watching Rowan at last lean against a low dresser beside the door. "Though maybe considering yesterday's decree from Morath, you'll be moving to more ... economical quarters."

Well, that said enough about what Fenrys and Gavriel knew regarding Erawan's decree concerning Dorian and his allies. "Worry over your own business, Fenrys," Gavriel said.

Fenrys snorted, toying with a small curl of golden hair at his nape. "How you even manage to walk with that much steel on you, Whitethorn, has always been a mystery to me."

Rowan said smoothly, "How no one has ever cut out your tongue just to shut

you up has always been a mystery to me as well.”

An edged chuckle. “I’ve been told it’s my best feature. At least the women think so.”

A low laugh escaped Dorian—the first sound like it Rowan had witnessed from the king.

Rowan braced his hands on the dresser. “How did you keep your scents hidden?”

Gavriel’s tawny eyes darkened. “A new trick of Maeve’s—to keep us nearly invisible in a land that does not receive our kind warmly.” He jerked his chin at Dorian and Rowan. “Though it seems it’s not wholly effective.”

Rowan said, “You two better have a damn good explanation for why you’re here—and why you dragged Rolfe into whatever it is.”

Fenrys drawled, “You get everything you want, Rowan, yet you’re still a stone-cold bastard. Lorcan would be proud.”

“Where’s Connall?” was Rowan’s mocking reply, naming Fenrys’s twin.

Fenrys’s face tightened. “Where do you think? One of us is always the anchor.”

“She’d stop keeping him as collateral if you didn’t make your discontent so obvious.”

Fenrys had always been a pain in his ass. And Rowan had not forgotten that it was Fenrys who had wanted the task of handling Aelin Galathynius this past spring. Fenrys loved anything that was wild and beautiful, and to dangle Aelin before him ... Maeve had known it was torture.

Perhaps it was torture, too, for Fenrys to be so far from Maeve’s grip—but to know that his twin was back in Doranelle, that if Fenrys never came back ... Connall would be punished in unspeakable ways. It was how the queen had ensnared them in the first place: offspring were rare among the Fae—but twins? Even rarer. And for twins to be born gifted with strength, to grow into males whose dominance rivaled that of warriors centuries older than them...

Maeve had coveted them. Fenrys had refused the offer to join her service. So she’d gone after Connall—the dark to Fenrys’s gold, quiet to Fenrys’s roar, thoughtful to Fenrys’s recklessness.

Fenrys got what he wanted: women, glory, wealth. Connall, though skilled, was forever in his twin’s shadow. So when the queen approached him about the blood oath, at a time when Fenrys, not Connall, had been selected to fight in the war with the Akkadians ... Connall had sworn it.

And when Fenrys returned to find his brother bound to the queen, and

learned what Maeve forced him to do behind closed doors ... Fenrys had bargained: he'd swear the oath, but only to get Maeve to back off his brother. For over a century now, Fenrys had served in the queen's bedroom, had sat chained by invisible shackles beside her dark throne.

Rowan might have liked the male. Respected him. If it weren't for that damned mouth of his.

"So," Fenrys said, well aware he had not answered Rowan's demand for information, "are we soon to call you King Rowan?"

Gavriel murmured, "Gods above, Fenrys." He gave the sigh of the long-suffering and added before Fenrys could open that stupid mouth, "Your arrival, Rowan, was a fortunate turn of events."

Rowan faced the male beside him—second-in-command for Maeve now that Rowan had vacated the title. As if the golden-haired warrior read the name from his eyes, Gavriel asked, "Where is Lorcan?"

Rowan had been debating how to answer that question from the moment he'd seen them. That Gavriel had asked ... Why *had* they come to Skull's Bay?

"I don't know where Lorcan is," Rowan said. Not a lie. If they were lucky, his former commander would get the other two Wyrkeys, realize Aelin had tricked him, and come running—delivering the two keys for Aelin to then destroy.

If they were lucky.

Gavriel said, "You don't know where he is—but you've seen him." Rowan nodded.

Fenrys snorted. "Are we really going to play truths and lies? Just tell us, you bastard."

Rowan pinned Fenrys with a look. The White Wolf of Doranelle smiled right back at him.

Gods help them all if Fenrys and Aedion ever sat in a room together.

Rowan said, "Are you here on Maeve's command—ahead of the armada?"

Gavriel shook his head. "Our presence has nothing to do with the armada sailing. She sent us to hunt him. You already know the crime he committed."

An act of love—though only in the twisted way that Lorcan could love things. Only in the twisted way he loved Maeve.

"He claims to be doing it in her best interest," Rowan said casually, aware of the king seated beside him. Rowan knew most underestimated the sharp intelligence under that disarming smile. Knew that Dorian's value wasn't his godlike magic, but his mind. He'd latched on to Rolfe's fear and trauma at the

hands of the Valg and laid the foundation—one he'd make sure Aelin would exploit.

“Lorcan's always been arrogant that way,” Fenrys drawled. “This time, he crossed the line.”

“So you've been sent here to bring Lorcan back?”

Those tattoos on Gavriel's throat—marks Rowan himself had inked—bobbed with each word as he said, “We've been sent here to kill him.”

Holy gods.

Rowan froze. “That explains the two of you, then.”

Fenrys tossed his hair out of his dark eyes. “Three, actually. Vaughan left yesterday afternoon to fly north—while we take the South.” Vaughan, with his osprey form, could cover the far harsher terrain more easily. “We landed in this shithole town to see if Rolfe had dealings with Lorcan—to bribe him to tip us off if Lorcan should come through here again, looking to hire a boat.” Skull’s Bay would be one of the few ports where Lorcan could do such a thing without questions. “Warning Rolfe about Maeve’s armada was part of convincing the bastard to help us. We’re to make our way onto the continent from here—start our hunt in the South. And since these lands are rather large...” A flash of white teeth in a feral smile. “Any inkling about his general whereabouts would be much appreciated, *Prince*.”

Rowan debated it. But if they caught Lorcan, and the commander had possession of even one of the Wyrkeys ... If they brought both commander and keys back to Maeve, especially if she was already sailing for Eyllwe for whatever reasons of her own...

Rowan shrugged. “I washed my hands of you all this spring. Lorcan’s business is his own.”

“You *prick*—” Fenrys snarled.

Gavriel cut in, “If we could bargain?”

There was something like pain—and regret—in Gavriel’s eyes. Of all of them, Gavriel had probably been his only friend.

Rowan debated if he should tell him about the son who now was making his way here. Debated if Aedion would like the chance to meet his father ... perhaps before war made corpses of them all.

But Rowan said, “Has Maeve given you leave to bargain on her behalf?”

“We only received our orders,” Fenrys drawled, “and the permission to use any means necessary to kill Lorcan. She did not mention your queen at all. So that amounts to a *yes*.”

Rowan crossed his arms. “You send me an army of Doranelle warriors, and I’ll tell you where Lorcan is, and where he plans to go.”

Fenrys let out a harsh laugh. “Mother’s tits, Rowan. Even if we could, the armada’s already in use.”

“I suppose I’ll have to make do with you two, then.”

Dorian had the good sense not to look as surprised as Rowan’s former brothers-in-arms.

Fenrys burst out laughing. “What—work for your queen? Fight in your battles?”

“Isn’t that what you want, Fenrys?” Rowan fixed him with a stare. “To serve my queen? You’ve been pulling on the leash for months. Well, here’s your shot.”

All amusement faded from Fenrys’s beautiful face. “You’re a bastard, Rowan.”

Rowan turned to Gavriel. “I’m assuming Maeve didn’t specify *when* you had to do this.” A shallow nod was his only confirmation. “And you will technically be fulfilling her command to you.” The blood oath operated on specific, clear demands. And relied on close physical contact to enable that *tug* to get the body to yield. This far away ... they had to obey Maeve’s orders—but could use any loopholes in the language to their own advantage.

“Lorcan might very well be gone by the time you’ve considered our bargain fulfilled,” Fenrys countered.

Rowan smiled a bit. “Ah, but the thing is ... Lorcan’s path will eventually lead him right back to me. To my queen. Who knows how long it will take, but he will find us again. At which time, he’ll be yours.” He tapped a finger against his bicep. “People are going to be talking about this war for a thousand years. Longer.” Rowan jerked his chin at Fenrys. “You’ve never shied from a fight.”

“That’s if we survive,” Fenrys said. “And what of Brannon’s gifts? How long will a single flame last against the darkness that gathers? Maeve hid her motives about the armada and Eyllwe, but she at least told us who really reigns in Morath.”

When Rowan had walked through the door of the Sea Dragon, he’d wondered what god had sent the storm that had pushed them to arrive in Skull’s Bay on this day, at this time.

Together, he and the cadre had taken on a legion of Adarlan’s forces this spring and won—easily.

And even if Lorcan, Vaughan, and Connall weren’t with them ... One Fae warrior was as good as a hundred mortal soldiers. Maybe more.

Terrasen needed more troops. Well, here was a three-male army.

And against the aerial Ironteeth legions, they would need Fae speed and strength and centuries of experience.

Together, they had sacked cities and kingdoms for Maeve; together, they had waged war and ended it.

Rowan said, “Ten years ago, we did nothing to stop this. If Maeve had sent a force, we might have kept it from growing so out of control. Our brethren were hunted and killed and tortured. Maeve let it happen for spite, because Aelin’s mother would not yield to her wishes. So yes—my Fireheart is one flame in the sea of darkness. But she is willing to fight, Fenrys. She is willing to take on Erawan, take on Maeve and the gods themselves, if it means peace can be had.”

Across the room, Dorian’s eyes had shuttered. Rowan knew the king would fight—and go down swinging—and that his gift could make a difference between victory and defeat. Yet ... he was untrained. Still untried, despite all he’d endured.

“But Aelin is one person,” Rowan went on. “And even her gifts might not be enough to win. Alone,” he breathed, meeting Fenrys’s stare, then Gavriel’s, “she will die. And once that flame goes out, it is done. There is no second chance. Once that fire extinguishes, we are all doomed, in every land and every world.”

The words were poison on his tongue, his very bones aching at the thought of that death—what he’d do if it should happen.

Gavriel and Fenrys looked at each other, speaking in that silent way he used to do with them. There was one card Rowan had to play to convince them—to convince Gavriel.

Even if the specificity of Maeve’s command might allow it, she could very well punish them for acting *around* her orders. She’d done it before; they all bore scars from it. They knew the risk of it as well as Rowan did. Gavriel shook his head slightly at Fenrys.

Before they could turn to say no, Rowan said to Gavriel, “If you do not fight in this war, Gavriel, then you doom your son to die.”

Gavriel froze.

Fenrys spat, “Bullshit.” Even Dorian was gaping a bit.

Rowan wondered just how pissed Aedion would be as he said, “Think on my proposal. But know that your son makes for Skull’s Bay. You may want to wait to decide until you meet him.”

“Who...” Rowan wasn’t sure Gavriel was breathing properly. The warrior’s hands were clenched so tightly the scars over his knuckles were moon white. “I

have a son?”

Some part of Rowan felt like the prick Fenrys claimed he was and not the male that Aelin believed him to be as he nodded.

The information would have gotten out sooner or later.

If Maeve had learned first, she might have schemed to ensnare Aedion—might have sent the cadre to kill or steal him. But now, Rowan supposed, he’d ensnared the cadre himself. It was only a matter of how desperately Gavriel wanted to meet his son ... and how afraid they were of failing Maeve should they not find Lorcan.

So Rowan said coldly, “Stay out of our way until they arrive and we’ll stay out of yours.”

Putting his back to them went against every instinct, but Rowan kept his shields tight, his magic spread to alert him if either so much as breathed wrong while he twisted to open the bedroom door in silent dismissal. He had much to do. Starting with writing a warning to the Eyllwe royals and Terrasen’s forces. Ending with trying to figure out how the hell they could fight two wars at once.

Gavriel rose, slack-faced, pale—something like devastation written there.

Rowan caught the spark of realization that flashed across Dorian’s eyes a heartbeat before the king buried it. Yes—at first glance, Aedion and Aelin looked like siblings, but it was Aedion’s smile that gave away his heritage. Gavriel would know in a heartbeat ... if Aedion’s scent didn’t give it away first.

Fenrys stepped closer to the male, a hand on his shoulder as they entered the hallway. For both Rowan and Fenrys, Gavriel had always been their sounding board. Never each other—no, he and Fenrys ... it was easier to be at each other’s throats instead.

Rowan said to both of his former companions, “If you so much as hint about Gavriel’s son to Maeve, our bargain is over. You’ll never find Lorcan. And if Lorcan does show up ... I’ll gladly help him kill you.” Rowan prayed it wouldn’t come to it—to a fight that brutal and devastating.

This was war, though. And he had no intention of losing it.

18

Yrene's heart thundered as she knelt beside Chaol on the bed and watched his toes shift.

“Can you—feel that?”

Chaol was still staring as if he didn't quite believe it.

“I ...” The words stalled in his throat.

“Can you control the movement?”

He seemed to concentrate.

Then his toes stopped.

“Good,” she said, sitting upright to watch more closely. “Now move them.”

He again appeared to concentrate and concentrate, and then—

Two toes curled. Then three on the other foot.

Yrene smiled—broadly, widely. Remained smiling as she turned her head toward him.

He only stared at her. Her smile. A sort of focused intensity falling across his features that made her go a bit still.

“How?” he asked.

“The—maybe when I got to you, when my magic blasted back darkness a little ...” It had been terrible. To find him inside all that dark. The void, the cold, the shrieking pain and horror.

She had refused to acknowledge what it tried to show her at that wall, again and again: that terrible fortress, the fate that awaited her when she returned. She

had refused to acknowledge it as she had struck the wall, her magic begging her to stop, to pull away.

Until ... until she'd heard *him*. Far off and deeper within.

She'd blindly lunged, a spear-throw toward that sound. And there he'd been—or whatever it was *of* him. As if *this* was the core of the tether between man and injury, not the wall against the nerves far, far above.

She'd wrapped herself around it, hugging tight even as the darkness pounded in again and again. And in answer, she'd sent her magic slashing into it, a scythe of light into the dark. A torch that burned just a fraction.

Just enough, it seemed.

“This is good,” Yrene declared—perhaps uselessly. “This is wonderful.”

Chaol was still staring at her as he said, “It is.”

She became aware of the blood on her—the state of her.

“Let's start with this,” she said. “Do a few exercises before we stop for the day.”

What she had admitted about her mother ... She had only told Hafiza upon entering the Torre. No one else. She had told no one else, not since she'd staggered onto her mother's cousin's farm and begged for sanctuary and shelter.

She wondered how long his own story had been locked in his chest.

“Let me order food first,” Yrene decided. She glanced toward the wood screen shielding the bathing room from sight, then down at her blood-crust chest and dress. “While we wait ... I might beg to use your bath. And borrow a set of your clothes.”

Chaol was still watching her with that focused, calm face. A different one from any she'd seen on him before. As if in shaving off some of that darkness, it had revealed this facet beneath.

This man she had not yet met.

She wasn't sure what to do with it. With him.

“Take whatever you want,” Chaol told her, his voice low—rough.

Yrene was light-headed when she crawled off the bed, taking his ruined shirt with her, and hurried for the bathing chamber. From the blood loss, she told herself.

Even as she smiled throughout her bath.



“I can’t help but feel neglected, you know,” Hasar drawled as she pored over maps Yrene didn’t dare inquire about. From across the princess’s lavish receiving room, she couldn’t view them properly—and could only watch as Hasar moved several ivory figurines here and there, her dark brows scrunched in concentration.

“Renia, of course,” Hasar went on, sliding a figure two inches to the right and frowning, “says I should not expect so much of your time, but perhaps I’ve grown spoiled these two years.”

Yrene sipped her mint tea and did not comment one way or the other. Hasar had summoned her here upon learning that Yrene had been healing Lord Westfall all day, sending a servant to fetch her to the princess’s rooms, with the promise of some much-needed refreshments. And indeed, the carob cookies and tea had pushed back the tide of her exhaustion just a fraction.

Her friendship with the princess had been purely accidental. In one of Yrene’s first on-site lessons, Hafiza had brought her to tend to the princess, who had returned from her seaside palace in the northeast to be treated for an unrelenting stomach pain. They were both of similar age, and during the hours that Hafiza went about removing a truly horrific tapeworm from the princess’s intestines, Hasar had ordered Yrene to talk.

So Yrene had, rambling about her lessons, occasionally mentioning the more disgusting moments of her year working at the White Pig. The princess particularly enjoyed her tales of the rather messier bar fights. Her favorite story to hear, which she’d ordered Yrene to narrate thrice during the days Hafiza had

extracted the magically slaughtered tapeworm through her mouth—one orifice or the other, the Healer on High had told the princess—was of the young stranger who had saved Yrene’s life, taught her to defend herself, and left her a small fortune in gold and jewels.

Yrene had deemed it idle talk, not expecting the princess to remember her name once Hafiza had coaxed the last inches of the tapeworm from her body. But two days later, she’d been called to the princess’s rooms, where Hasar was busy stuffing her face with all manner of delicacies to make up for the weight she’d lost.

Too thin, she’d told Yrene by way of greeting. She needed a fatter ass for her lover to grip at night.

Yrene had burst out laughing—the first bit of true laughter she’d had in a long, long time.

Hasar had only smirked, offered Yrene some smoked fish from the river-rich lowlands, and that had been that. Perhaps not a friendship of equals, but Hasar seemed to enjoy her company, and Yrene was in no position to deny her.

So the princess made a point to summon Yrene whenever she was in Antica—and had eventually brought Renia to the palace, both to meet her father and to meet Yrene. Renia, if Yrene was being honest, was far preferable to the demanding and sharp-tongued princess, but Hasar was prone to jealousy and territorialism, and often made sure Renia was kept well away from the court and would-be contenders for her affections.

Not that Renia had ever given cause for such a thing. No, the woman—older than Yrene by a month—only had eyes for the princess. Loved her with unflinching devotion.

Hasar called her a lady, had granted Renia lands within her own territory. Yet Yrene had heard some of the other healers whisper that when Renia had first entered Hasar’s orbit, Hafiza had been discreetly asked to heal her of ... unpleasantries from her former life. Former profession, apparently. Yrene had

never asked Hasar for the details, but given how loyal Renia was to the princess, she often wondered if the reason why Hasar so loved to hear Yrene's own story of her mysterious savior was because she, too, had once seen a woman suffering and reached out to help. And then to hold her.

"You're smiling more today, too," Hasar said, setting down her glass pen. "Despite those hideous clothes."

"Mine were sacrificed to the cause of healing Lord Westfall," Yrene said, rubbing at the dull throbbing in her temple that even the tea and carob cookies couldn't chase away. "He was kind enough to lend me some of his own."

Hasar smirked. "Some might see you and assume you lost your clothes for a far more pleasurable reason."

Yrene's face heated. "I'd hope they'd remember that I am a professional healer at the Torre."

"It'd make it even more valuable gossip."

"I'd think they'd have better things to do than whisper about a nobody healer."

"You are Hafiza's unofficial heir. That makes you slightly interesting."

Yrene wasn't insulted by the frank words. She didn't explain to Hasar that she'd likely be leaving, and Hafiza would have to find someone else. She doubted the princess would approve—and wasn't entirely certain that Hasar would *let* her leave. She'd been worried about Kashin for so long, yet Hasar ...

"Well, regardless, I have no designs on Lord Westfall."

"You should. He's divertingly handsome. Even *I'm* tempted."

"Really?"

Hasar laughed. "Not at all. But I could see why *you* might be."

"He and Captain Faliq are involved."

"And if they weren't?"

Yrene took a long sip from her tea. "He is my patient, and I am his healer. There are plenty of other handsome men."

“Like Kashin.”

Yrene frowned at the princess over the black-and-gold rim of her teacup. “You keep pushing your brother on me. Are *you* encouraging him?”

Hasar put a hand on her chest, her manicured nails gleaming in the late afternoon sun. “Kashin had no trouble with women until you came along. You two were once such close friends. Why shouldn’t I wish that my dear friend and brother form a deeper attachment?”

“Because if you are appointed khagan, you might kill us if he doesn’t submit.”

“Him, possibly, if he doesn’t bow. And if you prove to not be carrying his offspring, I might let you take the cleansing once my own line is established and keep your wealth.”

Such bald casual words. Of such horrible methods meant to keep this wondrous, sweeping empire from fracturing. She wished Kashin were here to listen, to understand.

Yrene asked, “And what would you do—for producing offspring?”

With Renia as the possible future Grand Empress, Hasar would need to find *some* way to produce a blood heir.

Hasar began pushing her figures around the map again. “I have already told my father, and it is no concern of yours.”

Right. For if she had selected some male to do the job ... dangerous knowledge. Her siblings might very well try to destroy someone whom Hasar and Renia trusted enough to assist in that way. Or would pay handsomely to know that Hasar and Renia were even *considering* offspring at this point.

But Hasar then said, “I heard that killer in the library hunted you.” Unforgiving will filled her face. “Why did you not come to me first?”

Before Yrene could answer, Hasar mercifully went on, “They said it was some strange death—not a typical one at all.”

Yrene tried and failed to block out the memory of the gaunt, leathery face. “It

was.”

Hasar sipped her tea. “I don’t care if the attack was a deliberate move on your life or whether it was just piss-poor coincidence.” She set down her cup with delicate precision. “When I find whoever it is, I’ll behead them myself.” The princess tapped a hand on the sheathed blade discarded along the edge of her oak desk.

Yrene didn’t doubt her. But she said, “I’ve been told the danger is ... considerable.”

“I do not take lightly to my friends being hunted like beasts.” Not the voice of a princess—but a warrior-queen. “And I do not take lightly to Torre healers being killed and terrorized.”

Hasar was many things, but she was loyal. To her core. To the few, few people whom she favored. It had always warmed something in Yrene. To have someone who actually meant what they said. Hasar *would* behead the killer if they were unfortunate enough to encounter her. She would ask no questions, either.

Yrene considered all she knew about the potential murderer and struggled to refrain from telling the princess that beheading was, in fact, the proper way to deal with a Valg demon.

Unless you were facing the remnants of it within someone. In which case ... As awful, as exhausting as today’s session with Lord Westfall had been, she’d already cataloged and tucked away the small scraps of information she’d gleaned. Not just for his healing, but if she should ever face it again—on those battlefields. Even if the prospect of seeing those Valg demons in the flesh ...

Taking a steadying drink of her tea, Yrene asked, “Are you not concerned that perhaps it is no coincidence war is upon the northern continent, and now we have enemies in our midst?” She didn’t dare mention Tumelun’s death.

“Perhaps Lord Westfall and Captain Faliq brought in their own spies to track you.”

“That is not possible.”

“Are you so certain? They are desperate. And desperation breeds people who are willing to do anything to get what they need.”

“And what would they need from me beyond what I am already giving them?”

Hasar beckoned Yrene over with a flick of her fingers. Yrene set down her teacup and strode across the deep blue carpet to the desk before the windows. Hasar’s rooms commanded a view of the teal bay—the ships and the gulls and the glittering sprawl of the Narrow Sea beyond.

Hasar gestured to the map in front of her. “What do you see here?”

Yrene’s throat tightened as she recognized the landmass. The northern continent—her own home. And all the figures on it, in red and green and black ...

“Are those—armies?”

“This is Duke Perrington’s force,” Hasar said, pointing to the line of black figures stretching like a wall across the middle of the continent. Other clusters lay to the south.

And to the north: one small green cluster. And a lone red figure just beyond the shores of Rifthold.

“What are the others?”

Hasar said, “There is a small army in Terrasen.” She snickered at the green figures clustered around Orynth.

“And in Adarlan?”

Hasar picked up the red figurine, twirling it between two figures. “No army to speak of. Dorian Havilliard remains unaccounted for. Will he flee north or south? Or perhaps cut inland—though there is certainly nothing beyond the mountains save for half-feral tribes.”

“What is that figure?” Yrene asked, noting the gold pawn Hasar had set off the map entirely.

Hasar picked it up, too. “It is Aelin Galathynius. *Also* unaccounted for.”

“She is not in Terrasen? With her army?”

“No.” Hasar patted the documents she’d been referencing as she’d adjusted her own maps. Reports, Yrene realized. “The latest news indicates the Queen of Terrasen is nowhere to be found in her own kingdom. Or in any other.” A slight smile. “Perhaps you should ask your lord that.”

“I doubt he’ll tell me.” She refrained from saying he wasn’t her lord.

“Then perhaps you should make him.”

Yrene carefully asked, “Why?”

“Because I would like to know.”

Yrene read between the words. Hasar wanted the information—before her father or siblings.

“To what end?”

“When a power broker of the realms goes missing, it is not a cause for celebration. Especially one who destroys palaces and takes cities on a whim.”

Fear. Well hidden, but Hasar was at least considering the possibility that Aelin Galathynius might set her sights beyond her own lands.

But to play spy for Hasar ... “You think the library attack has something to do with this?”

“I think that perhaps Lord Westfall and Captain Faliq are aware of how to play the game. And if they make it appear as if a threat from Perrington is in our midst, why wouldn’t we consider allying with them?”

Yrene didn’t think they played those sorts of games at all. “You think they’re doing this to help Aelin Galathynius? Or because she is missing and they’re frightened of losing a powerful ally themselves?”

“That’s what I would like to know. Along with the queen’s location. Or their best guess.”

Yrene made herself hold the princess’s stare. “And why should I help you?”

A Baast Cat’s smile. “Beyond the fact that we are dear friends? Is there

nothing I could give you to sweeten the offer, lovely Yrene?”

“I have all I need.”

“Yes, but you do remember that the armadas are mine. The Narrow Sea is mine. And crossing it may be very, very difficult to those who forget.”

Yrene did not dare back down. Didn't dare break the princess's dark gaze.

Hasar knew. Knew, or guessed, that Yrene wanted to leave. And if she did not aid the princess ... Yrene had no doubt that as fiercely as Hasar loved, so, too, could her need for retribution drive her. Enough to make sure Yrene never left these shores.

“I shall see what I can learn,” Yrene said, refusing to soften her voice.

“Good,” Hasar declared, and cleared the figurines off the map with a wipe of her hand, scattering them into a drawer and shutting them inside. “To begin, why don't you join me at Tehome's feast the night after tomorrow? I can keep Kashin occupied, if it will clear the way for you.”

Her stomach turned over. She'd forgotten that the sea goddess's holiday was in two days. Frankly, there were holidays nearly every other week, and Yrene participated when she could, but this one ... With her fleet, with the Narrow Sea and several others under her jurisdiction, Hasar would certainly be honoring Tehome. And the khaganate would certainly not fail to honor the Lady of the Great Deep, either—not when the oceans had been good to them these centuries.

So Yrene didn't dare object. Didn't let herself so much as hesitate before Hasar's piercing eyes. “As long as you don't mind me wearing the same dress from the other night,” she said as casually as she could, plucking at her oversized shirt.

“No need,” Hasar countered, smiling broadly. “I have something already selected.”

19

Chaol kept moving his toes long after Yrene had left. He wriggled them inside his boots, not quite *feeling* them, but just enough to know they *were* moving.

However Yrene had done it ...

He didn't tell Nesryn when she returned before dinner, no sign of the Valg to report. And he'd only quietly explained that he was making enough progress with Yrene that he'd like to put off tomorrow's visit to her family until another day.

She'd seemed a tad crestfallen, but had agreed, that cool mask slipping back over her face within a few blinks.

He kissed her when she'd walked by to dress for dinner.

He'd grabbed her by the wrist and tugged her down, and kissed her once. Brief—but thorough.

She'd been surprised enough that by the time he'd pulled away, she hadn't so much as laid a hand on him.

“Get ready,” he told her, motioning to her room.

With a backward glance at him, a half smile on her mouth, Nesryn obeyed.

Chaol stared after her for a few minutes, shifting his toes in his boots.

There had been no heat in it—the kiss. No real feeling.

He expected it. He'd practically shoved her away these weeks. He didn't blame her at all for the surprise.

He was still flexing his toes in his boots when they arrived at dinner. Tonight,

he'd ask the khagan for an audience. Again. Mourning or no, protocol or no. And then he'd warn the man of what he knew.

He would request it before Yrene's usual arrival—in case they lost time. Which seemed to be an occurrence. It had been three hours today. Three.

His throat was still raw, despite the honeyed tea Yrene had made him drink until he was nearly sick. Then she'd made him exercise, many of the movements ones she had to assist him with: rotating his hips, rolling each leg from side to side, rotating his ankles and feet in circles. All designed to keep the blood flowing to the muscles beginning to atrophy, all designed to re-create the pathways between his spine and brain, she said.

She'd repeated the sets over and over, until an hour had passed. Until she was swaying again on her feet, and that glassy look had crept over her eyes.

Exhaustion. For while she'd been rotating his legs, ordering him to move his toes every now and then, she'd sent tingles of her magic through his legs, bypassing his spine entirely. Little pinpricks in his toes—like swarms of fireflies had landed on him. That was all he felt, even as she kept trying to patch up those pathways in his body. What little she could do now, with the small progress she'd made hours ago.

But all that magic ... When Yrene had swayed after his last set, he'd called for Kadja. Ordered an armed carriage for the healer.

Yrene, to his surprise, didn't object. Though he supposed it was hard to, when the healer was nearly asleep on her feet by the time she left, Kadja supporting her. Yrene only murmured something about being on his horse again after breakfast, and was gone.

But perhaps the luck he'd had that afternoon was the last of it.

Hours later, the khagan was not at dinner. He was dining in private with his beloved wife, they said. The unspoken rest of it lay beneath the words: mourning was taking its natural course, and politics would be set aside. Chaol had tried to look as understanding as possible.

At least Nesryn seemed to be making some headway with Sartaq, even if the other royals had already grown bored with their presence.

So he dined, so he kept wriggling his toes within his boots, and did not tell anyone, even Nesryn, long after they'd returned to their suite and he'd tumbled off to bed.

He awoke with the dawn, found himself ... eager to wash and dress. Found himself eating breakfast as quickly as he could, while Nesryn only raised her brows.

But she, too, was off early to meet Sartaq atop one of the palace's thirty-six minarets.

There was some holiday tomorrow, to honor one of the thirty-six gods those minarets each represented. Their sea goddess, Tehome. There would be a ceremony at sunrise down by the docks, with all the royals, even the khagan, attending to lay wreaths into the water. Gifts for the Lady of the Great Deep, Nesryn had said. Then a grand feast at the palace come sundown.

He'd been indifferent about his own holidays back in Adarlan, found them outdated rites to honor forces and elements his ancestors could not explain, and yet the buzz of activity, the wreaths of flowers and seashells being raised within the palace to at last replace the white banners, the scent of shellfish simmering in butter and spices ... It intrigued him. Made him see a bit clearer, brighter, as he wheeled through the busy palace toward the courtyard.

The courtyard itself was a melee of arriving and departing vendors, bearing food and decorations and what seemed to be performers. All to beseech their sea goddess for mercy as the late summer gave way to annual violent storms that could rip apart ships and entire towns on the coastline.

Chaol scanned the courtyard for Yrene, flexing his toes. He spotted his horse and her mare alongside it in the few pens by the east wall, but ... no sign of her.

She'd been late yesterday, so he waited until a lull in the deliveries before he motioned the stable hands to help him mount. But it was the guard from

yesterday—the one who'd aided him most—who came forward when the mare was brought over. Shen, Yrene had called him; she'd greeted the guard as if she knew him well.

Shen said nothing, though Chaol knew every guard in this palace spoke an assortment of languages beyond Halha, only offering a nod of greeting. Which Chaol found himself returning before he silently mounted, his arms straining with the effort to haul himself upward. But he made it, perhaps easier than yesterday, earning what he could have sworn was a wink of approval from Shen before the guard sauntered back to his post.

Shutting out what that did to his chest, Chaol buckled the straps on his brace and surveyed the chaotic courtyard and open gates beyond. The guards inspected every wagon, every piece of paper that confirmed a royal order had been placed for the goods they bore.

Good. Regardless of whether he'd spoken to the khagan personally, at least someone had warned the guard to be careful—perhaps Kashin.

The sun drifted higher, raising the heat with it. Still Yrene did not come.

A clock chimed deep in the palace. An hour late.

The mare turned skittish, impatient beneath him, and he patted her thick, sweaty neck, murmuring.

Another fifteen minutes passed. Chaol studied the gates, the street beyond.

No word of alarm had come from the Torre, but staying still, just waiting here

...

He found himself snapping the reins, tapping the horse's flank to launch it into a walk.

He'd marked the path Yrene had taken yesterday. Perhaps he'd run into her on her way over here.



Antica was crawling with vendors and people setting up for tomorrow's holiday.

And those already toasting to the Lady of the Great Deep, filling the taverns and eating rooms lining the streets, musicians playing at each one.

It took him nearly twice as long to get to the Torre's owl-adorned gates, though part of that slowness was due to his scanning for Yrene on every crammed street and passing alley. But he found no sign of the healer.

He and his horse were sweating when they rode through the Torre gates, the guards smiling at him—faces he'd marked from yesterday's lesson.

How many times had he seen such a greeting in Adarlan? Taken it for granted?

He'd always ridden through the black iron gates to the glass palace without hesitation, without really doing more than noting who was stationed there and who wasn't looking up to snuff. He'd trained with those men, learned about their families and lives.

His men. They had been *his* men.

So Chaol's own answering smile was tight, and he couldn't stand to meet their bright eyes for more than a passing glance as he rode into the Torre courtyard, the scent of lavender wrapping around him.

But he paused a few feet in, wheeled his mare around, and asked the guard closest, "Has Yrene Towers left today?"

Like those at the khagan's palace, each of the Torre's guards was fluent in at least three languages: Halha, the tongue of the northern continent, and the language of the lands to the east. With visitors from all over Erilea, those at the Torre gates *had* to be fluent in the three common tongues.

The guard before him shook his head, sweat sliding down his dark skin in the rippling heat. "Not yet, Lord Westfall."

Perhaps it was rude to seek her out when she was likely too busy with other things to immediately tend to him. She'd mentioned other patients, after all.

With a nod of thanks, he again turned the roan mare toward the Torre, and was about to aim for the courtyard to its left when an ancient voice said from

below, “Lord Westfall. Good to see you out and about.”

Hafiza. The Healer on High stood a few feet away, a basket draped over her thin arm and two middle-aged healers flanking her. The guards bowed, and Chaol inclined his head.

“I was looking for Yrene,” he said by way of greeting.

Hafiza’s white brows rose. “Did she not come to you this morning?”

Unease tightened his gut. “No, though perhaps I missed her—”

One of the healers at Hafiza’s side stepped forward and murmured to the Healer on High, “She is abed, my lady.”

Hafiza now raised her brows at the woman. “Still?”

A shake of the head. “Drained. Eretia checked on her an hour ago—she was asleep.”

Hafiza’s mouth tightened, though Chaol had a feeling he knew what she was about to say. Felt guilty enough before the crone spoke. “Our powers can do great things, Lord Westfall, but they also demand a great cost. Yrene was ...” She sought the words, either from not using her native tongue or to spare him from further guilt. “She was asleep in the carriage when she arrived last night. She had to be carried to her room.”

He cringed.

Hafiza patted his boot, and he could have sworn he felt it in his toes. “It is of no concern, my lord. A day of sleep, and she will be back at the palace tomorrow morning.”

“If tomorrow is a holiday,” he volunteered, “she can have the day off.”

Hafiza chuckled. “You do not know Yrene very well at all if you think she considers these holidays to be *days off*. ” She pointed at him. “Though if *you* want the day off, you should certainly tell her, because she’ll likely be knocking at your door come sunrise.”

Chaol smiled, even as he gazed at the tower looming overhead.

“It is a restorative sleep,” Hafiza supplied. “Utterly natural. Do not let it

burden you.”

With a final look at the pale tower high above, he nodded and wheeled his horse back to the gates. “May I escort you anywhere?”

Hafiza’s smile was bright as the midday sun. “You certainly may, Lord Westfall.”



The Healer on High was stopped every block by those wishing to merely touch her hand, or have her touch *them*.

Sacred. Holy. Beloved.

It took them thirty minutes to get even half a dozen blocks from the Torre. And though he offered to wait while Hafiza and her companions entered the modest home on a quiet street, they waved him off.

The streets were clogged enough to deter him from exploring, so Chaol soon headed back toward the palace.

But even as he steered his horse through the crowds, he found himself glancing to that pale tower—a behemoth on the horizon. To the healer sleeping within.



Yrene slept for a day and a half.

She hadn’t meant to. Had barely been able to rouse herself long enough to see to her needs and wave off Eretia when she’d come to prod her, to make sure she was still alive.

The healing yesterday—two days ago, she realized as she dressed in the gray light before dawn—had decimated her. That bit of progress, the nosebleed afterward, had taken its toll.

But his toes had moved. And the pathways she’d sent her magic floating along, dots of light darting through him ... Damaged, yes, but if she could

slowly start to replace those frayed, tiny communicators within him ... It would be long, and hard, yet ...

Yrene knew it was not guilt alone that had her rising so early on Tehome's Day.

He was from Adarlan—she doubted he'd care if he got the day off.

Dawn had barely broken by the time Yrene slipped into the Torre courtyard and paused.

The sun had crept over the compound walls, spearing a few shafts of golden light into the purplish shadows.

And in one of those shafts of sunlight, the faint strands of gold in his brown hair gleaming ...

"She wakes," Lord Chaol said.

Yrene strode for him, gravel crunching loudly in the drowsy dawn. "You rode here?"

"All by myself."

She only arched a brow at the white mare beside his. "And you brought the other horse?"

"A gentleman through and through."

She crossed her arms, frowning up at where he sat mounted. "Any further movement?"

The morning sun lit his eyes, turning the brown into near-gold. "How are you feeling?"

"Answer my question, please."

"Answer mine."

She gaped at him a bit. Debated scowling. "I'm fine," she said, waving a hand. "But have you felt any further—"

"Did you get the rest you needed?"

Yrene gaped at him truly this time. "Yes." She scowled now, too. "And it's none of your concern—"

“It certainly is.”

He said it so *calmly*. With such *male* entitlement. “I know that in Adarlan, women bow to whatever men say, but here, if I say it’s none of your business, then *it isn’t*.”

Chaol gave her a half smile. “So we’re back to the animosity today.”

She reined in her rising shriek. “*We* are not back to anything. I’m your healer, and you are my patient, and I asked you about the status of your—”

“If you’re not rested,” he said, as if it were the most rational thing in the world, “then I’m not letting you near me.”

Yrene opened and closed her mouth. “And *how* will you decide that?”

Slowly, his eyes swept over her. Every inch.

Her heart thundered at the long look. The relentless focus. “Good color,” he said. “Good posture. Certainly good sass.”

“I’m not some prize horse, as *you* said yesterday.”

“Two days ago.”

She braced her hands on her hips. “I’m fine. Now, how are *you*?” Each word was accentuated.

Chaol’s eyes danced. “I’m feeling quite well, Yrene. Thank you for asking.”

Yrene. If she wasn’t inclined to leap onto his horse and strangle him, she might have contemplated how the way he said her name made her toes curl.

But she hissed, “Don’t mistake my kindness for stupidity. If you have had any progress, or regressions, I *will* find them out.”

“If this is your kindness, then I’d hate to see your bad side.”

She knew he meant the words in jest, yet ... Her back stiffened.

He seemed to realize it, and leaned down in his saddle. “It was a joke, Yrene. You have been more generous than ... It was a joke.”

She shrugged, heading for the white horse.

He said, perhaps an attempt to steer them back toward neutral ground, “How are the other healers faring—after the attack?”

A shiver crawled up her spine as she grabbed the mare's reins, but made no move to mount. Yrene had offered to help with the burial, but Hafiza had refused, telling her to save her strength for Lord Westfall. But it hadn't stopped her from visiting the death chamber beneath the Torre two days ago—from seeing the desiccated body laid out on the stone slab in the center of the rock-hewn chamber, the leathery, drained face, the bones that jutted out from paper-thin skin. She'd offered up a prayer to Silba before she'd left, and had not been awake yesterday when they'd buried her in the catacombs far beneath the tower.

Yrene now frowned up at the tower looming overhead, its presence always such a comfort, and yet ... Since that night in the library, despite Hafiza's and Eretia's best efforts, there had been a hush in the halls, the tower itself. As if the light that had filled this place had guttered.

"They fight to retain a sense of normalcy," Yrene said at last. "I think in defiance against ... against whoever did it. Hafiza and Eretia have led by example, staying calm, focused—smiling when they can. I think it helps the other girls not to be so petrified."

"If you want me to help with another lesson," he offered, "my services are at your disposal."

She nodded absently, running her thumb over the bridle.

Silence fell for a long moment, filled with the scent of swaying lavender and the potted lemon trees. Then—"Were you really planning on barging into my room at dawn?"

Yrene turned from the patient white mare. "You don't seem the type to laze in bed." She raised her brows. "Though, if you and Captain Faliq are engaging in ___"

"You can come at dawn, if you wish."

She nodded. Even though she usually *loved* sleeping. "I was going to check on a patient before I visited you. Since we tend to ... lose time." He didn't reply, so she went on, "I can meet you back at the palace in two hours, if you—"

“I can go with you. I don’t mind.”

She dropped the reins. Surveyed him. His legs. “Before we go, I should like to do some exercises with you.”

“On the horse?”

Yrene strode to him, gravel hissing beneath her shoes. “It’s actually a successful form of treatment for many—not just those with spinal injuries. The movements of a horse during riding can improve sensory processing, among other benefits.” She unbuckled the brace and slid his foot from the stirrup. “When I was on the steppes last winter, I healed a young warrior who had fallen from his horse on a grueling hunt—the wound was nearly the same as yours. His tribe devised the brace for him before I got there, since he was even less inclined to remain indoors than you.”

Chaol snorted, running a hand through his hair.

Yrene lifted his foot and began to rotate it, mindful of the horse he sat atop. “Getting him to do any of the exercising—the therapy—was an ordeal. He hated being cooped up in his *gir* and wanted to feel the fresh air on his face. So, just to give myself a moment’s peace, I let him get into the saddle, ride a bit, and then we’d do the exercises while he was astride. Only in exchange for later doing *more* comprehensive exercises in the tent. But he made such progress while astride that it became a main part of our treatment.” Yrene gently bent and straightened his leg. “I know you can’t feel much beyond your toes—”

“Nothing.”

“—but I want you to focus on wriggling them. *As much as you can*. Along with the rest of your leg, but concentrate on your feet while I do this.”

He fell silent, and she didn’t bother to look up as she moved his leg, going through what exercises she could with the horse beneath him. The solid weight of his leg was enough to get her sweating, but she kept at it, stretching and bending, pivoting and rolling. And beneath his boots, the thick black leather shifting ... his toes indeed wriggled and pushed.

“Good,” Yrene told him. “Keep at it.”

His toes strained against the leather again. “The steppes—that’s where the khagan’s people originally hailed from.”

She went through another full set of the exercises, making sure his toes were moving the entire time, before she answered. Setting his leg back within the brace and stirrup, giving the horse plenty of space as she went around its front and unbuckled his other leg, she said, “Yes. A beautiful, pristine land. The grassy hills roll on forever, interrupted only by sparse pine forests and a few bald mountains.” Yrene grunted against the weight of his leg as she began the same set of exercises. “Did you know that the first khagan conquered the continent with only a hundred thousand men? And that he did it in four years?” She took in the awakening city around them, marveling. “I knew about his people’s history, about the Darghan, but when I went to the steppes, Kashin told me—” She fell silent, wishing she could take back the last bit.

“The prince went with you?” A calm, casual question. She tapped his foot in silent order to keep wriggling his toes. Chaol obeyed with a huff of laughter.

“Kashin and Hafiza came with me. We were there over a month.” Yrene flexed his foot, up and down, working through the repetitive motions with slow, deliberate care. Magic aided in the healing, yes, but the physical element of it played equally as important a role. “Are you moving your toes as much as you can?”

A snort. “Yes, mistress.”

She hid her smile, stretching his leg as far as his hip would allow and rotating it in small circles.

“I assume that trip to the steppes was when Prince Kashin poured his heart out.”

Yrene nearly dropped his leg, but instead glared up at him, finding those rich brown eyes full of dry humor. “It is none of your business.”

“You do love to say that, for someone who seems so intent on demanding I

tell her everything.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to bending his leg at the knee, stretching and easing. “Kashin was one of the first friends I made here,” she said after a long moment. “One of my first friends anywhere.”

“Ah.” A pause. “And when he wanted more than friendship ...”

Yrene lowered Chaol’s leg at last, buckling it back into the brace and wiping the dust from his boots off her hands. She set her hands on her hips as she peered at him, squinting against the rising light. “I didn’t want more than that. I told him as much. And that is that.”

Chaol’s lips twitched toward a smile, and Yrene at last approached her waiting mare, hauling herself into the saddle. When she straightened, arranging the skirts of her dress over her legs, she said to him, “My aim is to return to Fenharrow, to help where I am needed most. I felt nothing strong enough for Kashin to warrant yielding that dream.”

Understanding filled his eyes, and he opened his mouth—as if he might say something about it. But he just nodded, smiling again, and said, “I’m glad you didn’t.” She lifted a brow in question, and his smile grew. “Where would I be without you here to bark orders at me?”

Yrene scowled, scooping up the reins and steering the horse toward the gates as she said sharply, “Let me know if you start to feel any discomfort or tingling in that saddle—and try to keep your toes moving as often as you can.”

To his credit, he didn’t object. He only said with that half smile, “Lead the way, Yrene Towers.”

And though she told herself not to ... a little smile tugged on Yrene’s mouth as they rode into the awakening city.

20

With most of the city down by the docks for the sunrise ceremony to honor Tehome, the streets were quiet. Chaol supposed only the sickest would be bedbound today, which was why, when they approached a slender house on a sunny, dusty street, he wasn't at all surprised to be greeted by violent coughing before they'd even reached the door.

Well, before Yrene had even reached the door. Without the chair, he'd remain atop the horse, but Yrene didn't so much as comment on it as she dismounted, tied her mare to the hitching post down the street, and strode for the house. He kept shifting his toes every so often—as much as he could manage within the boots. The movement alone, he knew, was a gift, but it required more concentration than he'd expected; more energy, too.

Chaol was still flexing them when an elderly woman opened the house door, sighing to see Yrene and speaking in very slow Halha. For Yrene to understand, apparently, because the healer replied in the language as she entered the house and left the door ajar, her use of the words tentative and unwieldy. Better than his own.

From the street, he could see through the house's open windows and door to the little bed tucked just under the painted sill—as if to keep the patient in the fresh air.

It was occupied by an old man—the source of that coughing.

Yrene spoke to the crone before striding to the old man, pulling up a squat,

three-legged stool.

Chaol stroked his horse's neck, wriggling his toes again, while Yrene took the man's withered hand and pressed another to his brow.

Each movement was gentle, calm. And her face ...

There was a soft smile on it. One he'd never seen before.

Yrene said something he couldn't hear to the old woman wringing her hands behind them, then rolled down the thin blanket covering the man.

Chaol cringed at the lesions crusting his chest and stomach. Even the old woman did.

But Yrene didn't so much as blink, her serene countenance never shifting as she lifted a hand before her. White light simmered along her fingers and palm.

The old man, though unconscious, sucked in a breath as she laid a hand on his chest. Right over the worst of those sores.

For long minutes, she only laid her hand there, brows scrunched, light flowing from her palm to the man's chest.

And when she lifted her hand ... the old woman wept. Kissed Yrene's hands, one after the other. Yrene only smiled, kissing the woman's sagging cheek, and bade her farewell, giving what had to be firm instructions for the man's continued care.

It was only after Yrene shut the door behind her that the beautiful smile faded. That she studied the dusty cobblestones and her mouth tightened. As if she'd forgotten he was there.

His horse nickered, and her head snapped up.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She only unhitched her horse and mounted, chewing on her lower lip as they started into a slow walk. "He has a disease that will not go gently. We have been battling it for five months now. That it flared up so badly this time ..." She shook her head—disappointed. With herself.

"It doesn't have a cure?"

“It has been defeated in other patients, but sometimes the host ... He is very old. And even when I think I’ve purged it from him, it comes back.” She blew out a breath. “At this point, I feel as if I’m just buying him time, not giving him a solution.”

He studied the tightness in her jaw. Someone who demanded excellence from herself—while perhaps not expecting the same from others. Or even hoping for it.

Chaol found himself saying, “Are there any other patients you need to see to?”

She frowned toward his legs. Toward the big toe he pushed against the top of his boot, the leather shifting with the movement. “We can return to the palace—”

“I like to be outside,” he blurted. “The streets are empty. Let me ...” He couldn’t finish.

Yrene seemed to get it, though. “There’s a young mother across the city.” A long, long ride away. “She’s recovering from a hard labor two weeks ago. I’d like to visit her.”

Chaol tried not to look too relieved. “Then let’s go.”



So they went. The streets remained empty, the ceremony, Yrene told him, lasting until midmorning. Even though the empire’s gods had been cobbled together, most people participated in their holidays.

Religious tolerance, she’d said, was something the very first khagan had championed—and all who had come after him, too. Oppressing various beliefs only led to discord within his empire, so he’d absorbed them all. Some literally, twining multiple gods into one. But always allowing those who wished to practice the freedom to do so without fear.

Chaol, in turn, told Yrene about the other use he’d learned while reading up on the history of the khagan rule: in other kingdoms, where religious minorities

were ill-treated, he found *many* willing spies.

She'd known that already—and had asked him if he'd ever used spies for his own ... position.

He told her no. Though he didn't reveal that he'd once had men who worked covertly, but they weren't like the spies Aedion and Ren Allsbrook had employed. That he himself had worked within Rifthold this spring and summer. But talking about his former guards ... He fell silent.

She'd remained quiet after that, as if sensing his silence was not from lack of conversation.

She brought him into a quarter of the city that was full of small gardens and parks, the houses modest yet well kept. Firmly middle-class. It reminded him a bit of Rifthold and yet ... Cleaner. Brighter. Even with the streets so quiet this morning, it teemed with life.

Especially at the elegant little house they stopped before, where a merry-eyed young woman spotted them from the window a level above. She called out to Yrene in Halha, then vanished inside.

“Well, that answers *that* question,” Yrene murmured, just as the front door opened and that woman appeared, a plump babe in her arms.

The mother paused upon seeing Chaol, but he offered a polite bob of his head.

The woman smiled prettily at him, but it turned outright devious as she faced Yrene and waggled her eyebrows.

Yrene laughed, and the sound ... Beautiful as the sound was, it was nothing like the smile on her face. The delight.

He'd never seen a face so lovely.

Not as Yrene dismounted and took the chubby baby—the portrait of newborn health—from the mother's outstretched arms. “Oh, she's beautiful,” she cooed, brushing a finger over a round cheek.

The mother beamed. “Fat as a dirt-grub.” She spoke in Chaol's own tongue,

either because Yrene used it with her, or from noticing his own features, so different from the various norms here in Antica. “Hungry as a pig, too.”

Yrene bobbed and swayed with the baby, cooing at the girl. “The feeding is going well?”

“She’d be on my breast day and night if I let her,” the mother grouched, not at all embarrassed to be discussing such things with him present.

Yrene chuckled, her smile growing as she let a tiny hand wrap around her finger. “She looks healthy as can be,” she observed. Then looked over the mother. “And you?”

“I’ve been following the regimen you gave me—the baths helped.”

“No bleeding?”

A shake of the head. Then she seemed to notice him, because she said a bit more quietly, and Chaol suddenly found the buildings down the street very interesting, “How long until I can—you know? With my husband.”

Yrene snorted. “Give it another seven weeks.”

The woman let out a squawk of outrage. “But you *healed* me.”

“And you nearly bled out before I could.” Words that brooked no argument. “Give your body time to rest. Other healers would tell you eight more weeks at a minimum, but ... try it at seven. If there is *any* discomfort—”

“I know, I know,” the woman said, waving a hand. “It’s just ... been a while.”

Yrene let out another laugh, and Chaol found himself gazing toward her as the healer said, “Well, you can wait a little longer at this point.”

The woman gave Yrene a wry smile as she took back her burbling baby. “I certainly hope *you* enjoy yourself, since I can’t.”

Chaol caught her meaningful glance in his direction before Yrene did.

And he got no small amount of smug satisfaction from watching Yrene blink, then stiffen, then go red. “What—oh. Oh, *no*.”

The way she spat that *no* ... He took no satisfaction in *that*.

The woman only laughed, hefting the baby a bit higher as she headed into her

charming house. “I certainly would.”

The door shut.

Still red, Yrene turned to him, distinctly not meeting his eyes. “She’s opinionated.”

Chaol chuckled. “I hadn’t realized that I was a firm *no*.”

She glared at him, hauling herself onto her mare. “I don’t share a bed with patients. And you’re with Captain Faliq,” she added quickly. “*And you’re—*”

“Not in fit form to pleasure a woman?”

He was shocked he said it. But again more than a tad smug to see her eyes flare.

“No,” Yrene said, somehow going redder. “Certainly not that. But you’re ... you.”

“I’m trying not to be insulted.”

She waved a hand, looking everywhere but at him. “You know what I mean.”

That he was a man from Adarlan, that he’d served the king? He certainly did. But he said, deciding to have mercy on her, “I was joking, Yrene. I ... am with Nesryn.”

She swallowed, still blushing like mad. “Where is she today?”

“She went to attend the ceremony with her family.” Nesryn hadn’t invited him, and he’d claimed he wanted to put off their own ride through the city. Yet here he now was.

Yrene nodded distantly. “Are you going to the party tonight—at the palace?”

“Yes. Are you?”

Another nod. Stilted silence. Then she said, “I’m afraid to work on you today—just in case we lose track of time again and miss the party.”

“Would it be so bad if we did?”

She eyed him while they turned a corner. “It would offend some of them. If it didn’t offend the Lady of the Great Deep herself. I’m not sure which scares me more.” He chuckled again as Yrene went on, “Hasar lent me a dress, so I have to

go. Or risk her wrath.”

Some shadow passed over her face. And he was about to ask about it when she said, “Do you want to have a tour?”

He stared at her, at the offer she’d thrown his way.

“I’ll admit I don’t know *that* much about the history, but my work has taken me to every quarter, so I can at least keep us from getting lost—”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes.”

Yrene’s smile was tentative. Quiet.

But she led him onward, the streets beginning to fill as the ceremonies ended and celebrating began. As laughing people streamed down the avenue and alleys, music pouring from everywhere, the smell of food and spices wrapping around him.

He forgot about the heat, the baking sun, forgot to keep moving his toes every now and then, as they rode through the winding quarters of the city, as he marveled at the domed temples and free libraries, as Yrene showed him the paper money they used—mulberry bark backed in silk—in lieu of unwieldy coins.

She bought him her favorite treats, a confection made from carob, and offered smiles to anyone who came her way. Rarely to him, though.

There was no street she balked at turning down, no neighborhood or alley she seemed to fear. A god-city, yes—and also a city of learning, of light and comfort and wealth.

When the sun reached its zenith, she led them into a lush public garden, its overhanging trees and vines blocking out the brutal rays. They rode down the labyrinth of walkways, the garden near-empty thanks to everyone now partaking in the midday meal.

Raised beds of flowers overflowed with blossoms, hanging ferns swayed in the cool breeze off the sea, birds called to one another from the cover of the drooping fronds overhead.

“Do you think ...,” Yrene said after long minutes of quiet, “that one day ...” She gnawed on her bottom lip. “That we could have a place like this?”

“In Adarlan?”

“In anywhere,” she said. “But yes—in Adarlan, in Fenharrow. I heard Eyllwe’s cities were once as fine as this, before ...”

Before the shadow between them. Before the shadow in his heart.

“They were,” Chaol said, sealing away the thought of the princess who’d lived in those cities, who’d loved them. Even as the scar on his face seemed to twinge. But he considered her question. And from those shadows of his memory, he heard Aedion Ashryver’s voice.

What do you suppose the people on other continents, across all those seas, think of us? Do you think they hate us or pity us for what we do to each other? Perhaps it’s just as bad there. Perhaps it’s worse. But ... I have to believe it’s better. Somewhere, it’s better than this.

He wondered if he’d ever get to tell Aedion that he’d found such a place. Perhaps he would tell Dorian what he’d seen here. Help rebuild the ruins of Rifthold, of his kingdom, into something like this.

He realized he hadn’t finished. That Yrene was still waiting, as she brushed aside a trailing vine of small purple flowers. “Yes,” he said at last, at the wariness hiding that tiny burning kernel of hope in her eyes. “I believe we can build this for ourselves one day.” He added, “If we survive this war.” If he could leave here with an army behind him to challenge Erawan.

Time pressed on him, smothering him. Faster. He had to move *faster* with everything—

Yrene scanned his face in the heavy heat of the garden. “You love your people very much.”

Chaol nodded, unable to find the words.

She opened her mouth, as if she’d say something, but closed it. Then said, “Even the people of Fenharrow were not blameless with their actions this past

decade.”

Chaol tried not to look at the faint scar across her throat. Had it been one of her own countrymen who had—

She sighed, studying the rose garden wilting in the blistering heat. “We should head back. Before the crowds get impossible.”

He wondered what she’d thought of saying a moment ago but decided against. What caused that shadow to lurk in her eyes.

But Chaol only followed her, all those words hanging between them.



They parted ways at the palace, the halls packed with servants readying for the evening’s festivities. Yrene went right to find Hasar and the dress—and bath—she’d been promised, and Chaol returned to his own suite, to wash off the dust and sweat and find something suitable to wear.

No sign of Nesryn until she’d returned midway through his bath, shouted that she was taking one of her own, and closed the door to her suite.

He’d opted for his teal jacket, and waited in the hall for Nesryn to emerge. When she did, he blinked at the well-cut amethyst jacket and pants. He hadn’t seen a sign of her captain’s uniform for days. And wasn’t about to ask as he said, “You look beautiful.”

Nesryn smiled, her glossy hair still damp from the bath. “You don’t look so bad yourself.” She seemed to note the color on his face and asked, “You were in the sun today?” Her slight accent had deepened, adding more of a twirl to certain sounds.

“I helped Yrene with some patients around the city.”

Nesryn smiled as they headed into the hallway. “I’m glad to hear it.” Not a word about the ride and visit he’d delayed with her—he wondered if she had even remembered.

He still hadn’t told her about his toes. But as they reached the great hall of the

palace ... Later. They'd discuss it all later.

The great hall of the palace was a wonder.

That was the only word for it.

The party was not as large as he would have assumed, only a few more people than the usual gathering of the viziers and royals, but no expense had been spared on the decorations. The feast.

He gaped a bit, Nesryn doing the same, as they were led to their spots at the high table—an honor he was still surprised they received. The khagan and his wife would not be joining them, he was told by Duva. Her mother had not been doing well these last few days and wished to celebrate with her husband in private.

No doubt seeing those mourning banners at last coming down had been difficult. And tonight likely wasn't the time to press the khagan about their alliance anyway.

A few more guests poured in, along with Hasar and Renia, arm in arm with Yrene.

When Yrene had left him at the crossroads of one of the palace's main halls, she'd been gleaming with sweat and dust, her cheeks rosy, her hair curling slightly around her ears. Her dress, too, had been wrinkled from a day of riding, the hem coated in dust.

Certainly not at all like what she wore now.

He felt the attention of half the men at the table slide toward Hasar—toward Yrene—as they entered, trailed by two of the princess's servant girls. Hasar was smirking, Renia utterly stunning in ruby red, but Yrene ...

For a beautiful woman clad in the finest clothes and jewels an empire could purchase, there was something resigned about her. Yes, her shoulders were back, her spine straight, but the smile that had hit him in the gut earlier was long gone.

Hasar had dressed Yrene in cobalt that brought out the warmth of her skin and set her brown hair glimmering as if it had indeed been gilded. The princess

had even dusted cosmetics along Yrene's face—or perhaps the hint of color on her freckled cheeks was from the fact that the gown was cut low enough to reveal the lushness of her figure. Cut low, and tight through the bodice.

Yrene's dresses certainly didn't hide her body, but the gown ... He hadn't quite realized how slim her waist was, how her hips flared beneath it. How her other assets swelled above.

He wasn't the only one taking a second glance. Sartaq and Arghun had leaned forward in their seats as their sister led Yrene to the high table.

Yrene's hair had been left mostly down, only the sides swept back and pinned with combs of gold and ruby. Matching earrings dangled to brush the slender column of her throat.

"She looks regal," Nesryn murmured to him.

Yrene indeed looked like a princess—albeit one heading to the gallows for how solemn her face was as they reached the table. Whatever contentment she'd possessed when they'd parted ways had since vanished upon the two hours she'd spent with Hasar.

The princes stood to greet Yrene this time, Kashin rising first.

The Healer on High's undeclared heir; a woman who would likely wield considerable power in this realm. They seemed to realize it, the depth of that implication. Arghun especially, from the shrewd look he gave Yrene. A woman of considerable power—and beauty.

He saw the word in Arghun's eyes: *prize*.

Chaol's jaw tightened. Yrene certainly didn't want the attentions of the handsomest of the princes—he couldn't imagine she'd be inclined to desire the affections of the other two.

Arghun opened his mouth to speak to Hasar, but the princess strode right to Chaol and Nesryn and murmured in Nesryn's ear, "Move."

21

Nesryn blinked at Hasar.

The princess smiled, cold as a snake, and clarified, “It is not polite to only sit with your companion. We should have separated you two before now.”

Nesryn glanced to him. Everyone watched. Chaol had no idea—absolutely none—what to say. Yrene seemed inclined to melt into the green marble floor.

Sartaq cleared his throat. “Join me here, Captain Faliq.”

Nesryn stood quickly, and Hasar beamed up at her. The princess patted the back of the seat Nesryn had vacated and crooned to Yrene, lingering a few feet away, “You sit here. In case you are needed.”

Yrene shot Chaol a look that might have been considered pleading, but he kept his face neutral and offered a close-lipped smile.

Nesryn found her seat beside Sartaq, who had asked a vizier to move down the table, and Hasar, satisfied that the adjustments had been done to her liking, deemed that her own usual seats were not to her taste and kicked out two viziers down by Arghun. The second seat was for Renia, who gave her lover a mildly disapproving glance, but smiled to herself—as if it were typical.

The meal resumed, and Chaol slid his attention to Yrene. The vizier on her other side paid her no heed. Platters were passed around by servants, food and drink piled and poured. Chaol muttered under his breath, “Do I want to know?”

Yrene cut into the simmered lamb and saffron rice heaped on her golden plate. “No.”

He was willing to bet whatever shadows had been in her eyes earlier today, the thing she'd halted herself from saying to him ... It went hand in hand with whatever was unfolding here.

He peered down the table, to where Nesryn watched them, half listening to Sartaq as the prince spoke about something Chaol could not hear over the clatter of silverware and discussion.

He shot her an apologetic look.

Nesryn threw him a warning one in answer—directed toward Hasar. *Be careful.*

“How are your toes?” Yrene said, taking tiny bites of her food. He'd seen her devour the box of carob sweets she'd gotten for them atop their horses. The dainty eating here—for show.

“Active,” he said with a half smile. No matter that it had only been two hours since they'd last seen each other.

“Sensation?”

“A tingle.”

“Good.” Her throat bobbed, that scar shifting with it.

He knew they were being watched. Listened to. She did as well.

Yrene's knuckles were white as she clenched her utensils, her back ramrod straight. No smile. Little light in her kohl-lined eyes.

Had the princess maneuvered them to sit together to talk, or to manipulate Kashin into some sort of action? The prince was indeed watching, even while he engaged two gold-robed viziers in conversation.

Chaol murmured to Yrene, “The role of pawn doesn't suit you.”

Those gold-brown eyes flickered. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

But she did. The words weren't meant for him.

He scrambled for topics to get them through the meal. “When do you meet with the ladies for their next lesson?”

Some of the tension drained from Yrene's shoulders as she said, “Two weeks.

It would normally be next week, but many of them have their examinations then, and will be focused on studying.”

“Some exercise and fresh air might be helpful.”

“I’d say so, but to them, these tests are life and death. They certainly were to me.”

“Do you have any more remaining?”

She shook her head, her jeweled earrings catching the light. “I completed my final one two weeks ago. I am an official healer of the Torre.” A bit of a self-effacing humor danced in her eyes.

He lifted his goblet to her. “Congratulations.”

A shrug, but she nodded in thanks. “Though Hafiza thinks to test me one last time.”

Ah. “So I am indeed an experiment.”

A piss-poor attempt at making light of their argument days ago, of that rawness that had ripped a hole through him.

“No,” Yrene said quietly, quickly. “You have very little to do with it. This last, unofficial test ... It is about me.”

He wanted to ask, but there were too many eyes upon them. “Then I wish you luck,” he said formally. So at odds with how they’d spoken while riding through the city.

The meal passed slowly and yet swiftly, their conversation stilted and infrequent.

It was only when the desserts and *kahve* were served that Arghun clapped his hands and called for entertainment.

“With our father in his chambers,” Chaol heard Sartaq confide to Nesryn, “we tend to have more ... informal celebrations.”

Indeed, a troupe of musicians in finery, bearing instruments both familiar and foreign, emerged into the space between the pillars beyond the table. Rumbling drums and flutes and horns announced the arrival of the main event: dancers.

A circle of eight dancers, both male and female—a holy number, Sartaq explained to a tentatively smiling Nesryn—emerged from the curtains to the side of the pillars.

Chaol tried not to choke.

They had been painted in gold, bedecked with jewels and gauzy, belted robes of thinnest silk, but beneath that ... nothing.

Their bodies were lithe and young, the peak of youth and virility. Hips rolled, backs arched, hands twined in the air above them as they began to weave around one another in circles and lines.

“I told you,” was all Yrene muttered to him.

“I think Dorian would enjoy this,” he muttered back, and was surprised to find the corners of his mouth tugging upward at the thought.

Yrene threw him a bemused look, some light back in her eyes. People had twisted in their seats to better watch the dancers, their sculpted bodies and nimble, bare feet.

Perfect, precise movements, their bodies merely instruments of the music. Beautiful—ethereal and yet ... tangible. Aelin, he realized, would have enjoyed this, too. Greatly.

As the dancers performed, servants hauled over chairs and couches, arranging pillows and tables. Bowls of smoking herbs were laid atop them, the smell sweet and cloying.

“Don’t get too close if you want your senses intact,” Yrene warned as a male servant bore one of the smoking metal dishes toward a carved wood table. “It’s a mild opiate.”

“They really let their hair down when their parents are away.”

Some of the viziers were leaving, but many left the table to take up cushioned seats, the entirety of the great hall remade in a matter of moments to accommodate lounging, and—

Servants emerged from the curtains, well groomed and dressed in gauzy, rich

silk as well. Men and women, all beautiful, found their way to laps and armrests, some curling at the feet of viziers or nobility.

He'd seen fairly unleashed parties at the glass castle, but there had still been a stiffness. A formality and sense that such things were hidden behind closed doors. Dorian had certainly saved it for his own room. Or someone else's. Or he just dragged Chaol into Rifthold, or down to Bellhaven, where the nobility held parties far more uninhibited than those of Queen Georgina.

Sartaq remained at the table beside Nesryn, who watched the skilled dancers with wide-eyed admiration, but the other royal children ... Duva, a hand on her belly, bid her farewells, her husband at her side, silent as always. The smoke was not good for the babe in her womb, Duva claimed, and Yrene nodded in approval, though no one looked her way.

Arghun claimed a couch for himself around the dancing, reclining and breathing in the smoke rippling off the embers in those small metal bowls beside them. Courtiers and viziers vied for the seats nearest the eldest prince.

Hasar and her lover took a small couch for themselves, the princess's hands soon tangling in her lover's thick black hair. Her mouth found a spot on the woman's neck a moment later. Renia's answering smile was slow and broad—her eyes fluttering closed as Hasar whispered something against her skin.

Kashin seemed to wait for minutes as Yrene and Chaol watched the unfolding decadence from the emptying banquet table.

Waiting for Yrene, no doubt, to rise.

Color had stained her cheeks as she kept her eyes firmly on her *kahve*, steam curling from the small cup.

“You've seen this before?” Chaol asked her.

“Give it an hour or two, and they'll all slip away to their rooms—not alone, of course.”

Prince Kashin seemed to have dragged out his conversation with the vizier beside him for as long as he could stomach. He opened his mouth, looking right

toward Yrene, and Chaol read the invitation in his eyes before the man could speak.

Chaol had perhaps a heartbeat to decide. To see that Sartaq had invited Nesryn to sit with him—not at the table, not on one of the couches, but at a pair of chairs to the far back of the room, where there was no smoke and the windows were open, and yet they could still watch. She gave Chaol a reassuring nod, her pace unhurried as she walked with the prince.

So as Kashin leaned forward to invite Yrene to join him at a couch, Chaol turned to the healer and said, “I would like to sit with you.”

Her eyes were slightly wide. “Where.”

Kashin shut his mouth, and Chaol had the sense that there was a target being drawn on his chest.

But he held Yrene’s gaze and said, “Where it is quieter.”

There were only a few couches left free—all close to the thickest smoke and dancing. But there was one half hidden in shadow near an alcove across the room, a small brazier of those herbs smoldering on the low-lying table before it. “If we are meant to be seen together tonight,” he said so quietly only Yrene could hear, “then remaining here for a while would be better than leaving together.” What a message *that* would send, given the shift in the party’s atmosphere. “And I would not have you walk alone.”

Yrene rose silently, smiling grimly. “Then let us relax, Lord Westfall.” She gestured toward the shadowed couch beyond the edge of the light.

She let him wheel himself over. Kept her chin high, the skirts of her gown trailing behind her as she headed for that alcove. The back of the dress was mostly open—revealing smooth, unblemished skin and the fine groove of her spine. It dipped low enough for him to make out the twin indentations in her lower back, as if some god had pressed his thumbs there.

He felt too many eyes upon them as she settled herself on the couch, the skirts of her dress twisted along the floor past her ankles, her arms bare as she

spread one along the back of the plush cushions.

Chaol held her low-lidded stare as he reached the couch, faster than the servants could approach, and eased himself from chair to cushions. A few movements had him angled toward her—and he nodded his thanks to the servant who moved his chair away. From this vantage, they had an unobstructed view of the dancers, the seating areas, the servants and nobility now starting to run hands and mouths over skin and fabric, even as they watched the unparalleled entertainment.

Something twisted—not unpleasantly—in his gut at the display.

“They do not force servants here,” Yrene said quietly. “It was the first thing I asked during my initial time at these gatherings. The servants are eager to raise their positions, and the ones who are here know what privilege it might bring them if they leave here with someone tonight.”

“But if they are paid,” he countered, “if they worry for their positions should they decline, then how can this ever be true consent?”

“It isn’t. Not when you put it that way. But the khaganate has made sure that other lines are maintained. Age restrictions. Vocal consent. Punishments for those—even royalty—who break those rules.” She’d said as much days ago.

A young woman and man had positioned themselves on either side of Arghun, one nibbling at his neck while the other traced circles along the prince’s thighs. All the while, the prince continued conversation with a vizier seated in a chair to his left, unfazed.

“I thought he had a wife,” Chaol said.

Yrene followed his gaze. “He does. She stays at his country estate. And servants are not considered affairs. The needs they see to ... It might as well be giving a bath.” Her eyes danced as she said, “I’m sure you discovered that your first day.”

His face heated. “I was ... surprised at the attention to detail. And involvement.”

“Kadja was likely selected to please you.”

“I’m not inclined to stray. Even with a willing servant.”

Yrene glanced toward Nesryn, deep in conversation with Sartaq. “She is lucky to have such a loyal companion, then.”

He waited for a tug of jealousy at seeing Nesryn’s smile to the prince, whose body was the pinnacle of relaxed, his arm draped along the back of the couch behind her, an ankle crossed over a knee.

Perhaps he just trusted Nesryn, but nothing stirred in him at the sight.

Chaol found Yrene watching him, her eyes like topaz in the shadows and smoke.

“I met with my friend the other evening,” she said, her lashes fluttering. No more than a woman lulled by the smoldering opiates. Even his own head was starting to feel fuzzy. His body warm. Cozy. “And again this evening before dinner.”

Hasar.

“And?” He found himself studying the slight curl to the ends of Yrene’s long hair. Found his fingers shifting, as if imagining the feel of it between them.

Yrene waited until a servant bearing a tray of candied fruits walked past. “She told me *your* friend is still unaccounted for. And a net has been stretched across the center of the table.”

He blinked, sorting through the smoke and the words.

Armies. Perrington’s armies had been stretched across the continent. No wonder she hadn’t discussed it earlier in the streets; no wonder it had brought such shadows to her eyes. “Where?”

“Mountains to—your usual haunt.”

He recalled a mental map of the land. From the Ferian Gap to Rifthold. Holy gods.

“You are sure of it?”

A nod.

He felt eyes sliding toward them now and then.

Yrene did, too. He tried not to start at the hand she laid on his arm. As she looked up at him beneath lowered lashes, eyes sleepy—inviting. “I was asked the other day, and again today, in a manner I cannot refuse.”

She was threatened. He clenched his jaw.

“I need a place. A direction,” she murmured. “For where your *other* friend might go.”

Aelin. “She is ... where is she?”

“They do not know.”

Aelin was—missing. Unaccounted for by even the khaganate’s spies.

“Not in her home?”

A shake of the head that made Chaol’s heart begin to pound wildly. Aelin and Dorian—both unaccounted for. Missing. If Perrington were to strike ... “I don’t know where she would go. What she planned to do.” He laid his hand over hers. Blocked out the softness of her skin. “Her plan was to return home. Rally a host.”

“She has not. And I do not doubt the clarity of the eyes here. And there.”

Hasar’s spies. And others.

Aelin was not in Terrasen. Had never reached Orynth.

“Wipe that look off your face,” Yrene purred, and though her hand brushed his arm, her eyes were hard.

He struggled to do so, but managed to give her a sleepy smile. “Does your friend think they have fallen into the hands of someone else?”

“She does not know.” Yrene trailed fingers up his arm, light and unhurried. That simple ring still sat upon her hand. “She wants me to ask you. Pry it from you.”

“Ah.” Her slender, beautiful hand slid along his arm. “Hence the new seating arrangement.” And why Yrene had so often seemed on the verge of speaking today and then opted for silence.

“She will make life very difficult if I do not appear to get you to warm to me.”

He halted her hand at his bicep, finding her fingers shaking slightly. Perhaps it was the sweet, cloying smoke curling around them, perhaps it was the music and the dancers with their bare skin and jewels, but Chaol said, “I would think you’d already done that, Yrene Towers.”

He watched the color bloom on her face. Watched how it made the gold in her eyes brighten.

Dangerous. Dangerous and stupid and—

He knew others were watching. Knew Nesryn sat with the prince.

She’d understand that it was for show. Nesryn’s presence with Sartaq was merely another part of it. Another display.

He told himself that as he continued to hold Yrene’s gaze, continued to press her hand against his upper arm. Continued to watch the color stain her cheeks. The tip of her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

He watched that, too.

A heavy, calming warmth settled deep into him.

“I need a place. Any place.”

It took him a few heartbeats to figure out what she was asking. The threat the princess implied for not getting information from him.

“Why lie at all? I would have told you the truth.” His mouth felt far away.

“After the lesson with the girls,” she murmured, “I owed you something.”

And this reveal of Hasar’s interests ... “Will she be swayed to our cause?”

Yrene studied the room, and Chaol found his hand drifting from hers. Sliding up her bare shoulder, to rest along her neck.

Her skin was soft as sun-warmed velvet. His thumb stroked up the side of her throat, so near that slender scar, and she cut her eyes to him.

There was warning there—warning and yet ... He knew the warning was not directed at him. But herself. Yrene breathed, “She ...” He couldn’t resist a

second stroke of his thumb down the side of her neck. Her throat brushed against his hand as she swallowed again. “She is concerned about the threat of fire.”

And fear could be a motivation that either helped or destroyed any chance of alliance.

“She thinks ... thinks you are potentially behind the library attack. As some manipulation.”

He snorted, but his thumb stilled, right over her fluttering pulse. “She gives us more credit than we’re due.” But that was alarm now flaring to life in Yrene’s eyes. “What do you believe, Yrene Towers?”

She laid her hand atop his own but made no move to remove his touch from her neck.

“I think your presence may have triggered other forces to act, but I do not believe you are the sort of man who plays games.”

Even if their current position said otherwise.

“You go after what you want,” Yrene continued, “and you pursue it directly. Honestly.”

“I used to be that sort of man,” Chaol countered. He could not look away from her.

“And now?” Her words were breathless, her pulse hammering beneath his palm.

“And now,” Chaol said, bringing his head closer to hers, near enough that her breath brushed his mouth, “I wonder if I should have listened to my father when he tried to teach me.”

Yrene’s eyes dropped to his mouth, and every instinct, every bit of focus, narrowed on that movement. Every part of him came to aching attention.

And the sensation of it, as he casually adjusted his jacket over his lap, was better than an ice bath.

The smoke—the opiates. It was some sort of aphrodisiac, some lulling of common sense.

Yrene was still watching his mouth as if it were a piece of fruit, her uneven breath lifting those lush, high breasts within the confines of her gown.

He forced himself to remove his hand from her neck. Forced himself to lean back.

Nesryn had to be watching. Had to be wondering what the hell he was doing.

He owed her better than this. He owed Yrene better than whatever he had just done, whatever madness—

“Skull’s Bay,” he threw out. “Tell her fire can be found at Skull’s Bay.”

It was perhaps the one place Aelin would never go—down to the domain of the Pirate Lord. He’d heard her story, once, of her “misadventure” with Rolfe. As if destroying his city and wrecking his prized ships were just another bit of fun. Heading there would indeed be the last thing Aelin would do, with the Pirate Lord’s promise to slaughter her on sight.

Yrene blinked, as if remembering herself, the situation that had brought them here, to this couch, to be knee-to-knee and nearly nose-to-nose.

“Yes,” she said, pulling away, blinking furiously again. She frowned at the smoldering embers within their metal cage on the table. “That will do.”

She waved away an unfurling talon of smoke that tried to wend between them. “I should go.”

A wild, keen-edged panic glinted in her eyes. As if she, too, had realized, had *felt*—

She stood, straightening the skirts of her gown. Gone was the sultry, steady woman who had strutted over to this couch. Here—here was the girl of about two-and-twenty, alone in a foreign city, prey to the whims of its royal children. “I hope ...,” she said, glancing toward Nesryn. Shame. It was—shame and guilt now weighing her shoulders. “I hope you never learn to play those sorts of games.”

Nesryn remained deep in conversation with Sartaq, showing no sign of distress, of knowledge of ... of whatever had happened here.

He was a bastard. A gods-damned bastard.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” was all he could think to say to Yrene. But he blurted as she walked away, “Let me get you an escort.”

Because Kashin was watching them from across the room, a servant girl in his lap, running a hand through his hair. And that was ... oh, that was cold violence in Kashin’s face as he noticed Chaol’s attention.

The others might think what had just gone on between him and Yrene was an act, but Kashin ... The man wasn’t as stupidly loyal as the others thought. No, he was well aware of those around him. He could read men. Assess them.

And it had not been the arousal that had let the prince realize it was genuine. But the guilt Chaol realized too late he and Yrene had let show.

“I will ask Hasar,” Yrene said, and headed toward where the princess and her lover sat on their couch, mouths roving over each other with an unhurried attention to detail.

He remained on the couch, monitoring as Yrene approached the women. Hasar blinked up blearily at her.

But the lust fogging the princess’s face cleared at the curt nod Yrene gave. Mission accomplished. Yrene leaned down and whispered into Hasar’s ear as she kissed her cheeks in farewell. Chaol read the movement of her lips even from across the room. *Skull’s Bay*.

Hasar smiled slowly, then snapped her fingers to a waiting guard. The man immediately strode for them. He watched her order the man, watched her undoubtedly threaten him with death and worse if Yrene did not make it back to the Torre safely.

Yrene only gave the princess an exasperated smile before bidding her and Renia good night and following the guard out. She glanced back at the archway.

Even across the nearly hundred feet of polished marble and towering pillars, the space between them went taut.

As if that white light he’d glimpsed inside himself two days ago was a living

rope. As if she'd somehow planted herself in him that afternoon.

Yrene did not so much as nod before she left, skirts swirling around her.

When Chaol looked to Nesryn again, he found her attention upon him.

Found her face blank—so carefully blank—as she gave him a little nod of what he assumed was understanding. The match was over for tonight. She was waiting to hear the final score.

The smoke was still clinging to Chaol's nostrils, his hair, his jacket as he and Nesryn entered their suite an hour later. He had joined her and Sartaq in their quiet little area, watching guests peel off to their own chambers—or someone else's. Yes, Dorian would certainly have loved this court.

Sartaq escorted them to their room and offered them a somewhat stiff good night. More restrained than his words and smiles of earlier. Chaol didn't blame him. There were likely eyes everywhere.

Even if the prince's own lingered mostly on Nesryn as she bid Sartaq farewell and she and Chaol slipped into their suite.

The suite was mostly dark, save for a colored glass lantern Kadja had left burning on the foyer table. Their bedroom doors loomed like cavern mouths.

The pause in the dim foyer went on for a heartbeat too long.

Nesryn silently stepped toward her room.

Chaol grabbed her hand before she could make it a foot.

Slowly, she looked back over her shoulder, her dark hair shifting like midnight silk.

Even in the dimness, he knew Nesryn read what lay in his eyes.

His skin tightened around his bones, his heart a thundering beat, but he waited.

She said at last, "I think I am needed elsewhere than this palace right now."

He maintained his grip on her hand. "We shouldn't discuss this in the hall."

Nesryn's throat bobbed, but she nodded once. She made to push his chair, but he moved before she could, steering himself into his bedroom. Letting her

follow.

Letting her shut the door behind them.

Moonlight leaked in through the garden windows, spilling upon the bed.

Kadja had not lit the candles, either anticipating the use of this room after the party for purposes other than sleeping or that he might not return at all. But in the dark, in the humming from the cicadas in the garden trees ...

“I need you here,” Chaol said.

“Do you?” A stark, honest question.

He gave Nesryn the respect of considering her question. “I ... We were supposed to do this together. Everything.”

She shook her head, short hair shifting. “Paths change. You know that as much as anyone.”

He did. He really damn did. But it still ... “Where do you mean to go?”

“Sartaq mentioned that he wishes to seek out answers amongst his people, about whether the Valg made it to this continent before. I ... I am tempted to go with him, if he will let me. To see if there are indeed answers to be found, and if I might convince him to perhaps go against his father’s orders. Or at least speak on our behalf.”

“To go with him to where, though? The ruk riders in the south?”

“Perhaps. He mentioned at the party that he’ll leave in a few days. But you and I have a slim enough shot. Maybe I can better our odds with the prince, find information of value amongst the rukhin. If one of Erawan’s agents is in Antica ... I trust the khagan’s guard to protect this palace and the Torre, but you and I, we must gather what forces we can before Erawan can send more against us.” She paused. “And you ... you are making good progress. I would not interfere with that.”

Unspoken words ran beneath her offer.

Chaol scrubbed at his face. For her to leave, to simply accept it, this fork in the path before them ... He blew out a breath. “Let’s wait until morning before

we decide anything. No good comes from choices made late at night.”

Nesryn fell silent, and he hoisted himself onto the mattress before removing his jacket and boots. “Will you sit with me? Tell me about your family—about the celebration today with them.” He had only received the barest of details, and perhaps it was guilt that now fueled him, but ...

Their eyes met in the dark, a nightingale’s hymn flitting through the closed doors. He could have sworn he saw understanding shine in her face, then settle, a rock dropped into a pool.

Nesryn approached the bed on silent feet, unbuttoning her jacket and slinging it over a chair before toeing off her boots. She climbed onto the mattress, a pillow sighing as she leaned against it.

I saw, he could have sworn he read flickering in her gaze. I know.

But Nesryn spoke of the dockside ceremony, how her four little cousins had chucked flower wreaths into the sea and then run shrieking from the gulls that swarmed them to steal the little almond cakes out of their hands. She told him of her uncle, Brahim, and her aunt, Zahida, and their beautiful house, with its multiple courtyards and crawling flowers and lattice screens.

With every glance, those unspoken words still echoed. I know. I know.

Chaol let Nesryn talk, listened until her voice lulled him to sleep, because he knew, too.

The *Wind-Singer* left Ilium at dawn, its crew and captain unaware that the two hooded individuals—and their pet falcon—who had paid in gold had no intention of going the entire journey to Leriba. Whether they pieced together that those two individuals were also the general and queen who had liberated their town the night before, they didn't let on.

It was considered an easy trip down the coast of the continent, though Aelin wondered if voicing that statement would guarantee it *wasn't* an easy trip. First, there was the matter of sailing through Adarlan's waters—near Rifthold, specifically. If the witches patrolled far out to sea...

But they had no other choice, not with the net Erawan had stretched across the continent. Not with his threat to find and capture Rowan and Dorian still ringing fresh in her mind, along with the throbbing of the deep purple bruise on her chest, right over her heart.

Standing on the deck of the ship, the rising sun staining the turquoise bay of Ilium with gold and pink, Aelin wondered if the next time she'd see these waters, they'd be red. Wondered how long the Adarlanian soldiers would remain on their side of the border.

Aedion stepped to her side, finished with his *third* inspection. "Everything looks fine."

"Lysandra said all was clear." Indeed, from high up on the mainmast of the ship, Lysandra's falcon eyes missed nothing.

Aedion frowned. "You know, you ladies *can* let us males do things every now and then."

Aelin lifted a brow. "Where would the fun be in that?" But she knew this would be an ongoing argument—stepping back so that others, so that Aedion, might fight for her. It'd been bad enough in Rifthold, bad enough knowing that those rings and collars might enslave them—but what Erawan had done to that overseer ... as an *experiment*.

Aelin glanced toward the scurrying crew, biting back her demand to *hurry*. Every minute delayed could be one that Erawan closed in on Rowan and Dorian.

It was only a matter of time before a report reached him regarding where they'd been spotted. Aelin tapped her foot on the deck.

The rocking of the ship on the calm waves echoed the beat of her foot. She'd always loved the smell and feel of the sea. But now ... even the lapping of those waves seemed to say, *Hurry, hurry.*

"The King of Adarlan—and Perrington, I suppose—had me in their grasp for years," Aedion said. His voice was tight enough that Aelin turned from the sea to face him. He'd gripped the wooden railing, the scars on his hands stark against his summer-tanned skin. "They met with me in Terrasen, in Adarlan. He had me in his rutting *dungeon*, gods above. And yet he didn't do *that* to me. He offered me the ring but didn't notice I wore a fake instead. Why not cleave me open and corrupt me? He had to know—he *had* to know that you'd come for me."

"The king left Dorian alone for as long as he could—perhaps that goodness extended to you, too. Perhaps he knew that if you were gone, I might very well have decided to let this world go to hell and never free him for spite."

"Would you have done that?"

The people you love are just weapons that will be used against you, Rowan had once told her. "Don't waste your energy worrying about what could have been." She knew she hadn't answered his question.

Aedion didn't look at her as he said, "I knew what happened in Endovier, Aelin, but seeing that overseer, hearing what he said..." His throat bobbed. "I was so close to the salt mines. That year—I was camped with the Bane right over the border for three months."

She whipped her head to him. "We're not starting down this road. Erawan sent that man for a reason—for *this* reason. He knows my past—*wants* me to know he's aware of it—and will use it against me. Against us. He'll use everyone we know, if he needs to."

Aedion sighed. "Would you have told me what happened last night if I hadn't been there?"

"I don't know. I bet you would have awoken as soon as I unleashed my power on him."

He snorted. "It's hard to miss."

The crying of gulls swooping overhead filled the quiet that followed. Despite her declaration not to linger in the past, Aelin said carefully, "Darrow claimed you fought at Theralis." She'd been meaning to ask for weeks, but hadn't worked up the nerve.

Aedion fixed his stare on the churning water. "It was a long time ago."

She swallowed against the burning in her throat. “You were barely fourteen.”

“I was.” His jaw tightened. She could only imagine the carnage. And the horror—not just of a boy killing and fighting, but seeing the people they cared for fall. One by one.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed. “That you had to endure it.”

Aedion turned toward her. No hint of the haughty arrogance and insolence. “Theralis is the battlefield I see the most—in my dreams.” He scratched at a fleck on the rail. “Darrow made sure I stayed out of the thick of it, but we were overwhelmed. It was unavoidable.”

He’d never told her—that Darrow had tried to shield him. She put a hand atop Aedion’s and squeezed. “I’m sorry,” she said again. She couldn’t bring herself to ask more.

He shrugged with a shoulder. “My life as a warrior was chosen long before that battlefield.”

Indeed, she couldn’t imagine him without that sword and shield—both currently strapped across his back. She couldn’t decide if it was a good thing.

Silence settled between them, heavy and old and weary.

“I don’t blame him,” Aelin said at last. “I don’t blame Darrow for blocking me from Terrasen. I would do the same, judge the same, if I were him.”

Aedion frowned. “I thought you were going to fight his decree.”

“I am,” she swore. “But... I understand why Darrow did it.”

Aedion observed her before nodding. A grave nod, from one soldier to another.

She put a hand against the amulet beneath her clothes. Its ancient, otherworldly power rubbed up against her, and a shiver went down her spine.
Find the Lock.

Good thing Skull’s Bay was on their way to the Stone Marshes of Eyllwe.

And good thing that its ruler possessed a magical map inked on his hands. A map that revealed enemies, storms ... and hidden treasure. A map to find things that did not wish to be found.

Aelin lowered her hand, propping both on the rail and examining the scar across each palm. So many promises and oaths made. So many debts and favors to still call in.

Aelin wondered what answers and oaths she might find waiting in Skull’s Bay.

If they got there before Erawan did.

Manon Blackbeak awoke to the sighing of leaves, the distant call of wary birds, and the reek of loam and ancient wood.

She groaned as she opened her eyes, squinting at the dappled sunlight through heavy canopy cover.

She knew these trees. Oakwald.

She was still strapped in the saddle, Abraxos sprawled beneath her, neck craned so he could monitor her breaths. His dark eyes widened with panic as she moaned, trying to sit up. She'd fallen flat onto her back, had undoubtedly lain here for some time, judging by the blue blood coating Abraxos's sides.

Manon lifted her head to peer at her stomach and bit back a cry as muscles pulled.

Wet warmth trickled from her abdomen. The wounds had barely set, then, if they were tearing so easily.

Her head pounded like a thousand forges. And her mouth was so dry she could barely shift her tongue.

First order of business: get out of this saddle. Then try to assess herself. Then water.

A stream babbled nearby, close enough that she wondered if Abraxos had chosen this spot for it.

He huffed, shifting in worry, and she hissed as her stomach tore more. "Stop," she rasped. "I'm ... fine."

She wasn't fine, not even close.

But she wasn't dead.

And that was a start.

The other bullshit—her grandmother, the Thirteen, the Crochan claim ... She'd deal with it once she didn't have one foot in the Darkness.

Manon lay there for long minutes, breathing against the pain.

Clean the wound; staunch the bleeding.

She had nothing on her but her leathers—but her shirt ... She didn't have the strength to boil the linen first.

She'd just have to pray that the immortality gracing her blood would drive off any infection.

The Crochan blood in her—

Manon sat up in a sudden jerk, not giving herself time to balk, biting down on her scream so hard her lip bled, a coppery tang filling her mouth.

But she was up. Blood dribbled from beneath her flying leathers, but she focused on unstrapping the harness, one buckle at a time.

She was not dead.

The Mother still had some use for her.

Free of the harness, Manon stared at the drop off Abraxos onto the mossy ground.

Darkness save her, this was going to hurt.

Just shifting her body to pivot her leg over one side made her clench her teeth against the sobbing. If her grandmother's nails had been poisoned, she'd be dead.

But they had been left jagged—jagged instead of honed, and full of rust.

A large head nudged at her knee, and she found Abraxos there, neck stretched—his head just below her feet, the offer in his eyes.

Not trusting consciousness to keep its grip much longer, Manon slid onto his wide, broad head, breathing through the ripples of fiery pain. His breath warmed her chilled skin as he gently lowered her onto the grassy clearing.

She lay on her back, letting Abraxos nose her, a faint whine breaking from him.

“Fine ...,” she breathed. “I’m...”



Manon awoke at twilight.

Abraxos was curled around her, his wing angled to form a makeshift covering.

At least she was warm. But her thirst...

Manon groaned, and the wing instantly snapped back, revealing a leathery head and concerned eyes. “You ... mother hen,” she gasped out, sliding her arms beneath her and pushing up.

Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods—

But she was in a sitting position.

Water. That stream...

Abraxos was too big to reach it through the trees—but she needed water. Soon. How many days had it been? How much blood had she lost?

“Help,” she breathed.

Powerful jaws closed around the collar of her tunic, hoisting her up with such gentleness Manon’s chest tightened. She swayed, bracing a hand on his leathery side, but stayed upright.

Water—then she could sleep more.

“Wait here,” she said, stumbling to the nearest tree, a hand on her belly, Wind-Cleaver a weight on her back. She debated leaving the sword behind, but any extra movement, even unbuckling the belt from across her chest, was unthinkable.

Tree to tree, she staggered, nails digging into each trunk to keep herself upright, her ragged breathing filling the silent forest.

She was alive; she was alive...

The stream was barely more than a trickle through some mossy boulders. But it was clear and fast and the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

Manon surveyed the water. If she knelt, could she get back up?

She’d sleep here if she had to. Once she drank.

Carefully, muscles trembling, she knelt at the bank. She swallowed her cry as she bowed over the stream, as more blood slid out. She drank the first few handfuls without stop—then slowed, her stomach aching inside and out now.

A twig snapped, and Manon was on her feet, instinct overriding pain so fast the agony hit her a breath later. But she scanned the trees, the rocks and canopy and little hills.

A cool female voice said from across the stream, “It seems you have fallen far from your aerie, Blackbeak.”

Manon couldn’t place who it belonged to, what witch she’d met...

From behind the shadows of a tree, a stunning young woman emerged.

Her body was supple yet lithe—her unbound auburn hair draping to partially cover her nakedness. Not a stitch of clothing covered that cream-colored skin. Not a scar or mark marred flesh as pure as snow. The woman’s silken hair moved with her as she stepped closer.

But the woman was no witch. And her blue eyes...

Run. *Run.*

Eyes of glacier blue gleamed even in the shadowed wood. And a full red mouth made for the bedroom parted in a too-white smile as she took in Manon, the blood, the injury. Abraxos roared in warning, shaking the ground, the trees,

the leaves.

“Who are you,” Manon said, her voice raw.

The young woman cocked her head—a robin studying a writhing worm. “The Dark King calls me his Bloodhound.”

Manon made every breath count as she rallied her strength.

“Never heard of you,” Manon rasped.

Something too dark to be blood slithered under the cream-colored skin of the woman’s abdomen, then vanished. She traced a small, beautiful hand over where it had squirmed across the curve of her taut belly. “You would not have heard of me. Until your treachery, I was kept beneath those other mountains. But when he honed the power within my own blood...” Those blue eyes pierced Manon, and it was madness that glittered there. “He could do much with you, Blackbeak. So much. He sent me to bring his crowned rider to his side once more...”

Manon backed away a step—just one.

“There is nowhere to flee. Not with your belly barely inside you.” She tossed her auburn hair over a shoulder. “Oh, what fun we’ll have now that I’ve found you, Blackbeak. All of us.”

Manon braced herself, drawing Wind-Cleaver as the woman’s form glowed like a black sun, then rippled, the edges expanding, morphing, until—

The woman had been an illusion. A glamour. The creature that stood before her had been birthed in darkness, so white she doubted it had ever felt the kiss of the sun until now. And the mind that had invented it ... The imagination of someone born in another world—one where nightmares prowled the dark, cold earth.

The body and face were vaguely human. But—Bloodhound. Yes, that was fitting. The nostrils were enormous, the eyes so large and lidless she wondered if Erawan himself had spread her eyelids apart, and her mouth ... The teeth were black stumps, the tongue thick and red—for tasting the air. And spreading from that white body—the method of Manon’s transportation: wings.

“You see,” the Bloodhound purred. “You see what he can give you? I can now taste the wind; smell its very marrow. Just as I smelled you across the land.”

Manon kept an arm cradled over her belly as the other trembled, lifting Wind-Cleaver.

The Bloodhound laughed, low and soft. “I shall enjoy this, I think,” she said—and pounced.

Alive—she was *alive*, and she would stay that way.

Manon jumped back, sliding between two trees, so close that the creature hit

them, a wall of wood in her way. Those calf eyes narrowed in rage, and her white hands—tipped with earth-digging claws—sank into the wood as she backtracked—

Only to be stuck.

Maybe the Mother was watching over her.

The Bloodhound had lodged herself between the two trees, half in, half out, thanks to those wings, wood squeezing—

Manon ran. Pain ripped at her with each step, and she sobbed through her teeth as she sprinted between the trees. A snap and crash of wood and leaves from behind.

Manon pushed herself, a hand shoved against her wound, gripping Wind-Cleaver tight enough it shook. But there was Abraxos, eyes wild, wings already flapping, preparing for flight.

“Go,” she rasped, flinging herself at him as wood crunched behind her.

Abraxos launched for her as she leaped for him—not onto him, but into his claws, into the mighty talons that wrapped her under her breasts, her stomach tearing a bit more as he hefted her up, up, up, through wood and leaf and nest.

The air snapped beneath her boots, and Manon, eyes streaming, peered down to see the Bloodhound’s claws reaching wildly. But too late.

A shriek of rage on her lips, the Bloodhound backed a few steps to the edge of the clearing, preparing to get a running leap into the air, as Abraxos’s wings beat like hell—

They cleared the canopy, his wings shattering branches, raining them onto the Bloodhound.

The wind tore at Manon as Abraxos sailed with her, higher and higher, heading east, toward the plains—east and south...

The thing wouldn’t be detained long. Abraxos realized it, too.

Had planned for it.

A flicker of white broke through the canopy below them.

Abraxos lunged, a swift, lethal dive, his roar of rage making Manon’s head buzz.

The Bloodhound didn’t have time to bank as Abraxos’s mighty tail slammed into her, poison-coated steel barbs hitting home.

Black festering blood sprayed; ivory membranous wings sundered.

Then they were sweeping back up and the Bloodhound was tumbling down through the canopy—dying or injured, Manon didn’t care.

“*I will find you,*” the Bloodhound screeched from the forest floor.

It was miles before the screamed words faded.

Manon and Abraxos paused only long enough for her to crawl onto his back and strap herself in. No signs of other wyverns in the skies, no hint of the Bloodhound pursuing them. Perhaps that poison would keep her down for a while—if not permanently.

“To the coast,” Manon said over the wind as the sky bled crimson into a final blackness. “Somewhere safe.”

Blood trickled from between her fingers—faster, stronger than before—only a moment before the Darkness claimed her again.

22

Yrene debated not showing up the next day.

What had happened on the couch last night ...

She'd returned to her room overheated and frantic, unable to settle. Peeling off Hasar's gown and jewels, she'd folded them neatly on her chair with shaking hands. Then she'd pushed her trunk in front of the door, just in case that murdering demon had spied her inhaling ungodly amounts of that smoke and thought to catch her out of her wits.

Because she had been. Utterly out of her mind. All she had known was the heat and smell and comforting size of him—the scrape of his calluses against her skin and how she wanted to feel them elsewhere. How she had kept looking at his mouth and it was all she could do to keep from tracing it with her fingers. Her lips.

She hated those parties. The smoke that made one abandon any sort of common sense. Inhibitions. Precisely why the nobility and wealthy loved to bring it out, but ...

Yrene had paced her tower room, running her hands over her face until she smudged the cosmetics Hasar had personally applied.

She'd washed her face thrice. Slipped into her lightest nightgown and then tossed and turned in bed, the fabric clinging and chafing against her sweaty, burning skin.

Counting down the hours, the minutes, until that smoke's grip loosened.

Cleared away.

It didn't let go easily. And it was only during the quietest, blackest hours of the night that Yrene took matters into her own hands.

A stronger dose than usual had been put out tonight. It crawled all over her, running talons along her skin. And the face it summoned, the hands she imagined brushing over her skin—

Release left her hollow—unsatisfied.

Dawn broke, and Yrene scowled at her haggard reflection in the sliver of mirror above the washbasin.

The opiate's grip had vanished with the few hours of sleep she'd managed to steal, but ... Something twisted low in her gut.

She washed and dressed and packed Hasar's finery and jewels in a spare satchel. It was best to get it over with. She'd return the princess's clothes and jewels after. Hasar had been smug as a Baast Cat at the information Yrene had given her, the lie Chaol had fed her to hand to the princess.

She had debated not telling him, but even before the smoke, before that madness ... When he'd offered to sit with her to avoid refusing Kashin, after a day spent wandering the city in unhurried ease, she'd decided. To trust him. And then lost her mind entirely.

Yrene could barely look the guards, the servants, the viziers and nobility in the face as she entered the palace and made her way to Lord Westfall's rooms. There was no doubt some had spied her on the couch with him. Some hadn't—though they might have heard.

She'd never shown such behavior at the palace. She should tell Hafiza. Let the Healer on High hear of her brazenness before it reached the Torre from other lips.

Not that Hafiza would scold her, but ... Yrene could not escape the feeling that she needed to confess. To make it right.

She'd keep today's session brief. Or as brief as they could, when she lost all

sense of time and place in that dark, raging hell of his wound.

Professional.

Yrene entered the suite, telling Kadja, “Ginger, turmeric, and lemon,” before walking to Chaol’s bedroom. Kadja seemed inclined to object, but Yrene ignored her and pushed open the bedroom door.

Yrene halted so fast she nearly stumbled.

It was the rumpled sheets and pillows she noticed first. Then his naked chest, his hips barely covered by a swath of white silk.

Then a dark head, facedown on the pillow beside his. Still sleeping. Exhausted.

Chaol’s eyes instantly flew open, and all Yrene managed was a silent, “Oh.”

Shock and—something else flared in his gaze, his mouth opening.

Nesryn stirred beside him, brows knotting, her shirt wrinkled.

Chaol grabbed fistfuls of the sheet, the muscles of his chest and abdomen shifting as he rose up on his elbows—

Yrene simply walked out.

She waited on the gold sofa in the sitting room, her knee bouncing as she watched the garden, the climbing flowers just beginning to open up along the pillars outside the glass doors.

Even with the burbling fountain, it didn’t quite block out the sounds of Nesryn murmuring as she awoke—then the pad of soft feet from his bedroom to her own, followed by the shutting of her door.

A moment later, wheels groaned, and there he was. In his shirt and pants. Hair still disheveled. As if he’d run his hands through it. Or Nesryn had. Repeatedly.

Yrene wrapped her arms around herself, the room somehow so very large. The space between them too open. She should have eaten breakfast. Should have done something to keep from this lightness. This hollow pit in her stomach.

“I didn’t realize you’d be here so early,” he said softly. She could have sworn

guilt laced his tone.

“You said I could come at dawn,” she replied with equal quiet, but hated the note of accusation in her voice and quickly added, “I should have sent word.”

“No. I—”

“I can come back later,” she said, shooting to her feet. “Let you two eat breakfast.”

Together. Alone.

“No,” he said sharply, pausing his approach near their usual couch. “Now is fine.”

She couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t meet his eyes. Or explain why.

“Yrene.”

She ignored the command in her name and went to the desk, seating herself behind it, grateful for the wall of carved wood between them. The stability of it beneath her palm as she opened up her satchel from where she’d left it along the edge and began unpacking her things with careful precision. Vials of oils she did not need. Journals.

Books—the ones she’d taken from the library, *The Song of Beginning* with them. Along with those ancient, precious scrolls. She had not been able to think of a safer place for them beyond here. Beyond him.

Yrene said very quietly, “I can make up a tonic. For her. If such a thing is needed. Isn’t wanted, I mean.”

A child, she couldn’t bring herself to say. Like the fat babe she’d spied him smiling so broadly at yesterday. As if it was a blessing, a joy he one day might desire—

“And I can make up a daily one for you,” she added, every word stumbling and tripping out of her mouth.

“She’s already taking one,” he said. “Since she was fourteen.”

Likely since she first started bleeding. For a woman in a city like Rifthold, it was wise. Especially if she planned to enjoy herself as well.

“Good,” was all Yrene could think to say, still stacking her books. “Smart.” He approached the desk until his knees slid beneath the other end. “Yrene.” She thumped book after book on top of each other.

“Please.”

The word had her lifting her gaze. Meeting his stare—the sun-warmed soil of his eyes.

And it was the formation of those two words that she beheld brewing in his gaze—*I’m sorry*—that had her shooting up from the desk again. Walking across the room. Flinging open the garden doors.

There was nothing to be sorry for. Nothing.

They were lovers, and she ...

Yrene lingered at the garden doors until Nesryn’s bedroom door opened and closed. Until she heard Nesryn poke her head into the sitting room, murmur a farewell to Chaol, and leave.

Yrene tried to bring herself to look over a shoulder at Captain Faliq, to offer a polite smile, but she pretended not to hear the brief encounter. Pretended to be too busy examining the pale purple flowers unfurling in the morning sunlight.

She shoved back against the hollowness. She had not felt so small, so ... insignificant for a long, long time.

You are the heir apparent to Hafiza, Healer on High. You are nothing to this man and he is nothing to you. Stay the course. Remember Fenharrow—your home. Remember those who are there—who need your help.

Remember all that you promised to do. To be.

Her hand slid into her pocket, curling around the note there.

The world needs more healers.

“It’s not what you think,” Chaol said behind her.

Yrene closed her eyes for a heartbeat.

Fight—fight for your miserable, useless, wasted life.

She turned, forcing a polite smile to her face. “It is a natural thing. A healthy

thing. I'm glad you're feeling ... up to the task."

From the ire that rippled in his eyes, the tightness of his jaw, Chaol perhaps was not.

The world needs more healers. The world needs more healers. The world needs more healers.

Finish with him, heal him, and she could leave Hafiza, leave the Torre, with her head held high. She could return home, to war and bloodshed, and make good on her promise. Make good on that stranger's gift of freedom that night in Innish.

"Shall we begin?"

It would be in here today. Because the prospect of sitting on that ruffled bed that likely still smelled of them—

There was a tightness to her throat, her voice, that she could not shake, no matter how many breaths she took.

Chaol studied her. Weighing her tone. Her words. Her expression.

He saw it—heard it. That tightness, that brittleness.

I expected nothing, she wanted to say. I—I am nothing.

Please don't ask. Please don't push. Please.

Chaol seemed to read that, too. He said quietly, "I didn't take her to bed."

She refrained from mentioning that the evidence seemed stacked against him.

Chaol went on, "We spoke long into the night and fell asleep. Nothing happened."

Yrene ignored the way her chest both hollowed out and filled at the words. Didn't trust herself to speak as the information settled.

As if sensing her need for a breath, Chaol began to turn toward the couch, but his attention snagged on the books she'd stacked on the table. On the scrolls.

The color drained from his face.

"What is that," he growled.

Yrene strode to the desk, picking up the parchment and unrolling it carefully

to display the strange symbols. “Nousha, the Head Librarian, found it for me that night when I asked her for information on ... the things that hurt you. In all the —upheaval, I forgot it. It was shelved near the Eyllwe books, so she threw it in, just in case. I think it’s old. Eight hundred years at least.” She was babbling, but couldn’t stop, grateful for any subject but the one he’d been so near to breaching. “I think they’re runes, but I’ve seen none like it. Neither had Nousha.”

“They are not runes,” Chaol said hoarsely. “They’re Wyrddmarks.”

And from what he had told her, Yrene knew there was much more. So much more he had not divulged. She stroked a hand over the dark cover of *The Song of Beginning*. “This book ... It mentioned a gate. And keys. And three kings to wield them.”

She wasn’t certain he was breathing. Then Chaol said, voice low, “You read that. In that book.”

Yrene opened the pages, flipping to the illustration of the three figures before that otherworldly gate. Approaching, she held the book open for him to see. “I couldn’t read much of it—it’s in an ancient form of Eyllwe—but ...” She flipped to the other illustration, of the young man being infested by that dark power on the altar. “Is that ... is that what they truly do?”

His hands slackened at the sides of his chair as he stared and stared at the panel featuring the young man’s cold, dark eyes. “Yes.”

The word held more pain and fear than she’d expected.

She opened her mouth, but he sliced a warning glare at her, mastering himself. “Hide it, Yrene. Hide *all* of it. Now.”

Her heart thundered in her chest, her limbs, but she snatched up the books. The scrolls. He watched the doors, the windows, while she set about placing them under cushions and inside some of the larger vases. But the scroll ... it was too precious. Too ancient to treat so callously. Even flattening it out might harm the integrity of the paper, the ink.

He noticed her looking around helplessly, the scroll in her hands. “My boots,

if you will, Yrene,” he said casually. “I have a second pair that I’d rather wear today.”

Right. Right.

Yrene hurried from the sitting room into his bedroom, wincing at the askew bed linens, at what she’d so stupidly assumed and seemed like such an enormous fool about—

She strode into the small dressing room, spotted his boots, and slid the parchment down the neck of one. Then took the pair and shoved it in a drawer, covering it with a stack of linen towels.

She reentered the sitting room a moment later. “I couldn’t find them. Perhaps Kadja sent them out for cleaning.”

“Too bad,” he said casually, his own boots now removed. Along with his shirt.

Her heart still raged as he eased onto the gold sofa but did not lie down.

“Do you know how to read?” she asked, kneeling before him and taking his bare foot in her hands. *The Wyrdmarks?*

“No.” His toes shifted as she began careful rotations of his ankle. “But I know someone who does it for me when it’s important.” Careful, veiled words for anyone listening.

Yrene went about exercising his legs, stretching and bending, the motions repeated over and over while he moved his toes as much as he could. “I should show you the library sometime,” she offered. “You might find something that strikes your fancy—for your reader to narrate to you.”

“Do you have many similarly interesting texts?”

She lowered his left leg and started on the other. “I could ask—Nousha knows everything.”

“When we’re done. After you rest. It’s been a while since I had a book to ... intrigue me.”

“It’d be my honor to escort you, my lord.” He grimaced at the formal title,

but Yrene worked his right leg, going through the same motions, before she bade him to lie down on the couch. They worked in silence while she rotated his hips, urging him to try to move them on his own, while bending and stretching as much of his leg as she could.

She said after a moment, her voice barely audible, “You only talk of Erawan.” His eyes flashed in warning at the name. “But what of Orcus and Mantyx?”

“Who?”

Yrene began another set of the exercises on his legs and hips and lower back. “The other two kings. They are named in that book.”

Chaol stopped wriggling his toes; she flicked them in reminder. The air whooshed from him as he resumed. “They were defeated in the first war. Sent back to their realm or slain, I can’t recall.”

Yrene considered as she lowered his leg to the couch, nudging him to flip onto his stomach. “I’m sure you and your companions are adept at this whole saving-the-world thing,” she mused, earning a snort from him, “but I would make sure you know for certain. Which one it is.”

She took up a perch on the thin lip of golden sofa cushion that his body did not cover.

Chaol twisted his head toward her, the muscles in his back bunching. “Why?”

“Because if they were merely banished to their realm, who is to say they aren’t still waiting to be let back into our world?”

23

Chaol's eyes went vacant as Yrene's question hung between them, the color again draining from his face. "Shit," he murmured. "*Shit.*"

"You can't remember what happened to the other two kings?"

"No—no, I'd assumed they were destroyed, but ... why is there mention of them *here*, of all places?"

She shook her head. "We could see—look into it more."

A muscle feathered in his jaw, and he blew out a long breath. "Then we will."

He reached a hand toward her in silent demand. For the bit, she realized.

Yrene studied his jaw and cheek again, the brimming anger and fear. Not a good state to begin a healing session. So she tried, "Who gave you that scar?"

Wrong question.

His back stiffened, his fingers digging into the throw pillow beneath his chin. "Someone who deserved to give it to me."

Not an answer. "What happened?"

He just extended his hand again for the bit.

"I'm not giving it to you," she said, her face an immovable mask as he turned baleful eyes on her. "And I'm not starting this session with you in a rage."

"When I'm in a rage, Yrene, you'll know."

She rolled her eyes. "Tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong is that I'm barely able to move my toes and I might not have one Valg king to face, but *three*. If we fail, if we can't—" He caught himself

before he could voice the rest. The plan that Yrene had no doubt was so secret he barely dared think about it.

“They destroy everything—everyone—they encounter,” Chaol finished, staring at the arm of the couch.

“Did they give you that scar?” She clenched her fingers into a fist to keep from touching it.

“No.”

But she leaned forward, instead brushing a finger down a tiny scar just barely hidden by the hair at his temple. “And this? Who gave you that one?”

His face went hard and distant. But the rage, the impatient, frantic energy ... it calmed. Went cold and aloof, but it centered him. Whatever that old anger was, it steadied him again.

“My father gave that scar to me,” Chaol said quietly. “When I was a boy.”

Horror sluiced through her, but it was an answer. It was an admission.

She didn’t press further. Didn’t demand more. No, Yrene just said, “When I go into the wound ...” Her throat bobbed as she studied his back. “I will try to find you again. If it’s waiting for me, I might have to find some other way to reach you.” She considered. “And might have to find some other plan of attack than an ambush. But we shall see, I suppose.” And even though the corner of her mouth tugged up in what he knew was meant to be a reassuring, healer’s smile, she knew he noted the quickening of her breathing.

“Be careful,” was all he said.

Yrene just offered him that bit at last, bringing it to his lips.

His mouth brushed her fingers as she slid it between his teeth.

For a few heartbeats, he scanned her face.

“Are you ready?” she breathed as the prospect of facing that insidious darkness again loomed.

He lifted his hand to squeeze her fingers in silent answer.

But Yrene removed her fingers from his, leaving his own to drop back to the

cushions.

He was still studying her, the way she took a bracing breath, as she laid her hand over the mark on his back.



It had snowed the day he told his father he was to leave Anielle. That he was abdicating his title as heir and joining the castle guard in Rifthold.

His father had thrown him out.

Thrown him right down the front stairs of the keep.

He'd cracked his temple on the gray stone, his teeth going through his lip. His mother's pleading screams had echoed off the rock as he slid along the ice at the landing. He didn't feel the pain in his head. Only the razor-sharp slice of the ice against his bare palms, cutting through his pants and ripping his knees raw.

There was only her pleading with his father, and the shriek of the wind that never stopped, even in summer, around the mountaintop keep that overlooked the Silver Lake.

That wind now tore at him, tugging at his hair—longer than he had kept it since. It hurled stray snowflakes into his face from the gray sky above. Hurling them to the grim city below that flowed to the banks of the sprawling lake and curved around its shores. To the west, to the mighty falls. Or the ghost of them. The dam had long since silenced them, along with the river flowing right from the White Fangs, which ended at their doorstep.

It was always cold in Anielle. Even in summer.

Always cold in this keep built into the curving mountainside.

“Pathetic,” his father had spat, none of the stone-faced guards daring to help him rise.

His head spun and spun, throbbing. Warm blood leaked and froze down his face.

“Find your own way to Rifthold, then.”

“Please,” his mother whispered. *“Please.”*

The last Chaol saw of her was his father’s arm gripping her above the elbow and dragging her into the keep of painted wood and stone. Her face pale and anguished, her eyes—his eyes—lined with silver as bright as the lake far below.

His parents passed a small shadow lurking in the open doorway to the keep itself.

Terrin.

His younger brother braved a step toward him. To risk those dangerously icy stairs and help him.

A sharp, barked word from his father within the darkness of the hall halted Terrin.

Chaol wiped the blood from his mouth and silently shook his head at his brother.

And it was terror—undiluted terror—on Terrin’s face as Chaol eased to his feet. Whether he knew that the title had just passed to him ...

He couldn’t bear it. That fear on Terrin’s round, young face.

So Chaol turned, clenching his jaw against the pain in his knee, already swollen and stiff. Blood and ice merged, leaking from his palms.

He managed to limp across the landing. Down the stairs.

One of the guards at the bottom gave him his gray wool cloak. A sword and knife.

Another gave him a horse and a bearing.

A third gave him a supply pack that included food and a tent, bandages and salves.

They did not say a word. Did not halt him more than necessary.

He did not know their names. And he learned, years and years later, that his father had watched from one of the keep’s three towers. Had seen them.

His father himself told Chaol all those years later what happened to those three men who had aided him.

They were let go. In the dead of winter. Banished into the Fangs with their families.

Three families sent into the wilds. Only two were still heard from in the summer.

Proof. It had been proof, he'd realized after he'd convinced himself not to murder his father. Proof that his kingdom was rife with corruption, with bad men punishing good people for common decency. Proof that he had been right to leave Anielle. To stick with Dorian—to keep Dorian safe.

To protect that promise of a better future.

He'd still sent out a messenger, his most discreet, to find those remaining families. He didn't care how many years had passed. He sent the man with gold.

The messenger never found them, and had returned to Rifthold, gold intact, months later.

He had chosen, and it had cost him. He had picked and he had endured the consequences.

A body on a bed. A dagger poised above his heart. A head rolling on stone. A collar around a neck. A sword sinking to the bottom of the Avery.

The pain in his body was secondary.

Worthless. Useless. Anyone he had tried to help ... it had made it worse.

The body on the bed ... Nehemia.

She had lost her life. And perhaps she had orchestrated it, but ... He had not told Celaena—Aelin—to be alert. Had not warned Nehemia's guards of the king's attention. He had as good as killed her. Aelin might have forgiven him, accepted that he was not to blame, but he knew. He could have done more. Been better. Seen better.

And when Nehemia had died, those slaves had risen up in defiance. A rallying cry as the Light of Eyllwe was extinguished.

The king had extinguished them as well.

Calaculla. Endovier. Women and men and children.

And when he had acted, when he had chosen his side ...

Blood and black stone and screaming magic.

You knew you knew you knew

You will never be my friend my friend my friend

The darkness shoved itself down his throat, choking him, strangling him.

He let it.

Felt himself open his jaws wide to let it in farther.

Take it, he told the darkness.

Yes, it purred to him. *Yes*.

It showed him Morath in its unparalleled horrors; showed him that dungeon beneath the glass castle, where faces he knew pleaded for mercy that would never come; showed him the young golden hands that had bestowed those agonies, as if they had stood side by side to do it—

He knew. Had guessed who had been forced to torture his men, to kill them. They both knew.

He felt the darkness swell, readying to pounce. To make him truly scream.

But then it was gone.

Rippling golden fields stretched away under a cloudless blue sky. Little sparkling streams wended through it, curling around the occasional oak tree. Strays from the tangled, looming green of Oakwald Forest to his right.

Behind him, a thatched roof cottage, its gray stones crusted in green and orange lichen. An ancient well sat a few feet away, its bucket balanced precariously on the stone lip.

Beyond it, attached to the house itself, a small pen with wandering chickens, fat and focused on the dirt before them.

And past them ...

A garden.

Not a formal, beautiful thing. But a garden behind a low stone wall, its wooden gate open.

Two figures were stooped amongst the carefully plotted rows of green. He drifted toward them.

He knew her by the golden-brown hair, so much lighter in the summer sun. Her skin had turned a lovely deep brown, and her eyes ...

It was a child's face, lit with joy, that looked upon the woman kneeling in the dirt, pointing toward a pale green plant with slender purple cones of blossoms swaying in the warm breeze. The woman asked, "And that one?"

"Salvia," the child—no more than nine—answered.

"And what does it do?"

The girl beamed, chin rising as she recited, "Good for improving memory, alertness, mood. Also assists with fertility, digestion, and, in a salve, can help numb the skin."

"Excellent."

The girl's broad smile revealed three missing teeth.

The woman—her mother—took the girl's round face in her hands. Her skin was darker than her daughter's, her hair a thicker, bouncier curl. But their builds ... It was the woman's build that the girl would grow into one day. The freckles that she'd inherit. The nose and mouth.

"You have been studying, my wise child."

The woman kissed her daughter on her sweaty brow.

He felt the kiss—the love in it—even as a ghost at the gate.

For it was love that shaded the entirety of the world here, gilded it. Love and joy.

Happiness.

The sort he had not known with his own family. Or anyone else.

The girl had been loved. Deeply. Unconditionally.

This was a happy memory—one of a few.

"And what is that bush, there by the wall?" the woman asked the girl.

Her brow scrunched in concentration. "Gooseberries?"

“Yes. And what do we do with gooseberries?”

The girl braced her hands on her hips, her simple dress blowing in the dry, warm breeze. “We ...” She tapped her foot with impatience—at her own mind, for not recalling. The same irritation he’d seen outside that old man’s house in Antica.

Her mother crept up behind her, sweeping the girl into her arms and kissing her cheek. “We make gooseberry pie.”

The girl’s squeal of delight echoed across the amber grasses and clear streams, even into the tangled, ancient heart of Oakwald.

Perhaps even to the White Fangs themselves, and the cold city nestled at their edge.



He opened his eyes.

And found his entire foot pressing into the couch cushions.

Felt the silk and embroidery scratching against the bare arch of his foot. His toes.

Felt.

He bolted upright, finding Yrene not at his side.

Nowhere near.

He gaped at his feet. Below the ankle ... He shifted and rotated his foot. *Felt* the muscles.

Words stalled in his throat. His heart thundered. “Yrene,” he rasped, scanning for her.

She wasn’t in the suite, but—

Sunlight on brown-gold caught his eye. In the garden.

She was sitting out there. Alone. Quietly.

He didn’t care that he was half dressed. Chaol heaved himself into the chair, marveling at the sensation of the smooth wood supports beneath his feet. He

could have sworn even his legs ... a phantom tingling.

He wheeled himself into the small, square garden, breathless and wide-eyed. She'd repaired another fraction, another—

She'd settled herself in an ornate little chair before the circular reflection pool, her head propped up by her fist.

At first, he thought she was sleeping in the sun.

But he inched closer and caught the gleam of light on her face. On the wetness there.

Not blood—but tears.

Streaming silently, unendingly, as she stared at that reflection pool, the pink lilies and emerald pads covering most of it.

She stared as if not seeing it. Not hearing him.

“Yrene.”

Another tear rolled down her face, dripping onto her pale purple dress. Another.

“Are you hurt,” Chaol said hoarsely, his chair crunching over the pale white gravel of the garden.

“I'd forgotten,” she whispered, lips wobbling as she stared and stared at the pool and did not move her head. “What she looked like. Smelled like. I'd forgotten—her voice.”

His chest strained as her face crumpled. He hauled his chair beside her own but did not touch her.

Yrene said quietly, “We make oaths—to never take a life. She broke that oath the day the soldiers came. She had hidden a dagger in her dress. She saw the soldier grab me, and she ... she leaped on him.” She closed her eyes. “She killed him. To buy me time to run. And I did. I left her. I ran, and I left her, and I watched ... I watched from the forest as they built that fire. And I could hear her screaming and screaming—”

Her body shook.

“She was good,” Yrene whispered. “She was good and she was kind and she loved me.” She still did not wipe her tears. “And they took her away.”

The man he had served ... *he* had taken her away.

Chaol asked softly, “Where did you go after that?”

Her trembling lessened. She wiped at her nose. “My mother had a cousin in the north of Fenharrow. I ran there. It took me two weeks, but I made it.”

At eleven. Fenharrow had been in the middle of conquest, and she’d made it—at *eleven*.

“They had a farm, and I worked there for six years. Pretended to be normal. Kept my head down. Healed with herbs when it wouldn’t raise suspicions. But it wasn’t enough. It ... There was a hole. In me. I was unfinished.”

“So you came here?”

“I left. I meant to come here. I walked through Fenharrow. Through Oakwald. Then over ... over the mountains ...” Her voice broke into a whisper. “It took me six months, but I made it—to the port of Innish.”

He’d never heard of Innish. Likely in Melisande, if she’d crossed—

She’d crossed mountains.

This delicate woman beside him ... She had crossed mountains to be here. Alone.

“I ran out of money for the crossing. So I stayed. I found work.”

He avoided the urge to look at the scar on her throat. To ask what manner of work—

“Most girls were on the streets. Innish was—is not a good place. But I found an inn by the docks and the owner hired me. I worked as a barmaid and a servant and ... I stayed. I meant to only work for a month, but I stayed for a year. Let him take my money, my tips. Increase my rent. Put me in a room under the stairs. I had no money for the crossing, and I thought ... I thought I would have to pay for my education here. I didn’t want to go without funds for tuition, so ... I stayed.”

He studied her hands, now clutching each other tightly in her lap. Pictured them with a bucket and mop, with rags and dirty dishes. Pictured them raw and aching. Pictured the filthy inn and its inhabitants—what they must have seen and coveted when they beheld her.

“How did you make it here?”

Yrene’s mouth tightened, her tears fading. She loosed a breath. “It is a long story.”

“I have time to listen.”

But she shook her head again and at last looked at him. There was a ... clarity to her face. Those eyes. And it did not falter as she said, “I know who gave you that wound.”

Chaol went wholly still.

The man who had taken away the mother she so deeply loved; the man who had sent her fleeing across the world.

He managed to nod.

“The old king,” Yrene breathed, studying the pool again. “He was—he was possessed, too?”

The words were hardly more than a whisper, barely audible even to him.

“Yes,” he managed to say. “For decades. I—I’m sorry I did not tell you. We’ve deemed that information ... sensitive.”

“For what it might mean about the suitability of your new king.”

“Yes, and open the door to questions that are best kept unasked.”

Yrene rubbed at her chest, her face haunted and bleak. “No wonder my magic recoils so.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. It was all he could think to offer.

Those eyes slid to him, any lingering fog clouding them clearing away. “It gives me further reason to fight it. To wipe away that last stain of him—of *it* forever. Just now, it was waiting for me. Laughing at me again. I managed to get to you, but then the darkness around you was too thick. It had made a ... shell. I

could see it—everything it showed you. Your memories, and his.” She rubbed her face. “I knew then. What it was—who gave you the wound. And I saw what it was doing to you, and all I could think to stop it, to blast it away ...” She pursed her lips, as if they might start trembling again.

“A bit of goodness,” he finished for her. “A memory of light and goodness.” He didn’t have the words to convey his gratitude for it, for what it must have been like to offer up that memory of her mother against the demon that had destroyed her.

Yrene seemed to read his thoughts, and said, “I am glad it was a memory of her that beat the darkness back a little further.”

His throat tightened, and he swallowed hard.

“I saw your memory,” Yrene said quietly. “The—man. Your father.”

“He is a bastard of the finest caliber.”

“It was not your fault. None of it.”

He refrained from commenting otherwise.

“You were lucky that you did not fracture your skull,” she said, scanning his brow. The scar just barely visible, covered by his hair.

“I’m sure my father considers it otherwise.”

Darkness flashed in her eyes. Yrene only said, “You deserved better.”

The words hit something sore and festering—something he had locked up and not examined for a long, long time. “Thank you,” he managed to say.

They sat in silence for long minutes. “What time is it?” he asked after a while.

“Three,” she said.

Chaol started.

But Yrene’s eyes went right to his legs. His feet. How they had moved with him.

Her mouth opened silently.

“Another bit of progress,” he said.

She smiled—subdued, but ... it was real. Not like the one she'd plastered on her face hours and hours ago. When she'd walked into his bedroom and found him there with Nesryn, and he'd felt the world slipping out from under him at the expression on her face. And when she had refused to meet his stare, when she'd wrapped her arms around herself ...

He wished he'd been able to walk. So she could see him crawl toward her.

He didn't know why. Why he felt like the lowest sort of low. Why he'd barely been able to look at Nesryn. Though he knew Nesryn was too observant not to be aware. It had been the unspoken agreement between them last night—silence on the subject. And that reason alone ...

Yrene poked at his bare foot. "Do you feel this?"

Chaol curled his toes. "Yes."

She frowned. "Am I pushing hard or soft?"

She ground her finger in.

"Hard," he grunted.

Her finger lightened. "And now?"

"Soft."

She repeated the test on the other foot. Touched each of his toes.

"I think," she observed, "I've pushed it down—to somewhere in the middle of your back. The mark is still the same, but it *feels* like ..." She shook her head. "I can't explain it."

"You don't need to."

It had been her joy—the undiluted joy of that memory—that had won him that bit of movement. What she'd opened up, given up, to push back the stain of that wound.

"I'm starving," Chaol said, nudging her with an elbow. "Will you eat with me?"

And to his surprise, she said yes.

Even after two weeks in Skull’s Bay, being utterly ignored by Rolfe despite their requests to meet with him, Dorian still wasn’t entirely used to the heat and humidity. It hounded him day and night, driving him from sleep to wake drenched in sweat, chasing him inside the Ocean Rose when the sun was at its zenith.

And since Rolfe refused to see them, Dorian tried to fill his days with things *other* than complaining about the heat. Mornings were for practicing his magic in a jungle clearing a few miles away. Worse, Rowan made him run there and back; and when they returned at lunch, he had the “choice” of eating before or after one of Rowan’s grueling workouts.

Honestly, Dorian had no idea how Aelin had survived months of this—let alone fallen in love with the warrior while she did. Though he supposed both the queen and prince possessed a sadistic streak that made them compatible.

Some days, Fenrys and Gavriel met them in the inn’s courtyard to either exercise or give unwanted pointers on Dorian’s technique with a sword and dagger. Some days, Rowan let them stay; others, he kicked them out with a snarl.

The latter, Dorian realized, usually happened when even the heat and sun couldn’t drive away the shadows of the past few months—when he awoke with his sweat feeling like Sorscha’s blood, when he couldn’t abide even the brush of his tunic against his neck.

He wasn’t sure whether to thank the Fae Prince for noticing or to hate him for the kindness.

During the afternoons, he and Rowan prowled the city for gossip and news, watching Rolfe’s men as closely as they were watched. Only seven captains of Rolfe’s depleted armada were on the island—eight including Rolfe, with fewer ships anchored in the bay. Some had fled after the Valg attack; some now slept with the fishes at the bottom of the harbor, their ships with them.

Reports poured in from Rifthold: of the city under witch command, of most of it in ruin, its nobility and merchants fleeing to country estates and leaving the poor to fend for themselves. The witches controlled the city gates and the docks

—nothing and no one got in without them knowing. Worse, ships from the Ferian Gap were sailing down the Avery toward Rifthold, carrying strange soldiers and beasts that turned the city into their own personal hunting ground.

Erawan was no fool with planning this war. Those ships prowling the Avery were too small, Rowan had claimed, and there was no way the force at the Dead End was the entirety of Erawan's armada. So where had Adarlan's fleet been all this time?

Rowan discovered the answer five days into their stay: the Gulf of Oro. Some of the fleet had been positioned near Eyllwe's northwestern coast, some hidden in Melisande's ports, where, rumor had it, their queen was allowing Morath soldiers in through any direction they pleased. Erawan had skillfully divided his fleet, placing it in enough key locations that Rowan informed Dorian they'd have to sacrifice land, allies, and geographical advantages in order to hold others.

Dorian had hated to admit to the Fae warrior that he'd never heard any of these plans these past years—his council meetings had all been on policy and trade and slaves. A distraction, he realized—a way to keep the lords and rulers of the continent focused on one thing while other plans were set in motion. And now ... if Erawan summoned the fleet from the gulf, they'd likely sail around Eyllwe's southern coast and sack every city until they reached Orynth's doorstep.

Perhaps they'd get lucky and Erawan's fleet would collide with Maeve's. Not that they'd heard anything of the latter. Not even a whisper of where and how fast her ships sailed. Or a whisper of where Aelin Galathynius had gone. It was for news of her, Dorian knew, that Rowan hunted through the city streets.

So Dorian and Rowan collected kernels of information and would return to the inn each night to analyze them over spiced prawns from the warm waters of the archipelago and steaming rice from traders in the southern continent, their glasses of orange-infused water resting atop the maps and charts they'd purchased in town. Information was mostly second- or third-hand—and a common whore patrolling the streets seemed to know as much as the sailors laboring at the docks.

But none of the whores or the sailors or the traders had news of Prince Hollin's or Queen Georgina's fates. War was coming—and the fate of a child and a flippant queen who had never bothered to take power for herself was of little concern to anyone but Dorian, it seemed.

On a particularly steamy afternoon, cooling off now thanks to a dazzling

thunderstorm, Dorian set down his fork beside his plate of steamed reef fish and said to Rowan, “I find I’m tired of waiting for Rolfe to meet with us.”

Rowan’s fork clinked against his plate as he lowered it—and waited with preternatural stillness. Where Gavriel and Fenrys were for the afternoon, he didn’t care. Dorian was actually grateful for their absence as he said, “I need some paper—and a messenger.”



Rolfe summoned them and the cadre to the Sea Dragon tavern three hours later.

Rowan had been teaching him about shielding these past few days—and Dorian erected one around himself as Rolfe led the four of them along the upstairs hall of the tavern, heading for his office.

His idea had unfolded smoothly—perfectly.

No one had noticed that the letter Rowan mailed after lunch was the same one that was later delivered to Dorian at the inn.

But Rolfe’s spies noticed the shock that Dorian displayed while reading it—the dismay and fear and rage at whatever news he’d received. Rowan, true to form, had paced and snarled at the *news* he’d attained. They made sure the servant washing the hallway had overheard their mention of the war-altering information, that Rolfe himself could gain much from it—or lose everything.

And now, striding for the man’s office, Dorian couldn’t tell if it pleased or unnerved him that they were so closely watched that his plan had worked. Gavriel and Fenrys, thankfully, asked no questions.

The Pirate Lord, clad in a faded blue-and-gold jacket, paused before the oak door to his office. His gloves were on, his face a bit haggard. He doubted that expression would improve when Rolfe realized there was no news whatsoever—and he’d have this meeting whether he wanted to or not.

Dorian caught the three Fae males assessing Rolfe’s each breath, his posture, listening to the sounds of the first mate and quartermaster a level below. All three exchanged barely perceptible nods. Allies—at least until Rolfe heard them out.

Rolfe unlocked the door, muttering, “This had better be worth my time,” and stalked into the awaiting dimness beyond. Then stopped dead.

Even in the watery light, Dorian could perfectly see the woman sitting at Rolfe’s desk, her black clothes dirty, weapons gleaming, and her feet propped on the dark wooden surface.

Aelin Galathynius, her hands laced behind her head, grinned at them all and said, “I like this office far better than your other one, Rolfe.”

24

Nesryn knew.

She knew it hadn't been mere interest that had prompted Chaol to ask her to talk to him last night, but guilt.

She was fine with it, she told herself. She had been a replacement for not one, but two of the women in his life. A third one ... She was fine with it, she repeated as she returned from stalking through Antica's streets—not a whisper of Valg to be found—and entered the palace grounds.

Nesryn braced herself as she peered up at the palace, not quite ready to return to their suite to wait out the brutal late afternoon heat.

A massive figure atop a minaret caught her eye, and she smiled grimly.

She was out of breath when she reached the aerie, but mercifully, Kadara was the only one present to witness it.

The ruk clicked her beak at Nesryn in greeting and went back to ripping at what appeared to be an entire slab of beef. Ribs and all.

"I heard you were headed here," Sartaq said from the stairs behind her.

Nesryn whirled. "I—how?"

The prince gave her a knowing smile and stepped into the aerie. Kadara puffed her feathers with excitement and dug back into her meal, as if eager to finish and be in the skies. "This palace is crawling with spies. Some of them mine. Is there anything you wanted?"

He scanned her—seeing the face that yesterday her aunt and uncle had

complained looked tired. Worn out. Unhappy. They'd crammed her with food, then insisted she take their four children back down to the docks to select fish for their evening meal, then shoved more food down her throat before she'd returned to the palace for the feast. *Still peaky*, Zahida clucked. *Your eyes are heavy*.

"I ..." Nesryn surveyed the view beyond, the city simmering in the late afternoon heat. "I just wanted some quiet."

"Then I'll let you have it," Sartaq said, and turned to the open archway into the stairwell.

"No," she blurted, reaching toward him. She halted her hand, dropping it immediately as it came within skimming distance of his leather jacket. No one grabbed a prince. No one. "I didn't mean you had to leave. I ... I don't mind your company." She added quickly, "Your Highness."

Sartaq's mouth quirked up. "It's a bit late to be throwing in my fancy title, isn't it?"

She gave him a pleading look. But she'd meant what she said.

Last night, talking with him at the party, even talking with him in the alley outside the Torre a few nights before that ... She had not felt quiet or aloof or strange. She had not felt cold or distant. He'd done her an honor in giving her such attention, and in escorting her and Chaol back to their rooms. She did not mind company—quiet as she could be, she *enjoyed* being around others. But sometimes ...

"I spent most of yesterday with my family. They can be ... tiring. Demanding."

"I know how you feel," the prince said drily.

A smile tugged at her lips. "I suppose you do."

"You love them, though."

"And you do not?" A bold, brash question.

Sartaq shrugged. "Kadara is my family. The rukhin, they are my family. My

bloodline, though ... It's hard to love one another, when we will one day contend with each other. Love cannot exist without trust." He smiled at his ruk. "I trust Kadara with my life. I would die for her, and she for me. Can I say the same of my siblings? My own parents?"

"It's a shame," Nesryn admitted.

"At least I have her," he said of the ruk. "And my riders. Pity my siblings, who have none of those blessings."

He was a good man. The prince ... he was a good man.

She strode for the open archways overlooking the deadly drop to the city far, far below.

"I am going to leave soon—for the mountains of the rukhin," Sartaq said softly. "To seek the answers you and I discussed the other night in the city."

Nesryn peered over her shoulder at him, trying to gather the right words, the nerve.

His face remained neutral, even as he added, "I'm sure your family will have my head for offering, but ... would you like to accompany me?"

Yes, she wanted to breathe. But she made herself ask, "For how long?"

For time was not on her side. Their side. And to hunt for answers while so many threats gathered close ...

"A few weeks. No more than three. I like to keep the riders in line, and if I go absent for too long, they pull at the leash. So the journey will serve two purposes, I suppose."

"I—I would need to discuss. With Lord Westfall." She'd promised him as much last night. That they'd consider this precise path, weighing the pitfalls and benefits. They were still a team in that regard, still served under the same banner.

Sartaq nodded solemnly, as if he could read everything on her face. "Of course. Though I leave soon."

She then heard it—the grunt of servants coming up the aerie stairs. Bringing supplies.

“You leave *now*,” Nesryn clarified as she noted the spear leaning against the far wall near the supply racks. His *sulde*. The russet horsehair tied beneath the blade drifted in the wind weaving through the aerie, the dark wood shaft polished and smooth.

Sartaq’s onyx eyes seemed to darken further as he strode to his *sulde*, weighing the spirit-banner in his hands before resting it beside him, the wood thunking on the stone floor. “I ...” It was the first she’d seen him stumble for words.

“You weren’t going to say good-bye?”

She had no right to make such demands, expect such things, tentative allies or no.

But Sartaq leaned his *sulde* against the wall again and began braiding back his black hair. “After last night’s party, I had thought you would be ... preoccupied.”

With Chaol. Her brows rose. “All day?”

The prince gave her a roguish smile, finishing off his long braid and picking up his spear once more. “I certainly would take all day.”

By some god’s mercy, Nesryn was saved from replying by the servants who appeared, panting and red-faced with the packs between them. Weapons glinted from some of them, along with food and blankets.

“How far is it?”

“A few hours before nightfall, then all day tomorrow, then another half day of travel to reach the first of the aeries in the Tavan Mountains,” Sartaq said as he handed his *sulde* to a passing servant, and Kadara patiently allowed them to load her with various packs.

“You don’t fly at night?”

“I tire. Kadara doesn’t. Foolish riders have made that mistake—and tumbled through the clouds in their dreams.”

She bit her lip. “How long until you go?”

“An hour.”

An hour to think ...

She had not told Chaol. That she'd seen his toes move last night. She'd seen them curl and flex in his sleep.

She had cried, silent tears of joy sliding onto the pillow. She hadn't told him. And when he'd awoken ...

Let's have an adventure, Nesryn Faliq, he'd promised her in Rifthold. She had cried then, too.

But perhaps ... perhaps neither of them had seen. The path ahead. The forks in it.

She could see down one path clearly.

Honor and loyalty, still unbroken. Even if it stifled him. Stifled her. And she ... she did not want to be a consolation prize. Be pitied or a distraction.

But this other path, the fork that had appeared, branching away across grasslands and jungles and rivers and mountains ... This path toward answers that might help them, might mean nothing, might change the course of this war, all carried on a ruk's golden wings ...

She would have an adventure. For herself. This one time. She would see her homeland, and smell it and breathe it in. See it from high above, see it racing as fast as the wind.

She owed herself that much. And owed it to Chaol as well.

Perhaps she and this dark-eyed prince might find some scrap of salvation against Morath. And perhaps she might bring an army back with her.

Sartaq was still watching, his face carefully neutral as the last of the servants bowed and vanished. His *sulde* had been strapped just below the saddle, within easy reach should the prince need it, its reddish horsehairs trailing in the wind. Trailing southward.

Toward that distant, wild land of the Tavan Mountains. Beckoning, as all spirit-banners did, toward an unknown horizon. Beckoning to claim whatever

waited there.

Nesryn said quietly, “Yes.”

The prince blinked.

“I will go with you,” she clarified.

A small smile tugged on his mouth. “Good.” Sartaq jerked his chin to the archway through which the servants had vanished down the minaret. “Pack lightly, though—Kadara is already near her limit.”

Nesryn shook her head, noting the bow and quiver stocked with arrows already atop Kadara. “I have nothing to bring with me.”

Sartaq watched her for a long moment. “Surely you would wish to say goodbye—”

“I have nothing,” she repeated. His eyes flickered at that, but she added, “I—I’ll leave a note.”

The prince solemnly nodded. “I can outfit you with clothes when we arrive. There is paper and ink in the cabinet by the far wall. Leave the letter in the box by the stairs, and one of the messengers will come to check at nightfall.”

Her hands shook slightly as she obeyed. Not with fear, but ... freedom.

She wrote two notes. The first one, to her aunt and uncle, was full of love and warning and well-wishes. Her second note ... it was quick, and to the point:

I have gone with Sartaq to see the rukhin. I shall be gone three weeks. I hold you to no promises. And I will hold to none of my own.

Nesryn shut both notes in the box, undoubtedly checked often for any messages from the skies, and changed into the leathers she’d left from the last time she’d flown.

She found Sartaq atop Kadara, waiting for her.

The prince extended a callused hand to help her up into the saddle.

She didn’t hesitate as she took his hand, his strong fingers wrapping around hers, and let him pull her into the saddle before him.

He strapped and buckled them in, checked all of it thrice. But he reined in Kadara when she would have soared out of the minaret.

Sartaq whispered in Nesryn's ear, "I was praying to the Eternal Sky and all thirty-six gods that you'd say yes."

She smiled, even if he couldn't see it.

"So was I," Nesryn breathed, and they leaped into the skies.

Dorian didn't dare move as Rolfe let out a snarl. "I have a distinct memory, Celaena Sardothien, of saying that if you set foot in my territory again, your life was forfeit."

"Ah," Aelin said, lowering her hands but leaving her feet still propped on Rolfe's desk, "but where would the fun be in that?"

Rowan was still as death beside him. Aelin's grin became feline as she finally lowered her feet and ran her hands along either side of the desk, assessing the smooth wood as if it was a prize horse. She inclined her head to Dorian. "Hello, Majesty."

"Hello, Celaena," he said as calmly as he could, well aware that two Fae males behind him could hear his thundering heart. Rolfe whipped his head toward him.

Because it was Celaena who sat here—for whatever purpose, it was Celaena Sardothien in this room.

She jerked her chin at Rolfe. "You've seen better days, but considering half your fleet has abandoned you, I'd say you look decent enough."

"Get out of my chair," Rolfe said too quietly.

Aelin did no such thing. She just gave Rowan a sultry sweep from foot to face. Rowan's expression remained unreadable, eyes intent—near-glowing. And then Aelin said to Rowan with a secret smile, "You, I don't know. But I'd like to."

Rowan's lips tugged upward. "I'm not on the market, unfortunately."

"Pity," Aelin said, cocking her head as she noticed a bowl of small emeralds on Rolfe's desk. *Don't do it, don't—*

Aelin swiped up the emeralds in a hand, picking them over as she glanced at Rowan beneath her lashes. "She must be a rare, staggering beauty to make you so faithful."

Gods save them all. He could have sworn Fenrys coughed behind him.

Aelin chucked the emeralds into the metal dish as if they were bits of copper, their plunking the only sound. "She must be clever"—*plunk*—"and

fascinating”—*plunk*—“and very, very talented.” *Plunk, plunk, plunk* went the emeralds. She examined the four gems remaining in her hand. “She must be the most wonderful person who ever existed.”

Another cough from behind him—from Gavriel this time. But Aelin only had eyes for Rowan as the warrior said to her, “She is indeed that. And more.”

“Hmmm,” Aelin said, rolling the emeralds in her scarred palm with expert ease.

Rolfe growled, “What. Are. You. Doing. Here.”

Aelin dumped the emeralds into their dish. “Is that any way to speak to an old friend?”

Rolfe stalked toward the desk, and Rowan trembled with restraint as the Pirate Lord braced his hands on the wooden surface. “Last I heard, your master was dead and you sold the Guild to his underlings. You’re a free woman. What are you doing in *my* city?”

Aelin met his sea-green eyes with an irreverence that Dorian wondered if she had been born with or had honed through skill and blood and adventure. “War is coming, Rolfe. Am I not allowed to weigh my options? I thought to see what *you* planned to do.”

Rolfe looked over his broad shoulder at Dorian. “Rumor has it she was your Champion this fall. Do you wish to deal with *this*?”

Dorian said smoothly, “You will find, Rolfe, that one does not *deal* with Celaena Sardothien. One survives her.”

A flash of a grin from Aelin. Rolfe rolled his eyes and said to the assassin-queen, “So, what is the plan, then? You made a bargain to get out of Endovier, became the King’s Champion, and now that he is dead, you wish to see how you might profit?”

Dorian tried not to flinch. Dead—his father was dead, at his own hands.

“You know how my tastes run,” Aelin said. “Even with Arobynn’s fortune and the sale of the Guild ... War can be a profitable time for people who are smart with their business.”

“And where is the sixteen-year-old self-righteous brat who wrecked six of my ships, stole two of them, and destroyed my town, all for the sake of two hundred slaves?”

A shadow flickered in Aelin’s eyes that sent a chill down Dorian’s spine. “Spend a year in Endovier, Rolfe, and you quickly learn how to play a different sort of game.”

“I told you”—Rolfe seethed with quiet venom—“that you’d one day pay for

that arrogance.”

Aelin’s smile became lethal. “Indeed I did. And so did Arobynn Hamel.”

Rolfe blinked—just once, then straightened. “Get out of my seat. And put back that emerald you slipped up your sleeve.”

Aelin snorted, and with a flash of her fingers, an emerald—the fourth one Dorian had forgotten—appeared between her fingers. “Good. At least your eyesight isn’t failing in your old age.”

“And the other one,” Rolfe said through clenched teeth.

Aelin grinned again. And then leaned back in Rolfe’s chair, tipped up her head, and spat out an emerald she’d somehow kept hidden under her tongue. Dorian watched the gem arc neatly through the air.

Its plunk in the dish was the only sound.

Dorian glanced at Rowan. But delight shone in the prince’s eyes—delight and pride and simmering lust. Dorian quickly looked away.

Aelin said to the Pirate Lord, “I have two questions for you.”

Rolfe’s hand twitched toward his rapier. “You’re in no rutting position to ask questions.”

“Aren’t I? After all, I made you a promise two and a half years ago. One that you signed.”

Rolfe snarled.

Aelin propped her chin on a fist. “Have you or have any of your ships bought, traded, or transported slaves since that ... unfortunate day?”

“No.”

A satisfied little nod. “And have you provided sanctuary for them here?”

“We haven’t gone out of our way, but if any arrived, yes.” Each word was tighter than the last, a spring about to burst forward and throttle the queen. Dorian prayed the man wouldn’t be dumb enough to draw on her. Not with Rowan watching his every breath.

“Good and good,” Aelin said. “Smart of you, not to lie to me. As I took it upon myself when I arrived this morning to look into your warehouses, to ask around in the markets. And then I came here...” She ran her hands over the papers and books on the desk. “To see your ledgers for myself.” She dragged a finger down a page containing various columns and numbers. “Textiles, spices, porcelain dining ware, rice from the southern continent, and various contraband, but ... no slaves. I have to say, I’m impressed. Both at you honoring your word and at your thorough record keeping.”

A low snarl. “Do you know what your stunt cost me?”

Aelin flicked her eyes toward a piece of parchment on the wall, various daggers, swords, and even scissors embedded in it—target practice, apparently, for Rolfe. “Well, there’s the bar tab I left unpaid ... ,” she said of the document, which was indeed a list of items, and—holy gods, that was a large sum of money.

Rolfe turned to Rowan, Fenrys, and Gavriel. “You want my assistance in this war? Here’s the cost. Kill her. Now. Then my ships and men are yours.”

Fenrys’s dark eyes glittered, but not at Rolfe, as Aelin rose to her feet. Her black clothes were travel-worn, her golden hair gleaming in the gray light. And even in a room of professional killers, she took the lion’s share of air. “Oh, I don’t think they will,” she said. “Or even can.”

Rolfe whirled to her. “You’ll find that you are not so skilled in the face of Fae warriors.”

She pointed to one of the chairs before the desk. “You might want to sit.”

“Get the *hell* out of—”

Aelin let out a low whistle. “Allow me to introduce to you, Captain Rolfe, the *incomparable*, the beautiful, and the absolutely and all-around flawless Queen of Terrasen.”

Dorian’s brows creased. But footsteps sounded, and then—

The males shifted as Aelin Galathynius indeed strode into the room, clad in a dark green tunic of equal wear and dirt, her golden hair unbound, her turquoise-and-gold eyes laughing as she strode past a slack-jawed Rolfe and perched on the arm of Aelin’s chair.

Dorian couldn’t tell—without a Fae’s sense of smell, he couldn’t tell.

“What—what devilry is this,” Rolfe hissed, yielding a single step.

Aelin and Aelin looked at each other. The one in black grinned up at the newcomer. “Oh, you *are* gorgeous, aren’t you?”

The one in green smiled, but for all its delight, all its wicked mischief ... It was a softer smile, made with a mouth that was perhaps less used to snarling and teeth-baring and getting away with saying hideous, swaggering things. Lysandra, then.

The two queens faced Rolfe.

“Aelin Galathynius had no twin,” he growled, a hand on his sword.

Aelin in black—the true Aelin, who had been among them all along—rolled her eyes. “Ugh, Rolfe. You ruin my fun. *Of course* I don’t have a twin.”

She jerked her chin at Lysandra, and the shifter’s flesh glowed and melted, hair becoming a heavy, straight fall of dark tresses, her skin sun-kissed, her

uptilted eyes a striking green.

Rolfe barked in alarm and staggered back—only for Fenrys to steady him with a hand on his shoulder as the Fae warrior stepped forward, eyes wide. “A shifter,” Fenrys breathed.

Aelin and Lysandra fixed the warrior with an unimpressed look that would have sent lesser men running.

Even Gavriel’s placid face was slack at the sight of the shape-shifter—his tattoos bobbing as he swallowed. Aedion’s father. And if Aedion was here with Aelin...

“As intrigued as I am to see that the cadre is present,” Aelin said, “will you verify to His Pirateness that I am who I say I am, and we can move on to more pressing matters?”

Rolfe’s face was white with fury as he realized they’d all known who truly sat before them.

Dorian said, “She is Aelin Galathynius. And Celaena Sardothien.”

But it was to Fenrys and Gavriel, the outside party, that Rolfe turned. Gavriel nodded, Fenrys’s eyes now fixed on the queen. “She is who she says she is.”

Rolfe turned to Aelin, but the queen frowned up at Lysandra as the shifter handed her a wax-sealed tube. “You made your hair shorter.”

“You try hair that long and see if you last more than a day,” Lysandra said, fingering the hair brushing her collarbone.

Rolfe gaped at them. Aelin grinned at her companion and faced the Pirate Lord.

“So, Rolfe,” the queen drawled, tossing the tube from hand to hand, “let’s discuss this little business of you refusing to aid my cause.”

Aelin Galathynius didn't bother to contain her smugness as Rolfe pointed to the large table on the right side of his office—far grander than the piece-of-shit office where he'd once had her and Sam meet him.

She managed all of one step toward her designated seat before Rowan was at her side, a hand on her elbow.

His face—oh, gods, she'd missed that harsh, unyielding face—was tight as he leaned in to whisper with Fae softness, “The cadre is working with us on the condition that it'll lead them to Lorcan, since Maeve sent them to kill him. I refused to divulge his whereabouts. Most of Adarlan's fleet is in the Gulf of Oro thanks to some foul agreement with Melisande to use their ports, and Maeve's own armada sails for Eyllwe—whether to attack or aid, we don't know.”

Well, it was nice to know absolute hell awaited them and that the information about Maeve's armada was correct. But then Rowan added, “And I missed you like hell.”

She smiled despite what he'd told her, pulling back to look at him. Untouched, unharmed.

It was more than she could have hoped for. Even with the news he'd delivered.

Aelin decided she didn't particularly give a shit who was watching and rose up on her toes to brush her mouth against his. It had taken all her wits and abilities to avoid leaving traces of her scent today for him to detect—and the shocked delight on his face had been utterly worth it.

Rowan's hand on her arm tightened as she pulled away. “The feeling, Prince,” she murmured, “is mutual.”

The others were doing their best not to watch them—save for Rolfe, who was still seething.

“Oh, don't look so put out, Captain,” she said, turning away from Rowan and sliding into a seat across from Rolfe. “You hate me, I hate you, we *both* hate being told what to do by busybody, overlording empires—it's a perfect pairing.”

Rolfe spat, “You nearly wrecked everything I've worked for. Your silver

tongue and arrogance won't get you through this."

Just for the hell of it, she smiled and stuck out her tongue. Not the real thing—but a forked tongue of silver fire that wriggled like a snake's in the air.

Fenrys choked on a dark laugh. She ignored him. She'd deal with *their* presence later. She just prayed she'd be able to warn Aedion before he ran into his father—who was now sitting two seats down from her, gawking at her as if she had ten heads.

Gods, even the expression was like Aedion's. How hadn't she noticed that this spring in Wendlyn? Aedion had been a boy the last time she'd seen him—but as a man ... With Gavriel's immortality, they even looked the same age. Different in many ways, but that look ... it was a reflection.

Rolfe wasn't smiling. "A queen who plays with fire is not one who makes a solid ally."

"And a pirate whose men abandoned him at the first test of allegiance makes for a shit naval commander, yet here I am, at this table."

"Careful, girl. You need me more than I need you."

"Do I?" A dance—that was all this was. Long before she'd set foot on this horrible island, it had been a dance, and she was now to enter into its second movement. She set Murtaugh's sealed letter of recommendation on the table between them. "The way I see it, I have the gold, and I have the ability to raise you up from a common criminal to a respectable, established businessman. Fenharrow can dispute who owns these islands, but ... what if I were to throw my support behind you? What if I were to make you not a Pirate Lord but a Pirate King?"

"And who would verify the word of a nineteen-year-old princess?"

She jerked her chin at the wax-sealed tube. "Murtaugh Allsbrook would. He wrote you a nice, long letter about it."

Rolfe picked up the tube, studied it, and chucked it in a neat arc—right into his rubbish bin. The thud echoed through the office.

"And I would," Dorian said, leaning forward before Aelin could snarl at the ignored letter. "We win this war, and you have the two largest kingdoms on this continent proclaiming you the undisputed King of all Pirates. Skull's Bay and the Dead Islands become not a hideout for your people, but a proper home. A new kingdom."

Rolfe let out a low laugh. "The talk of young idealists and dreamers."

"The world," Aelin said, "will be saved and remade by the dreamers, Rolfe."

"The world will be saved by the warriors, by the men and women who will

spill their blood for it. Not for empty promises and gilded dreams.”

Aelin laid her hands flat on the table. “Perhaps. But if we win this war, it will be a new world—a free world. That is my promise—to you, to anyone who will march under my banner. A better world. And you will have to decide where your place in it shall be.”

“That is the promise of a little girl who still doesn’t know how the world truly works,” Rolfe said. “Masters are needed to maintain order—to keep things running and profitable. It will not end well for those who seek to upend it.”

Aelin purred, “Do you want gold, Rolfe? Do you want a title? Do you want glory or women or land? Or is it just the bloodlust that drives you?” She gave a pointed glance at his gloved hands. “What was the cost for the map? What was the end goal if that sacrifice had to be made?”

“There is nothing you can offer or say, Aelin Galathynius, that I cannot attain myself.” A sly smile. “Unless you plan to offer me your hand and make me king of your territory ... which might be an interesting proposition.”

Bastard. Self-serving, awful bastard. He’d seen her with Rowan. He was drinking in the stillness with which both of them now sat, the death in Rowan’s eyes.

“Looks like you bid on the wrong horse,” Rolfe crooned. He flicked his eyes to Dorian. “What news did you receive?”

But that wrong horse cut in smoothly, “There was none. But you’ll be glad to know your spies at the Ocean Rose are certainly doing their job. And that His Majesty is quite an accomplished actor.” Aelin held in her laugh.

Rolfe’s face darkened. “Get out of my office.”

Dorian said coldly, “For a petty grudge, you’d refuse to consider allying with us?”

Aelin snorted. “I’d hardly call wrecking his shit-poor city and ships a ‘petty grudge.’”

“You have two days to get yourselves off this island,” Rolfe said, teeth flashing. “After that, my promise from two and a half years ago still holds.” A sneer at her companions. “Take your ... menagerie with you.”

Smoke curled in her mouth. She had expected debate, but ... It was time to regroup—time to see what Rowan and Dorian had done and plan out the next steps.

Let Rolfe think she was leaving the dance unfinished for now.



Aelin hit the narrow hallway, a wall of muscle at her back and by her side, and faced another dilemma: Aedion.

He was loitering outside the inn to monitor for any unfriendly forces. If she stormed right to him, she'd bring him face-to-face with his long-lost, completely oblivious father.

Aelin made it all of three steps down the hall when Gavriel said behind her, "Where is he?"

Slowly, she looked back. The warrior's tan face was tight, his eyes full of sorrow and steel.

She smirked. "If you are referring to sweet, darling Lorcan—"

"You know who I'm referring to."

Rowan took a step between them, but his harsh face yielded nothing. Fenrys slipped into the hall, shutting Rolfe's office door, and monitored them with dark amusement. Oh, Rowan had told her lots about him. A face and body women and men would kill to possess. What Maeve made him do, what he'd given for his twin.

But Aelin sucked on a tooth and said to Gavriel, "Isn't the better question 'Who is he?'"

Gavriel didn't smile. Didn't move. Buy herself time, buy Aedion time...

"You don't get to decide when and where and how you meet him," Aelin said.

"He's my gods-damned son. I think I do."

Aelin shrugged. "You don't even get to decide if you're allowed to call him that."

Those tawny eyes flashed; the tattooed hands curled into fists. But Rowan said, "Gavriel, she does not intend to keep you from him."


"Tell me where my son is. *Now.*"

Ah—there it was. The face of the Lion. The warrior who had felled armies, whose reputation made wintered soldiers shudder. Whose fallen warriors were tattooed all over him.

But Aelin picked at her nails, then frowned at the now-empty hall behind her. "Hell if I know where he's gone off to."

They blinked, then started as they beheld where Lysandra had once been. To where she had now vanished, flying or slithering or crawling out of the open window. To get Aedion away.

Aelin just said to Gavriel, her voice flat and cold, "Don't ever give me orders."



Aedion and Lysandra were already waiting at the Ocean Rose, and as they entered the pretty courtyard, Aelin barely dragged up the energy to remark to Rowan that she was shocked he hadn't opted for warrior-squalor.

Dorian, a few steps behind, laughed quietly—which was good, she supposed. Good that he was laughing. He had not been the last time she saw him.

And it had been weeks since she'd laughed herself, felt that weight lift long enough to do so.

She gave Rowan a look that told him to meet her upstairs, and halted halfway across the courtyard. Dorian, sensing her intent, paused as well.

The evening air was heavy with sweet fruit and climbing flowers, the fountain in the center gurgling softly. She wondered if the owner of the inn hailed from the Red Desert—if they'd seen the use of water and stone and greenery at the Keep of the Silent Assassins.

But Aelin murmured to Dorian, "I'm sorry. About Rifthold."

The king's summer-tanned face tightened. "Thank you—for the help."

Aelin shrugged. "Rowan's always looking for an excuse to show off. Dramatic rescues give him purpose and fulfillment in his dull, immortal life."

There was a pointed cough from the open balcony doors above them, sharp enough to inform her that Rowan had heard and wouldn't forget that little quip when they were alone.

She held in her smile. It had been a surprise and a delight, she supposed, that an easy, respectful calm flowed between Rowan and Dorian on their walk over here.

She motioned for the king to continue with her and said quietly, well aware of how many spies Rolfe employed within the building, "It seems you and I are currently without crowns, thanks to a few bullshit pieces of paper."

Dorian didn't return her smile. The stairs groaned beneath them as they headed for the second floor. They were almost to the room Dorian had indicated when he said, "Maybe that's a good thing."

She opened and closed her mouth—and opted, for once, to keep quiet, shaking her head a bit as she entered the chamber.

Their meeting was hushed, thorough. Rowan and Dorian laid out in precise detail what had happened to them, Aedion pushing for counts of the witches, their armor, how they flew, what formations they used. Anything to feed to the Bane, to amplify their northern defenses, regardless of who commanded them.

The general of the North—who would take all those pieces and build their resistance. But the sheer ease with which the Ironteeth legion had taken the city...

“Manon Blackbeak,” Aedion mused, “would be a valuable ally, if we can get her to turn.”

Aelin glanced at Rowan’s shoulder—where a faint scar now marred the golden skin beneath his clothes.

“Perhaps getting Manon to turn on her kin would ignite an internal battle among the witches,” she said. “Maybe they’ll save us the task of killing them and just destroy each other.”

Dorian straightened in his chair, but only cold calculation swirled in his eyes as he countered, “But what is it that they want? Beyond our heads, I mean. Why ally with Erawan at all?”

And all of them then looked to the thin necklace of scars marring the base of Aelin’s throat—where the scent permanently marked her as a Witch Killer. Baba Yellowlegs had visited the castle this winter for that alliance, but had there been anything else?

“We can contemplate the whys and hows of it later,” Aelin declared. “If we encounter any of the witches, we take them alive. I want some questions answered.”

Then she explained what they’d witnessed in Ilium. The order Brannon had given her: Find the Lock. Well, he and his little quest could get in line.

It was never-ending, she supposed while they dined that night on peppered crab and spiced rice. This burden, these threats.

Erawan had been planning this for decades. Maybe for centuries, while he’d slept, he’d planned all this out. And she was to be given nothing more than obscure commands by long-dead royals to find a way to stop it, nothing more than gods-damned *months* to rally a force against him.

She doubted it was a coincidence that Maeve was sailing for Eyllwe at the same moment Brannon had commanded she go to the Stone Marshes on its southwestern peninsula. Or that the gods-damned Morath fleet was squatting in the Gulf of Oro—right on its other side.

There was not enough time, not enough *time* to do what she needed to, to *fix* things.

But ... small steps.

She had Rolfe to deal with. The little matter of securing his people’s alliance. And the map she still needed to persuade him to use to assist her in tracking

down that Lock.

But first ... best to ensure that infernal map actually worked.

Too many animals loitering about the streets at this hour would attract the wrong sort of attention.

But Aedion still wished that the shifter was wearing fur or feathers compared to ... this.

Not that she was sore on the eyes as an auburn-haired and green-eyed young woman. She could have passed for one of the lovely mountain maidens of northern Terrasen with that coloring. It was *who* Lysandra was supposed to be as they waited just inside an alley. Who *he* was supposed to be, too.

Lysandra leaned against the brick wall, a foot propped against it to reveal a length of creamy-white thigh. And Aedion, with his hand braced against the wall beside her head, was no more than an hourly customer.

No sound in the alley but scuttling rats digging through rotten, discarded fruit. Skull's Bay was precisely the shithole he expected it to be, right down to its Pirate Lord.

Who now unwittingly held the only map to the Lock that Aelin had been commanded to find. When Aedion had complained that *of course* it was a map they could not steal, Rowan had been the one to suggest this ... plan. Trap. Whatever it was.

He glanced at the delicate gold chain dangling around Lysandra's pale throat, tracing its length down the front of her bodice, to where the Amulet of Orynth was now hidden beneath.

"Admiring the view?"

Aedion snapped his eyes up from the generous swells of her breasts. "Sorry."

But the shifter somehow saw the thoughts churning in his head. "You think this won't work?"

"I think there are plenty of valuable things on this island—why would Rolfe bother to go after this?" Storms, enemies, and treasure—that was what the map showed. And since he and Lysandra were not the first two ... only one, it seemed, would be able to appear on that map inked on Rolfe's hands.

"Rowan claimed Rolfe would find the amulet interesting enough to go after

it.”

“Rowan and Aelin have a tendency to say one thing and mean something else entirely.” Aedion heaved a breath through his nose. “We’ve already been here an hour.”

She arched an auburn brow. “Do you have somewhere else to be?”

“You’re tired.”

“We’re all tired,” she said sharply.

He shut his mouth, not wanting his head ripped off just yet.

Each shift took something out of Lysandra. The bigger the change, the bigger the animal, the steeper the cost. Aedion had witnessed her morph from butterfly to bumblebee to hummingbird to bat within the span of a few minutes. But going from human to ghost leopard to bear or elk or horse, she’d once demonstrated, took longer between shifts, the magic having to draw up the strength to *become* that size, to fill the body with all its inherent power.

Casual footsteps sounded, accented by a two-note whistle. Lysandra’s breath brushed against his jaw at the sound. Aedion, however, stiffened slightly as those steps grew closer, and he found himself staring at the son of his great enemy. King, now.

But still a face he’d hated, sneered at, debated cutting into tiny pieces for many, many years. A face he’d seen drunk out of his mind at parties mere seasons ago; a face he’d seen buried against the necks of women whose names he’d never bothered to learn; a face that had taunted him in that dungeon cell.

That face was now hooded, and for all the world, he looked like he was here to inquire about Lysandra’s services—once Aedion had finished with her. The general clenched his teeth. “What?”

Dorian looked over Lysandra, as if surveying the goods, and Aedion fought the urge to bristle. “Rowan sent me to see if you had any developments.” The prince and Aelin were back at the inn, drinking in the dining room—where all of Rolfe’s spying eyes might see and report them. Dorian blinked at the shifter, starting. “And gods above—you really *can* take on any human form.”

Lysandra shrugged, the irreverent street whore debating her rate. “It’s not as interesting as you’d think. I’d like to see if I could become a plant. Or a bit of wind.”

“Can you ... *do* that?”

“Of course she can,” Aedion said, pushing off the wall and crossing his arms.

“No,” Lysandra said, cutting a glare in Aedion’s direction. “And there’s nothing to report. Not even a whiff of Rolfe or his men.”

Dorian nodded, sliding his hands into his pockets. Silence.

Aedion's ankle barked in pain as Lysandra subtly kicked him.

He reined in his scowl as he said to the king, "So, you and Whitethorn didn't kill each other."

Dorian's brows scrunched. "He saved my life, nearly got himself burned out to do it. Why should I be anything but grateful?" Lysandra gave Aedion a smug smile.

But the king asked him, "Are you going to see your father?"

Aedion cringed. He'd been glad for their venture tonight to avoid deciding. Aelin hadn't brought it up, and he had been content to come out here, even if it put him at risk of running into the male.

"Of course I'll see him," Aedion said tightly. Lysandra's moon-white face was calm, steady as she watched him, the face of a woman trained to listen to men, to never show surprise—

He did not resent what she had been, what she portrayed now, only the monsters who had seen the beauty the child would grow into and taken her into that brothel. Aelin had told him what Arobynn had done to the man she'd loved. It was a miracle the shifter could smile at all.

Aedion jerked his chin at Dorian. "Go tell Aelin and Rowan we don't need their hovering. We can manage on our own."

Dorian stiffened, but backed down the alley, no more than a disgruntled would-be customer.

Lysandra shoved a hand against Aedion's chest and hissed, "That man has endured *enough*, Aedion. A little kindness wouldn't kill you."

"He *stabbed* Aelin. If you knew him as I have, you wouldn't be so willing to fawn over—"

"No one expects you to fawn over him. But a kind word, some *respect*—"

He rolled his eyes. "Keep your voice down."

She did—but went on, "He was enslaved; he was *tortured* for months. Not just by his father, but by that *thing* inside of him. He was *violated*, and even if you cannot draw up forgiveness for stabbing Aelin against his own will, then try to have some compassion for *that*." Aedion's heart stuttered at the anger and pain on her face. And that word she'd used—

He swallowed hard, checking the street behind them. No sign of anyone hunting for the treasure they bore. "I knew Dorian as a reckless, arrogant—"

"I knew your queen as the same. We were children then. We are allowed to make mistakes, to figure out who we wish to be. If you will allow Aelin the gift

of your acceptance—”

“I don’t care if he was as arrogant and vain as Aelin, I don’t *care* if he was enslaved to a demon that took his mind. I look at him and see my family *butchered*, see those tracks to the river, and hear Quinn tell me that Aelin was drowned and *dead*.” His breathing was uneven, and his throat burned, but he ignored it.

Lysandra said, “Aelin forgave him. Aelin never once held it against him.”

Aedion snarled at her. Lysandra snarled right back and held his stare with the face not trained or built for bedrooms, but the true one beneath—wild and unbroken and indomitable. No matter what body she wore, she was the Staghorns given form, the heart of Oakwald.

Aedion said hoarsely, “I’ll try.”

“Try harder. Try better.”

Aedion braced his palm against the wall again and leaned in to glower in her face. She did not yield an inch. “There is an order and rank in our court, *lady*, and last I checked, you were *not* number three. You don’t give me commands.”

“This isn’t a battlefield,” Lysandra hissed. “Any ranks are formalities. And the last *I* checked...” She poked his chest, right between his pectorals, and he could have sworn the tip of a claw pierced the skin beneath his clothes. “*You* weren’t pathetic enough to enforce rank to hide from being in the wrong.”

His blood sparked and thrummed. Aedion found himself taking in the sensuous curves of her mouth, now pressed thin with anger.

The hot temper in her eyes faded, and as she retracted her finger as if she’d been burned, he froze at the panic that filled her features instead. *Shit. Shit—*

Lysandra backed away a step, too casual to be anything but a calculated move. But Aedion tried—for her sake, he tried to stop thinking about her mouth

—
“You truly want to meet your father?” she asked calmly. Too calmly.

He nodded, swallowing hard. Too soon—she wouldn’t want a man’s touch for a long time. Maybe forever. And he’d be damned if he pushed her into it before she wanted to. And gods above, if Lysandra ever looked at *any* man with interest like that ... he’d be glad for her. Glad she was choosing for herself, even if it wasn’t him she picked—

“I...” Aedion swallowed, forcing himself to remember what she’d asked. His father. Right. “Did he want to see me?” was all he could think to ask.

She cocked her head to the side, the movement so feline he wondered if she was spending too much time in that ghost leopard’s fur. “He nearly bit Aelin’s

head off when she refused to tell him where and who you are.” Ice filled his veins. If his father had been rude to her—“But I got the sense,” Lysandra quickly clarified as he tensed, “that he is the sort of male who would respect your wishes if you chose not to see him. Yet in this small town, with the company we’re keeping ... that might prove impossible.”

“Did you also get the sense that it could persuade him to help us? Knowing me?”

“I don’t think Aelin would ever ask that of you,” Lysandra said, laying a hand on the arm still braced beside her head.

“What do I even say to him?” Aedion murmured. “I’ve heard so many stories about him—the Lion of Doranelle. He’s a gods-damned white knight. I don’t think he’ll approve of a son most people call Adarlan’s Whore.” She clicked her tongue, but Aedion pinned her with a look. “What would you do?”

“I can’t answer that question. My own father...” She shook her head. He knew about that—the shifter-father who had either abandoned her mother or not even known she was pregnant. And then the mother who had thrown Lysandra into the street when she discovered her heritage. “Aedion, what do *you* want to do? Not for us, not for Terrasen, but for *you*.”

He bowed his head a bit, glancing sidelong at the quiet street again. “My whole life has been ... not about what I want. I don’t know how to choose those things.”

No, from the moment he’d arrived in Terrasen at age five, he’d been trained—his path chosen. And when Terrasen had burned beneath Adarlan’s torches, another hand had gripped the leash of his fate. Even now, with war upon them ... Had he truly never wanted something for himself? All he’d wanted had been the blood oath. And Aelin had given that away to Rowan. He didn’t resent her for it, not anymore, but ... He had not realized he had asked for so little.

Lysandra said quietly, “I know. I know what that feels like.”

He lifted his head, finding her green eyes again in the darkness. He sometimes wished Arobynn Hamel were still alive—just so he could kill the assassin-king himself.

“Tomorrow morning,” he murmured. “Will you come with me? To see him.”

She was quiet for a moment before she said, “You really want me to go with you?”

He did. He couldn’t explain why, but he wanted her there. She got under his skin so damn easily, but ... Lysandra steadied him. Perhaps because she was something new. Something he had not encountered, had not filled with hope and

pain and wishes. Not too many of them, at least.

“If you wouldn’t mind ... yes. I want you there.”

She didn’t respond. He opened his mouth, but steps sounded.

Light. Too casual.

They ducked deeper into the shadows of the alley, its dead-end wall looming behind them. If this went poorly...

If it went poorly, he had a shape-shifter capable of shredding apart droves of men at his side. Aedion flashed Lysandra a grin as he leaned over her once more, his nose within grazing distance of her neck.

Those steps neared, and Lysandra loosed a breath, her body going pliant.

From the shadows of his hood, he monitored the alley ahead, the shadows and shafts of moonlight, bracing himself. They’d picked the dead-end alley for a reason.

The girl realized her mistake a step too late. “Oh.”

Aedion looked up, his own features hidden within his hood, as Lysandra purred to the young woman who perfectly matched Rowan’s description of Rolfe’s barmaid, “I’ll be done in two minutes, if you want to wait your turn.”

Color stained the girl’s cheeks, but she gave them a flinty look, scanning them from head to toe. “Wrong turn,” she said.

“You sure?” Lysandra crooned. “A bit late in the evening for a stroll.”

Rolfe’s barmaid fixed them with that sharp stare and sauntered back down the street.

They waited. A minute. Five. Ten. No others came.

Aedion at last pulled away, Lysandra now watching the alley entrance. The shifter wound an auburn curl around her finger. “She seems an unlikely thief.”

“Some would say similar things about you and Aelin.” Lysandra hummed in agreement. Aedion mused, “Perhaps she was just a scout—Rolfe’s eyes.”

“Why bother? Why not just come take the thing?”

Aedion glanced again at the amulet that disappeared beneath Lysandra’s bodice. “Maybe she thought she was looking for something else.”

Lysandra, wisely, didn’t fish the Amulet of Orynth out from her dress. But his words hung between them as they carefully picked their way back to the Ocean Rose.

25

Yrene and Chaol hurried to the Torre library immediately after lunch. Chaol mounted his horse with relative ease, Shen giving him a hearty pat on the back in approval. Some small part of Yrene had wanted to beam when she noticed that Chaol met the man's eyes to offer a tight smile of thanks.

And when they passed through those white walls, as the mass of the Torre rose above them and the scent of lemon and lavender filled Yrene's nose ... some part of her eased in its presence. Just how it had done from the first moment she'd spied the tower rising above the city while her ship at last neared the shore, as if it were a pale arm thrust toward the sky in greeting.

As if to proclaim to her, *Welcome, daughter. We have been waiting for you.*

The Torre's library was located in the lower levels, most of its halls ramped thanks to the rolling carts the librarians used to transport the books around and collect any tomes that careless acolytes had forgotten to return.

There were a few stairs where Yrene had been forced to grit her teeth and haul him up.

He'd stared at her when she'd done it. And when she asked why, he'd said it was the first time she'd touched his chair. Moved it.

She supposed it was. But she'd warned him not to get used to it, and let him propel himself through the brightly lit corridors of the Torre.

A few of the girls from her defense class spotted them and paused to fawn over the lord, who indulged them with a crooked smile that set them giggling as

they walked away. Yrene herself smiled at them as they departed, shaking her head.

Or perhaps the good mood was from the fact that his entire foot from the ankle down was regaining feeling *and* movement. She'd forced him to endure another set of exercises before coming here, sprawling him on the carpet while she aided him in moving his foot around and around, in stretching it, rotating it. All designed to get the blood flowing, to hopefully awaken more of his legs.

The progress was enough to keep Yrene smiling until they reached Nousha's desk, where the librarian was currently shoving a few tomes into her heavy satchel. Packing up for the day.

Yrene glanced at the bell that had been rung only a few nights ago, but refused to blanch. Chaol had brought a sword and dagger, and she'd been mesmerized while he'd buckled them on with such efficiency. He had barely needed to look, his fingers guided by sheer muscle memory. She could picture it—every morning and night that he'd put on and removed that sword belt.

Yrene leaned over the desk and said to Nousha, who was sizing up Chaol while he also assessed her, "I would like to see where you found those texts from Eyllwe. And the scrolls."

Nousha's white brows crossed. "Will it bring trouble?" Her gaze slid to the sword Chaol had positioned across his lap to keep it from clacking against his chair.

"Not if I can help it," Yrene said quietly.

Behind them, curled on an armchair in the large sitting area before the crackling hearth, a snow-white Baast Cat half slumbered, her long tail swishing like a pendulum as it draped over the edge of the cushion. No doubt listening to every word—likely to report to her sisters.

Nousha sighed sharply in a way that Yrene had witnessed a hundred times, but waved them toward the main hallway. She barked an order in Halha to a nearby librarian to mind the desk and led the way.

As they followed, the white Baast Cat cracked open a green eye. Yrene made sure to give her a respectful bow of the head. The cat merely went back to sleep, satisfied.

For long minutes, Yrene watched Chaol take in the colored lanterns, the warm stone walls, and endless stacks. “This would give the royal library in Rifthold a run for its money,” he observed.

“Is it that large?”

“Yes, but this might be larger. Older, definitely.” His eyes danced with shadows—bits of memory that she wondered if she would glimpse the next time she worked on him.

Today’s encounter ... It had left her reeling and raw.

But the salt of her tears had been cleansing. In a way she had not known she needed.

Down and down they went, taking the main ramp that looped through the levels. They passed librarians shelving books, acolytes in solitary or group study around the tables, healers poring over musty tomes in doorless rooms, and the occasional Baast Cat sprawled over the top of the shelves, or padding into the shadows, or simply sitting at a crossroads—as if waiting.

Still they went deeper.

“How did you know they were down here?” Yrene asked Nousha’s back.

“We keep good records,” was all the Head Librarian said.

Chaol gave Yrene a look that said, *We have cranky librarians in Rifthold, too.*

Yrene bit her lip to keep from grinning. Nousha could sniff out laughter and amusement like a bloodhound on a scent. And shut it down as viciously, too.

At last, they reached a dark corridor that reeked of stone and dust.

“Second shelf down. Don’t ruin anything,” Nousha said by way of explanation and farewell, and left without a look back.

Chaol’s brows lifted in bemusement, and Yrene swallowed her chuckle.

It stopped being an effort as they approached the shelf the librarian had

indicated. Piles of scrolls lay tucked beneath books whose spines glittered with the Eyllwe language.

Chaol let out a low whistle through his teeth. “How old is the Torre, exactly?”

“Fifteen hundred years.”

He went still.

“This library has been here that long?”

She nodded. “It was all built in one go. A gift from an ancient queen to the healer who saved her child’s life. A place for the healer to study and live—close to the palace—and to invite others to study as well.”

“So it predates the khaganate by a great deal.”

“The khagans are the latest in a long line of conquerors since then. The most benevolent since that first queen, to be sure. Even her palace itself did not survive so well as the Torre. What you stay in now ... they built it atop the rubble of the queen’s castle. After the conquerors who came a generation before the khaganate razed it to the ground.”

He swore, low and creatively.

“Healers,” Yrene said, scanning the shelves, “are in high demand, whether you are the current ruler or the invading one. All other posts ... perhaps unnecessary. But a tower full of women who can keep you from death, even if you are hanging by a thread ...”

“More valuable than gold.”

“It begs the question of why Adarlan’s last king ...” She almost said *your* king, but the word clanged strangely in her head now. “Why he felt the need to destroy those of us with the gift in his own continent.” *Why the thing in him felt the need*, she didn’t say.

Chaol didn’t meet her eyes. And not from shame.

He knew something. Something else.

“What?” she asked.

He scanned the dim stacks, then listened for anyone nearby. “He was indeed

... taken. Invaded.”

It had been a shock to realize whose dark power she'd been fighting against within his wound—a shock, and yet a rallying cry to her magic. As if some fog had been cleared away, some veil of fear, and all that had been left beneath were her blinding rage and sorrow, unfaltering as she'd leaped upon the darkness. But ... the king truly had been possessed, then. All this time.

Chaol pulled a book from the shelf and flipped through it, not really reading the pages. She was fairly certain he didn't know how to read Eyllwe. “He knew what was happening to him. The man within him fought against it as best he could. He knew that their kind ...” The Valg. “They found people with *gifts* ... enticing.” Magic-wielders. “Knew their kind wanted to conquer the gifted ones. For their power.”

Infest them, as the king had been. As that drawing in *The Song of Beginning* had depicted.

Yrene's gut roiled.

“So the man within wrested control long enough to give the order that the magic-wielders were to be put down. Executed, rather than used against him. Us.”

Turned into hosts for those demons and made into weapons.

Yrene leaned against the stack behind them, a hand sliding up to her throat. Her pulse pounded beneath her fingers.

“It was a choice he hated himself for. But saw as a necessary decision to make. Along with a way to make sure those in control could not *use* magic. Or find those who had it. Not without lists of them. Or those willing to sell them out for coin—to the men he ordered to hunt them down.”

Magic's vanishing had not been natural at all. “He—he found a way to banish —?”

A sharp nod. “It is a long story, but he halted it. Dammed it up. To keep those conquerors from having the hosts they wanted. And then hunted the rest of them

down to make sure their numbers were fewer still.”

The King of Adarlan had stopped magic, killed its bearers, had sent his forces to execute her mother and countless others ... not just from blind hatred and ignorance, but some twisted way of trying to *save* their kind?

Her heart thundered through her body. “But healers—we have no power to use in battle. Nothing beyond what you see from me.”

Chaol was utterly still as he stared at her. “I think you might have something they want very badly.”

The hair along her arms rose.

“Or want to keep you from knowing too much about.”

She swallowed, feeling the blood leave her face. “Like—your wound.”

A nod.

She blew out a shaky breath, going to the stack before her. The scrolls.

His fingers grazed her own. “I will not let any harm come to you.”

Yrene felt him waiting for her to tell him otherwise. But she believed him.

“And what I showed you earlier?” she said, inclining her head to the scrolls. The Wyrdblocks, he’d called them.

“Part of the same thing. An earlier and different sort of power. Outside of magic.”

And he had a friend who could read them. Wield them.

“We’d better be quick,” she said, still careful of any potential listeners. “I’m sure the volume I need for your chronic toe fungus is down here somewhere, and I’m growing hungry.”

Chaol gave her an incredulous look. She offered him an apologetic wince in return.

But laughter danced in his eyes as he began pulling books into his lap.



Nesryn’s face and ears were numb with cold by the time Kadara alighted on a

rocky outcropping high atop a small mountain range of gray stone. Her limbs were hardly better, despite the leathers, and were sore enough that she winced as Sartaq helped her down.

The prince grimaced. “I forgot that you aren’t used to riding for so long.”

It wasn’t the stiffness that really brutalized her, but her bladder—

Clenching her legs together, Nesryn surveyed the campsite the ruk had deemed suitable for her master. It was protected on three sides by boulders and pillars of gray rock, with a broad overhang against the elements, but no possibility of concealment. And asking a prince where to see to her needs—

Sartaq merely pointed to a cluster of boulders. “There’s privacy that way, if you need it.”

Face heating, Nesryn nodded, not quite able to meet him in the eye as she hurried to where he’d indicated, slipping between two boulders to find another little outcropping that opened onto a sheer drop to the unforgiving rocks and streams far, far below. She picked a small boulder that faced away from the wind and didn’t waste any time unbuckling her pants.

When she emerged again, still wincing, Sartaq had removed most of the packs from Kadara, but had left her saddle. Nesryn approached the mighty bird, who eyed her closely, lifting a hand toward the first buckle—

“Don’t,” Sartaq said calmly from where he’d set the last of the packs under the overhang, his *sulde* tucked against the wall behind them. “We leave the saddles on while we travel.”

Nesryn lowered her hand, examining the mighty bird. “Why?”

Sartaq removed two bedrolls and laid them out against the rocky wall, claiming one for himself. “If we’re ambushed, if there is some danger, we need to be able to get into the skies.”

Nesryn scanned the surrounding mountain range, the sky stained pink and orange as the sun set. The Asimil Mountains—a small, lonely range, if her memory of the land served her correctly. Still far, far north from the Tavan

Mountains of the rukhin. They hadn't passed a village or sign of civilization in over an hour, and up amongst these desolate peaks: landslides, flash floods ... She supposed there were dangers aplenty.

Supposed that the only ones who could reach them up here were other ruks. Or wyverns.

Sartaq pulled out tins of cured meats and fruit, along with two small loaves of bread. "Have you seen them—the mounts of Morath?" His question was nearly ripped away by the howl of the wind beyond the wall of rocks. How he'd known where her mind had drifted, she couldn't guess.

Kadara settled herself near one of the three faces, folding in her wings tightly. They'd stopped once earlier—to let Kadara feed and for them to see to their needs—so the ruk wouldn't have to seek out dinner in these barren mountains. Belly still full, Kadara now seemed content to doze.

"Yes," Nesryn admitted, tugging free the leather strap around the base of her short braid and finger-combing her hair. Tangles snared on her still-freezing fingers as she coaxed them away, grateful that the task kept her from shuddering at the memory of the witches and their mounts. "Kadara is probably two-thirds to half the size of a wyvern. Maybe. Is she large or small, for a ruk?"

"I thought you'd heard all the stories about me."

Nesryn snorted, shaking out her hair a final time as she approached the bedroll and food he'd laid out for her. "Do you know they call you the Winged Prince?"

A ghost of a smile. "Yes."

"Do you like the title?" She settled on the roll, crossing her legs beneath her.

Sartaq passed her the tin of fruits, beckoning her to eat. She didn't bother to wait for him before she dug in, the grapes cool thanks to the hours in the crisp air.

"Do I like the title?" he mused, tearing off a piece of bread and passing it to her. She took it with a nod of thanks. "It's strange, I suppose. To become a story

while you are still alive.” A sidelong glance at her while he ripped into his bread. “You yourself are surrounded by some living tales. How do *they* feel about it?”

“Aelin certainly enjoys it.” She’d never met another person with so many names and titles—and who enjoyed bandying them about so much. “The others ... I don’t suppose I know them well enough to guess. Though Aedion Ashryver ... he takes after Aelin.” She popped another grape into her mouth, her hair swaying as she leaned forward to pluck a few more into her palm. “They’re cousins, but act more like siblings.”

A considering look. “The Wolf of the North.”

“You’ve heard of him?”

Sartaq passed the tin of cured meats, letting her pick through which slices she wanted. “I told you, Captain Faliq, my spies do their jobs well.”

A careful line—nudging him toward a potential alliance was a careful line to walk. Look too eager, praise her companions too much and she’d be transparent, but to do nothing ... It went against her very nature. Even as a city guard, her day off had usually sent her looking for *something* to do, whether it was a walk through Rifthold or helping her father and sister prepare the next day’s goods.

Wind-seeker, her mother had once called her. *Unable to keep still, always wandering where the wind calls you. Where shall it beckon you to journey one day, my rose?*

How far the wind had now called her.

Nesryn said, “Then I hope your spies have told you that Aedion’s Bane is a skilled legion.”

A vague nod, and she knew Sartaq saw right through all her plans. But he finished off his part of the bread and asked, “And what are the tales they tell about you, Nesryn Faliq?”

She chewed on the salted pork. “No one has any stories about me.”

It didn’t bother her. Fame, notoriety ... She valued other things more, she supposed.

“Not even the story about the arrow that saved a shape-shifter’s life? The impossible shot fired from a rooftop?”

She snapped her head toward him. Sartaq only swigged from his water with a look that said, *I told you my spies were good.*

“I thought Arghun was the one who dealt in covert information,” Nesryn said carefully.

He passed the waterskin. “Arghun’s the one who boasts about it. I’d hardly call it covert.”

Nesryn drank a few mouthfuls of water and lifted a brow. “But this is?”

Sartaq chuckled. “I suppose you’re right.”

The shadows grew deeper, longer, the wind picking up. She studied the rock around them, the packs. “You won’t risk a fire.”

A shake of his head, his dark braid swaying. “It’d be a beacon.” He frowned at her leathers, the packs lumped around them. “I have heavy blankets—somewhere in there.”

They fell into silence, eating while the sun vanished and stars began to blink awake among the last, vibrant ribbon of blue. The moon herself appeared, bathing the campsite with enough light to see by as they finished up, the prince sealing the tins and tucking them back into the packs.

Across the space, Kadara began to snore, a deep wheeze that rumbled through the rock.

Sartaq chuckled. “Apologies if that keeps you awake.”

Nesryn just shook her head. Sharing a campsite with a ruk, in the mountains high above the grassy plains below, the Winged Prince beside her ... No, her family would not believe it.

They watched the stars quietly, neither making a move to sleep. One by one, the rest of the stars emerged, brighter and clearer than she’d seen since those weeks on the ship here. Different stars, she realized with a jolt, than those up north.

Different, and yet these stars had burned for countless centuries above her ancestors, above her father himself. Had it been strange for him to leave them behind? Had he missed them? He'd never spoken of it, what it was like to move to a land with foreign stars—if he'd felt adrift at night.

“Neith’s Arrow,” Sartaq said after uncounted minutes, leaning back against the rock.

Nesryn dragged her gaze from the stars to find his face limned in moonlight, silver dancing along the pure onyx of his braid.

He rested his forearms on his knees. “That’s what my spies called you, what I called you until you arrived. Neith’s Arrow.” The Goddess of Archery—and the Hunt, originally hailing from an ancient sand-swept kingdom to the west, now enfolded into the khaganate’s vast pantheon. A corner of his mouth tugged upward. “So don’t be surprised if there’s now a story or two about you already finding its way across the world.”

Nesryn observed him for a long moment, the howling mountain wind blending with Kadara’s snoring. She’d always excelled at archery, took pride in her unmatched aim, but she had not learned because she coveted renown. She’d done it because she enjoyed it, because it gave her a direction to aim that wind-seeking inclination. And yet ...

Sartaq cleared away the last of the food and did a quick check that the campsite was secure before heading off between the boulders himself.

With only those foreign stars to witness, Nesryn smiled.

26

Chaol dined in the Torre kitchens, where a rail-thin woman called only Cook had stuffed him with pan-fried fish, crusty bread, roasted tomatoes with mild cheese and tarragon, and then managed to convince him to eat a light, flaky pastry dripping with honey and crusted in pistachios.

Yrene had sat beside him, hiding her smiles as Cook kept piling more and more food onto his plate until he literally *begged* her to stop.

He was full enough that the idea of moving seemed a monumental task, and even Yrene had pleaded with Cook to have mercy upon them.

The woman had relented, though she'd turned that focus upon the workers in her kitchen—presiding over the serving of the evening meal to the hall a level above with a general's command that Chaol found himself studying.

He and Yrene sat in companionable silence, watching the chaos unfold around them until the sun had long since set through the wide windows beyond the kitchen.

He'd uttered half a mention of getting his horse saddled when Yrene *and* Cook told him he was spending the night and to not bother arguing.

So he did. He sent a note back to the palace through a healer on her way there to oversee a patient in the servants' quarters, telling Nesryn where he was and not to wait up.

And when he and Yrene had finally managed to get their overstuffed stomachs to settle, he followed her to a room in the complex. The Torre was

mostly stairs, she said with no pity whatsoever, and there were no guest rooms anyway. But the adjacent physicians' complex—she'd gestured to the building they'd passed through, all angles and squares where the Torre was round—always had a few rooms on the ground level available for the night, mostly for the loved ones of sick patients.

She opened the door to a room that overlooked a garden courtyard, the space small but clean, its pale walls inviting and warm from the day. A narrow bed lay against one wall, a chair and small table before the window. Just enough space for him to maneuver.

“Let me see again,” Yrene said, pointing to his feet.

Chaol lifted his leg with his hands, stretching it out. Then rolled his ankles, grunting against the considerable weight of his legs.

She removed his boots and socks as she knelt before him. “Good. We'll need to keep that up.”

He glanced to the satchel full of books and scrolls she'd pillaged from the library, discarded by the doorway. He didn't know what the hell any of it said, but they'd taken as many as they could. If whoever or whatever had been in that library had stolen some, and perhaps not gotten the chance to return for more ... He wouldn't risk them eventually returning to claim the rest.

Yrene had thought the scroll she'd hidden in his rooms to be eight hundred years old. But that deep in the library, considering the age of the Torre ...

He didn't tell her he thought it might be much, much older. Full of information that might not have even survived in their own lands.

“I can find you some clothes,” Yrene said, scanning the small room.

“I'll be fine with what I have.” Chaol added without looking at her, “I sleep—without them.”

“Ah.”

Silence fell, as she no doubt remembered how she'd found him that morning. That morning. Had it truly been only hours ago? She had to be exhausted.

Yrene gestured to the candle burning on the table. “Do you need more light?”
“I’m fine.”

“I can get you some water.”

“I’m fine,” he said, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

She pointed to the porcelain pot in the corner. “Then at least let me bring you to the—”

“I can manage that, too. It’s all about aim.”

Color stained her cheeks. “Right.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “Well ... good night, then.”

He could have sworn she was lingering. And he would have let her, except ... “It’s late,” he told her. “You should go to your room while people are still about.”

Because while Nesryn had found no trace of the Valg in Antica, while it had been days since that attack in the Torre library, he would take no risks.

“Yes,” Yrene said, bracing a hand on the threshold. She reached for the handle to pull the door shut behind her.

“Yrene.”

She paused, angling her head.

Chaol held her stare, a small smile curling his mouth. “Thank you.” He swallowed. “For all of it.”

She only nodded and backed out, shutting the door behind her. But as she did so, he caught a glimmer of the light that danced in her eyes.



The following morning, a stern-faced woman named Eretia appeared at his door to inform him Yrene had a meeting with Hafiza and would meet him at the palace by lunch.

So Yrene had asked Eretia to escort him back to the palace—a task Chaol could only wonder why she’d bestowed on the old woman, who tapped her foot

as he gathered his weapons, the heavy bag of books, and clicked her tongue at every minor delay.

But the ride through the steep streets with Eretia wasn't awful; the woman was a surprisingly skilled rider who brooked no nonsense from her mount. Yet she offered no pleasantries and little more than a grunted farewell before she left him in the palace courtyard.

The guards were just changing their shift, the morning rotation lingering to chat amongst one another. He recognized enough of them by now to earn a few nods of greeting, and to manage to return them as his chair was brought over by one of the stable hands.

He'd no sooner removed his feet from the stirrups and prepared himself for the still-daunting process of dismounting when light footsteps jogged over to him. He looked over to find Shen approaching, a hand on his forearm—

Chaol blinked. And by the time Shen stopped before him, the guard had tugged the glove back on his hand.

Or what Chaol had assumed was his hand. Because what he'd glimpsed beneath the glove and the sleeve of Shen's uniform, going right up to the elbow ... It was a masterwork—the metal forearm and hand.

And only now that he looked, looked long enough to actually observe anything ... he could indeed see the raised lines by Shen's bicep of where the metal arm was strapped to him.

Shen noticed his stare. Noticed it right as Chaol hesitated at the arm and shoulder Shen offered to aid him in dismounting.

The guard said in Chaol's own tongue, "I helped you just fine before you knew, Lord Westfall."

Something like shame, perhaps something deeper, cracked through him.

Chaol made himself brace a hand on the man's shoulder—the same shoulder that housed the metal arm. Found the strength beneath to be unwavering as Shen assisted him into the awaiting chair.

And when Chaol was seated in it, staring at the guard as the stable hands led his horse away, Shen explained, “I lost it a year and a half ago. There was an attack on Prince Arghun’s life when he visited a vizier’s estate, a rogue band from a disgruntled kingdom. I lost it during the fight. Yrene worked on me when I returned—I was one of her first considerable healings. She managed to repair as much as she could from here upward.” He pointed to right below his elbow, then up his shoulder.

Chaol studied the hand that was so lifelike within the glove he could not notice the difference, save for the fact that it did not move at all.

“Healers can do many wonders,” Shen said, “but growing limbs from thin air ...” A soft laugh. “That is beyond their skill—even one such as Yrene.”

Chaol didn’t know what to say. Apologies felt wrong, but ...

Shen smiled down at him—with no trace of pity. “It has taken me a long time to get to this place,” he said a bit quietly.

Chaol knew he didn’t mean the skilled use of his artificial arm.

Shen added, “But know that I did not get here alone.”

The unspoken offer shone in the guard’s brown eyes. Unbroken, this man before him. No less of a man for his injury, for finding a new way to move through the world.

And—Shen had stayed on as a guard. As one of the most elite palace guards in the world. Not from any pity of the others, but through his own merit and will.

Chaol still couldn’t find the right words to convey what coursed through him.

Shen nodded as if he understood that, too.

It was a long trip back to his suite. Chaol didn’t mark the faces he passed, the sounds and smells and streams of wind wending through the halls.

He returned to the rooms to find his note to Nesryn sitting on the foyer table. Unread.

It was enough to chase any other thoughts from his mind.

Heart thundering, his fingers shook as he picked up his unread, unseen letter.

But then he spotted the letter beneath it. His name written in her handwriting. He ripped it open, reading the few lines.

He read it twice. Thrice.

He set it down on the table and stared at her open bedroom door. The silence leaking from it.

He was a bastard.

He'd dragged her here. Had nearly gotten her killed in Rifthold so many times, had implied so much about the two of them, and yet—

He didn't let himself finish the thought. He should have been better. Treated her better. No wonder she'd flown off to the ruk aeries to help Sartaq find any sort of information on the Valg history in this land—or their own.

Shit. *Shit.*

She might not hold him to any promises, but *he* ... He held himself to them.

And he had let this thing between them go on, had used her like some crutch

—

Chaol blew out a breath, crumpling Nesryn's letter and his own in his fist.



Perhaps he had not slept well in that tiny room at the physicians' compound, accustomed to far larger and finer accommodations, Yrene told herself that afternoon. It would explain his few words. The lack of smiling.

She'd had one on her face when she'd entered Chaol's suite after lunch. She'd explained her progress to Hafiza, who had been very pleased indeed. Even giving Yrene a kiss on her brow before she left. Practically skipping here.

Until she entered and found it quiet.

Found him quiet.

"Are you feeling well?" Yrene asked casually as she hid the books he'd brought back with him that morning.

"Yes."

She leaned against the desk to study where Chaol sat on the gold couch.

“You have not exercised in a few days.” She angled her head. “The rest of your body, I mean. We should do it now.”

For people accustomed to physical activity every day, going without for so long could feel like ripping an addict off a drug. Disoriented, restless. He’d kept up the exercises for his legs, but the rest ... perhaps it was what clawed at him.

“All right.” His eyes were glazed, distant.

“Here, or one of the guards’ training facilities?” She braced herself for the shutdown.

But Chaol just said flatly, “Here is fine.”

She tried again. “Perhaps being around the other guards will be beneficial to —”

“Here is fine.” Then he moved himself onto the floor, sliding his body away from the couch and low-lying table and to the open carpet. “I need you to brace my feet.”

Yrene checked her irritation at the tone, the outright refusal. But she still said as she knelt before him, “Have we really gone back to that place?”

He ignored her question and launched into a series of upward curls, his powerful body surging up, then down. One, two, three ... She lost count around sixty.

He didn’t meet her stare each time he rose up over his bent knees.

It was natural, for the emotional healing to be as difficult as the physical. For there to be hard days—hard *weeks*, even. But he’d been smiling when she’d left him last night, and—

“Tell me what happened. Something happened today.” Her tone was perhaps not *quite* as gentle as a healer’s ought to be.

“Nothing happened.” The words were a push of air as he kept moving, sweat sliding down the column of his neck and into the white shirt beneath.

Yrene clenched her jaw, counting quietly in her head. Snapping would do

neither of them any good.

Chaol eventually turned onto his stomach and began another set that required her to hold his feet in a position that would keep him slightly aloft.

Up and down, down and up. The sleek muscles of his back and arms bunched and rippled.

He went through six other exercises, then started the entire set again.

Yrene supported and held and watched in simmering silence.

Let him have his space. Let him think through it, if that's what he wants.

Damn what he wants.

Chaol finished a set, his breathing ragged, chest heaving as he stared up at the ceiling.

Something sharp and driving flickered across his face, as if in silent answer to something. He lurched upward to begin the next set—

“That’s enough.”

His eyes flashed, meeting hers at last.

Yrene didn’t bother looking pleasant or understanding. “You’ll do yourself an injury.”

He glared toward where she had stabilized his bent knees and curled upward again. “I know my limits.”

“And so do I,” she snapped, jerking her chin toward his legs. “You might hurt your back if you keep this up.”

He bared his teeth—the temper vicious enough that she let go of his feet. His arms shot out to brace him as he slid backward, but she lunged, grabbing for his shoulders to keep him from slamming to the ground.

His sweat-drenched shirt soaked into her fingers, his breathing rasping in her ear as she confirmed he wasn’t about to fall. “I’ve got it,” he growled in her ear.

“Forgive me if I don’t take your word for it,” she snipped, assessing for herself that he indeed could support himself before she withdrew and settled herself a few feet away on the carpet.

In silence, they glared at each other. “Exercising your body is vital,” Yrene said, her words clipped, “but you will do more harm than good if you push yourself too hard.”

“I’m fine.”

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing?”

Chaol’s face was a hard mask, sweat sliding down his temple.

“This was your sanctuary,” she said, gesturing to his honed body, the sweat on him. “When things got hard, when they went wrong, when you were upset or angry or sad, you would lose yourself in the training. In sweating until it burned your eyes, in practicing until your muscles were shaking and begging you to stop. And now you can’t—not as you once did.”

Ire boiled in his face at that.

She kept her own face cool and hard as she asked, “How does that make you feel?”

His nostrils flared. “Don’t think you can provoke me into talking.”

“How does it feel, *Lord Westfall*?”

“You know how it feels, *Yrene*.”

“Tell me.”

When he refused to answer, she hummed to herself. “Well, since you seem determined to get a complete exercise routine in, I might as well work your legs a bit.”

His stare was a brand. She wondered if he could sense the tightness that now clamped down on her chest, the pit that opened in her stomach as he remained quiet.

But Yrene rose up on her knees and moved down his body, beginning the series of exercises designed to trigger pathways between his mind and spine. The ankle and foot rotations, he could do on his own, though he certainly gritted his teeth after the tenth set.

But Yrene pushed him through it. Ignored his bubbling anger, keeping a

saccharine smile on her face while she coaxed his legs through the movements.

It was only when she reached for his upper thighs that Chaol halted her with a hand on her arm.

He met her stare—then looked away, jaw tight, as he said, “I’m tired. It’s late. Let’s meet tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t mind starting now with the healing.” Perhaps with the exercising, those wrecked pathways might be firing up more than usual.

“I want some rest.”

It was a lie. Despite his exercising, he had good color in his face, his eyes were still bright with anger.

She weighed his expression, the request. “Resting doesn’t seem at all like your style.”

His lips tightened. “Get out.”

Yrene snorted at the order. “You may command men and servants, Lord Westfall, but I don’t answer to you.” Still, she uncoiled to her feet, having had quite enough of his attitude. Bracing her hands on her hips, she stared at where he remained sprawled on the carpet. “I’ll have food sent in. Things to help pack on the muscle.”

“I know what to eat.”

Of course he did. He’d been honing that magnificent body for years now. But she only brushed out the skirts of her dress. “Yes, but I’ve actually studied the subject.”

Chaol bristled but said nothing. Returned to staring at the swirls and flora woven into the carpet.

Yrene gave him another honey-sweet smile. “I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow, Lord—”

“Don’t *call* me that.”

She shrugged. “I think I’ll call you whatever I want.”

His head snapped up, his face livid. She braced herself for the verbal attack,

but he seemed to check himself, shoulders stiffening as he only said once more, “Get out.”

He pointed to the door with a long arm as he said so.

“I should kick that gods-damned finger you’re pointing,” Yrene snapped, striding to the door. “But a broken hand would only keep you here longer.”

Chaol again bared his teeth, ire pouring off him in waves now, that scar down his cheek stark against his flushed skin. “*Get out.*”

Yrene just flashed another sickly sweet smile at him and shut the door behind her.

She strode through the palace at a clip, fingers curling at her sides, reining in her roar.

Patients had bad days. They were entitled to them. It was natural, and a part of the process.

But ... they had worked through so much of that. He had started to tell her things, and she’d told *him* things so few knew, and she’d enjoyed herself yesterday—

She mulled over every word exchanged the night before. Perhaps he’d been angry at something Eretia had said on their ride here. The woman wasn’t known for her bedside manner. Yrene was honestly surprised the woman tolerated anyone, let alone felt inclined to *help* human beings. She could have upset him. Insulted him.

Or maybe he’d come to depend on Yrene’s constant presence, and the interruption of that routine had been disorienting. She’d heard of patients and their healers in such situations.

But he’d shown no traits of dependency. No, the opposite went through him, a streak of independence and pride that hurt as much as it helped him.

Breathing uneven, his behavior dragging claws down her temper, Yrene sought out Hasar.

The princess was just coming from swordplay lessons of her own. Renia was

out shopping in the city, Hasar said as she looped her sweat-damp arm through Yrene's and led her toward her chambers.

"Everyone is busy-busy-busy today," Hasar grouched, flicking her sweaty braid over a shoulder. "Even Kashin is off with my father at some meeting about his troops."

"Is there any reason why?" A careful question.

Hasar shrugged. "He didn't tell me. Though he probably felt inclined to do it, since Sartaq showed us all up by flying off to his nest in the mountains for a few weeks."

"He left?"

"And he took Captain Faliq with him." A wry smile. "I'm surprised you aren't consoling Lord Westfall."

Oh. Oh. "When did they leave?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Apparently, she said no word about it. Didn't take her things. Just left a note and vanished into the sunset with him. I didn't think Sartaq had it in him to be such a charmer."

Yrene didn't return the smile. She'd bet good money that Chaol had returned this morning to find that note. To find Nesryn gone.

"How did you learn she'd left a note?"

"Oh, the messenger told everyone. Didn't know what was inside it, but a note with Lord Westfall's name on it, left at the aerie. Along with one to her family in the city. The only trace of her."

Yrene made a mental mark to never send correspondence to the palace again. At least not letters that mattered.

No wonder Chaol had been restless and angry, if Nesryn had vanished like that.

"Do you suspect foul play?"

"From *Sartaq*?" Hasar cackled. The question was answer enough.

They reached the princess's doors, servants silently opening them and

stepping aside. Little more than shadows made flesh.

But Yrene paused in the doorway, digging in her heels as Hasar tried to lead her in. “I forgot to get him his tea,” she lied, disentangling her arm from Hasar’s.

The princess only gave her a knowing smile. “If you hear any interesting tidbits, you know where to find me.”

Yrene managed a nod and turned on her heel.

She didn’t go to his rooms. She doubted Chaol’s mood had improved in the ten minutes she’d been storming through the palace halls. And if she saw him, she knew she wouldn’t be able to refrain from asking about Nesryn. From pushing him until that control shattered. And she couldn’t guess where that would leave them. Perhaps a place neither of them was ready for.

But she had a gift. And a relentless, driving *thrum* now roared in her blood thanks to him.

She could not sit still. Did not want to go back to the Torre to read or help any of the others with their work.

Yrene left the palace and headed down the dusty streets of Antica.

She knew the way. The slums never moved. Only grew or shrank, depending on the ruler.

In the bright sun, there was little to fear. They were not bad people. Only poor—some desperate. Many forgotten and disheartened.

So she did as she had always done, even in Innish.

Yrene followed the sound of coughing.

Yrene healed six people by the time the sun set, and only then did she leave the slums.

One woman had a dangerous growth on her lungs that would have killed her. She'd been too busy with work to see a healer or physician. Three children had been burning up with fever in a too-cramped house, their mother weeping with panic. And then with gratitude as Yrene's magic soothed and settled and purified. One man had broken his leg the week before and visited a piss-poor physician in the slums because he could not afford a carriage to carry him up to the Torre. And the sixth one ...

The girl was no more than sixteen. Yrene had noticed her first because of the black eye. Then the cut lip.

Her magic had been wobbling, her knees with it, but Yrene had led the girl into a doorway and healed her eye. The lip. The cracked ribs. Healed the enormous handprint-shaped bruises on her forearm.

Yrene asked no questions. She read every answer in the girl's fearful eyes anyway. Saw the girl consider whether it would land her with worse injuries to return home healed.

So Yrene had left the coloring. Left the appearance of bruises but healed all beneath. Leaving only the upper layer of skin, perhaps a little tender, to conceal the repaired damage.

Yrene did not try to tell her to leave. Whether it was her family or a lover or

something else entirely, Yrene knew that no one but the girl would decide whether to walk out that door. All she did was inform her that should she ever need it, the door to the Torre would always be open. No questions asked. No fee demanded. And they would make sure that no one was allowed to take her out again unless she wished it.

The girl had kissed Yrene's knuckles in thanks and scurried home in the falling dark.

Yrene herself had hurried, following the glimmering pillar of the Torre, her beacon home.

Her stomach was grumbling, her head throbbing with fatigue and hunger.

Drained. It felt good to be drained. To help.

And yet ... That hounding, restless energy still thrummed. Still pushed. *More more more.*

She knew why. What was left unsettled. Still raging.

So she changed course, spearing for the glowing mass of the palace.

She paused at a favorite food stall, indulging in a meal of slow-roasted lamb that she devoured in a few minutes. It was rare that she got to eat beyond the confines of the palace or the Torre, thanks to her busy schedule, but when she did ... Yrene was rubbing her satisfied belly as she made her way up to the palace. But then spotted an open *kahve* shop and managed to find room in her stomach for a cup of it. And a honey-dipped pastry.

Dawdling. Restless and angry and stupid.

Disgusted with herself, Yrene stomped up to the palace at last. With the summer sun setting so late, it was well past eleven by the time she headed through the dark halls.

Perhaps he'd be asleep. Maybe it would be a blessing. She didn't know why she'd bothered to come. Biting off his head could have waited until tomorrow.

He was likely asleep.

Hopefully asleep. It'd probably be better if his healer didn't barge into his

room and shake him silly. It definitely wasn't behavior approved by the Torre.
By Hafiza.

And yet she kept walking, her pace increasing, steps near-clomping on the marble floors. If he wanted to take a step back on their progress, that was just fine. But she certainly didn't have to let him do it—not without trying.

Yrene stormed down a long, dim corridor. She wasn't a coward; she wouldn't back down from this fight. She'd left that girl in that alley in Innish. And if he was inclined to sulk about Nesryn, then he was entitled to do so. But to call off their *session* because of it—

Unacceptable.

She'd simply tell him that and leave. Calmly. Rationally.

Yrene scowled with each step, muttering the word under her breath.

Unacceptable.

And she had *let* him kick her out, no matter what she might have tried to tell herself.

That was even *more* unacceptable.

Stupid fool. She muttered that, too.

Loud enough that she nearly missed the sound.

The footstep—the scrape of shoes on stone—just behind her.

This late, servants were likely heading back to their masters' rooms, but—

There it was. That sense, pricking again.

Only shadows and shafts of moonlight filled the pillar-lined hallway.

Yrene hurried her pace.

She heard it again—the steps behind. A casual, stalking gait.

Her mouth went dry, her heart thundering. She had no satchel, not even her little knife. Nothing in her pockets beyond that note.

Hurry, a small, gentle voice murmured in her ear. In her *head*.

She had never heard that voice before, but she sometimes felt its warmth. Coursing through her as her magic flowed out. It was as familiar to her as her

own voice, her own heartbeat.

Hurry, girl.

Urgency laced each word.

Yrene increased her pace, nearing a run.

There was a corner ahead—she need only round it, make it thirty feet down that hall, and she'd be at his suite.

Was there a lock on the door? Would it be locked against her—or be able to keep whoever it was out?

Run, Yrene!

And that voice ...

It was her mother's voice that bellowed in her head, her heart.

She didn't stop to think. To wonder.

Yrene launched into a sprint.

Her shoes slipped along the marble, and the person, the *thing* behind her—those footsteps broke into a run, too.

Yrene turned the corner and slid, skidding into the opposite wall so hard her shoulder barked in pain. Feet scrambling, she fought to regain momentum, not daring to look back—

Faster!

Yrene could see his door. Could see the light leaking out from beneath it.

A sob broke from her throat.

Those rushing steps behind her closed in. She didn't dare risk her balance by looking.

Twenty feet. Ten. Five.

Yrene hurled for the handle, gripping it with all her strength to keep from sliding past as she shoved against it.

The door opened, and she whirled in, legs slipping beneath her as she slammed her entire body into the door and fumbled for the lock. There were two.

She finished the first when the person on the other side barreled into the door.

The entire thing shuddered.

Her fingers shook, her breath escaping in sharp sobs as she fought for the second, heavier lock.

She flipped it closed just as the door buckled again.

“What in *hell*—”

“Get inside your room,” she breathed to Chaol, not daring to take her eyes off the door as it shuddered. As the handle rattled. “Get in—*now*.”

Yrene looked then to find him in the threshold of his bedroom, sword in his hand. Eyes on the door.

“Who the hell is that.”

“Get inside,” she said, her voice breaking. “*Please*.”

He read the terror in her face. Read and understood.

He shoved back into the room, holding the door for her and then sealing it behind her.

The front door cracked. Chaol locked his bedroom door with a click. Only one lock.

“The chest,” he said, his voice unfaltering. “Can you move it?”

Yrene whirled to the chest of drawers beside the door. She didn’t reply as she threw herself against it, shoes again slipping on the polished marble—

She kicked off her shoes, bare skin finding better grip on the stone as she heaved and grunted and shoved—

The chest slid in front of the bedroom door.

“The garden doors,” Chaol ordered, finishing locking them.

They were solid glass.

Dread and panic curled in her gut, ripping the breath from her throat.

“Yrene,” Chaol said evenly. Calmly. He held her gaze. Steadying her. “How far is the nearest entrance to the garden from the outer hall?”

“A two-minute walk,” she replied automatically. It was only accessible from the interior rooms, and as most of these were occupied ... They’d have to take

the hall to the very end. Or risk running through the bedrooms next door, which ... “Or one.”

“Make it count.”

She scanned the bedroom for anything. There was an armoire beside the glass doors, towering high above. Too high, too enormously heavy—

But the movable screen to the bathroom ...

Yrene hurtled across the room, Chaol lunging for a set of daggers on his nightstand.

She grabbed the heavy wooden screen and hauled and shoved it, cursing as it snagged on the rug. But it moved—it got there. She flung open the armoire doors and wedged the screen between it and the wall, shaking it a few times for good measure. It held.

She rushed to the desk, throwing books and vases off it. They shattered across the floor.

Stay calm; stay focused.

Yrene hauled the desk to the wood screen and flipped it onto its side with a clattering crash. She shoved it against the barricade she’d made.

But the window—

There was one across the room. High and small, but—

“Leave it,” Chaol ordered, sliding into place in front of the glass doors. Sword angled and dagger in his other hand. “If they try that route, the small size will force them to be slow.”

Long enough for him to kill it—whoever it was.

“Get over here,” he said quietly.

She did so, eyes darting between the bedroom door and the garden doors.

“Deep breaths,” he told her. “Center yourself. Fear will get you killed as easily as a weapon.”

Yrene obeyed.

“Take the dagger on the bed.”

Yrene balked at the weapon.

“Do it.”

She grabbed the dagger, the metal cool and heavy in her hand. Unwieldy.

His breathing was steady. His focus unrelenting as he monitored both doors.

The window.

“The bathroom,” she whispered.

“The windows are too high and narrow.”

“What if it’s not in a human body?”

The words ripped from her in a hoarse whisper. The illustrations she’d seen in that book—

“Then I’ll keep it occupied while you run.”

With the furniture in front of the exits—

His words sank in.

“You will do no such—”

The bedroom door shuddered beneath a blow. Then another.

The handle shook and shook.

Oh, gods.

They hadn’t bothered with the garden. They’d simply gotten in the front doors.

Another bang that had her flinching away. Another.

“Steady,” Chaol murmured.

Yrene’s dagger trembled as he angled himself to the bedroom door, his blades unwavering.

Another bang, furious and raging.

Then—a voice.

Soft and hissing, neither male nor female.

“Yrene,” it whispered through the crack in the door. She could hear the smile in its voice. “Yrene.”

Her blood went cold. It was not a human voice.

“What is it you want,” Chaol said, his own voice like steel.

“*Yrene.*”

Her knees buckled so wildly she could barely stand. Every moment of training she’d done slithered right out of her head.

“*Get out,*” Chaol snarled toward the door. “Before you regret it.”

“*Yrene,*” it hissed, laughing a bit. “*Yrene.*”

Valg. One had indeed been hunting her that night, and had come for her again tonight—

Clapping her free hand over her mouth, Yrene sank onto the edge of the bed.

“Don’t you waste one heartbeat being afraid of a coward who hunts women in the darkness,” Chaol snapped at her.

The thing on the other side of the door growled. The doorknob rattled. “*Yrene,*” it repeated.

Chaol only held her stare. “Your fear grants it power over you.”

“*Yrene.*”

He approached her, lowering his dagger and sword into his lap. Yrene flinched, about to warn him not to lower his weapons. But Chaol stopped before her. Took her face in his hands, his back wholly to the door now. Even though she knew he monitored every sound and movement behind it. “I am not afraid,” he said softly, but not weakly. “And neither should you be.”

“*Yrene,*” the thing snapped on the other side of the door, slamming into it.

She cringed away, but Chaol held her face tightly. Did not break her gaze.

“We will face this,” he said. “Together.”

Together. Live or die here—together.

Her breathing calmed, their faces so close his own breath brushed her mouth.

Together.

She hadn’t thought to use such a word, to *feel* what it meant ... She hadn’t felt it since—

Together.

Yrene nodded. Once. Twice.

Chaol searched her eyes, his breath fanning her mouth.

He lifted her hand, still clutched around the dagger, and adjusted her grip. “Angle it up, not straight in. You know where it is.” He put a hand on his chest. Over his heart. “The other places.”

Brain. Through the eye socket. Throat, slashing to unleash the life’s blood. All the various arteries that could be struck to ensure a swift bleed-out.

Things she had learned to save. Not—end.

But this thing ...

“Beheading works best, but try to get it down first. Long enough to sever the head.”

He’d done this before, she realized. He’d killed these things. Triumphed against them. Had taken them on with no magic but his own indomitable will and courage.

And she ... she had crossed mountains and seas. She had done it on her own.

Her hand stopped shaking. Her breathing evened out.

Chaol’s fingers squeezed around her own, the hilt’s fine metal pushing into the palm of her hand. “Together,” he said one last time, and released her to pluck up his own weapons again.

To face the door.

There was only silence.

He waited, calculating. Sensing. A predator poised to strike.

Yrene’s dagger held steady as she rose to her feet behind him.

A crash sounded through the foyer—followed by shouting.

She started, but Chaol loosed a breath. One of shuddering relief.

He recognized the sounds before she did.

The shouts of guards.

They spoke in Halha—cries through the bedroom door about their status. Safe? Hurt?

Yrene replied in her own shoddy use of the language that they were unharmed. The guards said the servant girl had seen the broken suite door and come running to fetch them.

There was no one else in the suite.

Prince Kashin arrived swiftly, summoned by the guards at Yrene's request—before she or Chaol even dared to remove the furniture barring the door. Any of the other royals required too much explaining, but Kashin ... He understood the threat.

Chaol knew the prince's voice well enough by that point—Yrene knew it well herself—that as it filled the suite foyer, he gave her the nod to haul away the furniture blocking the door.

Chaol was grateful, just for a heartbeat, that he remained in this chair. Relief might have buckled his legs.

He hadn't been able to discern a viable path out of it. Not for her. In the chair, against a Valg minion, he was as good as carrion, though he'd calculated that a well-timed throw of his dagger and sword might save them. That had been his best option: *throwing*.

He hadn't cared—not really. Not about what it meant for him. But about how much time that throw might buy her.

Someone had *hunted* her. Meant to kill her. Terrorize and torment her. Perhaps worse, if it was indeed a Valg-infested agent of Morath. Which it had sure as hell sounded like.

He hadn't been able to make out the voice. Male or female. Just one of them, though.

Yrene remained calm as she opened the door at last to reveal a wild-eyed

Kashin, panting heavily. The prince scanned her from head to toe, gave Chaol a brief glance, then returned his focus to the healer. “What happened?”

Yrene lingered behind Chaol’s chair as she said with surprising calm, “I was walking back here to make sure Lord Westfall took a tonic.”

Liar. Smooth, pretty liar. She’d likely been coming back to give him the second earful Chaol had been waiting for all evening.

Yrene came around the chair to stand beside him, close enough that the heat of her warmed his shoulder. “And I was nearly here when I sensed someone behind me.” Yrene then explained the rest, observing the room every now and then, as if whoever it had been would leap out of the shadows. And when Kashin asked if she suspected why someone might do her harm, Yrene glanced at Chaol, a silent conversation passing between them: it had likely been to spook her from helping him, for whatever wicked purpose of Morath. But she’d only told the prince she didn’t know.

Kashin’s face tightened with fury as he studied the cracked door to Chaol’s bedroom. He said over his shoulder to the guards combing through the suite, “I want four of you outside this suite. Another four at the end of the hall. A dozen of you in the garden. Six more at the various hall crossroads that lead here.”

Yrene let out a breath of what might very well have been relief.

Kashin heard it, putting a hand on the hilt of his sword as he said, “The castle is already being searched. I plan to join them.”

Chaol knew it wasn’t for Yrene alone. Knew that the prince had good reason to join the hunt, that there was likely still a white banner hanging from his windows.

Gallant and dedicated. Perhaps how all princes should be. And perhaps a good friend for Dorian to have. If everything went in their favor.

Kashin seemed to take a bracing breath. Then he asked Yrene quietly, “Before I go ... why don’t I escort you back to the Torre? With an armed guard, of course.”

There was enough concern and hope in the prince's eyes that Chaol made a point to busy himself by monitoring the guards still examining every inch of the rooms.

Yet Yrene wrapped her arms around herself and said, "I feel safer here."

Chaol tried not to blink at her. At the words.

With him. She felt safer here with *him*.

He avoided the urge to remind her that he was in this chair.

Kashin's gaze now shifted to him, as if remembering he was there. And it was disappointment that now hardened his gaze—disappointment and warning as he met Chaol's stare.

Chaol clamped down on *his* warning to Kashin to stop giving him that look and go search the palace.

He'd keep his hands to himself. He'd been unable to stop thinking about Nesryn's letter all day. When he wasn't mulling over all that Shen had shown him—what it had done to him to see what lay beneath that proud guard's sleeve.

But the prince just bowed his head, a hand on his chest. "Send word if you need anything."

Yrene barely managed a nod in Kashin's direction. It was dismissive enough that Chaol almost felt bad for the man.

The prince moved out with a lingering glance at Yrene, some guards trailing him, the others remaining behind. Chaol watched through the garden doors as they settled into place just outside.

"Nesryn's bedroom is empty," he said when they were alone in his chamber at last.

He waited for the question about *why*—but realized she hadn't so much as mentioned Nesryn when she'd fled in here. Hadn't tried to rouse her. She'd gone right to him.

So it was no surprise when Yrene just said, "I know it is."

Palace spies or gossip, he didn't care. Not as Yrene said, "I—can I stay in

here? I'll sleep on the floor—”

“You can sleep in the bed. I doubt I'll get any rest tonight.”

Even with the guards outside ... He'd seen what one Valg could do against multiple men. He'd seen Aelin move, one assassin through a field of men. And cut them down in heartbeats.

No, he would not be sleeping tonight.

“You can't sit in that chair all night—”

Chaol gave her a look that said otherwise.

Yrene swallowed and excused herself to the bathing room. As she quickly washed up, he assessed the guards outside, the integrity of the bedroom lock. She emerged still in her dress, neckline wet, face wan again. She hesitated before the bed.

“They changed the sheets,” Chaol said softly.

She didn't look at him as she climbed in. Each movement smaller than usual—brittle.

Terror still gripped her. Though she'd done beautifully. He wasn't sure if *he* would have been able to move that chest of drawers, but pure terror had given her a dose of strength. He'd heard stories of mothers lifting entire wagons off their children crushed beneath.

Yrene slid beneath the covers, but made no move to nestle her head onto the pillow. “What is it like—to kill someone?”

Cain's face flashed in his mind.

“I—I'm new to it,” Chaol admitted.

She angled her head.

“I took my first life ... just after Yulemas last year.”

Her brows narrowed. “But—you—”

“I trained for it. Had fought before. But never killed someone.”

“You were the Captain of the Guard.”

“I told you,” he said with a bitter smile, “it was complicated.”

Yrene nestled down at last. “But you have done it since.”

“Yes. But not enough to grow used to it. Against the Valg, yes, but the humans they infest ... Some are lost forever. Some are still there, beneath the demon. Figuring out who to kill, who can be spared—I still don’t know where the bad choices lie. The dead do not speak.”

Her head slid against the pillow. “I took an oath before my mother. When I was seven. Never to kill a human being. Some healings ... she told me offering death could be a mercy. But that it was different from slaughter.”

“It is.”

“I think—I might have tried to kill whoever it was tonight. I was that ...” He waited for her to say *frightened*. *Frightened, with my only defender in a chair*. “I was that decided against running. You told me you’d buy me time, but ... I can’t do it. Not again.”

His chest tightened. “I understand.”

“I’m glad I didn’t do it. But—whoever it is got away. Perhaps I should not be so relieved.”

“Kashin may be lucky in his search.”

“I doubt it. They were gone before the guards arrived.”

He fell quiet. After a moment, he said, “I hope you never have to use that dagger—or any other, Yrene. Even as a mercy.”

The sorrow in her eyes was enough to knock the breath from him. “Thank you,” she said softly. “For being willing to take that death upon yourself.”

No one had ever said such a thing. Even Dorian. But it had been expected. Celaena—*Aelin* had been grateful when he’d killed Cain to save her, but she had expected him to one day make a kill.

Aelin had made more than he could count by that point, and his own lack of it had been ... embarrassing. As if such a thing were possible.

He had killed plenty since then. In Rifthold. With those rebels against the Valg. But Yrene ... she made that number smaller. He hadn’t looked at it that

way. With pride. Relief.

“I’m sorry Nesryn left,” Yrene murmured into the dim light.

I hold you to no promises. And I will hold to none of my own.

“I promised her an adventure,” Chaol admitted. “She deserved to go on one.”

Yrene was quiet enough that he turned from the garden doors. She had snuggled deep into his bed, her attention fixed wholly on him. “What about you? What do you deserve?”

“Nothing. I deserve nothing.”

Yrene studied him. “I don’t agree at all,” she murmured, eyelids drooping.

He monitored the exits again. After a few minutes, he said, “I was given enough and squandered it.”

Chaol looked over at her, but Yrene’s face was softened with sleep, her breathing steady.

He watched her for a long while.



Yrene was still sleeping when dawn broke.

Chaol had dozed for a few minutes at a time, as much as he’d allow himself.

But as the sun crept across the bedroom floor, he found himself washing his face. Scrubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Yrene didn’t stir as he moved out of the suite and into the hall. The guards were precisely where Kashin had ordered them to remain. And they told him precisely where he needed to go when he met them each in the eye and asked for directions.

And then he informed them that if Yrene were harmed while he was gone, he’d shatter every bone in their bodies.

Minutes later, he found the training courtyard Yrene had mentioned yesterday.

It was already full of guards, some of whom eyed him and some of whom

ignored him fully. Some of whom he recognized from Shen's shift, and gave him a nod.

One of the guards he did not know approached him, older and grayer than the rest.

Like Brullo, his former instructor and Weapons Master.

Dead—hanging from those gates.

Chaol pushed away the image. Replaced it with the healer still asleep in his bed. How she had looked when she'd declared to the prince, the world, that she felt safer there. With him.

He replaced the pain that rippled through him at the sight of the exercising guards, the sight of this private training space, so similar to the one in which he'd spent so many hours of his life, with the image of Shen's artificial arm, the unwavering, quiet strength he'd felt supporting him while he'd mounted his horse. No less a man without that arm—no less a guard.

"Lord Westfall," said the gray-haired guard, using his language. "What can I do for you at this hour?" The man seemed astute enough to know if there had been something related to the attack, this would not be the place to discuss it. No, the man knew Chaol had come here for a different reason, and read the tension in his body as not a source of alarm, but intrigue.

"I trained for years with men from my continent," Chaol said, lifting the sword and dagger he'd brought with him. "Learned as much as they know."

The older guard's brows flicked up.

Chaol held the man's stare. "I would like to learn what *you* know."



The aging guard—Hashim—worked him until Chaol could barely breathe. Even in the chair. And out of it.

Hashim, who was a rank below captain and oversaw the guards' training, found ways for Chaol to do their exercises either with someone bracing his feet

or modified versions from the chair.

He had indeed worked with Shen a year ago—many of the guards had. They'd banded together, assisting Shen in any way they could with the reorienting of his body, his way of fighting, during those long months of recovery.

So not one of them stared or laughed. Not one of them whispered.

They were all too busy, too tired, to bother anyway.

The sun rose over the courtyard, and still they worked. Still Hashim showed him new ways to strike with a blade. How to disarm an opponent.

A different way of thinking, of killing. Of defending. A different language of death.

They broke at breakfast, all of them near-trembling with exhaustion.

Even winded, Chaol could have kept going. Not for any reserve of strength, but because he *wanted* to.

Yrene was waiting when he returned to the suite and bathed.

Six hours, they then spent lost in that darkness. At the end of it, the pain had wrecked him, Yrene was shaking with exhaustion, but a precise sort of awareness had awoken within his feet. Crept up past his ankles. As if the numbness were a receding tide.

Yrene returned to the Torre that night under heavy guard, and he fell into the deepest sleep of his life.

Chaol was waiting for Hashim in the training ring before dawn.

And the next dawn.

And the next.

After two weeks of inching across the muddy open plains, Elide was tired of using her mother's name.

Tired of constantly being on alert to hear it barked by Molly to clean up after every meal (a mistake, no doubt, to have ever told the woman she had some experience washing dishes in busy kitchens), tired of hearing Ombriel—the dark-haired beauty not a carnival act at all but Molly's niece and their money-keeper—use it when questioning about how she'd hurt her leg, where her family came from, and how she'd learned to observe others so keenly that she could turn a coin as an oracle.

At least Lorcan barely used it, as they'd hardly spoken while the caravan trudged through the mud-laden fields. The ground was so saturated with the daily afternoon summer rain that the wagons often became stuck. They'd barely covered any distance at all, and when Ombriel would catch Elide gazing northward, she'd ask—yet another recurring question—what lay in the North to draw her attention so frequently. Elide always lied, always evaded. The sleeping situation between Elide and her *husband*, fortunately, was more easily avoided.

With the sodden earth, sleeping on it was nearly impossible. So the women laid out wherever they could in the two wagons, leaving the men to draw straws each night for who would get any remaining space and who would sleep on the ground atop a makeshift floor of reeds. Lorcan, somehow, always got the short straw, either by his own devices, sleight of hand from Nik, who ran security and the nightly straw-drawing, or simply from sheer bad luck.

But at least it kept Lorcan far, far away from her, and kept their interactions to a minimum.

Those few conversations they'd had—held when he escorted her to draw water from a swollen stream or gather whatever firewood could be found on the plain—weren't much to bother her, either. He pressed her for more details regarding Morath, more information about the guards' clothes, the armies camped around it, the servants and witches.

She'd started at the top of the Keep—with the aeries and wyverns and

witches. Then she'd descended, floor by floor. It had taken them these two weeks to work their way down to the sublevels, and their companions had no idea that while the young, married couple snuck off for more "firewood," whispering sweet nothings was the last thing on their minds.

When the caravan stopped that night, Elide aimed for a copse of trees in the heart of the field to see what could be used at their large campfire. Lorcan trailed at her side, as quiet as the hissing grasses around them. The nickering of the horses and clamor of their companions readying for the evening meal faded behind, and Elide frowned as her boot sank deep into a pocket of mud. She yanked on it, ankle barking at bearing her weight, and gritted her teeth until—

Lorcan's magic pushed against her leg, an invisible hand freeing her boot, and she tumbled into him. His arm and side were as hard and unyielding as the magic he'd used, and she rebounded away, tall grass crunching beneath her. "Thank you," she murmured.

Lorcan stalked ahead and said without looking back, "We finished at the three dungeons and their entrances yesterday night. Tell me about what's inside them."

Her mouth went a bit dry as she recalled the cell she'd squatted in, the darkness and tight air...

"I don't know what's inside," she lied, following him. "Suffering people, no doubt."

Lorcan stooped, his dark head disappearing beneath a wave of grass. When he emerged, two sticks were gripped in his massive hands. He snapped them with little effort. "You described everything else with no problem. Yet your scent changed just now. Why?"

She strode past him, bending over and over to collect whatever scattered wood she could find. "They did horrible things down there," she said over a shoulder. "You could sometimes hear people screaming." She prayed Terrasen would be better. It *had* to be.

"Who did they keep down there? Enemy soldiers?" Potential allies, no doubt, for whatever he planned to do.

"Whoever they wanted to torture." The hands of those guards, their sneers—"I assume you're going to leave as soon as I finish describing the last pit of Morath?" She plucked up stick after stick, ankle objecting with each shift in her balance.

"Is there a problem if I do? That was our bargain. I've stayed longer than I intended."

She turned, finding him with an armful of larger sticks. He unceremoniously dumped them into the small pile in her arms and thumbed free the hatchet at his side before prowling to the curving, fallen branch behind him. “So, am I just to play the abandoned wife, then?”

“You’re already playing the oracle, so what difference does another role make?” Lorcan brought his hatchet down upon the branch with a solid *thwack!* The blade sank unnervingly deep; wood groaned. “Describe the dungeons.”

It was only fair, and it had been their bargain, after all: his protection and help to get her out of harm’s way, in exchange for what she knew. And he’d been complacent in all the lies she’d spun to their company—quiet, but he’d gone along with it.

“The dungeons are gone,” Elide managed to say. “Or most of them should be. Along with the catacombs.”

Thwack, thwack, thwack. Lorcan severed the branch, the wood yielding with a splintering cry. He set to cutting another section apart. “Taken out in that blast?” He lifted his axe, the muscles in his powerful back shifting beneath his dark shirt, but paused. “You said you were near the courtyard when the blast happened—how do you know the dungeons are gone?”

Fine. She had lied about it. But ... “The explosion came from the catacombs and took out some of the towers. One would assume the dungeons would be in its path, too.”

“I don’t make plans based on assumptions.” He resumed hacking apart the branch, and Elide rolled her eyes at his back. “Tell me the layout of the northern dungeon.”

Elide turned toward the sinking sun staining the fields with orange and gold beyond them. “Figure it out yourself.”

The thud of metal on wood halted. Even the wind in the grasses died down.

But she had endured death and despair and terror, and she had told him enough—turned over every horrible stone, looked around every dark corner at Morath for him. His rudeness, his arrogance ... He could go to hell.

She had barely set one foot into the swaying grasses when Lorcan was before her, no more than a lethal shadow himself. Even the sun seemed to avoid the broad planes of his tan face, though the wind dared ruffle the silken black strands of his hair across it.

“We have a bargain, girl.”

Elide met that depthless gaze. “You did not specify when I had to tell you. So I may take as much time as I wish to recall details, if you desire to wring every

last one of them from me.”

His teeth flashed. “Do *not* toy with me.”

“Or what?” She stepped around him as if he were no more than a rock in a stream. Of course, walking with temper was a bit difficult when every other step was limping, but she kept her chin high. “Kill me, hurt me, and you’ll still be out of answers.”

Faster than she could see, his arm lashed out—gripping her by the elbow. “Marion,” he growled.

That *name*. She looked up at his harsh, wild face—a face born in a different age, a different world. “Take your hand off me.”

Lorcan, to her surprise, did so immediately.

But his face did not change—not a flicker—as he said, “You will tell me what I wish to know—”

The thing in her pocket began thrumming and beating, a phantom heartbeat in her bones.

Lorcan yielded a step, his nostrils flaring delicately. As if he could sense that stone awakening. “What are you,” he said quietly.

“I am nothing,” she said, voice hollow. Maybe once she found Aelin and Aedion, she’d find some purpose, some way to be of use to the world. For now, she was a messenger, a courier of this stone—to Celaena Sardothien. However Elide might find one person in such an endless, vast world. She had to get north—and quickly.

“Why do you go to Aelin Galathynius?”

The question was too tense to be casual. No, every inch of Lorcan’s body seemed restrained. Leashed rage and predatory instincts.

“You know the queen,” she breathed.

He blinked. Not in surprise, but to buy himself time.

He did know—and he was considering what to tell her, how to tell her—

“Celaena Sardothien is in the queen’s service,” he said. “Your two paths are one. Find one and you’ll find the other.”

He paused, waiting.

Would this be her life, then? Wretched people, always looking out for themselves, every kindness coming at a cost? Would her own queen at least gaze at her with warmth in her eyes? Would Aelin even remember her?

“Marion,” he said again—the word laced with a growl.

Her mother’s name. Her mother—and her father. The last people who had looked at her with true affection. Even Finnula, all those years locked in that

tower, had always watched her with some mixture of pity and fear.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been held. Or comforted. Or smiled at with any genuine love for who she was.

Words were suddenly hard, the energy to dredge up a lie or retort too much to bother with. So Elide ignored Lorcan's command and headed back toward the cluster of painted wagons.

Manon had come for her, she reminded herself with each step. Manon, and Asterin, and Sorrel. But even they had left her alone in the woods.

Pity, she reminded herself—self-pity would do her no good. Not with so many miles between her and whatever shred of a future she stood a chance of finding. But even when she arrived, handed over her burden, and found Aelin ... what could she offer? She couldn't even read, gods above. The mere thought of explaining that to Aelin, to anyone—

She'd think on it later. She'd wash the queen's clothes if she had to. At least she didn't need to be literate for that.

Elide didn't hear Lorcan this time as he approached, arms laden with massive logs.

"You will tell me what you know," he said through his teeth. She almost sighed, but he added, "Once you are ... better."

She supposed that, to him, sorrow and despair would be some sort of sickness.

"Fine."

"Fine," he said right back.

Their companions were smiling when she and Lorcan returned. They had found dry ground on the other side of the wagons—solid enough for tents.

Elide spied the one that had been raised for her and Lorcan and wished it would rain.



Lorcan had trained enough warriors to know when not to push. He'd tortured enough enemies to know when they were one slice or snap away from breaking in ways that would make them useless.

So Marion, when her scent had changed, when he'd felt even the strange, otherworldly power hidden in her blood shift to sorrow ... worse, to hopelessness...

He'd wanted to tell her not to bother with hope anyway.

But she was barely into womanhood. Perhaps hope, foolish as it was, had gotten her out of Morath. At least her cleverness had, lies and all.

He'd dealt with enough people, killed and bedded and fought alongside enough people, to know Marion wasn't wicked, or conniving, or wholly selfish. He wished she was, because it'd make it easier—make his task so much easier.

But if she didn't tell him about Morath, if he broke her from pushing too much ... He needed every advantage when he slipped into that Keep. And when he slipped out again.

She'd done it once. Perhaps Marion was the only person alive who had managed to escape.

He was about to explain that to her when he saw what she was staring at—the tent.

Their tent.

Ombriel came forward, throwing her usual wary glance his way, and slyly informed Elide they'd finally have a night *alone* together.

Arms full of logs, Lorcan could only watch as that pale face of sorrow and despair transformed into youth and mischief, into blushing anticipation, as easily as if Marion had held up a mask. She even gave him a flirting glance before beaming at Ombriel and rushing to dump her armful of sticks and twigs into the pit they'd cleared for the nightly fire.

He possessed the good sense to at least smile at the woman who was supposed to be his wife, but by the time he'd followed to drop his own burden into the fire pit, she'd stalked off for the tent set a good distance away from the others.

It was small, he realized with no tiny amount of horror. Probably meant for the sword-thrower who'd last used it. Marion's slim figure slipped through the white canvas flaps with hardly a ripple. Lorcan just frowned a bit before ducking inside.

And remained ducking slightly. His head would go straight through the canvas if he stood to his full height. Woven mats atop gathered rushes covered the stuffy interior, and Marion stood on the other side of the tent, cringing at the sleeping roll on the makeshift floor.

The tent probably had enough room for a proper bed and table, if need be, but unless they were camping longer than a night, he doubted they'd get any of those things.

"I'll sleep on the ground," he offered blandly. "You take the roll."

"What if someone comes in?"

“Then you’ll say we got into a fight.”

“Every night?” Marion pivoted, her rich eyes meeting his. The cold, weary face was back.

Lorcan considered her words. “If someone walks into our tent without permission tonight, no one here will make the same mistake again.”

He’d punished men in his war camps for less.

But her eyes remained weary—wholly unimpressed and unmoved. “Fine,” she said again.

Too close—far too close to the edge of snapping entirely. “I could find some buckets, heat water, and you could bathe in here, if you want. I’ll stand watch outside.”

Creature comforts—to get her to trust him, be grateful to him, to want to help him. To ease that dangerous brittleness.

Indeed, Marion peered down at herself. The white shirt that was now dirt-flecked, the brown leather pants that were filthy, the boots...

“I’ll offer Ombriel a coin to wash it all for you tonight.”

“I have no other clothes to wear.”

“You can sleep without them.”

Wariness faded in a flash of dismay. “With you in here?”

He avoided the urge to roll his eyes.

She blurted, “What about your own clothes?”

“What of them?”

“You ... they’re filthy, too.”

“I can wait another night.” She’d likely beg to sleep in the wagon if he was naked in here—

“Why should I be the only one naked? Wouldn’t the ruse work better if you and I both took the opportunity at once?”

“You are very young,” he said carefully. “And I am very old.”

“How old?”

She’d never asked.

“Old.”

She shrugged. “A body is a body. You reek as badly as I do. Go sleep outside if you won’t wash.”

A test—not driven by any desire or logic, but ... to see if he’d listen to her. Who was in control. Get her a bath, do as she asked ... Let her get a sense of control over the situation. He gave her a thin smile. “Fine,” he echoed.

When Lorcan pushed through the tent again, laden with water, he discovered

Marion seated on the bedroll, boots off, that ruined ankle and foot stretched out before her. Her small hands were braced on the mangled, discolored flesh, as if she'd been rubbing the ache from it.

"How badly does it hurt every day?" He sometimes used his magic to brace the ankle. *When* he remembered. Which wasn't often.

Marion's focus, however, went right to the steaming cauldron he'd set on the floor, then the bucket he'd hauled over a shoulder for her to use as well.

"I've had it since I was a child," she said distantly, as if hypnotized by the clean water. She rose on uneven feet, wincing at her wrecked leg. "I learned to live with it."

"That's not an answer."

"Why do you even care?" The words were barely more than a breath as she unbraided her long, thick hair, still fixated on the bath.

He was curious; he wanted to know how and when and why. Marion was beautiful—surely marring her like that had been done with some ill intent. Or to prevent something worse.

She at last cut him a glance. "You said you'd stand watch. I thought you meant *outside*."

He snorted. Indeed he did. "Enjoy yourself," he said, pushing out of the tent once more.

Lorcan stood in the grasses, monitoring the busy camp, the wide bowl of the darkening sky. He hated the plains. Too much open space; too much visibility.

Behind him, his ears picked up the sigh and hiss of leather sliding down skin, the rustle of rough-woven cloth being peeled off. Then fainter, softer sounds of more delicate fabric sliding away. Then silence—followed by a very, very quiet rustling. Like she didn't want even the gods hearing what she was doing. Hay crunched. Then a thud of the mattress roll lifting and falling—

The little witch was hiding something. The hay snapped again as she returned to the cauldron.

Hiding something under the mattress—something she'd been carrying with her and didn't want him knowing about. Water splashed, and Marion let out a moan of surprising depth and sincerity. He shut out the sound.

But even as he did, Lorcan's thoughts drifted toward Rowan and his bitch-queen.

Marion and the queen were about the same age—one dark, one golden. Would the queen bother at all with Marion once she arrived? Likely, if her curiosity was piqued about why she wished to see Celaena Sardothien, but ...

what about after?

It wasn't his concern. He'd left his conscience on the cobblestones of the back streets of Doranelle five centuries ago. He'd killed men who had begged for their lives, wrecked entire cities and never once looked back at the smoldering rubble.

Rowan had, too. Gods-damned Whitethorn had been his most effective general, assassin, and executioner for centuries. They had laid waste to kingdoms and then drunk and bedded themselves into stupors in the following days-long celebrations on the ruins.

This winter, he'd had a damn fine commander at his disposal, brutal and vicious and willing to do just about anything Lorcan ordered.

The next time he'd seen Rowan, the prince had been roaring, desperate to fling himself into lethal darkness to save the life of a princess with no throne. Lorcan had known—in that moment.

Lorcan had known, as he'd pinned Rowan into the grass outside Mistward, the prince thrashing and screaming for Aelin Galathynius, that everything was about to change. Knew that the commander he'd valued was altered irrevocably. No longer would they glut themselves on wine and women; no longer would Rowan gaze toward a horizon without some glimmer of longing in his eyes.

Love had broken a perfect killing tool. Lorcan wondered if it would take him centuries more to stop being so pissed about it.

And the queen—princess, whatever Aelin called herself ... She was a fool. She could have bartered Athril's ring for Maeve's armies, for an alliance to wipe Morath off the earth. Even not knowing what the ring was, she could have used it to her advantage.

But she'd chosen Rowan. A prince with no crown, no army, no allies.

They deserved to perish together.

Marion's soaked head popped out of the tent, and Lorcan twisted to see the heavy wool blanket wrapped around her like a gown. "Can you bring the clothes now?" She chucked her pile out. She'd bundled her underthings in her white shirt, and the leathers ... They'd never be dry before morning—and would likely shrink beyond use if washed improperly.

Lorcan stooped, picking up the bundle of clothes and trying not to peer into the tent to learn what she'd hidden beneath the bedroll. "What about standing guard?"

Her hair was plastered to her head, heightening the sharp lines in her cheekbones, her fine nose. But her eyes were bright again, her full lips once

more like a rosebud, as she said, “Please get them washed. Quickly.”

Lorcan didn't bother confirming as he carried her clothes away from the tent, leaving her to sit in partial nakedness inside. Ombriel was in the middle of cooking whatever was in the pot over the fire. Likely rabbit stew. Again. Lorcan examined the clothes in his hands.

Thirty minutes later, he returned to the tent, plate of food in hand. Marion was perched on the bedroll, foot stretched out before her, blanket tucked under her shoulders.

Her skin was so pale. He'd never seen such white unmarred skin.

As if she'd never been let outside.

Her dark brows furrowed at the plate—then at the bundle under his arm.

“Ombriel was busy—so I washed your clothes myself.”

She flushed.

“A body is a body,” he repeated simply to her. “So are undergarments.”

She frowned, but her attention was again riveted on the plate. He set it down before her. “I got you dinner, since I assumed you didn't want to sit among everyone in your blanket.” He dumped the pile of clothes on her bedroll. “And I got you clothes from Molly. She's charging you, of course. But at least you won't sleep naked.”

She dug into the stew without so much as thanking him.

Lorcan was about to leave when she said, “My uncle ... He is a commander at Morath.”

Lorcan froze. And looked right to the bedroll.

But Marion continued between bites, “He ... locked me in the dungeon once.”

The wind in the grasses died; the campfire far beyond their tent flickered, the people around it huddling closer together as the nighttime insects went silent and the small, furred creatures of the plains scampered into their burrows.

Marion either didn't notice the surge of his dark power, the magic kissed by Death himself, or didn't care. She said, “His name is Vernon, and he is clever and cruel, and he will likely try to keep you alive if you are caught. He wields people to gain power for himself. He has no mercy, no soul. There is no moral code that guides him.”

She went back to her food, done for the night.

Lorcan said quietly, “Would you like me to kill him for you?”

Her limpid, dark eyes rose to his face. And for a moment, he could see the woman she'd become—was already becoming. Someone who, regardless of

where she'd been born, any queen would prize at her side. "Would there be a cost?"

Lorcan hid his smile. Smart, cunning little witch. "No," he said, and meant it. "Why did he lock you in the dungeon?"

Marion's white throat bobbed once. Twice. She seemed to hold his stare through effort of will, through a refusal not to back down from him, but from her own fears. "Because he wished to see if his bloodline could be crossed with the Valg. That was why I was brought to Morath. To be bred like a prize mare."

Every thought emptied out of Lorcan's head.

He had seen and dealt and endured many, many unspeakable things, but this...

"Did he succeed?" he managed to ask.

"Not with me. There were others before me who ... Help came too late for them."

"That explosion was not accidental, was it."

A small shake of the head.

"You did it?" He glanced to the bedroll—to whatever she hid beneath.

Again that shake of the head. "I will not say who, or how. Not without risking the lives of the people who saved me."

"Are the ilken—"

"No. The ilken are not the creatures that were bred in the catacombs. Those ... those came from the mountains around Morath. Through far darker methods."

Maeve had to know. She had to know what they were doing in Morath. The horrors being bred there, the army of demons and beasts to rival any from legend. She would never ally with such evil—never be foolish enough to ally with the Valg. Not when she warred with them millennia ago. But if she did not fight ... How long would it be before these beasts were howling around Doranelle? Before it was his own continent under siege?

Doranelle could hold out. But he would likely be dead, once he found some way to destroy the keys and Maeve punished him. And with him dead and Whitethorn likely carrion, too ... how long would Doranelle last? Decades? Years?

A question snagged in Lorcan's mind, drawing him to the present, to the stuffy little tent. "Your foot has been ruined for years, though. He locked you in the dungeon that long?"

"No," she said, not even flinching at his rough description. "I was only in the dungeon for a week. The ankle, the chain ... He did that to me long before."

“What chain.”

She blinked. And he knew she'd meant to avoid telling him that one particular detail.

But now that he looked ... he could make out, among the mass of scars, a white band. And there, around her perfect, lovely other ankle, was its twin.

A wind laced with the dust and coldness of a tomb gnawed through the field.

Marion merely said, “When you kill my uncle, ask him yourself.”

PART TWO
MOUNTAINS AND SEAS

29

Storms waylaid Nesryn and Sartaq on their way out of the northern Asimil Mountains.

Upon awakening, the prince had taken one look at the bruised clouds and ordered Nesryn to secure everything she could on their rocky outcropping. Kadara shifted from clawed foot to clawed foot, rustling her wings as her golden eyes monitored the storm galloping in.

That high up, the crack of thunder echoed off every rock and crevice, and as Nesryn and Sartaq sat pressed against the stone wall beneath the overhang, winds lashing them, she could have sworn even the mountain beneath shuddered. But Kadara held fast against the storm, settling herself in front of them, a veritable wall of white and golden feathers.

Still the icy rain managed to find them, freezing Nesryn down to her bones even with the thick ruk leathers and heavy wool blanket Sartaq insisted she wrap around herself. Her teeth chattered violently enough to make her jaw hurt, and her hands were so numb and raw that she kept them tucked beneath her armpits just to savor any scrap of warmth.

Even before magic had vanished, Nesryn had never longed for magical gifts. And after magic had disappeared, after the decrees banning it and the terrible hunts for those who had once wielded it, Nesryn hadn't dared to even *think* about magic. She'd been content to practice her archery, to learn how to wield knives and swords, to master her body until it, too, was a weapon. Magic had failed,

she'd told her father and sister whenever they asked. Good steel would not.

Yet sitting on that cliff, whipped by the wind and rain until she couldn't remember what warmth felt like, Nesryn found herself wishing for a spark of flame in her veins. Or at least for a certain Fire-Bringer to come swaggering around the corner of the cliff to warm them.

But Aelin was far away—unaccounted for, if Hasar's report was to be believed, which Nesryn did. The true question was whether Aelin and her court's vanishing were due to some awful play by Morath, or some scheme of the queen herself.

Having seen what Aelin was capable of in Rifthold, the plans she'd laid out and enacted without any of them knowing ... Nesryn's money was on Aelin. The queen would show up when and where she wished—at precisely the moment she intended. Nesryn supposed that was why she liked the queen: there were plans so long in the making that for someone who let the world deem her unchecked and brash, Aelin showed a great deal of restraint in keeping it all hidden.

And as that storm raged around Nesryn and Sartaq, she wondered if Aelin Galathynius might yet have some card up her sleeve that even her court might not know about. She prayed Aelin did. For all their sakes.

But magic had failed before, Nesryn reminded herself as her teeth clacked against each other. And she'd do everything she could to find a way to fight Morath without it.

It was hours before the storm at last lumbered off to terrorize other parts of the world, Sartaq only easing to his feet when Kadara fanned her feathers, shaking off the rain. Spraying them in the process, but Nesryn was in no position to complain, when the ruk had taken the brunt of the storm's wrath for them.

Of course, it also left the saddle damp, which in turn led to a fairly uncomfortable ride as they soared down the brisk, clean winds from the mountains and into the sprawling grasslands below.

With the delay, they were forced to camp for another night, this time in a

copse of trees, again with not so much as an ember to warm them. Nesryn kept her mouth shut about it—the cold that lingered along her bones, the roots that dug into her back through the bedroll, the empty pit in her stomach that fruit and dried meat and day-old bread couldn't fill.

Sartaq, to his credit, gave her his blankets and asked if she wanted a change of his clothes. But she barely knew him, she realized. This man she'd flown off with, this prince with his *sulde* and sharp-eyed ruk ... He was little more than a stranger.

Such things didn't usually bother her. Working for the city guard, she'd dealt with strangers every day, in various states of awfulness or panic. The pleasant encounters had been few and far between, particularly in the past six months, when darkness had crept over the city and hunted beneath it.

But with Sartaq ... As Nesryn shivered all night long, she wondered if she'd perhaps been a tad hasty in coming here, possible alliance or no.

Her limbs ached and eyes burned when the gray light of dawn trickled through the slim pines. Kadara was already stirring, eager to be off, and Nesryn and Sartaq exchanged less than a half-dozen sentences before they were airborne for the last leg of their journey.

They'd been flying for two hours, the winds growing crisper the farther south they sailed, when Sartaq said in her ear, "That way." He pointed due east. "Fly half a day in that direction, and you will reach the northern edges of the steppes. The heartland of the Darghan."

"Do you visit often?"

A pause. He said over the wind, "Kashin holds their loyalty. And—Tumelun." The way he spoke his sister's name implied enough. "But the rukhin and the Darghan were once one and the same. We chased down the ruks atop our Muniqi horses, tracked them deep into the Tavan Mountains." He pointed to the southeast as Kadara shifted, aiming for the towering, jagged mountains that clawed at the sky. They were peppered with forests, some peaks capped in snow.

“And when we tamed the ruks, some of the horse-lords chose not to return down to the steppes.”

“Which is why so many of your traditions remain the same,” Nesryn observed, glancing down at the *sulde* strapped to the saddle. The drop far, far below loomed, dried grasses swaying like a golden sea, carved by thin, twining rivers.

She quickly looked ahead toward the mountains. Though she’d grown mostly accustomed to the idea of how very little stood between her and death atop this ruk, reminding herself of it did nothing to settle her stomach.

“Yes,” Sartaq said. “It is also why our riders often band with the Darghan in war. Our fighting techniques differ, but we mostly know how to work together.”

“A cavalry below and aerial coverage above,” Nesryn said, trying not to sound too interested. “Have you ever gone to war?”

The prince was quiet for a minute. Then he said, “Not on the scale of what is being unleashed in your land. Our father ensures that the territories within our empire are well aware that loyalty is rewarded. And resistance is answered with death.”

Ice skittered down her spine.

Sartaq went on, “So I have been dispatched twice now to remind certain restless territories of that cold truth.” A hot breath at her ear. “Then there are the clans within the rukhin themselves. Ancient rivalries that I have learned to navigate, and conflicts I have had to smooth over.”

The hard way, he didn’t add. He instead said, “As a city guard, you must have dealt with such things.”

She snorted at the thought. “I was mostly on patrol—rarely promoted.”

“Considering your skill with a bow, I would have thought you ran the entire place.”

Nesryn smiled. Charmer. Beneath that unfailingly sure exterior, Sartaq was certainly a shameless flirt. But she considered his implied question, though she

had known the answer for years. “Adarlan is not as ... open as the khaganate when it comes to embracing the role of women in the ranks of its guards or armies,” she admitted. “While I might be skilled, men usually were promoted. So I was left to rot on patrol duty at the walls or busy streets. Handling the underworld or nobility was left for more important guards. And ones whose families hailed from Adarlan.”

Her sister had raged anytime it happened, but Nesryn had known that if she’d exploded to her superiors, if she’d challenged them ... They were the sort of men who would tell her to be grateful to be admitted at all, then demand she turn in her sword and uniform. So she’d figured it was better to remain, to be passed over, not for mere pay, but for the fact that there were so few other guards like her, helping those who needed it most. It was for them she stayed on, kept her head down while lesser men were appointed.

“Ah.” Another beat of quiet from the prince. “I’ve heard they were not so welcoming toward people from other lands.”

“To say the least.” The words were colder than she’d meant. And yet that was where her father had insisted they live, thinking it offered some sort of better life. Even when Adarlan had launched its wars to conquer the northern continent, he’d stayed—though her mother had tried to convince him to return to Antica, the city of her heart. Yet for whatever reason, perhaps stubbornness, perhaps defiance against the people who wanted to throw him out again, he’d stayed.

And Nesryn tried not to fault him for it, she really did. Her sister couldn’t understand it—Nesryn’s occasional, simmering anger on the topic. No, Delara had always loved Rifthold, loved the bustle of the city and thrived on winning over its hard-edged people. It had been no surprise that she’d married a man born and raised in the city itself. A true child of Adarlan—that’s what her sister was. At least, of what Adarlan had once been and might one day again become.

Kadara caught a swift wind and coasted along it, the world below passing in a blur as those towering mountains grew closer and closer. Sartaq asked quietly,

“Were you ever—”

“It’s not worth talking about.” Not when she could sometimes still feel that rock as it collided with her head, hear the taunts of those children. She swallowed and added, “Your Highness.”

A low laugh. “So my title makes an appearance again.” But he didn’t press further. He only said, “I’m going to beg you not to call me Prince or Your Highness around the other riders.”

“You’re going to beg me, or you are?”

His arms tightened around her in mock warning. “It took me years to get them to stop asking if I needed my silk slippers or servants to brush my hair.” Nesryn chuckled. “Amongst them, I am simply Sartaq.” He added, “Or Captain.”

“Captain?”

“Another thing you and I have in common, it seems.”

Shameless flirt indeed. “But you rule all six ruk clans. They answer to you.”

“They do, and when we all gather, I am Prince. But amongst my family’s own clan, the Eridun, I captain their forces. And obey the word of my hearth-mother.” He squeezed her again for emphasis. “Which I’d advise you doing as well, if you don’t want to be stripped and tied to a cliff face in the middle of a storm.”

“Holy gods.”

“Indeed.”

“Did she—”

“Yes. And as you said, it’s not worth talking about.”

But Nesryn chuckled again, surprised to find her face aching from smiling so often these past few minutes. “I appreciate the warning, Captain.”

The Tavan Mountains turned mammoth, a wall of dark gray stone higher than any she’d ever beheld in her own lands. Not that she’d seen many mountains up close. Her family had rarely ventured inland into Adarlan or its surrounding kingdoms—mostly because her father had been busy, but partially because the rural people in those areas did not take so well to outsiders. Even when their

children had been born on Adarlanian soil, with an Adarlanian mother. Sometimes that latter fact had been more enraging to them.

Nesryn only prayed that the rukhin would be more welcoming.



In all her father's stories, the descriptions of the aeries of the rukhin somehow still did not convey the sheer impossibility of what had been built into the sides and atop three towering peaks clustered in the heart of the Tavan Mountains.

It was no assortment of *gir*—framed, wide tents—that the horse-clans moved about the steppes. No, the Eridun aerie had been hewn into the stone, houses and halls and chambers, many of them originally nests for the ruks themselves.

Some of those nests remained, usually near a ruk's rider and their family, so the birds could be summoned at a moment's notice. Either through a whistled command or by someone climbing the countless rope ladders anchored to the stone itself, allowing movement between various homes and caves—though internal stairwells had also been built within the peaks themselves, mostly for the elderly and children.

The homes themselves each came equipped with a broad cave mouth for the ruks to land, the living quarters hewn behind them. A few windows dotted the rock face here and there, markers of rooms hidden behind the stone, and drawing fresh air to the chambers within.

Not that they needed much more fresh air here. The wind was a river between the three close-knit peaks that housed Sartaq's hearth-clan, full of ruks of various sizes soaring or flapping or diving. Nesryn tried and failed to count the dwellings carved into the mountains. There had to be hundreds here. And perhaps more lay within the mountains themselves.

"This—this is only *one* clan?" Her first words in hours.

Kadara soared up the face of the centermost peak. Nesryn slid back in the saddle, Sartaq's body a warm wall behind her as he leaned forward, guiding her

to do so as well. His thighs bracketed hers, the muscles shifting beneath as he kept their balance with the stirrups. “The Eridun is one of the largest—the oldest, if we’re to be believed.”

“You’re not?” The aerie around them had indeed seemed to have existed for untold ages.

“Every clan claims it is the oldest and first among riders.” A laugh that rumbled into her body. “When there is a Gathering, you should only hear the arguments about it. You’re better off to insult a man about his wife than to tell him to his face that your clan is the eldest.”

Nesryn smiled, even as she squeezed her eyes shut against the sheer drop behind her. Kadara aimed, swift and unfaltering, for the broadest of overhangs—a veranda, she realized as the ruk banked toward it. People were already standing just beneath the enormous arch of the cave mouth, arms raised in greeting.

She felt Sartaq’s smile at her ear. “There lies the Mountain-Hall of Altun, the home of my hearth-mother and my family.” Altun—*Windhaven*, was the rough translation. It was indeed larger than any other dwelling amid the three peaks: the Dorgos, or Three Singers, they were called—the cave itself at least forty feet tall and thrice as wide. Far within, she could just make out pillars and what indeed seemed to be a massive hall.

“The reception court—where we host our meetings and celebrations,” Sartaq explained, his arms tightening around her just as Kadara back-flapped. Squeezing her eyes shut again in front of the awaiting people would certainly not win her any admiration, but—

Nesryn gripped the saddle horn with one hand, the other clenching Sartaq’s knee, braced behind hers. Hard enough to bruise.

The prince only laughed quietly. “So the famed archer does have a weakness, then.”

“I’ll find out yours soon enough,” Nesryn countered, earning another soft laugh in reply.

The ruk mercifully made a smooth landing on the polished dark stone of the almost-balcony, those waiting at the entrance bracing themselves against the wind off her wings.

Then they were still, and Nesryn quickly straightened, releasing her death-grip on both saddle and prince to behold a hall full of pillars of carved, painted wood. The braziers burning throughout cast the gold paint glinting amongst the green and red, and thick carpets in bold, striking patterns covered much of the stone floor, interrupted only by a round table and what seemed to be a small dais against one of the far walls. And beyond it, the gloom brightened by bracketed torches, a hallway flowed into the mountain itself. Lined with doors.

But in the very center of the Mountain-Hall of Altun: a fire.

The pit had been carved into the floor, so deep and wide that layers of broad steps led down to it. Like a small amphitheater—the main entertainment not a stage but the flame itself. The hearth.

It was indeed a domain fit for the Winged Prince.

Nesryn squared her shoulders as people young and old pressed forward, smiling broadly. Some were clad in familiar riding leathers, some wore beautifully colored, heavy wool coats that flowed to their knees. Most possessed Sartaq's silken onyx hair and wind-chapped, golden-brown skin.

"Well, well," drawled a young woman in a cobalt-and-ruby coat, tapping her booted foot on the smooth rock floor as she peered up at them. Nesryn forced herself to keep still, to endure that sweeping stare. The young woman's twin braids, tied with bands of red leather, fell well past her breasts, and she brushed one over a shoulder as she said, "Look who decided to give up his fur muff and oiled baths to join us once more."

Nesryn schooled her face into careful calm. But Sartaq just dropped Kadara's reins, the prince giving Nesryn a distinct *I told you so* look before he said down to the girl, "Don't pretend that you haven't been praying I bring back more of those pretty silk slippers for you, Borte."

Nesryn bit her lip to keep from smiling, though the others certainly showed no such restraint as their chuckles rumbled off the dark stones.

Borte crossed her arms. “I suppose you’d know where to buy them, since you’re so fond of wearing them yourself.”

Sartaq laughed, the sound rich and merry.

It was an effort not to gawk. He had not made such a laugh, not once, at the palace.

And when had she last made such a bright sound? Even with her aunt and uncle, her laughter had been restrained, as if some invisible damper lay over her. Perhaps long before that, stretching back to days when she was only a city guard with no idea what crawled through the sewers of Rifthold.

Sartaq smoothly dismounted Kadara and offered a hand to help Nesryn down.

It was the hand he lifted that made the dozen or so gathered notice her—study her. None more closely than Borte.

Another shrewd, weighing look. Seeing the leathers, but none of the features that marked her as one of them.

She’d dealt with the judgment of strangers long before now—this was nothing new. Even if she now stood in the gilded halls of Altun, amongst the rukhin.

Ignoring Sartaq’s offered hand, Nesryn forced her stiff body to smoothly slide one leg over the saddle and dismounted herself. Her knees popped at the impact, but she managed to land lightly, and didn’t let herself touch her hair—which she was certain was a rat’s nest despite her short braid.

A faint gleam of approval entered Borte’s dark eyes just before the girl jerked her chin toward Nesryn. “A Balruhni woman in the leathers of a rukhin. Now, there’s a sight.”

Sartaq didn’t answer. He only glanced in Nesryn’s direction. An invitation. And challenge.

So Nesryn slipped her hands into the pockets of her close-fitting pants and

sauntered to the prince's side. "Will it be improved if I tell you I caught Sartaq filing his nails this morning?"

Borte stared at Nesryn, blinking once.

Then she tipped back her head and howled.

Sartaq threw an approving yet beleaguered glance in Nesryn's direction before saying, "Meet my hearth-sister, Borte. Granddaughter and heir of my hearth-mother, Houlun." He reached between them to tug one of Borte's braids. She batted his hand away. "Borte, meet Captain Nesryn Faliq." He paused for a breath, then added, "Of the Royal Guard of Adarlan."

Silence. Borte's arched dark brows rose.

An aging man in rukhin leathers pressed forward. "But what is more unusual: that a Balruhni woman is their captain, or that a captain of Adarlan has ventured so far?"

Borte waved the man off. "Always the idle chatter and questions with you," she scolded him. And to Nesryn's shock, the man winced and shut his mouth. "The real question is ..." A sly grin at Sartaq. "Does she come as emissary or bride?"

Any attempt at a steady, cool, calm appearance vanished as Nesryn gaped at the girl. Right as Sartaq snapped, "*Borte.*"

Borte gave a downright wicked grin. "Sartaq never brings such pretty ladies home—from Adarlan *or* Antica. Be careful walking around the cliff edges, Captain Faliq, or some of the girls here might give you a shove."

"Will you be one of them?" Nesryn's voice remained unruffled, even if her face had heated.

Borte scowled. "I should think not." Some of the others laughed again.

"As my hearth-sister," Sartaq explained, leading Nesryn toward the cluster of low-backed chairs near the lip of the fire pit, "I consider Borte a blood relative. Like my own sister."

Borte's devilish grin faded as she fell into step alongside Sartaq. "How fares

your family?”

Sartaq’s face was unreadable, save for the faint flicker in those dark eyes. “Busy,” was all he said. A nonanswer.

But Borte nodded, as if she knew his moods and inclinations well, and kept quiet while Sartaq escorted Nesryn into a carved and painted wooden chair. The heat from the blazing fire was delicious, and she nearly groaned as she stretched out her frozen feet toward it.

Borte hissed. “You couldn’t get your sweetheart a proper pair of boots, Sartaq?”

Sartaq growled in warning, but Nesryn frowned at her supple leather boots. They’d been more expensive than any she’d ever dared purchase for herself, but Dorian Havilliard had insisted. Part of the uniform, he’d told her with a wink.

She wondered if he still smiled so freely, or spent as generously, wherever he was.

But she glanced toward Borte, whose boots were leather, yet thicker—lined with what seemed to be thickest sheepskin. Definitely better-equipped for the chilly altitudes.

“I’m sure you can dig up a pair somewhere,” Sartaq said to his hearth-sister, and Nesryn twisted in her chair while the two of them drifted back toward where Kadara waited.

The people pressed in around Sartaq, murmuring too softly for Nesryn to hear from across the hall. But the prince spoke with easy smiles, talking while he unloaded their packs, handing them off to whoever was closest, and then unsaddled Kadara.

He gave the golden ruk a stroke down her neck, then a solid thump on her side—and then Kadara was gone, flapping into the open air beyond the cave mouth.

Nesryn debated going over to them, offering to help with the packs that were now being hauled through the chamber and into the hallway beyond, but the heat

creeping up her body had sapped the strength from her legs.

Sartaq and Borte appeared, the others dispersing, just as Nesryn noticed the man sitting near a brazier across the hall. A cup curling with steam sat on the small, wooden table beside his chair, and though there seemed to be an open scroll in his lap, his eyes remained fixed on her.

She didn't know what to remark upon: that while his skin was tan, it was clear that he did not hail from the southern continent; that his short brown hair was far from the long, silken braids of the ruk riders; or that his clothes seemed more akin to Adarlan's jackets and pants.

Only a dagger hung at his side, and while he was broad-shouldered and fit, he didn't possess the self-assured swagger, the pitiless surety of a warrior. He was perhaps in his late forties, pale white lines etched at the corner of his eyes, where he'd squinted in the sun or wind.

Borte led Sartaq around the fire pit, past the various pillars, and right to the man, who got to his feet and bowed. He stood roughly at Sartaq's height, and even from across the hall, with the crackling fire and groaning wind, Nesryn could make out his shoddy Halha: "It is an honor, Prince."

Borte snorted.

Sartaq just gave a curt nod and replied in the northern language, "I'm told you have been a guest of our hearth-mother for the past few weeks."

"She was gracious enough to welcome me here, yes." The man sounded slightly relieved to be using his native tongue. A glance toward Nesryn. She didn't bother to pretend she wasn't listening. "I couldn't help but overhear what I thought was mention of a captain from Adarlan."

"Captain Faliq oversees the royal guard."

The man didn't take his eyes off Nesryn as he murmured, "Does she, now?"

Nesryn only held his stare from across the room. *Go ahead. Gawk all you like.*

Sartaq asked sharply, "And your name?"

The man dragged his gaze back to the prince. “Falkan Ennar.”

Borte said to Sartaq in Halha, “He is a merchant.”

And if he’d come from the northern continent ... Nesryn slid to her feet, her steps near-silent as she approached. She made sure they were, as Falkan watched her the entire way, running an eye over her from foot to head. Made sure he noted that the grace with which she moved was not some feminine gift, but from training that had taught her how to creep up on others undetected.

Falkan stiffened as if he finally realized it. And understood that the dagger at his side would be of little use against her, if he was stupid enough to pull something.

Good. It made him smarter than a great number of men in Rifthold. Stopping a casual distance away, Nesryn asked the merchant, “Have you any news?”

Up close, the eyes she’d mistaken for dark were a midnight sapphire. He’d likely been moderately handsome in his youth. “News of what?”

“Of Adarlan. Of ... anything.”

Falkan stood with remarkable stillness—a man perhaps used to holding his ground in a bargain. “I wish that I could offer you any, Captain, but I have been in the southern continent for over two years now. You probably have more news than I do.” A subtle request.

And one that would go unanswered. She was not about to blab her kingdom’s business for all to hear. So Nesryn just shrugged and turned back toward the fire pit across the hall.

“Before I left the northern continent,” Falkan said as she strode away, “a young man named Westfall was the Captain of the Royal Guard. Are you his replacement?”

Careful. She indeed had to be so, so careful not to reveal too much. To him, to anyone. “Lord Westfall is now Hand to King Dorian Havilliard.”

Shock slackened the merchant’s face. She marked it—every tick and flicker. No joy or relief, but no anger, either. Just ... surprise. Honest, bald surprise.

“Dorian Havilliard is king?”

At Nesryn’s raised brows, Falkan explained, “I have been in the deep wilds for months now. News does not come swiftly. Or often.”

“An odd place to be selling your goods,” Sartaq murmured. Nesryn was inclined to agree.

Falkan merely gave the prince a tight smile. A man with secrets of his own, then.

“It has been a long journey,” Borte cut in, looping her arm through Nesryn’s and turning her toward the dim hallway beyond. “Captain Faliq needs refreshment. And a bath.”

Nesryn wasn’t certain whether to thank the young woman or begrudge her for interrupting, but ... Her stomach was indeed an aching pit. And it had been a long while since she’d bathed.

Neither Sartaq nor Falkan stopped them, though their murmuring resumed as Borte escorted her into the hallway that shot straight into the mountain itself. Wooden doors lined it, some open to reveal small bedchambers—even a little library.

“He is a strange man,” Borte said in Halha. “My grandmother refuses to speak of why he came here—what he seeks.”

Nesryn lifted a brow. “Trade, perhaps?”

Borte shook her head, opening a door halfway down the hall. The room was small, a narrow bed tucked against one wall, the other occupied by a trunk and a wooden chair. The far wall held a washbasin and ewer, along with a pile of soft-looking cloths. “We have no goods to sell. *We* are usually the merchants—ferrying goods across the continent. Our clan here, not so much, but some of the others ... Their aeries are full of treasures from every territory.” She toed the rickety bed and frowned. “Not this old junk.”

Nesryn chuckled. “Perhaps he wishes to assist you in expanding, then.”

Borte turned, braids swaying. “No. He doesn’t meet with anyone, or seem

interested in that.” A shrug. “It matters little. Only that he is *here*.”

Nesryn folded away the tidbits of information. He didn’t seem like one of Morath’s agents, but who knew how far the arm of Erawan now stretched? If it had reached Antica, then it was possible it had delved into the continent. She’d be on her guard—had no doubt Sartaq already was.

Borte twirled the end of a braid around a finger. “I saw the way you sized him up. You don’t think he’s here for business, either.”

Nesryn weighed the merits of admitting the truth, and opted for, “These are strange days for all of us—I have learned not to take men on their word. Or appearance.”

Borte dropped her braid. “No wonder Sartaq brought you home. You sound just like him.”

Nesryn hid her smile, not bothering to say that she found such a thing to be a compliment.

Borte sniffed, waving to the room. “Not as fine as the khagan’s palace, but better than sleeping on one of Sartaq’s shitty bedrolls.”

Nesryn smiled. “Any bed is better than that, I suppose.”

Borte smirked. “I meant what I said. You need a bath. And a comb.”

Nesryn at last raised a hand to her hair and winced. Tangles and knots and more tangles. Just getting it out of the braid would be a nightmare.

“Even Sartaq braids better than that,” Borte teased.

Nesryn sighed. “Despite my sister’s best efforts to teach me, I’m useless when it comes to such things.” She offered the girl a wink. “Why do you think I keep my hair so short?”

Indeed, her sister had practically fainted when Nesryn had come home one afternoon at age fifteen with hair cut to her collarbone. She’d kept the hair that length ever since—in part to piss off Delara, who still pouted about it, and partially because it was *far* easier to deal with. Wielding blades and arrows was one thing, but styling hair ... She was hopeless. And showing up at the guards’

barracks with a pretty hairstyle would *not* have been well received.

Borte only gave Nesryn a curt nod—as if she seemed to realize that. “Before you fly the next time, I’ll braid it properly for you.” Then she pointed down the hall, to a set of narrow stairs that led into the gloom. “Baths are this way.”

Nesryn sniffed herself and cringed. “Oh, that’s awful.”

Borte snickered as Nesryn entered the hall. “I’m surprised Sartaq’s eyes weren’t watering.”

Nesryn chuckled as she followed her toward what she prayed was a boiling-hot bath. She again felt Borte’s sharp, assessing gaze and asked, “What?”

“You grew up in Adarlan, didn’t you?”

Nesryn considered the question, why it might be asked. “Yes. I was born and raised in Rifthold, though my father’s family comes from Antica.”

Borte was quiet for a few steps. But as they reached the narrow stairwell and stepped into the dim interior, Borte smiled over a shoulder at Nesryn. “Then welcome home.”

Nesryn wondered if those words might be the most beautiful she’d ever heard.



The baths were ancient copper tubs that had to be filled kettle by kettle, but Nesryn didn’t object as she finally slid into one.

An hour later, hair finally detangled and brushed out, she found herself seated at the massive round table in the great hall, shoveling roast rabbit into her mouth, nestled in thick, warm clothes that had been donated by Borte herself. The flashes of embroidered cobalt and daffodil on the sleeves snared Nesryn’s attention as much as the platters of roast meats before her. Beautiful clothes—layered and toasty against the chill that permeated the hall, even with the fires. And her toes ... Borte had indeed found a pair of those fleece-lined boots for her.

Sartaq sat beside Nesryn at the empty table, equally silent and eating with as

much enthusiasm. He had yet to bathe, though his windblown hair had been rebraided, the long plait falling down the center of his muscled back.

As her belly began to fill and her fingers slowed their picking, Nesryn glanced toward the prince. She found him smiling faintly. “Better than grapes and salted pork?”

She jerked her chin toward the bones littering her plate in silent answer, then to the grease on her fingers. Would it be uncouth to lick it off? The seasonings had been exquisite.

“My hearth-mother,” he said, that smile fading, “is not here.”

Nesryn paused her eating. They’d come here to seek the counsel of this woman—

“According to Borte, she will be returning tomorrow or the day after.”

She waited for more. Silence could be just as effective as spoken questions.

Sartaq pushed back his plate and braced his arms on the table. “I’m aware that you’re pressed for time. If I could, I’d go look for her myself, but even Borte wasn’t sure where she’d gone off to. Houlun is ... adrift like that. Sees her *sulde* waving in the wind and takes her ruk out to chase it. And will whack us with it if we try to stop her.” A gesture toward the rack of spears near the cave mouth, Sartaq’s own *sulde* among them.

Nesryn smiled at that. “She sounds like an interesting woman.”

“She is. In some ways, I’m closer to her than ...” The words trailed off, and he shook his head. *Than his own mother*. Indeed, Nesryn hadn’t witnessed him being nearly so open, so teasing with his own siblings, as he was with Borte.

“I can wait,” Nesryn said at last, trying not to wince. “Lord Westfall still needs time to heal, and I told him I’d be gone three weeks. I can wait a day or two more.” *And please, gods, not another moment after it.*

Sartaq nodded, tapping a finger on the ancient wood of the table. “Tonight, we will rest, but tomorrow ...” A hint of a smile. “How would you like a tour tomorrow?”

“It would be an honor.”

Sartaq’s smile grew. “Perhaps we could also do a bit of archery practice.” He looked her over with a frankness that made her shift in her seat. “I’m certainly keen to match myself against Neith’s Arrow, and I’m sure the young warriors are, too.”

Nesryn pushed back her own plate, brows lifting. “They’ve heard of me?”

Sartaq grinned. “I might have told a story or two the last time I came here. Why do you think there were so many people gathered when we arrived? They certainly don’t usually bother to drag themselves here to see *me*.”

“But Borte seemed like she’d never—”

“Does Borte seem like a person who gives *anyone* an easy time?”

Something deeper in her warmed. “No. But how could they have known I was coming?”

His answering grin was the portrait of princely arrogance. “Because I sent word a day before that you were likely to join me.”

Nesryn gaped at him, unable to maintain that mask of calm.

Rising, Sartaq scooped up their plates. “I told you that I was praying you’d join me, Nesryn Faliq. If I’d shown up empty-handed, Borte would have never let me hear the end of it.”

30

Within the interior chamber of the hall, Nesryn had no way of telling how long she'd slept or what hour of the morning it was. She'd dozed fitfully, awakening to comb through the sounds beyond her door, to detect if anyone was astir. She doubted Sartaq was the type to scold her for sleeping in, but if the rukhin indeed teased the prince about his courtly life, then lazing about all morning was perhaps not the best way to win them over.

So she'd tossed and turned, catching a few minutes of sleep here and there, and gave up entirely when she noticed shadows interrupting the light cracking beneath the door. Someone, at least, was awake in the Hall of Altun.

She'd dressed, pausing only to wash her face. The room was warm enough that the water in the ewer wasn't icy, though she certainly could have used a freezing splash on her gritty eyes.

Thirty minutes later, seated in the saddle before Sartaq, she regretted that wish.

He'd indeed been awake and saddling Kadara when she'd emerged into the still-quiet great hall. The fire pit burned brightly, as if someone tended to it all night, but save for the prince and his ruk, the pillar-filled hall was empty. It was still empty when he hauled her up into the saddle and Kadara leaped from the cave mouth.

Freezing air slammed into her face, whipping at her cheeks as they dove.

A few other ruks were aloft. Likely out for their breakfasts, Sartaq told her,

his voice soft in the emerging dawn. And it was in pursuit of Kadara's own meal that they went, sailing out of the three peaks of the Eridun's aerie and deep into the fir-cruled mountains beyond.

It was only after Kadara had snatched half a dozen fat silver salmon from a rushing turquoise river, hurling them each in the air before swallowing them in a slicing bite, that Sartaq steered them toward a cluster of smaller peaks.

"The training run," he said, pointing. The rocks were smoother, the drops between peaks less sharp—more like smooth, rounded gullies. "Where the novices learn to ride."

Though less brutal than the three brother-peaks of the Dorgos, it didn't seem any safer. "You said you raised Kadara from a hatchling. Is that how it is done for all riders?"

"Not when we are first learning to ride. Children take out the seasoned, more docile ruks, ones too old to make long flights. We learn on them until we are thirteen, fourteen, and then find our hatchling to raise and train ourselves."

"Thirteen—"

"We take our first rides at four. Or the others do. I was, as you know, a few years late."

Nesryn pointed to the training run. "You let four-year-olds ride alone through *that*?"

"Family members or hearth-kin usually go on the first several rides."

Nesryn blinked at the little mountain range, trying and failing to imagine her various nieces and nephews, who were still prone to running naked and shrieking through the house at the mere whisper of the word *bath*, responsible for not only commanding one of the beasts beneath her, but staying *in* the saddle.

"The horse-clans on the steppes have the same training," Sartaq explained. "Most can stand atop the horses by six, and begin learning to wield bows and spears as soon as their feet can reach the stirrups. Aside from the standing"—a chuckle at the thought—"our children have an identical process." The sun

peeked out, warming the skin she'd left exposed to the biting wind. "It was how the first khagan conquered the continent. Our people were already well trained as a cavalry, disciplined and used to carrying their own supplies. The other armies they faced ... Those kingdoms did not anticipate foes who knew how to ride across thick winter ice they believed would guard their cities during the cold months. And they did not anticipate an army that traveled light, engineers amongst them to craft weapons from any materials they found when they reached their destinations. To this day, the Academy of Engineers in Balruhn remains the most prestigious in the khaganate."

Nesryn knew that—her father still mentioned the Academy every now and then. A distant cousin had attended and gone on to earn a small degree of fame for inventing some harvesting machine.

Sartaq steered Kadara southward, soaring high above the snowcapped peaks. "Those kingdoms also didn't anticipate an army that conquered from behind, by taking routes that few would risk." He pointed to the west, toward a pale band along the horizon. "The Kyzultum Desert lies that way. For centuries, it was a barrier between the steppes and the greener lands. To attempt to conquer the southern territories, everyone had always taken the long way around it, giving plenty of time for the defenders to rally a host. So when those kingdoms heard the khagan and his hundred thousand warriors were on the move, they positioned their armies to intercept them." Pride limned his every word. "Only to discover that the khagan and his armies had directly crossed the Kyzultum, befriending local nomads long sneered at by the southern kingdoms to guide them. Allowing the khagan to creep right behind them and sack their unguarded cities."

She felt his smile at her ear and found herself settling a little farther into him. "What happened then?" She'd only heard fragments of the stories—never such a sweeping account, and certainly not from the lips of one born to this glorious bloodline. "Was it open war?"

"No," Sartaq said. "He avoided outright combat whenever he could, actually.

Made a brutal example of a few key leaders, so that terror would spread, and by the time he reached many of those cities or armies, most laid down their arms and accepted his terms of surrender in exchange for protection. He used fear as a weapon, just as much as he wielded his *sulde*.”

“I heard he had two—*sulde*, I mean.”

“He did. And my father still does. The Ebony and the Ivory, we call them. A *sulde* with white horsehair to carry in times of peace and one with black horsehair to wield in war.”

“I assume he brought the Ebony with him on those campaigns.”

“Oh, he certainly did. And by the time he’d crossed the Kyzultum and sacked that first city, word of what awaited resistance, word that he was indeed carrying the Ebony *sulde*, spread so quick and so far that when he arrived at the next kingdom, they didn’t even bother to raise an army. They just surrendered. The khagan rewarded them handsomely for it—and made sure other territories heard of that, too.” He was quiet for a moment. “Adarlan’s king was not so clever or merciful, was he?”

“No,” Nesryn said, swallowing. “He was not.” The man had destroyed and pillaged and enslaved. Not the man—the demon within him.

She added, “The army that Erawan has rallied ... He began amassing it long before Dorian and Aelin matured and claimed their birthrights. Chaol—Lord Westfall told me of tunnels and chambers beneath the palace in Rifthold that had been there for years. Places where human and Valg had been experimented upon. Right under the feet of mindless courtiers.”

“Which raises the question of why,” Sartaq mused. “If he’d conquered most of the northern continent, why gather such a force? He thought Aelin Galathynius was dead—I assume he did not anticipate that Dorian Havilliard would turn rebel, too.”

She hadn’t told him of the Wyrddkeys—and still couldn’t bring herself to divulge them. “We’ve always believed that Erawan was hell-bent on conquering

this world. It seemed motive enough.”

“But you sound doubtful now.”

Nesryn considered. “I just don’t understand why. Why all this effort, why want to conquer *more* when he’d secretly controlled the northern continent anyway. Erawan got away with plenty of horrors. Is it only that he wishes to plunge our world into further darkness? Does he wish to call himself master of the earth?”

“Perhaps things like motives and reason are foreign to demons. Perhaps he only has the drive to destroy.”

Nesryn shook her head, squinting against the sun as it rose higher, the light turning blinding.



Sartaq returned to the Eridun aerie, left Kadara in the great hall, and continued Nesryn’s tour. He spared her the embarrassment of begging not to use the rope ladders along the cliff face and led her through the internal stairwells and passageways of the mountain. To get to the other two peaks, he claimed, they’d need to either fly across or take one of the two bridges strung between them. One glance at the rope and wood and Nesryn announced she could wait for another day to try.

Riding on Kadara was one thing. Nesryn trusted the bird, and trusted her rider. But the swaying bridge, however well built ... She might need a drink or two before trying to cross.

But there was plenty to see within the mountain itself—Rokhal, the Whisperer, he was called. The other two brother-peaks that made up the Dorgos were Arik, the Lilter; and Torke, the Roarer—all three named for the way the wind itself sang as it passed over and around them.

Rokhal was the biggest of them, the most delved, his crown jewel being the Hall of Altun near the top. But even in the chambers below Altun, Nesryn hardly

knew where to look as the prince showed her through the winding corridors and spaces.

The various kitchens and small gathering halls; the ruk riders' houses and workshops; the nests of various ruks, who ranged in color from Kadara's gold to dark brown; the smithies where armor was forged from ore mined within the mountain; the tanneries where the saddles were meticulously crafted; the trading posts where one might barter for household goods and small trinkets. And lastly, atop Rokhal himself, the training rings.

There was no wall or fence along the broad, flat-topped summit. Only the small, round building that provided a reprieve from the wind and cold, as well as access to the stairwell beneath.

Nesryn was out of breath by the time they opened the wooden door to the rasping wind—and the sight that stretched before her certainly snatched away any remaining air in her lungs.

Even flying above and amongst the mountains felt somehow different from this.

Snowcapped, dominating peaks surrounded them, ancient as the earth, untouched and slumbering. Nearby, a long lake sparkled between twin ridges, ruks mere shadows over the teal surface.

She'd never seen anything so great and unforgiving, so vast and beautiful. And even though she was as insignificant as a mayfly compared with the size of the mountains around them, some piece of her felt keenly a part of it, born from it.

Sartaq stood at her side, following where her attention drifted, as if their gazes were bound together. And when Nesryn's stare landed upon a lonely, broad mountain on the other end of the lake, he drew in a swift breath. No trees grew on its dark sides; only snow provided a cape over its uppermost crags and summit.

"That is Arundin," Sartaq said softly, as if fearful of even the wind hearing.

“The fourth Singer amid these peaks.” The wind indeed seemed to flow from the mountain, cold and swift. “The Silent One, we call him.”

Indeed, a heavy sort of quiet seemed to ripple around that peak. In the turquoise waters of the lake at his feet lay a perfect mirror image, so clear that Nesryn wondered if one might dive beneath the surface and find another world, a shadow-world, beneath. “Why?”

Sartaq turned, as if the sight of Arundin was not one to be endured for long. “It is upon his slopes that the rukhin bury our dead. If we fly closer, you’ll see *sulde* covering his sides—the only markers of the fallen.”

It was an entirely inappropriate and morbid question, but Nesryn asked, “Will you one day be laid there, or out in the sacred land of the steppes with the rest of your family?”

Sartaq toed the smooth rock beneath them. “That choice remains before me. The two parts of my heart shall likely have a long war over it.”

She certainly understood it—that tug between two places.

Shouts and clanging metal drew her attention from the beckoning, eternal silence of Arundin to the real purpose of the space atop Rokhal: the training rings.

Men and women in riding leathers stood at various circles and stations. Some fired arrows at targets with impressive accuracy, some hurled spears, some sparred sword to sword. Older riders barked orders or corrected aim and posture, stalking amongst the warriors.

A few turned in Sartaq’s direction as he and Nesryn approached the training ring at the far end of the space. The archery circuit.

With the wind, the cold ... Nesryn found herself calculating those factors. Admiring the archers’ skill all the more. And she was somehow not surprised to find Borte among the three archers aiming at stuffed dummies, her long braids snapping in the wind.

“Here to have your ass handed to you again, brother?” Borte’s smirk was full

of that wicked delight.

Sartaq let out his rich, pleasant laugh again, taking up a longbow and shouldering a quiver from the stand nearby. He nudged his hearth-sister aside with a bump of the hip, nocking an arrow with ease. He aimed, fired, and Nesryn smiled as the arrow found its mark, right in the neck of the dummy.

“Impressive, for a princeling,” Borte drawled. She turned to Nesryn, her dark brows high. “And you?”

Well, then. Swallowing her smile, Nesryn shrugged out of the heavier wool overcoat, gave Borte an incline of her head, and approached the rack of arrows and bows. The mountain wind was bracing with only her riding leathers for warmth, but she blocked out Rokhal’s whispering as she ran her fingers down the carved wood. Yew, ash ... She plucked up one of the yew bows, testing its weight, its flexibility and resistance. A solid, deadly weapon.

Yet familiar. As familiar as an old friend. She had not picked up a bow until her mother’s death, and during those initial years of grief and numbness, the physical training, the concentration and strength required, had been a sanctuary, and a reprieve, and forge.

She wondered if any of her old tutors had survived the attack on Rifthold. If any of their arrows had brought down wyverns. Or slowed them enough to save lives.

Nesryn let the thought settle as she moved to the quivers, pulling out arrows. The metal tips were heavier than those she’d used in Adarlan, the shaft slightly thicker. Designed to cut through brutal winds at racing speeds. Perhaps, if they were lucky, take out a wyvern or two.

She selected arrows from various quivers, setting them into her own before she strapped it across her back and approached the line where Borte, Sartaq, and a few others were silently watching.

“Pick a mark,” Nesryn told Borte.

The woman smirked. “Neck, heart, head.” She pointed to each of the three

dummies, a different mark for each one. Wind rattled them, the aim and strength needed to hit each utterly different. Borte knew it—all the warriors here did.

Nesryn lifted an arm behind her head, dragging her fingers along the fletching, the feathers rippling against her skin as she scanned the three targets. Listened to the murmur of the winds racing past Rokhal, that wild summons she heard echoed in her own heart. *Wind-seeker*, her mother had called her.

One after another, Nesryn withdrew an arrow and fired.

Again, and again, and again.

Again, and again, and again.

Again, and again, and again.

And when she finished, only the howling wind answered—the wind of Torke, the Roarer. Every training ring had stopped. Staring at what she'd done.

Instead of three arrows distributed amongst the three dummies, she'd fired nine.

Three rows of perfectly aligned shots on each: heart, neck, and head. Not an inch of difference. Even with the singing winds.

Sartaq was grinning when she turned to him, his long braid drifting behind him, as if it were a *sulde* itself.

But Borte elbowed past him, and breathed to Nesryn, "Show me."



For hours, Nesryn stood atop the Rokhal training ring and explained how she'd done it, how she calculated wind and weight and air. And as much as she showed the various rotations that came through, *they* also demonstrated their own techniques. The way they twisted in their saddles to fire backward, which bows they wielded for hunting or warfare.

Nesryn's cheeks were wind-chapped, her hands numb, but she was smiling—wide and unfailingly—when Sartaq was approached by a breathless messenger who had burst from the stairwell entrance.

His hearth-mother had returned to the aerie at last.

Sartaq's face revealed nothing, though a nod from him had Borte ordering all the onlookers to go back to their various stations. They did so with a few grins of thanks and welcome to Nesryn, which she returned with an incline of her head.

Sartaq set his quiver and bow on the wooden rack, extending a hand for Nesryn's. She passed him both, flexing her fingers after hours of gripping bow and string.

"She'll be tired," Borte warned him, a short sword in her hand. Her training, apparently, was not over for the day. "Don't pester her too much."

Sartaq threw an incredulous look at Borte. "You think I want to get smacked with a spoon again?"

Nesryn choked at that, but shrugged into the embroidered cobalt-and-gold wool coat, belting it tightly. She trailed the prince as he headed into the warm interior, straightening her wind-tossed hair as they descended the dim stairwell.

"Even though Borte is to one day lead the Eridun, she trains with the others?"

"Yes," Sartaq said without glancing over his shoulder. "Hearth-mothers all know how to fight, how to attack and defend. But Borte's training includes other things."

"Like learning the different tongues of the world." Her use of the northern language was as impeccable as Sartaq's.

"Like that. And history, and ... more. Things even I am not told of by either Borte or her grandmother."

The words echoed off the stones around them. Nesryn dared ask, "Where's Borte's mother?"

Sartaq's shoulders tensed. "Her *sulde* stands on Arundin's slopes."

Just the way he spoke it, the cold cut of his voice ... "I'm sorry."

"So am I," was all Sartaq said.

"Her father?"

"A man her mother met in distant lands, and whom she did not care to hold

on to for longer than a night.”

Nesryn considered the fierce, wicked young woman who’d fought with no small skill in the training rings. “I’m glad she has you, then. And her grandmother.”

Sartaq shrugged. Dangerous, strange territory—she’d somehow waded into a place where she had no right to pry.

But then Sartaq said, “You’re a good teacher.”

“Thank you.” It was all she could think to say. He’d kept close to her side while she walked the others through her various positions and techniques, but had said little. A leader who did not need to constantly be filling the air with talking and boasting.

He blew out a breath, shoulders loosening. “And I’m relieved to see that the reality lives up to the legend.”

Nesryn chuckled, grateful to be back on safer ground. “You had doubts?”

They reached the landing that would take them to the great hall. Sartaq let her fall into step beside him. “The reports left out some key information. It made me doubt their accuracy.”

It was the sly gleam in his eye that made Nesryn angle her head. “What, exactly, did they fail to mention?”

They reached the great hall, empty save for a cloaked figure just barely visible on the other side of the fire pit—and someone sitting beside her.

But Sartaq turned to her, examining her from head to toe and back again. There was little that he missed. “They didn’t mention that you’re beautiful.”

Nesryn opened and closed her mouth in what she was sure was an unflattering impression of a fish on dry land.

With a wink, Sartaq strode ahead, calling, “*Ej.*” The rukhin’s term for *mother*, he’d told her this morning. Nesryn hurried after him. They rounded the massive fire pit, the figure sitting atop the uppermost stair pulling back her hood.

She’d expected an ancient crone, bent with age and toothless.

Instead, a straight-backed woman with braided, silver-streaked onyx hair smiled grimly at Sartaq. And though age had indeed touched her features ... it was Borte's face. Or Borte's face in forty years.

The hearth-mother wore a rider's leathers, though her dark blue cloak—actually a jacket she'd left hanging over her shoulders—covered much of them.

But at her side ... Falkan. His face equally grave, those dark sapphire eyes scanning them. Sartaq checked his pace at the sight of the merchant, either irritated that he hadn't been first to claim her attention or simply that the merchant was present for this reunion.

Manners or self-preserving instincts kicked in, and Sartaq continued his approach, hopping down onto the first ledge of the pit to stride the rest of the way.

Houlun rose when he was near, enfolding him in a swift, hard embrace. She cupped his shoulders when she was done, the woman nearly as tall as him, shoulders strong and thighs well muscled, and surveyed Sartaq with a shrewd eye.

"Sorrow weighs heavily on you still," she observed, running a scar-flecked hand over Sartaq's high cheekbone. "And worry."

Sartaq's eyes shuttered before he ducked his head. "I have missed you, *Ej*."

"Sweet-talker," Houlun chided, patting his cheek.

To Nesryn's delight, she could have sworn the prince blushed.

The firelight cast the few strands of silver in Houlun's hair with red and gold as she peered around Sartaq's broad shoulders to where Nesryn stood atop the lip of the pit. "And the archer from the north arrives at last." An incline of her head. "I am Houlun, daughter of Dochin, but you may call me *Ej*, as the others do."

One glance into the woman's brown eyes and Nesryn knew Houlun was not one who missed much. Nesryn bowed her head. "It is an honor."

The hearth-mother stared at her for a long moment. Nesryn met her gaze, remaining as still as she could. Letting the woman see what she wanted.

At last, Houlun's eyes slid toward Sartaq. "We have matters to discuss."

Absent that fierce gaze, Nesryn loosed a breath but kept her spine ramrod straight.

Sartaq nodded, something like relief on his face. But he glanced toward Falkan, watching all from his seat. "They are things that should be told privately, *Ej*."

Not rude, but certainly not warm. Nesryn refrained from echoing the prince's sentiment.

Houlun waved a hand. "Then they may wait." She pointed to the stone bench. "Sit."

"*Ej—*"

Falkan shifted, as if he'd do them all a favor and go.

But Houlun pointed to him in silent warning to remain. "I would have you all listen."

Sartaq dropped onto the bench, the only sign of his discontent being the foot he tapped on the floor. Nesryn sat beside him, the stern woman reclaiming her perch between them and Falkan.

"An ancient malice is stirring deep in these mountains," Houlun said. "It is why I have been gone these past few days—to seek it out."

"*Ej*." Warning and fear coated the prince's voice.

"I am not so old that I cannot wield my *sulde*, boy." She glowered at him. Indeed, nothing about this woman seemed old at all.

Sartaq asked, frowning, "What did you go in pursuit of?"

Houlun glanced around the hall for any stray ears. "Ruk nests have been pillaged. Eggs stolen in the night, hatchlings vanishing."

Sartaq swore, filthy and low. Nesryn blinked at it, even as her stomach tightened. "Poachers have not dared tread in these mountains for decades," the prince said. "But you should not have pursued them *alone*, *Ej*."

"It was not poachers I sought. But something worse."

Shadows lined the woman's face, and Nesryn swallowed. If the Valg had come here—

“My own *ej* called them the *kharankui*.”

“It means shadow—darkness,” Sartaq murmured to Nesryn, dread tightening his face.

Her heart thundered. Should the Valg be here already—

“But in your lands,” Houlun went on, glancing between Nesryn and Falkan, “they call them something different, don't they?”

Nesryn sized up Falkan as he swallowed, wondering herself how to lie or deflect revealing anything about the Valg—

But Falkan nodded. And he replied, voice barely audible above the flame, “We call them the stygian spiders.”

“The stygian spiders are little more than myths,” Nesryn managed to say to Houlun. “Spidersilk is so rare some even doubt it exists. You might be chasing ghosts.”

But it was Falkan who replied with a grim smile, “I would beg to differ, Captain Faliq.” He reached into the breast of his jacket, and Nesryn tensed, hand shooting for the dagger at her waist—

It was no weapon he pulled out.

The white fabric glittered, the iridescence like starfire as Falkan shifted it in his hand. Even Sartaq whistled at the handkerchief-sized piece of cloth.

“Spidersilk,” Falkan said, tucking the piece back into his jacket. “Straight from the source.”

As Nesryn’s mouth popped open, Sartaq said, “You have seen these terrors up close.” Not quite a question.

“I bartered with their kin in the northern continent,” Falkan corrected, that grim smile remaining. Along with shadows. So many shadows. “Nearly three years ago. Some might deem it a fool’s bargain, but I walked away with a hundred yards of Spidersilk.”

The handkerchief in his jacket alone could fetch a king’s ransom. A hundred yards of it ... “You must be wealthy as the khagan,” she blurted.

A shrug. “I have learned that true wealth is not all glittering gold and jewels.”

Sartaq asked quietly, “What was the cost, then?” For the stygian spiders

traded not in material goods, but dreams and wishes and—

“Twenty years. Twenty years of my life. Taken not from the end, but the prime.”

Nesryn scanned the man, his face just beginning to show the signs of age, the hair still without gray—

“I am twenty-seven,” Falkan said to her. “And yet I now appear to be a man of nearly fifty.”

Holy gods. “What are you doing at the aerie, then?” Nesryn demanded. “Do the spiders here produce the silk, too?”

“They are not so civilized as their sisters in the north,” Houlun said, clicking her tongue. “The *kharankui* do not create—only destroy. Long have they dwelled in their caves and passes of the Dagul Fells, in the far south of these mountains. And long have we maintained a respectful distance.”

“Why do you think they now come to steal our eggs?” Sartaq glanced to the few ruks lingering at the cave mouth, waiting for their riders. He leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs.

“Who else?” the hearth-mother countered. “No poachers have been spotted. Who else might sneak upon a ruk’s nest, so high in the world? I flew over their domain these past few days. The webs indeed have grown from the peaks and passes of the Fells down to the pine forests in the ravines, choking off all life.” A glance toward Falkan. “I do not believe it mere coincidence that the *kharankui* have again begun preying upon the world at the same time a merchant seeks out our aerie for answers regarding their northern kin.”

Falkan raised his hands at Sartaq’s sharp look. “I have not sought them out nor provoked them. I heard whispers of your hearth-mother’s trove of knowledge and thought to seek her counsel before I dared anything.”

“What do you want with them?” Nesryn asked, angling her head.

Falkan examined his hands, flexing the fingers as if they were stiff. “I want my youth back.”

Houlun said to Sartaq, “He sold his hundred yards but still thinks he can reclaim the time.”

“I *can* reclaim it,” Falkan insisted, earning a warning glare from Houlun at his tone. He checked himself, and clarified, “There are ... things that I still have left to do. I should like to accomplish them before old age interferes. I was told that slaying the spider who ate my twenty years was the only way to return those lost years to me.”

Nesryn’s brows narrowed. “Why not go hunt that spider back home, then? Why come here?”

Falkan didn’t answer.

Houlun said, “Because he was also told that only a great warrior can slay a *kharankui*. The greatest in the land. He heard of our close proximity to the terrors and thought to try his luck here first—to learn what we know about the spiders; perhaps how to kill them.” A faintly bemused look. “Perhaps also to find some backdoor way of reclaiming his years, an alternate route *here*, to spare him the confrontation *there*.”

A sound enough plan for a man insane enough to barter away his life in the first place.

“What does any of this have to do with the stolen eggs and hatchlings, *Ej*?” Sartaq, too, apparently possessed little sympathy for the merchant who’d traded his youth for kingly wealth. Falkan turned his face toward the fire, as if well aware of that.

“I want you to find them,” Houlun said.

“They have likely already died, *Ej*.”

“Those horrors can keep their prey alive long enough in their cocoons. But you are right—they have likely already been consumed.” Rage flickered in the woman’s face, a vision of the warrior beneath; the warrior her granddaughter was becoming as well. “Which is why I want you to find them the next time it happens. And remind those unholy piles of filth that we do not take kindly to

theft of our young.” She jerked her chin to Falkan. “When they go, you will go, too. See if the answers you seek are there.”

“Why not go now?” Nesryn asked. “Why not seek them out and punish them?”

“Because we have no proof still,” Sartaq answered. “And if we attack unprovoked ...”

“The *kharankui* have long been the enemies of the ruks,” Houlun finished. “They warred once, long ago. Before the riders climbed up from the steppes.” She shook her head, chasing away the shadow of memory, and declared to Sartaq, “Which is why we shall keep this quiet. The last thing we need is for riders and ruks to fly out there in a rage, or fill this place with panic. Tell them to be on their guard at the nests, but do not say why.”

Sartaq nodded. “As you will it, *Ej*.”

The hearth-mother turned to Falkan. “I would have a word with my captain.”

Falkan understood the dismissal and rose. “I am at your disposal, Prince Sartaq.” With a graceful bow, he strode off into the hall.

When Falkan’s steps had faded, Houlun murmured, “It is starting anew, isn’t it?” Those dark eyes slid to Nesryn, the fire gilding the whites. “The One Who Sleeps has awoken.”

“Erawan,” Nesryn breathed. She could have sworn the great fire banked in answer.

“You know of him, *Ej*?” Sartaq moved to sit on the woman’s other side, allowing Nesryn to scoot closer down the stone bench.

But the hearth-mother swept her sharp stare over Nesryn. “You have faced them. His beasts of shadow.”

Nesryn clamped down on the memories that surfaced. “I have. He’s built an army of terrors on the northern continent. In Morath.”

Houlun turned toward Sartaq. “Does your father know?”

“Bits and pieces. His grief ...” Sartaq watched the fire. Houlun placed a hand

on the prince's knee. "There was an attack in Antica. On a healer of the Torre."

Houlun swore, as filthily as her hearth-son.

"We think one of Erawan's agents might be behind it," Sartaq went on. "And rather than waste time convincing my father to listen to half-formed theories, I remembered your tales, *Ej*, and thought to see if you might know anything."

"And if I told you?" A searching, sharp look—fierce as a ruk's gaze. "If I told you what I know of the threat, would you empty every aerie and nest? Would you fly across the Narrow Sea to face them—to never return?"

Sartaq's throat bobbed. And Nesryn realized that he had not come here for answers.

Perhaps Sartaq already knew enough about the Valg to decide for himself about how to face the threat. He had come here to win over his people—this woman. He might command the ruks in the eyes of his father, the empire. But in these mountains, Houlun's word was law.

And in that fourth peak, on Arundin's silent slopes ... Her daughter's *sulde* stood in the wind. A woman who understood the cost of life—deeply. Who might not be so eager to let her granddaughter ride with the legion. If she allowed the Eridun rukhin to leave at all.

"If the *kharankui* are stirring, if Erawan has risen in the north," Sartaq said carefully, "it is a threat for all to face." He bowed his head. "But I would hear what you know, *Ej*. What perhaps even the kingdoms in the north might have lost to time and destruction. Why it is that our people, tucked away in this land, know such stories when the ancient demon wars never reached these shores."

Houlun surveyed them, her long, thick braid swaying. Then she braced a hand on the stone and rose, groaning. "I must eat first, and rest awhile. Then I shall tell you." She frowned toward the cave mouth, the silvery sheen of sunlight staining the walls. "A storm is coming. I outran it on the flight back. Tell the others to prepare."

With that, the hearth-mother strode from the warmth of the pit and into the

hall beyond. Her steps were stiff, but her back was straight. A warrior's pace, clipped and unfaltering.

But instead of aiming for the round table or the kitchens, Houlun entered a door that Nesryn had marked as leading into the small library.

"She is our Story Keeper," Sartaq explained, following Nesryn's attention. "Being around the texts helps to tunnel into her memory."

Not just a hearth-mother who knew the rukhin's history, but a sacred Story Keeper—a rare gift for remembering and telling the legends and histories of the world.

Sartaq rose, groaning himself as he stretched. "She's never wrong about a storm. We should spread the word." He pointed to the hall behind them. "You take the interior. I'll go to the other peaks and let them know."

Before Nesryn could ask who, exactly, she should approach, the prince stalked for Kadara.

She frowned. Well, it would seem that she'd only have her own thoughts for company. A merchant hunting for spiders that might help him reclaim his youth, or at least learn how he might take it back from their northern kin. And the spiders themselves ... Nesryn shuddered to think of those things crawling here, of all places, to feed on the most vulnerable. Monsters out of legend.

Perhaps Erawan was summoning all the dark, wicked things of this world to his banner.

Rubbing her hands as if she could implant the heat of the flame into her skin, Nesryn headed into the aerie proper.

A storm was coming, she was to tell any who crossed her path.

But she knew one was already here.



The storm struck just after nightfall. Great claws of lightning ripped at the sky, and thunder shuddered through every hall and floor.

Seated around the fire pit, Nesryn glanced to the distant cave mouth, where mighty curtains had been drawn across the space. They billowed and puffed in the wind, but remained anchored to the floor, parting only slightly to allow glimpses of the rain-lashed night.

Just inside them, three ruks sat curled in what seemed to be nests of straw and cloth: Kadara, a fierce brown ruk that Nesryn had been told belonged to Houlun, and a smaller ruk with a reddish-dun coloring. The tiniest ruk belonged to Borte—a veritable runt, the girl had called her at dinner, even as she'd beamed with pride.

Nesryn stretched out her aching legs, grateful for the heat of the fire and the blanket Sartaq had dropped in her lap. She'd spent hours going up and down the aerie stairs, telling whoever she encountered that Houlun had said a storm approached.

Some had given her thankful nods and hurried off; others had offered hot tea and small samplings of whatever they were cooking in their hearths. Some asked where Nesryn had come from, why she was here. And whenever she explained that she had come from Adarlan but that her people hailed from the southern continent, their replies were all the same: *Welcome home*.

The trek up and down the various stairs and sloped halls had taken its toll, along with the hours of training that morning. And by the time Houlun settled herself on the bench between Nesryn and Sartaq—Falkan and Borte having drifted off to their own rooms after dinner—Nesryn was near nodding off.

Lightning cracked outside, limning the hall with silver. For long minutes, as Houlun stared into the fire, there was only the grumble of thunder and the howl of the wind and the patter of the rain, only the crackle of the fire and rustling of ruk's wings.

“Stormy nights are the domain of Story Keepers,” Houlun intoned in Halha. “We can hear one approaching from a hundred miles away, smell the charge in the air like a hound on a scent. They tell us to prepare, to ready for them. To

gather our kin close and listen carefully.”

The hair on Nesryn’s arms rose beneath the warmth of her wool coat.

“Long ago,” Houlun continued, “before the khaganate, before the horse-lords on the steppes and the Torre by the sea, before any mortal ruled these lands ... A rip appeared in the world. In these very mountains.”

Sartaq’s face was unreadable as his hearth-mother spoke, but Nesryn swallowed.

A rip in the world—an open Wyrddgate. Here.

“It opened and closed swiftly, no more than a flash of lightning.”

As if in answer, veins of forked lightning lit the sky beyond.

“But that was all that was needed. For the horrors to enter. The *kharankui*, and other beasts of shadow.”

The words echoed through Nesryn.

The *kharankui*—the stygian spiders ... and other infiltrators. None of them ordinary beasts at all.

But Valg.

Nesryn was grateful she was already sitting. “The Valg were *here*?” Her voice was too loud, too ordinary in the storm-filled silence.

Sartaq gave Nesryn a warning look, but Houlun only nodded, a jab of the chin. “Most of the Valg left, summoned northward when more hordes appeared there. But this place ... perhaps the Valg that arrived here were a vanguard, who assessed this land and did not find what they were seeking. So they moved out. But the *kharankui* remained in the mountain passes, servants to a dark crown. They did not leave. The spiders learned the tongues of men as they ate the fools stupid enough to venture into their barren realm. Some who made it out claimed they remained because the Fells reminded them of their own, blasted world. Others said the spiders lingered to guard the way back—to wait for that door to open up again. And to go home.

“War waged in the east, in the ancient Fae realms. Three demon kings against

a Fae Queen and her armies. Demons that passed through a door between worlds to conquer our own.”

And so she went on, describing the story Nesryn knew well. She let the hearth-mother narrate as her mind spun.

The stygian spiders—actually Valg hiding in plain sight all this time.

Houlun went on, and Nesryn reeled herself back together until, “And yet, even when the Valg were banished to their realm, even when the final remaining demon king slithered into the dark places of the world to hide, the Fae came here. To these mountains. They taught the ruks to fight the *kharankui*, taught the ruks the languages of Fae and men. They built watchtowers along these mountains, erected warning beacons throughout the land. Were they a distant guard against the *kharankui*? Or were the Fae, too, like the spiders, waiting for that rip in the world to open again? By the time anyone thought to ask why, they had left those watchtowers and faded into memory.”

Houlun paused, and Sartaq asked, “Is there ... is there anything on how the Valg might be defeated—beyond mere battle? Any power to help us fight these new hordes Erawan has built?”

Houlun slid her gaze to Nesryn. “Ask her,” she said to the prince. “She already knows.”

Sartaq barely hid his ripple of shock as he leaned forward.

Nesryn breathed, “I cannot tell you. Any of you. If Morath hears a whisper of it, the sliver of hope we have is gone.” The Wyrdkeys ... she couldn’t risk saying it. Even to them.

“You brought me down here on a fool’s errand, then.” Sharp, cold words.

“No,” Nesryn insisted. “There is much we still don’t know. That these spiders hail from the Valg’s world, that they were *part* of the Valg army and have an outpost here as well as in the Ruhnn Mountains in the northern continent ... Perhaps it is tied, somehow. Perhaps there is something we have not yet learned, some weakness amongst the Valg we might exploit.” She studied the hall,

calming her thundering heart. Fear helped no one.

Houlun glanced between them. “Most of the Fae watchtowers are gone, but some still stand in partial ruin. The closest is perhaps half a day’s flight from here. Begin there—see if anything remains. Perhaps you might find an answer or two, Nesryn Faliq.”

“No one has ever looked?”

“The Fae set them with traps to keep the spiders at bay. When they abandoned the towers, they left them intact. Some tried to enter—to loot, to learn. None returned.”

“Is it worth the risk?” A cool question from a captain to the hearth-mother of his aerie.

Houlun’s jaw clenched. “I have told you what I can—and even this is mere scraps of knowledge that have passed beyond most memories in this land. But if the *kharankui* are stirring again ... Someone *should* go to that watchtower. Maybe you will discover something of use. Learn how the Fae fought these terrors, how they kept them at bay.” A long, assessing look at Nesryn as thunder rattled the caves again. “Perhaps it will make that sliver of hope just a bit larger.”

“Or get us killed,” Sartaq said, frowning toward the ruks half asleep in their nests.

“Nothing valuable comes without a cost, boy,” Houlun countered. “But do not linger in the watchtower after dark.”

Well, on the one hand, at least Rolfe’s map worked.

It had been Rowan’s idea, actually. And she might have felt slightly guilty for letting Aedion and Lysandra believe the Pirate Lord had only gone after the Amulet of Orynth, but ... at least they now knew his unholy map functioned. And that the Pirate Lord was indeed living in terror of the Valg returning to this harbor.

She wondered what Rolfe made of it—what his map had shown him of the Wyrdkey. If it revealed the difference between it and the Wyrdstone rings his men had been enslaved with. Whatever the reason, the Pirate Lord had sent his barmaid to scout for any hint of the Valg, not realizing Rowan had selected that dead-end alley to ensure *only* someone sent by Rolfe would venture so far down it. And since Aelin had no doubt whatsoever that Aedion and Lysandra had snuck through the streets unnoticed ... Well, at least that part of her evening had gone right.

As for the rest of it ... It was just past midnight when Aelin wondered how the hell she and Rowan would ever go back to normalcy if they survived this war. If there’d be a day when it wasn’t easy to leap over rooftops as if they were stones on a stream, to break into someone’s room and hold a blade to the occupant’s throat.

They did the first two within the span of fifteen minutes.

And as they found Gavriel and Fenrys waiting for them in their shared room in the Sea Dragon inn, Aelin supposed she needn’t bother with the third. Even if both she and Rowan kept their hands within casual reach of their daggers while they leaned against the wall beside the now-shut window. They’d unlocked it with Rowan’s wind—only to have a candle ignite the moment the window swung away. Revealing two stone-faced Fae warriors, both dressed and armed.

“You could have used the door,” Fenrys said, arms crossed—a bit too casually.

“Why bother when a dramatic entrance is so much more fun?” Aelin countered.

Fenrys's beautiful face twitched with amusement that didn't quite meet his onyx eyes. "What a shame it'd be for you to miss out on any of that."

She grinned at him. He grinned at her.

She supposed both of their smiles were less of a grin and more ... teeth-exposing.

She snorted. "You two look like you enjoyed your summer in Doranelle. How's sweet Aunt Maeve?"

Gavriel's tattooed hands closed into loose fists. "You deny me the right to see my son and yet you barge into our room in the dead of the night to demand we divulge information about our blood-sworn queen."

"One, *I* did not deny you anything, kitty-cat."

Fenrys let out what might have been a choking sound.

"It's your son's decision, not mine. I don't have enough time to oversee or really care." Lies.

"It must be hard to find the time to care at all," Fenrys cut in, "when you are facing a mortal life span." A sly, cutting glance at Rowan. "Or is she due to Settle soon?"

Oh, he was a bastard. A bitter, hard-edged bastard, the laughing side of the coin to Lorcan's sullen brooding. Maeve certainly had a type.

Rowan's face yielded nothing. "The matter of Aelin's Settling is none of your concern."

"Isn't it? Knowing if she's immortal changes things. Many things."

"Fenrys," Gavriel warned.

She knew enough about it—the transition pureblooded Fae, and some demi-Fae, went through once their bodies locked into immortal youth. It was a rough process, their bodies and magic needing months to adjust to the sudden freezing and reordering of their aging process. Some Fae had no control over their power—some lost it entirely during the time it took to Settle.

And demi-Fae ... some might be longer-lived, some might have the true immortal gift given to them. Like Lorcan. And possibly Aedion. They'd find out in the next few years if he'd take after his mother ... or the male sitting across the room from her. If they survived the war.

And as for her ... She did not let herself think about it. Precisely for the reasons Fenrys claimed. "I don't see what it would change," she said to him. "There's already one immortal queen. Surely a second would be nothing new."

"And will you hand out blood oaths to males who catch your eye, or will it just be Whitethorn at your side?"

She could feel the aggression beginning to pour off Rowan, and she was half tempted to grumble, *They're your friends. Deal with them.* But he kept quiet, containing himself, as she said, "You didn't seem nearly so interested in me that day at Mistward."

"Trust me, he was," Gavriel muttered.

Aelin lifted a brow. But Fenrys was giving Gavriel a look that promised a slow death.

Rowan explained, "Fenrys was the one who ... volunteered to train you when Maeve told us you'd come to Wendlyn."

Was he, now. Interesting. "Why?"

Rowan opened his mouth, but Fenrys cut him off. "It would have gotten me out of Doranelle. And we likely would have had far more fun, anyway. I know what a bastard Whitethorn can be when it comes to training."

"You two would have stayed on that rooftop in Varese and drunk yourselves to death," Rowan said. "And as for training ... You're alive today because of that training, boyo."

Fenrys rolled his eyes. Younger, she realized. Still old by human standards, but Fenrys was and felt younger. Wilder.

"Speaking of Varese," Aelin said with cool amusement. "And Doranelle..."

"I will warn you," Gavriel said quietly, "that there is little we know regarding Maeve's plans, and less still we can reveal with the blood oath's constraints."

"How does she do it?" Aelin asked baldly. "With Rowan, it's not ... Every order I give him, even casual ones, are his to decide what to do with. Only when I actively pull on the bond can I get him to ... yield. And even then it's more of a suggestion."

"It is different with her," Gavriel said softly. "Dependent on the ruler it is sworn to. You two took the oath to each other with love in your hearts. You had no desire to own or rule him."

Aelin tried not to flinch at the truth of that word—*love*. That day ... when Rowan had looked into her eyes as he drank her blood ... she'd started to realize what it was. That the feeling that passed between them, so powerful there was no language to describe it ... It was not mere friendship, but something born of and strengthened by it.

"Maeve," Fenrys added, "offers it with those things in mind. And so the bond itself is born of obedience to her—no matter what. She orders, we submit. For whatever she wishes." Shadows danced in those eyes, and Aelin's fingers curled into fists. That Maeve felt the need to force any of them into her bed ...

Rowan had told her their familial bloodline, while distant, was still close enough that it had kept Maeve from seeking him out, but the others...

“So you couldn’t break it on your own.”

“Never—if we did so, the magic that binds us to her would kill us in the process,” Fenrys said. She wondered if he’d tried. How many times. He angled his head to the side, the movement purely lupine. “Why are you asking this?”

Because if Maeve somehow can claim ownership over Aedion’s life thanks to his bloodline, I can’t do a damn thing to help him.

Aelin shrugged. “Because you sidetracked me.” She gave him a little smile that she knew drove Rowan and Aedion insane, and—yes. It seemed it was a surefire way to piss off *any* Fae male, because ire flashed across Fenrys’s stupidly perfect face.

She picked at her nails. “I know you two are old and up past your bedtime, so I’ll keep this quick: Maeve’s armada sails for Eyllwe. We are now allies. But my path might take me into direct conflict with that fleet, maybe with her, whether I desire it or not.” Rowan had tensed slightly, and she wished it wouldn’t look weak to glance at him, try to read whatever had sparked the reaction.

Fenrys looked to Rowan—as if it were habit. “I think the bigger concern is whether Maeve sails to join Erawan. She could go either way.”

“Our—her network of information is too vast,” Rowan countered. “There’s not a chance she doesn’t already know the empire’s fleet is camped out in the Gulf of Oro.”

Aelin wondered how often her Fae Prince had to silently correct himself about what terms to use. *Our, her ...* Wondered if he ever missed the two males frowning at them.

“Maeve could be going to intercept it,” Gavriel mused. “Vanquish Morath’s fleet as proof of her intentions to assist you, then ... play it into whatever agenda she has beyond that.”

Aelin clicked her tongue. “Even with Fae soldiers on those ships, she couldn’t be stupid enough to risk such catastrophic losses just to get into my good graces again.” No matter that Aelin knew she’d accept any offer of aid from Maeve, risk or no.

Fenrys’s edged smile flashed. “Oh, the losses of Fae lives would be of little concern to her. It likely just increases her excitement about it.”

“Careful,” Gavriel said. Gods, he nearly sounded identical to Aedion with that tone.

Aelin went on, “Regardless. You two know what we face with Erawan; you know what Maeve wanted from me in Doranelle. What Lorcan left to do.” Their faces had resumed their warrior-calm and didn’t so much as flicker as she asked, “Did Maeve give you an order to take those keys from Lorcan as well? And the ring? Or is it just his life you’ll be claiming?”

“If we say she gave us the order to take everything,” Fenrys drawled, bracing his hands behind him on the bed, “will you kill us, Heir of Fire?”

“It’ll depend on how useful you prove to be as an ally,” Aelin simply said.

The weight hanging between her breasts beneath her shirt rumbled as if in answer.

“Rolfe has weapons,” Gavriel said quietly. “Or will be receiving them.”

Aelin lifted a brow. “And will hearing about it cost me?”

Gavriel wasn’t stupid enough to ask for Aedion. The warrior just said, “They’re called firelances. Alchemists in the southern continent developed them for their own territory wars. More than that, we don’t know, but the device can be wielded by one man—to devastating effect.”

And with magic-users still so new to their returned gifts, or mostly dead thanks to Adarlan...

She would not be alone. Not the only fire-wielder on that battlefield.

But only if Rolfe’s armada became hers. If he did what she was carefully, so carefully, guiding him to do. Reaching out to the southern continent could take months she didn’t have. But if Rolfe had already ordered a supply ... Aelin nodded at Rowan once more, and they pushed off the wall.

“That’s it?” Fenrys demanded. “Do we get to know what you plan to do with this information, or are we just your lackeys, too?”

“You don’t trust me; I don’t trust you,” Aelin said. “It’s easier that way.” She nudged open the window with her elbow. “But thank you for the information.”

Fenrys’s brows rose high enough that she wondered if Maeve had uttered those words in his hearing. And she honestly wished she’d melted her aunt that day in Doranelle.

She and Rowan leaped and climbed the rooftops of Skull’s Bay, the ancient shingles still slick from the day’s rain.

When the Ocean Rose glittered like a pale jewel a block ahead, Aelin paused in the shadows beside a chimney and murmured, “There is no room for error.”

Rowan laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know. We’ll make it count.”

Her eyes burned. “We’re playing a game against two monarchs who have ruled and schemed longer than most kingdoms have existed.” And even for her,

the odds of outsmarting and outmaneuvering them ... “Seeing the cadre, how Maeve contains them ... She came so close to separating us this spring. So close.”

Rowan traced his thumb over her mouth. “Even if Maeve had kept me enslaved, I would have fought her. Every day, every hour, every breath.” He kissed her softly and said onto her lips, “I would have fought for the rest of my life to find a way to return to you again. I knew it the moment you emerged from the Valg’s darkness and smiled at me through your flames.”

She swallowed the tightness in her throat and raised a brow. “You were willing to do that before all this? So few benefits back then.”

Amusement and something deeper danced in his eyes. “What I felt for you in Doranelle and what I feel for you now are the same. I just didn’t think I’d ever get the chance to act on it.”

She knew why she needed to hear it—he knew, too. Darrow’s and Rolfe’s words danced around in her head, an endless chorus of bitter threats. But Aelin only smirked at him. “Then act away, Prince.”

Rowan let out a low laugh, and said nothing else as he claimed her mouth, nudging her back against the crumbling chimney. She opened for him, and his tongue swept in, thorough, lazy.

Oh, gods—this. This was what drove her out of her mind—this fire between them.

They could burn the entire world to ashes with it. He was hers and she was his, and they had found each other across centuries of bloodshed and loss, across oceans and kingdoms and war.

Rowan pulled back, breathing heavily, and whispered against her lips, “Even when you’re in another kingdom, Aelin, your fire is still in my blood, my mouth.” She let out a soft moan, arching into him as his hand grazed her backside, not caring if anyone spotted them in the streets below.

“You said you wouldn’t take me against a tree the first time,” she breathed, sliding her hands up his arms, across the breadth of his sculpted chest. “What about a chimney?”

Rowan huffed another laugh and nipped at her bottom lip. “Remind me again why I missed you.”

Aelin chuckled, but the sound was quickly silenced as Rowan claimed her mouth again and kissed her deeply in the moonlight.

“Good,” said Yrene, the heavy, solid weight of Chaol’s leg braced against her shoulder while she slowly rotated it.

Spread below her on the floor of the workroom in the physicians’ compound of the Torre several days later, Chaol watched her in silence. The day was already burning enough that Yrene was drenched in sweat; or would have been, if the arid climate didn’t dry up the sweat before it could really soak her clothes. She could feel it, though, on her face—see it gleaming on Chaol’s own, his features tight with concentration while she knelt over him.

“Your legs are responding well to the training,” she observed, fingers digging into the powerful muscle of his thighs.

Yrene hadn’t asked what had changed. Why he’d started going to the guards’ courtyard at the palace. He hadn’t explained, either.

“They are,” Chaol merely answered, scrubbing his jaw. He hadn’t shaved that morning. When she’d entered his suite after he’d returned from this morning’s practice with the guard, he’d said he wanted to go for a ride—and to get a change in scenery for the day.

That he was so eager, so willing to see the city, to adapt to his surroundings ... Yrene hadn’t been able to say no. So they’d come here, after a meandering ride through Antica, to work in one of the quiet rooms down this hall. The rooms were all the same, each occupied by a desk, cot, and wall of cabinets, and each adorned with a solitary window that overlooked the neat rows of the sprawling

herb garden. Indeed, despite the heat, the scents of rosemary, mint, and sage filled the chamber.

Chaol grunted as Yrene lowered his left leg to the cool stone floor and started on his right. Her magic was a low thrum flowing through her and into him, careful to avoid the black stain that slowly—so, so slowly—receded down his spine.

They fought against it every day. The memories devoured him, fed on him, and Yrene shoved back against them, chipping away at the darkness that pushed in to torment him.

Sometimes, she glimpsed what he endured in that whirling black pit. The pain, the rage and guilt and sorrow. But only flickers, as if they were tendrils of smoke drifting past her. And though he did not discuss what he saw, Yrene managed to push back against that dark wave. So little at a time, mere chips of stone off a boulder, but ... better than nothing.

Closing her eyes, Yrene let her power seep into his legs like a swarm of white fireflies, finding those damaged pathways and congregating, surrounding the frayed bits that went silent during these exercises, when they should have been lit up like the rest of him.

“I’ve been researching,” she said, opening her eyes as she rotated his leg in his hip socket. “Things ancient healers did for people with spinal injuries. There was one woman, Linqin—she was able to make a magical brace for the entire body. An invisible sort of exoskeleton that allowed the person to walk, until they could reach a healer, or if the healing was somehow unsuccessful.”

Chaol cocked a brow. “I’m assuming you don’t have one?”

Yrene shook her head, lowering his leg and again picking up the other to begin the next set. “Linqin only made about ten, all connected to talismans that the user could wear. They’ve been lost to time, along with her method of creating them. And there was another healer, Saanvi, who legend says was able to bypass the healing entirely by planting some sort of tiny, magical shard of

stone in the brain—”

He cringed.

“I wasn’t suggesting I experiment on you,” she said, slapping his thigh. “Or need to.”

A half smile tugged on his mouth. “So how did this knowledge become lost? I thought the library here contained all your records.”

Yrene frowned. “Both were healers working at outposts far from the Torre. There are four throughout the continent—small centers for Torre healers to live and work. To help the people who can’t make the trip here. Linqin and Saanvi were so isolated that by the time anyone remembered to fetch their records, they’d been lost. All we have now is rumor and myth.”

“Do *you* keep records? Of all this?” He gestured between them.

Yrene’s face heated. “Parts of it. Not when you’re acting like a stubborn ass.”

Again, that smile tugged on his face, but Yrene set down his leg and pulled back, though she remained kneeling on the tiles. “My point,” she said, steering conversation from the journals in her room levels and levels above, “is that it *has* been done. I know it’s taking us a long while, and I know you’re anxious to return—”

“I am. But I’m not rushing you, Yrene.” He sat up in a smooth movement. On the floor like this, he towered over her, the sheer size of him nearly overwhelming. He rotated his foot slowly—fighting for each movement as the muscles in the rest of his legs objected.

Chaol lifted his head, meeting her stare. Reading it easily. “Whoever is hunting you won’t get the chance to hurt you—whether you and I finish tomorrow, or in six months.”

“I know,” she breathed. Kashin and his guards hadn’t caught or found traces of whoever had tried to attack her. And though it had been quiet these last few nights, she’d barely slept, even in the safety of the Torre. Only exhaustion from healing Chaol granted her any measure of reprieve.

She sighed. “I think we should see Nousha again. Take another visit to the library.”

His gaze turned wary. “Why?”

Yrene frowned at the open window behind them, the bright gardens and lavender bushes swaying in the sea breeze, the bees bobbing amongst them all. No sign of anyone listening nearby. “Because we still haven’t asked *how* those books and scrolls wound up here.”



“There are no records for acquisitions dating that far back,” Nousha said in Yrene and Chaol’s own tongue, her mouth a tight line of disapproval as she gazed at them over her desk.

Around them, the library was a dim hive of activity, healers and assistants flowing in and out, some whispering hello to Yrene and Nousha as they passed. Today, an orange Baast Cat lounged by the massive hearth, her beryl eyes tracking them from her spot draped over the rolled arm of a sofa.

Yrene offered Nousha her best attempt at a smile. “But maybe there’s some record of why those books were even *needed* here?”

Nousha braced her dark forearms on the desk. “Some people might be wary of what knowledge they’re seeking if they’re being hunted—which *started* around the time you began poking into the topic.”

Chaol leaned forward in his chair, teeth flashing. “Is that a threat?”

Yrene waved him off. Overprotective man. “I *know* it is dangerous—and likely tied to it. But it is *because* of that, Nousha, that any additional information about the material here, where it came from, who acquired it ... It could be vital.”

“For getting him to walk again.” A dry, disbelieving statement.

Yrene didn’t dare glance at Chaol.

“You can see that our progress is slow,” Chaol answered tightly. “Perhaps the

ancients have some sort of advice for how to make it go faster.”

Nousha gave them both a look that said she wasn't buying it for a minute, but sighed at the ceiling. “As I said, there are no records here dating that far back. *But,*” she added when Chaol opened his mouth, “there are rumors that out in the desert, caves exist with such information—caves this information came from. Most have been lost, but there was one in the Aksara Oasis ...” Nousha's look turned knowing as Yrene winced. “Perhaps you should start there.”



Yrene chewed on her lip as they walked from the library, Chaol keeping pace beside her.

When they were close to the Torre's main hallway, to the courtyard and horse that would take him home for the evening, he asked, “Why are you cringing?”

Yrene crossed her arms, scanning the halls around them. Quiet at this time of day, right before the dinner rush. “That oasis, Aksara. It's not exactly ... easy to get to.”

“Far?”

“No, not that. It's owned by the royals. *No one* is allowed there. It's their private refuge.”

“Ah.” He scratched at the shadow of stubble on his jaw. “And asking to access it outright will lead to too many questions.”

“Exactly.”

He studied her, eyes narrowing.

“Don't you dare suggest I use Kashin,” she hissed.

Chaol lifted his hands, eyes dancing. “I wouldn't dare. Though he certainly ran the moment you snapped your fingers the other night. He's a good man.”

Yrene braced her hands on her hips. “Why don't *you* invite him to a romantic interlude in the desert, then.”

Chaol chuckled, trailing her as she started for the courtyard again. “I'm not

versed in court intrigue, but you *do* have another palace connection.”

Yrene grimaced. “Hasar.” She toyed with a curl at the end of her hair. “She hasn’t asked me to play spy recently. I’m not sure if I want to ... open that door again.”

“Perhaps you could convince her that a trip to the desert—an outing—would be ... fun?”

“You want me to manipulate her like that?”

His gaze was steady. “We can find another way, if you’re uncomfortable.”

“No—no, it might work. It’s just Hasar was *born* into this sort of thing. She might see right through me. And she’s powerful enough that ... Is it worth risking her entanglement, her anger, if we’re just going on a suggestion from Nousha?”

He considered her words. In a way that only Hafiza really did. “We’ll think on it. With Hasar, we’ll need to proceed carefully.”

Yrene stepped into the courtyard, motioning to one of the awaiting Torre guards that the lord needed his horse brought around from the stables. “I’m not a very good accomplice in intrigue,” she admitted to Chaol with an apologetic smile.

He only brushed his hand against hers. “I find it refreshing.”

And from the look in his eyes ... she believed him. Enough that her cheeks heated, just a bit.

Yrene turned toward the Torre looming over them, just to buy herself some breathing room. Looked up, up, up to where her own little window gazed toward the sea. Toward home.

She lowered her gaze from the Torre to find his face grim. “I’m sorry to have brought all this upon you—all of you,” Chaol said quietly.

“Don’t be. Perhaps that’s what it wants. To use fear and guilt to end this—stop us.” She studied him, the proud lift of his chin, the strength he radiated in every breath. “Though ... I do worry that time is not on our side.” Yrene

amended, “Take all the time you need to heal. Yet ...” She rubbed at her chest. “I have a feeling we have not seen the last of that hunter.”

Chaol nodded, his jaw tight. “We’ll deal with it.”

And that was that. Together—they’d deal with it together.

Yrene smiled slightly at him as the light steps of his horse approached on the pale gravel.

And the thought of climbing back to her room, the thought of hours spent fretting ...

Maybe it made her pathetic, but Yrene blurted, “Would you like to stay for dinner? Cook will mope that you didn’t say hello.”

She knew it was not mere fear that spurred her. Knew that she just wanted to spend a few more minutes with him. Talk to him in a way that she so rarely did with anyone else.

For a long moment, Chaol only watched her. As if she were the only person in the world. She braced herself for the refusal, the distance. Knew she should have just let him ride off into the night.

“What if we ventured out for dinner instead?”

“You mean—in the city?” She pointed toward the open gates.

“Unless you think the chair in the streets—”

“The walkways are even.” Her heart hammered. “Do you have any preference for what to eat?”

A border—this was some strange border that they were crossing. To leave their neutral territories and emerge into the world beyond, not as healer and patient, but woman and man—

“I’ll try anything,” Chaol said, and she knew he meant it. And from the way he looked to the open gates of the Torre, to the city just starting to glow beyond ... She knew he *wanted* to try anything; was as eager for a distraction from that shadow looming over them as she herself was.

So Yrene signaled to the guards that they didn’t need his horse. Not for a

while yet. "I know just the place."



Some people stared; some were too busy going about their business or journeys home to remark on Chaol as he wheeled his chair alongside Yrene.

She had to step in only a few times, to help him over the bump of a curve, or down one of the steep streets. She led him to a place five blocks away, the establishment like nothing he'd seen in Rifthold. He'd visited a few private dining rooms with Dorian, yes, but those had been for the elite, for members and their guests.

This place ... it was akin to those private clubs, in that it was *only* for eating, full of tables and carved wooden chairs, but this was open to anyone, like the public rooms at an inn or tavern. The front of the pale-stoned building had several sets of doors that were open to the night, leading out onto a patio full of more tables and chairs under the stars, the space jutting into the street itself so that diners could watch the passing city bustle, even glimpse down the sloping street to the dark sea sparkling under the moonlight.

And the enticing smells coming from within: garlic, something tangy, something smoky ...

Yrene murmured to the woman who came to greet them, which must have amounted to a table for two and without one chair, because within a moment, he was being led to the street-patio, where a servant discreetly removed one of the chairs at a small table for him to pull up to the edge.

Yrene claimed a seat opposite him, more than a few heads turning their way. Not to gawk at him, but her.

The Torre healer.

She didn't seem to notice. The servant returned to rattle off what had to be the menu, and Yrene ordered in her halting Halha.

She bit her lower lip, glancing to the table, the public dining room. "Is this all

right?”

Chaol took in the open sky above them, the color bleeding to a sapphire blue, the stars beginning to blink awake. When had he last relaxed? Eaten a meal not to keep his body healthy and alive, but to *enjoy* it?

He grappled for the words. Grappled to settle into the ease. “I’ve never done anything like this,” he at last admitted.

His birthday this past winter, in that greenhouse—even then, with Aelin, he’d been half there, half focused on the palace he’d left behind, on remembering who was in charge and where Dorian was supposed to be. But now ...

“What—eaten a meal?”

“Had a meal when I wasn’t ... Had a meal when I was just ... Chaol.”

He wasn’t sure if he’d explained it right, if he could articulate it—

Yrene angled her head, her mass of hair sliding over a shoulder. “Why?”

“Because I was either a lord’s son and heir, or Captain of the Guard, or now Hand to the King.” Her gaze was unflinching as he fumbled to explain. “No one recognizes me here. No one has ever even heard of Anielle. And it’s ...”

“Liberating?”

“Refreshing,” he countered, giving Yrene a small smile at the echo to his earlier words.

She blushed prettily in the golden light from the lanterns within the dining room behind them. “Well ... good.”

“And you? Do you go out with friends often—leave the healer behind?”

Yrene watched the people streaming by. “I don’t have many friends,” she admitted. “Not because I don’t want them,” she blurted, and he smiled. “I just—at the Torre, we’re all busy. Sometimes, a few of us will go for a meal or drink, but our schedules rarely align, and it’s easier to eat at the mess hall, so ... we’re not really a lively bunch. Which was why Kashin and Hasar became my friends—when they’re in Antica. But I’ve never really had the chance to do much of this.”

He almost asked, *Go out to dinner with men?* But said, “You had your focus elsewhere.”

She nodded. “And maybe one day—maybe I’ll have the time to go out and enjoy myself, but ... there are people who need my help. It feels selfish to take time for myself, even now.”

“You shouldn’t feel that way.”

“And you’re any better?”

Chaol chuckled, leaning back as the servant came, bearing a pitcher of chilled mint tea. He waited until the man left before saying, “Maybe you and I will have to learn how to live—if we survive this war.”

It was a sharp, cold knife between them. But Yrene straightened her shoulders, her smile small and yet defiant as she lifted her pewter glass of tea. “To living, Lord Chaol.”

He clinked his glass against hers. “To being Chaol and Yrene—even just for a night.”



Chaol ate until he could barely move, the spices like small revelations with every bite.

They talked as they dined, Yrene explaining her initial months at the Torre, and how demanding her training had been. Then she’d asked about his training as captain, and he’d balked—balked at talking of Brullo and the others, and yet ... He couldn’t refuse her joy, her curiosity.

And somehow, talking about Brullo, the man who had been a better father to him than his own ... It did not hurt, not as much. A lower, quieter ache, but one he could withstand.

One he was glad to weather, if it meant honoring a good man’s legacy by telling his story.

So they talked, and ate, and when they finished, he escorted her to the

glowing white walls of the Torre. Yrene herself seemed glowing as she smiled when they stopped within the gates while his horse was readied.

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks flushed and gleaming. “For the meal—and company.”

“It was my pleasure,” Chaol said, and meant it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning—at the palace?”

An unnecessary question, but he nodded.

Yrene shifted from one foot to another, still smiling, still shining. As if she were the last, vibrant ray of the sun, staining the sky long after it had vanished over the horizon.

“What?” she asked, and he realized he’d been staring.

“Thank you for tonight,” Chaol said, stifling what tried to leap off his tongue: *I can’t take my eyes off you.*

She bit her lip again, the crunch of hooves on gravel approaching. “Good night,” she murmured, and took a step away.

Chaol reached out. Just to brush his fingers over hers.

Yrene paused, her fingers curling, as if they were the petals of some shy flower.

“Good night,” he merely said.

And as Chaol rode back to the illuminated palace across the city, he could have sworn that some weight in his chest, on his shoulders, had vanished. As if he’d lived with it his entire life, unaware, and now, even with all that gathered around him, around Adarlan and those he cared for ... How strange it felt.

That lightness.

Aedion had been up half the night, debating the merits of every possible place to meet his father. On the beach seemed like it was asking for a private conversation he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to have; in Rolfe's headquarters felt too public; the inn courtyard felt too formal ... He'd tossed and turned on his cot, nearly asleep when he heard Aelin and Rowan *returning* well past midnight. Not surprising they'd snuck out without telling anyone. But at least she'd gone with the Fae Prince.

Lysandra, sleeping like the dead, hadn't stirred as their steps had creaked in the hall outside. She'd barely made it through the door hours earlier, Dorian already asleep on his cot, before she'd shifted back into her usual body and swayed on her feet.

Aedion had hardly noticed her nakedness—not when she teetered and he lunged to grab her before she ate carpet.

She'd blinked dazedly at him, her skin drained of color. So he'd gently set her on the edge of the bed, grabbed the throw across it, and draped it around her.

“You've seen naked women plenty,” she'd said, not bothering to hold it in place. “It's too hot for wool.”

So the blanket slid off her back as she leaned forward, bracing her forearms on her knees and breathing deep. “Gods, it makes me so dizzy.”

Aedion put a hand on her bare back and gently stroked. She stiffened at the touch, but he made broad, light circles over that velvet-soft skin. After a moment, she let out a sound that might have been a purr.

The silence went on for long enough that Aedion realized she'd somehow fallen asleep. And not normal sleep, but the sleep that Aelin and Rowan sometimes went into in order to let their magic recover. So deep and thorough no training could pierce it, no instincts could override it. The body had claimed what it needed, at any cost, at any vulnerability.

Easing her into his arms before she could fall right onto her face, Aedion hauled her over a shoulder and carried her around to the head of the bed. He flipped back the crisp cotton sheets with one hand and then laid her down, her

once-again long hair covering her high, firm breasts. So much smaller than the ones he'd first seen her with. He didn't care what size they were—they were beautiful in both forms.

She hadn't awoken again, and he'd drifted to his own cot. He only slept once the light had shifted to the watery gray trickle before dawn, awoke just past sunrise, and gave up on sleep entirely. He doubted any sort of rest would come until this meeting was past him.

So Aedion bathed and dressed, debating if it made him a fool to brush his hair for his father.

Lysandra was awake as he padded back into the room, the color mercifully returned to her cheeks, the king still asleep on his cot.

But the shifter looked Aedion over and said, "*That's what you're wearing?*"



Lysandra made him change out of his dirty travel clothes, barged into Aelin and Rowan's room wearing no more than her own bedsheet, and took whatever she wanted from the Fae Prince's armoire.

Aelin's barked *Get out!* was likely heard from across the bay, and Lysandra was smirking with feline wickedness as she returned, chucking the green jacket and pants at him.

When he emerged from the bathing room, the lady was in clothes of her own—where she'd gotten them, he had no idea. They were simple: black, tight pants, knee-high boots, and a tucked-in white shirt. She'd left her hair half down, half up, and now twisted the silken mass of it over a shoulder. Lysandra surveyed him with an approving smirk. "Much better. Much more princely and less ... derelict."

Aedion gave her a mocking bow.

Dorian stirred, a cool breeze fluttering in as if his magic awoke as well, squinted at them both, then at the clock atop the mantel. He hauled the pillow over his eyes and went back to sleep.

"Very kingly," Aedion told him, heading for the door.

Dorian grumbled something through the pillow that Aedion chose not to hear.

He and Lysandra grabbed a quiet breakfast in the dining room—though he had to force half the food down. The shifter asked no questions, either from consideration or because she was so busy stuffing her face with every single

morsel offered at the buffet table.

Gods, the females in his court ate more than he did. He supposed the magic burned through their energy reserves so fast it was a miracle they weren't constantly biting his head off.

They walked to Rolfe's tavern in silence, too, the sentries out front stepping aside without so much as a question. He reached for the handle when Lysandra finally said, "You're sure?"

He nodded. And that was that.

Aedion opened the door, finding the cadre precisely where he'd guessed they'd be at this hour: eating breakfast in the taproom. The two males halted as they entered.

And Aedion's eyes went right to the golden-haired man—one of two, but ... there was no denying which one was ... his.

Gavriel set his fork on his half-eaten plate.

He wore clothes like Rowan's—and like the Fae Prince, he was heavily armed, even at breakfast.

Aelin was the other side of his fair coin, but Gavriel was a murky reflection. The honed, broad features; the harsh mouth—that was where he'd gotten them from. The cropped golden hair was different; more sunshine to Aedion's shoulder-length honey gold. And Aedion's skin was Ashryver golden—not the sun-kissed, deep tan.

Slowly, Gavriel stood. Aedion wondered if he'd also inherited that grace, the predatory stillness, the unreadable, intent face—or if they'd both been trained that way.

The Lion incarnate.

He'd wanted to do it this way, little more than an ambush, so his father wouldn't have time to prepare pretty speeches. He wanted to see what his father would do when confronted with him, what sort of male he was, how he reacted to *anything*—

The other warrior, Fenrys, was glancing between them, a fork still raised to his open mouth.

Aedion made himself walk, knees surprisingly steady, even if his body felt as if it belonged to someone else. Lysandra kept at his side, solid and bright-eyed. With every step he took, his father surveyed him, face yielding nothing, until—

"You look ... ," Gavriel breathed, sinking into his chair. "You look so much like her."

Aedion knew Gavriel didn't mean Aelin. Even Fenrys looked at the Lion

now, at the grief rippling in those tawny eyes.

But Aedion barely remembered his mother. Barely recalled anything more than her dying, wrecked face.

So he said, “She died so your *queen* wouldn’t get her claws on me.”

He wasn’t sure his father was breathing. Lysandra stepped closer, a solid rock in the thrashing sea of his rage.

Aedion pinned his father with a look, not sure where the words came from, the wrath, but there they were, snapping from his lips like whips. “They could have cured her in the Fae compounds, but she wouldn’t go near them, wouldn’t let them come for fear of Maeve”—he spat the name—“knowing I existed. For fear I’d be enslaved to her as *you* were.”

His father’s tan face had drained of all color. Whatever Gavriel had suspected until now, Aedion didn’t care. The Wolf snarled at the Lion, “She was twenty-three years old. She never married, and her family shunned her. She refused to tell anyone who’d sired me, and took their disdain, their humiliation, without an ounce of self-pity. She did it because she loved *me*, not you.”

And he suddenly wished he’d asked Aelin to come, so he could tell her to burn this warrior into ashes like that commander in Ilium, because looking at the face—*his face* ... he hated him. He hated him for the twenty-three-year-old his mother had been, younger than he now was when she’d died, alone and sorrowful.

Aedion growled, “If your bitch of a queen tries to take me, I’ll slit her throat. If she hurts my family any more than she already has, I’ll slit yours, too.”

His father rasped, “Aedion.”

The sound of the name his mother had given him on his lips ... “I want nothing from you. Unless you plan to help us, in which case I will not object to the ... assistance. But beyond that, I want nothing from you.”

“I’m sorry,” his father said, those Lion’s eyes full of such grief Aedion wondered if he’d just struck a male already down.

“I’m not the one you need to apologize to,” he said, turning toward the door.

His father’s chair scraped against the floor. “Aedion.”

Aedion kept walking, Lysandra falling into place beside him.

“Please,” his father said as Aedion’s hand clamped down on the handle.

“Go to hell,” Aedion said, and left.

He didn’t return to the Ocean Rose. And he couldn’t stand to be around people, to be around their sounds and smells. So he strode for the dense mountain above the bay, losing himself in the jungle of leaves and shade and

damp soil. Lysandra stayed a step behind him, silent as he was.

It wasn't until he'd found a rocky outcropping jutting from the side of the mountain to overlook the bay, the town, the pristine waters beyond, that he paused. That he sat. And breathed.

Lysandra sat beside him on the flat rock, crossing her legs beneath her.

He said, "I didn't expect to say any of that."

She was gazing toward the nearby watchtower nestled at the base of the mountain. He watched her green eyes survey the lower level where Ship-Breaker was wrapped around a massive wheel, the spiraling exterior staircase up the tower itself, all the way up to the upper levels, where a catapult, and a turret-mounted, massive harpoon—or was it a giant crossbow?—was locked into place, its wielder's seat and arrow aimed at an invisible enemy in the bay below. With the size of the weapon and the machine that had been rigged to launch it into the bay, he had no doubt it could smash through a hull and do lethal damage to a ship. Or spear three men on it.

Lysandra said simply, "You spoke from your heart. Perhaps it's good he heard that."

"We need them to work with us. I might have made an enemy of him."

She tucked her hair over a shoulder. "Trust me, Aedion, you have not. If you'd told him to crawl over hot coals, he would have."

"He'll realize soon enough who, exactly, I am, and perhaps not be so desperate."

"Who, exactly, do you think you are?" She frowned at him. "Adarlan's Whore? Is that what you still think of yourself? The general who held his kingdom together, who saved his people when they were forgotten even by their own queen—that's the man I know." She snarled softly, and not at him. "And if he starts pointing fingers, I'll remind him that he's served that bitch in Doranelle for centuries without question."

Aedion snorted. "I'd pay good money to see you go toe-to-toe with him. And Fenrys."

She nudged him with an elbow. "You say the word, General, and I'll transform into the face of their nightmares."

"And what creature is that?"

She gave him a knowing little smile. "Something I've been working on."

"I don't want to know, do I?"

White teeth flashed. "No, you really don't."

He laughed, surprised he could even do so. "He's a handsome bastard, I'll

give him that.”

“I think Maeve likes to collect pretty men.”

Aedion snorted. “Why not? She has to deal with them for eternity. They might as well be pleasant to look at.”

She laughed again, and the sound loosed a weight from his shoulders.



Bearing both Goldryn and Damaris for once, Aelin walked into the Sea Dragon two hours later and wished for the days when she could sleep without the dread or urgency of *something* pulling at her.

Wished for the days when she might have had the time to bed her gods-damned lover and not choose to catch a few hours of sleep instead.

She'd meant to. Last night, they'd returned to the inn, and she'd bathed faster than she'd ever washed before. She'd even emerged from the bathing room naked ... and found her Fae Prince asleep atop the glowingly white bed, still clothed, looking for all the world like he'd intended to close his eyes while she washed.

And the heavy exhaustion on him ... She let Rowan rest. Had curled up beside him above the blankets, still naked, and had been unconscious before her head had settled against his chest. There would be a time, she knew, when they would not be able to sleep so safely, so soundly.

A grand total of five minutes before Lysandra barged in, Rowan had awoken—and begun the process of awakening her, too. Slowly, with taunting, proprietary strokes down her bare torso, her thighs, accented with little biting kisses to her mouth, her ear, her neck.

But as soon as Lysandra had thundered through the room to steal clothes for Aedion, as soon as she'd explained *where* Aedion was going ... the interruption had lasted. Made her remember what, exactly, she needed to accomplish today. With a man currently inclined to kill her and a scattered, petrified fleet.

Gavriel and Fenrys were now sitting with Rolfe at the table in the back of the taproom, no sign of Aedion, both a bit wide-eyed as she swaggered in.

She might have preened at the look, had Rowan not prowled in right behind her, already prepared to slit their throats.

Rolfe shot to his feet. “What are you doing here?”

“I would be very, very careful how you speak to her today, Captain,” Fenrys said with more wariness and consideration than she'd seen him use yesterday.

His eyes were fixed on Rowan, who was indeed watching Rolfe as if he were dinner. “Choose your words wisely.”

Rolfe glanced at Rowan, saw his face, and seemed to get it.

Maybe that caution would make Rolfe more inclined to agree to her request today. If she played it right. If she’d played all of it right.

Aelin gave Rolfe a little smile and leaned against the vacant table beside theirs, the chipped gold lettering on the slats reading *Mist-Cutter*. Rowan took up a spot beside her, his knee brushing hers. Like even a few feet of distance was unbearable.

But she smiled a bit wider at Rolfe. “I came to see if you’d changed your mind. About my alliance.”

Rolfe drummed his tattooed fingers on the table, right over some gilded letters that read *Thresher*. And beside it ... a map of the continent had been spread between Rolfe and the Fae warriors.

Not the map she really, truly needed now that she knew the damn thing worked, but—Aelin stiffened at what she beheld.

“What is that,” she said, noting the silver figurines camped across the middle of the continent, an impenetrable line from the Ferian Gap to the mouth of the Avery. And the additional figures in the Gulf of Oro. And in Melisande and Fenharrow and near Eyllwe’s northern border.

Gavriel, looking a bit like someone had knocked him in the head—gods, how had the meeting with Aedion gone?—said before Rolfe could get his throat ripped out by Rowan with whatever response he had brewing, “Captain Rolfe received word this morning. He wanted our counsel.”

“What *is* this,” she said, stabbing a finger near the main line of figures stretched across the middle of the continent.

“It’s the latest report,” Rolfe drawled, “of the locations of Morath’s armies. They have moved into position. Aid to the North is now impossible. And they stand poised to strike Eyllwe.”

The Watchtower of Eidolon jutted up from the mist-shrouded pines like the shard of a broken sword. It had been situated atop a low-lying peak that overlooked a solid wall of gargantuan mountains, and as Nesryn and Sartaq swept near the tower, sailing along the tree-cruled hills, she had the sense of racing toward a tidal wave of hard stone.

For a heartbeat, a wave of lethal glass swept for her instead. She blinked, and it was gone.

“There,” Sartaq whispered, as if fearful that any might hear while he pointed toward the enormous mountains lurking beyond. “Over that lip, that is the start of *kharankui* territory, the Dagul Fells. Those in the watchtower would have been able to see anyone coming down from those mountains, especially with their Fae sight.”

Fae sight or not, Nesryn scanned the barren slopes of the Fells—a wall of boulders and shards of rock. No trees, no streams. As if life had fled. “Houlun flew over *that*?”

“Believe me,” Sartaq grumbled, “I am not pleased. Borte got an earful about it this morning.”

“I’m surprised your kneecaps still function.”

“Didn’t you notice my limp earlier?”

Despite the nearing watchtower, despite the wall of mountain that rose up beyond it, Nesryn chuckled. She could have sworn Sartaq leaned closer, his

broad chest pushing into the quiver and bow she had strapped across her back, along with the twin long knives courtesy of Borte.

They hadn't told anyone where they were going or what they sought, which had earned no shortage of glares from Borte over breakfast, and curious glances from Falkan across the round table. But they had agreed last night, when Sartaq left Nesryn at her bedroom door, that secrecy was vital—for now.

So they'd departed an hour after dawn, armed and bearing a few packs of supplies. Even though they planned to be headed home well before sunset, Nesryn had insisted on bringing their gear. Should the worst happen, should *anything* happen, it was better to be prepared.

Borte, despite her ire at being left in the dark, had braided Nesryn's hair after breakfast—a tight, elegant plait starting at the crown of her head and landing just where her cape fell to cover her flying leathers. The braid was tight enough that Nesryn had avoided the urge to loosen it these hours that they'd flown, but now that the tower was in sight and her hair had barely shifted, Nesryn supposed the braid could stay.

Kadara circled the watchtower twice, dropping lower with each pass.

“No signs of webs,” Nesryn observed. The upper levels of the watchtower had been destroyed by weather or some long-ago passing army, leaving only two floors above the ground. Both were exposed to the elements, the winding stairwell in the center coated in pine needles and dirt. Broken beams and blocks of stone also littered it, but no indications of life. Or any sort of miraculously preserved library.

With Kadara's size, the ruk had to find a clearing nearby to land, since Sartaq didn't trust the watchtower walls to hold her. The bird leaped into the air as soon as they'd begun the climb up the small incline to the watchtower proper. She'd circle overhead until Sartaq whistled for her, apparently.

Another trick of the rukhin and the Darghan on the steppes: the whistling, along with their whistling arrows. They had long allowed both peoples to

communicate in a way that few noticed or bothered to comprehend, passing messages through enemy territory or down army lines. The riders had trained the ruks to understand the whistles, too—to know a call for help from a warning to flee.

Nesryn prayed with each grueling step through the thick pine trees and granite boulders that they would only need the whistle to summon the bird. She was no great tracker, but Sartaq, it seemed, was deftly reading the signs around them.

A shake of the prince's head told Nesryn enough: no hint of a presence, arachnid or otherwise. She tried not to look too relieved. Despite the tall trees, the Fells were a solid, looming presence to her right, drawing the eye even as it repelled every instinct.

Blocks of stone greeted them first. Great, rectangular chunks, half buried in the pine needles and soil. The full weight of summer lay upon the land, yet the air was cool, the shade beneath the trees outright chilly.

"I don't blame them for abandoning it if it's this cold in the summer," Nesryn muttered. "Imagine it in winter."

Sartaq smiled but pressed a finger to his lips as they cleared the last of the trees. Blushing that he'd needed to remind her, Nesryn unslung her bow and nocked an arrow, letting it hang limply while they tipped back their heads to take in the tower.

It must have been enormous, thousands of years ago, if the ruins were enough to make her feel small. Any barracks or living quarters had long since tumbled away or rotted, but the stone archway into the tower itself remained intact, flanked by twin statues of some sort of weather-worn bird.

Sartaq approached, his long knife gleaming like quicksilver in the watery light as he studied the statues. "Ruks?" The question was a mere breath.

Nesryn squinted. "No—look at the face. The beak. They're ... owls." Tall, slender owls, their wings tucked in tight. The symbol of Silba, of the Torre.

Sartaq's throat bobbed. "Let's be swift. I don't think it's wise to linger."

Nesryn nodded, one eye behind them as they slipped through the open archway. It was a familiar position, the rearguard—in Rifthold's sewers, she'd often let Chaol stalk ahead while she covered behind, arrow aimed into the darkness at their backs. So her body acted on pure muscle memory while Sartaq took the first steps through the archway and she twisted back, arrow aimed at the pine forest, scanning the trees.

Nothing. Not a bird or rustle of wind through the pines.

She turned a heartbeat later, assessing efficiently, as she had always done, even before her training: marking exits, pitfalls, possible sanctuaries. But there wasn't much to note in the ruin.

The tower floor was well lit thanks to the vanished ceiling above, the crumbling staircase leading into the gray sky. Slits in the stone revealed where archers might have once positioned themselves—or watched from within the warmth of a tower on a freezing day. "Nothing up," Nesryn observed perhaps a bit uselessly, facing Sartaq just as he took a step toward an open archway leading down into a dark stairwell. She grabbed his elbow. "Don't."

He gave her an incredulous look over his shoulder.

Nesryn kept her own face like stone. "Your *ej* said these towers were laid with traps. Just because we have yet to see one does not mean they are not still here." She pointed with her arrow toward the open archway to the levels belowground. "We keep quiet, tread carefully. I go first."

To hell with being the rearguard, if he was prone to plunging into danger.

The prince's eyes flared, but she didn't let him object. "I faced some of the horrors of Morath this spring and summer. I know how to mark them—and where to strike."

Sartaq looked her over again. "You really should have been promoted."

Nesryn smiled, releasing his muscled bicep. Wincing as she realized the liberties she'd taken by grabbing him, touching a prince without permission—

“Two captains, remember?” he said, noting the cringe she failed to hide.

Indeed. Nesryn inclined her head and stepped in front of him—and into the archway of the stairs leading below.

Her arm strained as she pulled the bowstring taut, scanning the darkness immediately beyond the stairwell entrance. When nothing leaped out, she slackened the bow, placed her arrow back in the quiver, and plucked up a handful of rocks from the ground, shards and chips from the felled blocks of stone around them.

A step behind, Sartaq did the same, filling his pockets with them.

Listening carefully, Nesryn rolled one of the rocks down the spiral stairs, letting it bounce and crack and—

A faint *click*, and Nesryn hurled herself back, slamming into Sartaq and sending them both sprawling to the ground. A thud sounded within the stairwell below, then another.

In the quiet that followed, her heavy breathing the only sound, she listened again. “Hidden bolts,” she observed, wincing as she found Sartaq’s face mere inches away. His eyes were upon the stairwell, even as he kept a hand on her back, the other angling his long knife toward the archway.

“Seems I owe you my life, Captain,” Sartaq said, and Nesryn quickly peeled back, offering a hand to help him rise. He clasped it, his hand warm around hers as she hauled him to his feet.

“Don’t worry,” Nesryn said drily. “I won’t tell Borte.” She plucked up another handful of rocks and sent them rolling and scattering down the gloom of the stairs. A few more clicks and thumps—then silence.

“We go slow,” she said, all amusement fading, and didn’t wait for his nod as she prodded the first step down with the tip of her bow.

She tapped and pushed along the stair, watching the walls, the ceiling. Nothing. She did it to the second, third, and fourth steps—as far as her bow could reach. And only when she was satisfied that no surprises waited did she

allow them to step onto the stairs.

Nesryn repeated it with the next four steps, finding nothing. But when they reached the first turn of the spiral stairs ...“I *really* owe you my life,” Sartaq breathed as they beheld what had been fired from a slit in the wall at the ninth step.

Barbed iron spikes. Designed to slam into flesh and stay there—unless the victim wanted to rip out more of their skin or organs on the curved, vicious hooks on the way out.

The spike had been fired so hard that it had sunk deep into the mortar between the stones. “Remember that these traps were not for human assailants,” she breathed.

But for spiders as large as horses. Who could speak, and plan, and remember.

She tapped the steps ahead, the wood of her bow a hollow echo through the dark chamber, prodding the slit where the bolt had been fired. “The Fae must have memorized what stairs to avoid while living here,” she observed as they cleared another few feet. “I don’t think they were stupid enough to do an easy pattern, though.”

Indeed, the next bolt had emerged three steps down. The one after that, five apart. But after that ... Sartaq reached into his pocket and pulled out another handful of stones. They both squatted as he rolled a few down the stairs.

Click.

Nesryn was so focused on the wall ahead that she didn’t consider where the click had come from. Not in front, but below.

One heartbeat, she was crouched on a step.

The next, it had slid away beneath her feet, a black pit yawning open beneath

—

Strong hands wrapped around her shoulder, her collar, a blade clattering on stone—

Nesryn scabbled for the lip of the nearest stair as Sartaq held her, grunting at

her weight, his long knife tumbling into the blackness beneath.

Metal hit metal. Bounced off it again and again, the clanking filling the stairwell.

Spikes. Likely a field of metal spikes—

Sartaq hauled her up, and her nails cracked on stone as she grappled for purchase on the smooth step. But then she was up, half sprawled on the stairs between Sartaq's legs, both of them panting as they peered to the gap beyond.

"I think we're even," Nesryn said, fighting and failing to master her shaking.

The prince clasped her shoulder, while his other hand brushed down the back of her head. A comforting, casual touch. "Whoever built this place had no mercy for the *kharankui*."

It took her another minute to stop trembling. Sartaq patiently waited, stroking her hair, fingers rippling over the ridges of Borte's braid. She let him, leaned into the touch while she studied the gap they'd now have to jump, the stairs still beyond.

When she could at last stand without her knees clacking together, they carefully jumped the hole—and made it several more steps before another one appeared, this time accompanied by a bolt. But they kept going, the minutes dripping by, until they at last reached the level below.

Shafts of pale light shone from carefully hidden holes in the ground above, or perhaps through some mirror contraption in the passageways high above. She didn't care, so long as the light was bright enough to see by.

And see they did.

The bottom level was a dungeon.

Five cells lay open, the doors ripped off, prisoners and guards long gone. A rectangular stone table lay in the center.

"Anyone who thinks the Fae are prancing creatures given to poetry and singing needs a history lesson," Sartaq murmured as they lingered on the bottom step, not daring to touch the floor. "That stone table was not used for writing

reports or dining.”

Indeed, dark stains still marred the surface. But a worktable lay against the nearby wall, scattered with an assortment of weapons. Any papers had long ago melted away in the snow and rain, and any leather-bound books ... also gone.

“Do we risk it, or leave?” Sartaq mused.

“We’ve come this far,” Nesryn said. She squinted toward the far wall. “There—there is some writing there.” Near the floor, in dark lettering—a tangle of script.

The prince just reached into his pockets, casting more stones throughout the space. No clicks or groans answered. He chucked a few at the ceiling, at the walls. Nothing.

“Good enough for me,” Nesryn said.

Sartaq nodded, though they both tested each block of stone with the tip of the bow or his fine, thin sword. They made it past the stone table, and Nesryn did not bother to examine the various instruments that had been discarded.

She’d seen Chaol’s men hanging from the castle gates. Had seen the marks on their bodies.

Sartaq paused at the worktable, sorting through the weapons there. “Some of these are still sharp,” he observed, and Nesryn approached as he pulled a long dagger from its sheath. The watery sunlight caught in the blade, dancing along the markings carved down the center.

Nesryn reached for a short-sword, the leather scabbard nearly crumbling beneath her hand. She brushed away the ancient dirt from the hilt, revealing shining dark metal inlaid with swirls of gold, the cross-guard curving slightly at its ends.

The scabbard was indeed so old that it fell apart as she lifted the sword, its weight light despite its size, the balance perfect. More markings had been engraved down the fuller of the blade. A name or a prayer, perhaps.

“Only Fae blades could remain this sharp after a thousand years,” said Sartaq,

setting down the knife he'd been inspecting. "Likely forged by the Fae smiths in Asterion, to the east of Doranelle—perhaps even before the first of the demon wars."

A prince who had studied not only his own empire's history, but that of many others.

History was certainly not her strongest subject, so she asked, "Asterion—like the horses?"

"One and the same. Great smiths and horse-breeders. Or so it once was—before borders closed and the world darkened."

Nesryn studied the short-sword in her hand, the metal shining as if imbued with starlight, interrupted only by the carvings down the fuller. "I wonder what the markings say."

Sartaq examined another blade, shards of light bouncing over the planes of his handsome face. "Likely spells against enemies; perhaps even against the—" He halted at the word.

Nesryn nodded all the same. The Valg. "Half of me hopes we never have to find out." Leaving Sartaq to pick one for himself, she fastened the short-sword to her belt as she approached the far wall and the scribbled dark writing along the bottom.

She tested each block of stone on the floor, but found nothing.

At last, she peered at the script in flaking black letters. Not black, but—

"Blood," Sartaq said, coming up beside her, an Asterion knife now at his side.

No sign of a body, or any lingering effects of whoever had written it, perhaps while they lay dying.

"It's in the Fae tongue," Nesryn said. "I don't suppose your fancy tutors taught you the Old Language during your history lessons?"

A shake of the head.

She sighed. "We should find a way to write it down. Unless your memory is the sort that—"

“It’s not.” He swore, turning toward the stairs. “I have some paper and ink in Kadara’s saddlebags. I could—”

It wasn’t his cut-off words that made her whirl. But the way he went utterly still.

Nesryn slid that Fae blade free from where she’d tied it.

“There is no need to translate it,” said a light female voice in Halha. “It says, *Look up*. Pity you didn’t heed it.”

Nesryn indeed looked up at what emerged from the stairwell, crawling along the ceiling toward them, and swallowed her scream.

It was worse than Nesryn had ever dreamed.

The *kharankui* that slid from the ceiling and onto the floor was so much worse.

Bigger than a horse. Her skin was black and gray, mottled with splotches of white, her multiple eyes depthless pools of obsidian. And despite her bulk, she was slender and sleek—more black widow than wolf spider.

“Those Fae morsels forgot to *look up* when they built this place,” the spider said, her voice so lovely despite her utter monstrosity. Her long front legs clicked against the ancient stone. “To remember who they laid these traps for.”

Nesryn sized up the stairwell behind the spider, the light shafts, for any exits. Found none.

And this watchtower had now become a veritable web. Fool; utter fool for lingering—

The claws at the tops of the spider’s legs scraped over the rock.

Nesryn sheathed her sword again.

“Good,” the spider purred. “Good that you know how useless that Fae rubbish will be.”

Nesryn drew her bow, nocking an arrow.

The spider laughed. “If Fae archers did not halt me long ago, human, you will not now.”

Beside her, Sartaq’s sword lifted a fraction.

Dying here, now, had not occurred to her at breakfast while Borte braided her hair.

But there was nothing to do as the spider advanced, fangs slipping from her jaws.

“When I am done with you, rider, I shall make your bird scream.” Drops of liquid plopped from those fangs. Venom.

Then the spider lunged.

Nesryn fired an arrow, another aimed before her first found its mark. But the spider moved so swiftly that the blow intended for an eye hit the hard shell of her abdomen, barely embedding. The spider slammed into the stone torture table, as if she’d leap off to pounce on them—

Sartaq struck, a brutal slash toward the nearest clawed leg.

The spider shrieked, black blood spurting, and they hurtled for that distant doorway—

The *kharankui* intercepted them first. Slammed her legs between the wall and the stone table, blocking their path. So close, the reek of death leaking from those fangs—

“Human filth,” the spider spat, venom spraying onto the stones at their feet.

From the corner of her eye, Nesryn saw Sartaq fling an arm in her path, to shove her away, to leap in front of those deadly jaws—

She didn’t know what happened at first.

What the blur of motion was, what made the *kharankui* scream.

One heartbeat, she’d been ready to fight past Sartaq’s self-sacrificing idiocy, the next ... the spider was crashing through the room, tumbling over and over.

Not Kadara, but something large, armed with claws and fangs—

A gray wolf. As large as a pony, and utterly ferocious.

Sartaq wasted no time, and neither did Nesryn. They sprinted for the archway and stairs beyond, not caring how many bolts or arrows shot from the walls as they outraced even the traps. Tearing up the stairs, leaping the gaps between

them, they did not stop at the crashing and screeching below—

A canine yelp sounded, then silence.

Nesryn and Sartaq hit the top of the stairs, running for the trees beyond the open doorway. The prince had a hand on her back, shoving her along, both of them half turned toward the tower.

The spider exploded from the gloom, aiming not for the trees, but the upper stairs of the watchtower. As if she'd climb up to ambush the wolf when it chased after her.

And exactly as she'd planned, the wolf flew from the stairwell, heading for the open archway to the woods, not even looking behind.

The spider leaped. Gold flashed from the skies.

Kadara's war cry sent the pines trembling, her claws ripping right into the abdomen of the *kharankui* and sending her toppling off the stairs.

The wolf darted away as Sartaq's roar of warning to his ruk was swallowed by the screaming of bird and spider. The *kharankui* landed on her back, precisely where Kadara wanted her.

Leaving her underbelly exposed to the ruk's talons. And her blade-sharp beak.

A few vicious slashes, black blood spraying and sleek limbs flailing, and—silence.

Nesryn's bow dangled from her shaking hands as Kadara dismembered the twitching spider. She whirled to Sartaq, but his eyes were turned away. To the wolf.

She knew. Right as the wolf limped toward them, a deep gash in its side, and she beheld its dark sapphire eyes.

Knew what it was, *who* it was, as the edges of his gray coat shimmered, his entire body filling with light that shrank and flowed.

And when Falkan waved on his feet before them, a hand pressed to the bloody wound in his ribs, Nesryn breathed, "You're a shape-shifter."

Falkan dropped to his knees, pine needles scattering, blood dribbling between his tan fingers.

Nesryn made to rush to him, but Sartaq blocked her with an arm. “Don’t,” he warned.

Nesryn shoved his arm out of her way and ran to the injured man, kneeling before him. “You followed us here.”

Falkan lifted his head, pain lining his eyes. “I listened last night. At your fire.”

Sartaq snarled, “No doubt as some rat or insect.”

Something like shame indeed filled Falkan’s face. “I flew here as a falcon— saw you go in. Then saw *her* creep up the hill after you.” He shuddered as he glanced to where Kadara had finished ripping apart the spider and now sat atop the tower, studying *him* as if he were her next meal.

Nesryn waved toward the bird to hop down with their saddlebags. Kadara pointedly ignored her. “He needs help,” she hissed to Sartaq. “Bandages.”

“Does my *ej* know?” was all the prince demanded.

Falkan tried and failed to remove his blood-soaked hand from his side, panting through his teeth. “Yes,” he managed to say. “I told her everything.”

“And what court paid you to come here?”

“*Sartaq*.” She’d never heard him speak that way, never seen him so *furious*. She grabbed the prince’s arm. “He saved our lives. Now we return the favor.”

She pointed to the ruk. “Bandages.”

Sartaq turned those livid eyes on her. “His kind are assassins and spies,” he snarled. “Better to let him die.”

“I am neither,” Falkan panted. “I am what I said: a merchant. In Adarlan, growing up, I didn’t even *know* I had the gift. It—it ran in my family, but by the time magic vanished, I’d assumed I hadn’t gotten it. Was *glad* for it. But I must not have matured enough, because when I set foot in these lands as a man, as *this* ...” A gesture to his body. To the twenty years he’d given up. He winced against what the movement did to his wound. “I could use it. I could change. Badly, and not often, but I can manage it, if I concentrate.” He said to the prince, “It is nothing to me, this heritage. It was my brother’s gift, my father’s—I never wanted it. I still don’t.”

“Yet you can change from bird to wolf to man as easily as if you trained.”

“Trust me, it’s more than I’ve done in my—” Falkan groaned, swaying.

Nesryn caught him before he could eat dirt, and snapped at Sartaq, “If you don’t get him bandages and supplies right now, I’ll give you a wound to match.”

The prince blinked at her, mouth falling open.

Then he whistled through his teeth, sharp and swift, while he strode for Kadara, his steps clipped.

The ruk hopped from the tower to land upon one of the owl statues anchored into the archway walls, stone cracking beneath her.

“I am no assassin,” Falkan insisted, still shaking. “I’ve met a few, but I’m not one.”

“I believe you,” Nesryn said, and meant it. Sartaq hauled the packs off Kadara, searching through them. “*The left one*,” she barked. The prince threw her another look over his shoulder, but obeyed.

“I wanted to kill her myself,” Falkan panted, his eyes glazing, no doubt from blood loss. “To see if ... that might return the years. Even ... even if she is not the one who took my youth, I thought maybe there was some ... joint system

between them, even across oceans. A web, as it were, of all that their kind has taken.” A bitter, strained laugh. “But it seems my death blow was taken, too.”

“I think we can all forgive Kadara for doing it instead,” Nesryn said, noting the black blood splattered over the ruk’s beak and feathers.

Another pained laugh. “You are not scared—of what I am.”

Sartaq strode over with the bandages and salve. And what seemed to be a jar of a honey-like substance, to likely seal the wound until they could reach a healer. Good.

“One of my friends is a shifter,” Nesryn admitted—just as Falkan fainted in her arms.



They were airborne within minutes of Nesryn cleaning out the gash down Falkan’s ribs and Sartaq indeed packing the wound with what seemed to be some sort of leaves and a coating of honey. To keep infection away and stave the blood loss as they swiftly soared back to the aerie.

She and the prince barely spoke, though with Falkan propped behind them, the ride didn’t afford much opportunity. It was a tight, perilous flight, Falkan’s dead weight occasionally listing far enough to the side that Sartaq had to grunt at holding him in the saddle. There were only two sets of buckles, he’d told Nesryn when they climbed onto the saddle. He wasn’t wasting either of their lives on a shifter, life debt or no.

But they made it, just as the sun was setting and the three peaks of the Dorgos were aglow with countless fires, like the mountains were crusted in fireflies.

Kadara loosed a shrill scream as they neared the Mountain-Hall of Altun. Some sort of signal, apparently, because by the time they landed, Borte, Houlun, and countless others were gathered, armed with supplies.

No one asked what happened to Falkan. No one wondered how he’d gotten out there. Either under order from Houlun not to pester them or simply from the

chaos of getting him off the ruk and into a healer's care. No one, except Borte.

Sartaq was still fuming enough that he led his *ej* to a corner of the hall to begin demanding answers about the shifter. Or that's what it seemed like, with his set jaw and crossed arms.

Houlun only squared off against him, feet braced on the floor, her jaw as tight as his.

Alone with Kadara, Nesryn set to unbuckling the packs while Borte observed from a few feet away, "That he has the balls to lecture *her* tells me something went *very* wrong. And that she is allowing him to do so tells me she feels just a smidge guilty."

Nesryn didn't answer, grunting as she hauled down a particularly heavy pack.

Borte strode around Kadara, looking the bird over. Carefully.

"Black blood on her talons, her beak, and chest. Lots of black blood."

Nesryn dumped the pack against the wall.

"And *your* back is crusted in red blood."

From where Falkan had leaned against her during the ride.

"And that is a new blade. A *Fae blade*," Borte breathed, stepping up to examine the naked blade dangling from her sword belt. Nesryn backed up a step.

Borte's mouth tightened. "Whatever you know, I want to know it."

"It's not my call."

They glanced toward Sartaq, who was still seething, Houlun simply letting him vent.

Borte began rattling off items on her fingers. "*Ej* sails off on her own for days. Then you go, returning with a man who did not leave with you and who took no ruk. And poor Kadara returns covered in this ... foulness." A sniff toward the black blood. The ruk clicked her beak in answer.

"It's mud," Nesryn lied.

Borte laughed. "And I'm a Fae Princess. Either I can start asking around, or —"

Nesryn dragged her to the wall with the packs. “Even if I tell you, you are *not* to breathe a word of it to anyone. Or be involved in any way.”

Borte put a hand on her heart. “I swear it.”

Nesryn sighed toward the distant, rocky ceiling, Kadara giving her a warning look as if to ask her to reconsider her judgment. But Nesryn told Borte everything.



She should have listened to Kadara. Borte, to her credit, did not tell anyone else. Other than Sartaq, who at last stalked over from Houlun, only to receive an earful and a smack on the shoulder for not informing his hearth-sister where he was going. And worse, for not *inviting* her along.

Sartaq had glared at Nesryn when he realized who’d told Borte, but she was too tired to care. Instead she only strode for her room, weaving between the pillars. She knew Sartaq was on her heels thanks to Borte’s shouted, “*You will bring me next time, you stubborn ass!*”

And just before Nesryn reached the door to her room, to the sanctuary of a soft bed, the prince gripped her elbow. “I would have words with you.”

Nesryn just shoved into the room, Sartaq stalking in behind her. Shutting the door and leaning against it. He crossed his arms at the same moment she did.

“Borte threatened to ask pointed questions around the aerie if I didn’t tell her.”

“I don’t care.”

Nesryn blinked. “Then what—”

“Who has the Wyrdkeys?” The question echoed between them.

Nesryn swallowed. “What’s a Wyrdkey?”

Sartaq pushed off the door. “Liar,” he breathed. “While we were gone, my *ej* recalled some of the other stories, dragged them up from whatever collective memory she possesses as Story Keeper. Tales of a Wyrdgate that the Valg and

their kings passed through—could open at will with three keys when wielded together. Remembered that those keys went *missing*, after Maeve herself stole them and used them to send the Valg back. Hidden, she says. Throughout the world.”

Nesryn only lifted a brow. “And what of it?”

A cold snort. “It is how Erawan has raised an army so quickly, why even Aelin of the Wildfire cannot take him on without assistance. He must have at least one. Not all, or we’d be calling Erawan our master already. But at least one, maybe two. So where is the third?”

She honestly had not a clue. Whether Aelin and the others possessed an inkling, they’d never told her. Only that their ultimate path, beyond war and death, was to retrieve the ones Erawan held. But even telling him that ...

“Perhaps now you understand,” Nesryn said with equal cold, “why we are so desperate for your father’s armies.”

“To be slaughtered.”

“When Erawan is done slaughtering us, he will come to your doorstep next.”

Sartaq swore. “What I saw today, that *thing* ...” He scrubbed his face with shaking hands. “The Valg once used those spiders as foot soldiers. Legions of them.” He lowered his hands. “Houlun has learned of three other watchtowers in ruin—to the south. We’ll fly to the first as soon as the shifter is healed.”

“We’re taking Falkan?”

Sartaq yanked open the door, hard enough that she was surprised he didn’t rip it clean off its hinges. “As piss-poor of a shifter as he claims to be, a man who can change into a wolf that big is too good a weapon not to bring into danger.” A sharp glare. “He rides with me.”

“And where will I be?”

Sartaq gave her a humorless smile before entering the hall. “You’ll be flying with Borte.”

“Eyllwe has no standing army,” Aelin said, feeling the blood drain from her face. “There is nothing and no one to fight after this spring—save for rebel militia bands.”

Rowan said to Rolfe, “Do you have exact numbers?”

“No,” the captain said. “The news was given only as a warning—to keep any shipments away from the Avery. I wanted their opinions”—a nod of the chin toward the cadre—“for handling it. Though I suppose I should have invited you, too, since they seem intent on telling you my business.”

None of them deigned to respond. Aelin scanned that line—that line of *armies*.

Rowan said, “How fast do they move?”

“The legions departed Morath nearly three weeks ago,” Gavriel supplied. “They moved faster than any army I’ve ever seen.”

The timing of it...

No. No—no, it couldn’t be because of Ilium, because she’d taunted him...

“It’s an extermination,” Rolfe said baldly.

She closed her eyes, swallowing hard. Even the captain didn’t dare speak.

Rowan slid a hand along her lower back, a silent comfort. He knew—was piecing it together, too.

She opened her eyes, that line burning into her vision, her heart, and said, “It’s a message. For me.” She unfurled her fist, gazing at the scar there.

“Why attack Eyllwe, though?” Fenrys asked. “And why move into position but not sack it?”

She couldn’t say the words aloud. That she’d brought this upon Eyllwe by mocking Erawan, because he knew who Celaena Sardothien had cared for, and he wanted to break her spirit, her heart, by showing her what his armies could do. What they *would* do, whenever he now felt like it. Not to Terrasen ... but to the kingdom of the friend she’d loved so dearly.

The kingdom she had sworn to protect, to save.

Rowan said, “We have personal ties to Eyllwe. He knows it matters to her.”

Fenrys's eyes lingered on her, scanning. But Gavriel, voice steady, said, "Erawan now holds everything south of the Avery. Save for this archipelago. And even here, he has a foothold in the Dead End."

Aelin stared at that map, at the space that now seemed so small to the north.

To the west, the vast expanse of the Wastes spread beyond the mountainous continental divide. And her gaze snagged on a small name along the western coast.

Briarcliff.

The name clanged through her, shuddering her awake, and she realized they'd been talking, debating how such an army might move so quickly over the terrain.

She rubbed her temple, staring at that speck on the map.

Considering the life debt owed to her.

Her gaze dragged down—south. To the Red Desert. Where another life debt, many life debts, waited for her to claim them.

Aelin realized they had asked her something, but she didn't care to figure it out as she said quietly to Rolfe, "You're going to give me your armada. You're going to arm it with those firelances I know you've ordered, and you will ship any extras to the Mycenian fleet when they arrive."

Silence.

Rolfe barked a laugh and sat again. "Like hell I am." He waved that tattooed hand over the map, the waters inked on it churning and changing in some pattern she wondered if only he could read. A pattern she *needed* him to be able to read, to find that Lock. "This just shows how utterly outmatched you are." He chewed over her words. "The Mycenian fleet is little more than a myth. A bedside tale."

Aelin looked to the hilt of Rolfe's sword, to the inn itself and his ship anchored just outside.

"You are the heir of the Mycenian people," Aelin said. "And I have come to claim the debt you owe my bloodline on that account, too."

Rolfe did not move, did not blink.

"Or were all the sea dragon references from some personal fetish?" Aelin asked.

"The Mycenians are gone," Rolfe said flatly.

"I don't think so. I think they have been hiding here, in the Dead Islands, for a long, long time. And you somehow managed to claw your way back to power."

The three Fae males were glancing between them.

Aelin said to Rolfe, "I have liberated Ilium from Adarlan. I took back the

city—your ancient home—for you. For the Mycenians. It is yours, if you dare to claim your people’s inheritance.”

Rolfe’s hand shook slightly. He fisted it, tucking it beneath the table.

She allowed a flicker of her magic to rise to the surface then, allowed the gold in her eyes to glow like bright flame. Gavriel and Fenrys straightened as her power filled the room, filled the city. The Wyrdkey between her breasts began thrumming, whispering.

She knew there was nothing human, nothing mortal on her face.

Knew it because Rolfe’s golden-brown skin had paled to a sickly sheen.

She closed her eyes and loosed a breath.

The tendril of power she’d gathered rippled away in an invisible line. The world shuddered in its wake. A city bell chimed once, twice, in its force. Even the waters in the bay shivered as it swept past and out into the archipelago.

When Aelin opened her eyes, the mortality had returned.

“What the rutting hell was that?” Rolfe at last demanded.

Fenrys and Gavriel became *very* interested in the map before them.

Rowan said smoothly, “Milady has to release bits of her power daily or it can consume her.”

Despite herself, despite what she’d done, she decided she wanted Rowan to call her *milady* at least once every day.

Rowan continued on, pressing Rolfe about the moving army. The Pirate Lord, who Lysandra had confirmed weeks ago *was* Mycenian thanks to Arobynn’s own spying on his business partners, seemed barely able to speak, thanks to the offer she’d laid out for him. But Aelin merely waited.

Aedion and Lysandra arrived after some time—and her cousin only spared Gavriel a passing glance as he stood over the map and fell into that general’s mindset, demanding details large and minute.

But Gavriel silently stared up at his son, watching her cousin’s eyes dart over the map, listening to the sound of his voice as if it were a song he was trying to memorize.

Lysandra drifted to the window, monitoring the bay.

Like she could see that ripple Aelin had sent out into the world.

The shifter had told Aedion by now—of why they had truly gone to Ilium. Not only to see Brannon, not only to save its people ... but for this. She and the shifter had hatched the plan during the long night watches together on the road, considering all pitfalls and benefits.

Dorian strolled in ten minutes later, his eyes going straight to Aelin. He’d felt

it, too.

The king gave a polite greeting to Rolfe, then remained silent as he was briefed on the positioning of Erawan's armies. Then he slid into a seat beside her while the other males continued discussing supply routes and weapons, being led in circle after circle by Rowan.

Dorian just gave her an unreadable glance and folded his ankle over a knee.

The clock struck eleven, and Aelin rose to her feet in the middle of whatever Fenrys had been saying about various armor and Rolfe possibly investing in the ore to supply the demand.

Silence fell again. Aelin said to Rolfe, "Thank you for your hospitality."

And then turned away. She made it a step before he demanded, "That's it?"

She looked over her shoulder, Rowan approaching her side. Aelin let a bit of that flame rise to the surface. "Yes. If you will not give me an armada, if you will not unite what is left of the Mycenians and return to Terrasen, then I'll find someone else who will."

"There is no one else."

Again, her eyes went to the map on his table. "You once said I would pay for my arrogance. And I did. Many times. But Sam and I took on your entire city and fleet and destroyed it. All for two hundred lives you deemed less than human. So perhaps I've been underestimating myself. Perhaps I do not need you after all."

She turned again, and Rolfe sneered, "Did Sam die still pining after you, or did you finally stop treating him like filth?"

There was a choking sound, and a slam and rattle of glasses. She looked slowly to find Rowan with his hand around Rolfe's neck, the captain pressed onto the map, the figures scattered everywhere, Rowan's snarling teeth close to ripping off Rolfe's ear.

Fenrys smirked a bit. "I told you to choose your words carefully, Rolfe."

Aedion seemed to be doing his best to ignore his father as he said to the captain, "Nice to meet you." Then he strolled toward where Aelin, Dorian, and Lysandra waited by the door.

Rowan leaned in, murmuring something in Rolfe's ear that made him blanch, then shoved him a bit harder into the table before stalking for Aelin.

Rolfe set his hands on the table, pushing up to bark some surely stupid words at them, but went rigid. As if some pulse thrashed through his body.

He turned his hands over, fitting the edges of his palms together.

His eyes lifted—but not to her. To the windows.

To the bells that had begun ringing in the twin watchtowers flanking the mouth of the bay.

The frantic pealing set the streets beyond them halting, silencing.

Each bleat's meaning was clear enough.

Rolfe's face went pale.

Aelin watched as black—darker than the ink that had been etched there—spread across his fingers, to his palms. Black such as only the Valg could bring.

Oh, there was no doubt now that the map worked.

She said to her companions, "We leave. Now."

Rolfe was already storming toward her—toward the door. He said nothing as he flung it open, striding onto the quay, where his first mate and quartermaster were already sprinting for him.

Aelin shut the door behind Rolfe and surveyed her friends. And the cadre.

It was Fenrys who spoke first, rising to his feet and watching through the window as Rolfe and his men rushed about. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Dorian said quietly, "If that force reaches this town, these people—"

"It won't," Aelin said, meeting Rowan's stare. Pine-green eyes held her own.

Show them why you're my blood-sworn, she silently told him.

A hint of a wicked smile. Rowan turned to them. "Let's go."

"Go," Fenrys blurted, pointing to the window. "Where?"

"There's a boat," Aedion said, "anchored on the other side of the island." He inclined his head toward Lysandra. "You'd think they'd notice a skiff being tugged out to sea by a shark last night, but—"

The door banged open, and Rolfe's towering figure filled it. "*You.*"

Aelin put a hand on her chest. "Me?"

"*You* sent that magic out there; *you* summoned them."

She barked a laugh, pushing off the table. "If I ever learn such a useful talent, I'd use it for summoning my allies, I think. Or the Mycenians, since you seem so adamant they don't exist." She glanced over his shoulder—the sky was still clear. "Good luck," she said, stepping around him.

Dorian blurted, "What?"

Aelin looked the King of Adarlan over. "This isn't our battle. And I won't sacrifice my kingdom's fate over a skirmish with the Valg. If you have any sense, you won't, either." Rolfe's face contorted with wrath—even as fear, deep and true, shone in his eyes. She took a step toward the chaotic streets but paused, turning to the Pirate Lord. "I suppose the cadre will be coming with me, too."

Since they're now my allies."

Silently, Fenrys and Gavriel approached, and she could have sighed with relief that they did so without question, that Gavriel was willing to do whatever it took to stay near his son.

Rolfe hissed, "You think withholding your assistance will sway me into helping you?" But far beyond the bay, between the distant, humped islands, a cloud of darkness gathered.

"I meant what I said, Rolfe. I can do fine without you, armada or no. Mycenians or no. And this island has now become dangerous for my cause." She inclined her head toward the sea. "I'll offer a prayer to Mala for you." She patted the hilt of Goldryn. "A bit of advice, from one professional criminal to the other: cut off their heads. It's the only way to kill them. Unless you burn them alive, but I bet most would jump ship and swim to shore before your flaming arrows can do much damage."

"And what of your idealism—what of that *child* who stole two hundred slaves from me? You'd leave the people of this island to perish?"

"Yes," she said simply. "I told you, Rolfe, that Endovier taught me some things."

Rolfe swore. "Do you think *Sam* would stand for this?"

"Sam is dead," she said, "because men like you and Arobynn have power. But Arobynn's reign is now over." She smiled at the darkening horizon. "Seems like yours might end rather soon as well."

"You *bitch*—"

Rowan snarled, taking all of a step before Rolfe flinched away.

Rushing footsteps sounded, then Rolfe's quartermaster filled the doorway. He panted as he rested a hand on the threshold, the other gripping the sea dragon-shaped pommel of his sword. "We are knee-deep in shit."

Aelin paused. Rolfe's face tightened. "How bad?" the captain asked.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Eight warships teeming with soldiers—at least a hundred on each, more on the lower levels I couldn't see. They're flanked by two sea-wyverns. All moving so fast that it's like storm winds carry them."

Aelin cut a glance at Rowan. "How quickly can we get to that boat?"

Rolfe was gazing at the few ships in his harbor, his face deathly pale. At Ship-Breaker out in the bay, the chain currently beneath the calm surface. Fenrys, seeing the captain's stare, observed, "Those sea-wyverns will snap that chain. Get your people off this island. Use every skiff and sloop you have and

get them *out*.”

Rolfe slowly turned to Aelin, his sea-green eyes simmering with hate. And resignation. “Is this an attempt to call my bluff?”

Aelin toyed with the end of her braid. “No. It’s convenient timing, but no.”

Rolfe surveyed them all—the power that could level this island if they chose. His voice was hoarse as he at last spoke. “I want to be admiral. I want this entire archipelago. I want Ilium. And when this war is over, I want *Lord* in front of my name, as it was before my ancestors’ names long ago. What of my payment?”

Aelin surveyed him in turn, the entire room deathly quiet compared to the chaos of outside. “For every Morath ship you sack, you can keep whatever gold and treasure is aboard it. But weapons and ammunition go to the front. I’ll give you land, but no royal titles beyond those of Lord of Ilium and King of the Archipelago. If you bear any offspring, I will recognize them as your heirs—as I would any children Dorian might bear.”

Dorian nodded gravely. “Adarlan will recognize you and your heirs, and this land as yours.”

Rolfe ground out, “You send those bastards down to the inky black, and my fleet is yours. I cannot guarantee the Mycenians will rise, though. We’ve been scattered too far and too long. Only a small number live here, and they will not stir without proper ... motivation.” He glanced toward the bar, as if he’d expected to see someone behind it.

But Aelin held out her hand, smiling faintly. “Leave that to me.”

Tattooed skin met scarred flesh as Rolfe shook her hand. Hard enough to break bones, but she did it right back. Sent a little flame searing into his fingers.

He hissed, pulling back his hand, and Aelin grinned. “Welcome to Her Majesty’s army, Privateer Rolfe.” She gestured to the open door. “Shall we?”



Aelin was insane, Dorian realized. Brilliant and wicked, but insane.

And perhaps the greatest, most unremorseful liar he’d ever encountered.

He’d felt her summons sweep through the world. Felt fire hum against his skin. There was no mistaking who it belonged to. And there was no mistaking that it had gone right to the Dead End, where the forces dwelling there would know there was one person alive with that kind of flame at her disposal, and track the magic back here.

He didn’t know what had triggered it, why she’d chosen now, but—

But Rowan had informed Aelin how the Valg haunted Rolfe. How he had this city watched day and night, terrified of their return. So Aelin had used it to her advantage. The Mycenians—holy gods. They were little more than a bedtime story and cautionary tale. But here they were, carefully hidden away. Until Aelin had smoked them out.

And as the Pirate Lord and Queen of Terrasen shook hands and she grinned at Rolfe, Dorian realized he ... perhaps he could do with a bit more wickedness and insanity, too.

This war would not be won on smiles and manners.

It would be won by a woman willing to gamble with an entire *island* full of people to get what she needed to save them all. A woman whose friends were equally willing to play along, to rip their souls to shreds if it meant saving the greater population. They knew the weight of the lives panicking around them if they gambled wrong. Aelin perhaps more than anyone else.

Aelin and Rolfe stalked through the open tavern doorway and into the street beyond. Behind him, Fenrys let out a low whistle. “Gods help you, Rowan, that woman is...”

Dorian didn’t wait to hear the rest as he followed the pirate and the queen into the street, Aedion and Lysandra trailing. Fenrys kept at a distance from the others, but Gavriel remained close, his gaze still fixed on his son. Gods, they looked so much alike, *moved* alike, the Lion and the Wolf.

Rolfe barked to his men waiting in a line before him, “Every ship that can bear men sails *now*.” He rattled off orders, delegating his men to various ships long bereft of crew to run them, including his own, while Aelin stood there, hands braced on her hips, watching them all.

She said to the captain, “What’s your fastest ship?”

He pointed at his own.

She held his stare, and Dorian waited for the wild, reckless plan. But she said without looking at any of them, “Rowan, Lysandra, Fenrys, and Gavriel, you’re with me. Aedion, you get on the northern watchtower and man the mounted harpoon. Any ship gets too close to the chain, you blast a hole through their gods-damned side.” Dorian stiffened as she at last addressed him, seeing the orders already in her eyes. He opened his mouth to object, but Aelin said simply, “This battle is no place for a king.”

“And it’s one for a queen?”

There was no amusement, nothing but icy calm as she handed him a sword he hadn’t realized she’d been carrying at her side. Damaris.

Goldryn was still strapped across her back, its ruby glowing like a living ember as she said, “One of us has to live, Dorian. You take the southern watchtower—stay at the base, and get your magic ready. Any forces that try to cross the chain, you take them out.”

Not with steel, but magic. He fastened Damaris to his sword belt, its weight foreign. “And what are you going to do?” he demanded. As if in answer, his power writhed in his gut, like an asp curling to strike.

Aelin glanced at Rowan, at his tattooed hand. “Rolfe, get whatever iron chains you have left from your slave-mongering. We’re going to need them.”

For her—for Rowan. As a check against their magic, if it got out of control.

Because Aelin ... Aelin was going to sail that ship right into the heart of the enemy fleet and blow them all out of the water.

She was a liar, and a murderer, and a thief, and Aelin had a feeling she'd be called much worse by the end of this war. But as that unnatural darkness gathered on the horizon, she wondered if she might have bitten off more than she and all her fanged friends could chew.

She did not give her fear an inch of space.

Did not do anything but let black fire ripple through her.

Securing this alliance was only part of it. The other part, the bigger part ... was the message. Not to Morath.

But to the world.

To any potential allies watching this continent, contemplating if it was indeed a lost cause.

Today her message would thunder across the realms.

She was not a rebel princess, shattering enemy castles and killing kings.

She was a force of nature. She was a calamity and a commander of immortal warriors of legend. And if those allies did not join with her ... she wanted them to think of today, of what she would do, and wonder if they might find her on their shores, in their harbors, one day, too.

They had not come ten years ago. She wanted them to know she had not forgotten it.

Rolfe finished barking orders to his men and rushed aboard the *Sea Dragon*, Aedion and Dorian hurtling for horses to carry them to their respective watchtowers. Aelin turned to Lysandra, the shifter calmly monitoring all. Aelin said quietly, "Do you know what I need you to do?"

Lysandra's moss-green eyes were bright as she nodded.

Aelin did not allow herself to embrace the shifter. Did not allow herself to so much as touch her friend's hand. Not with Rolfe watching. Not with the citizens of this town watching, the lost Mycenians among them. So Aelin merely said, "Good hunting."

Fenrys let out a choked sound, as if he realized what she had indeed demanded of the shape-shifter. Beside him, Gavriel was still too busy staring

after Aedion, who hadn't so much as glanced at his father before fastening his shield and sword across his back, mounting a sorry-looking mare, and galloping for the watchtower.

Aelin said to Rowan, the wind already dancing in the silver hair of her warrior-prince, "We move now."

So they did.

People were panicking in the streets as the dark force took shape on the horizon: massive ships with black sails, converging on the bay as if they were indeed carried on a preternatural wind.

But Aelin, Lysandra close to her, stalked for the towering *Sea Dragon*, Rowan and his two companions falling into step behind them.

People halted and gawked while they ascended the gangway, securing and rearranging their weapons. Knives and swords, Rowan's hatchet gleaming while he hooked it at his side, a bow and quiver full of black-feathered arrows that Aelin assumed Fenrys could fire with deadly accuracy, and more blades. As they prowled onto the gently rocking deck of the *Sea Dragon*, the wood meticulously polished, Aelin supposed that together they formed a walking armory.

Gavriel had no sooner set foot on board than the gangway was hauled up by Rolfe's men. The others, seated on benches flanking the deck, lifted oars, two men to a seat. Rowan jerked his chin at Gavriel and Fenrys, and the two wordlessly went to join the men, his cadre falling into rank and rhythms that were older than some kingdoms.

Rolfe stalked out a door that no doubt led to his chambers, two men behind him bearing enormous iron chains.

Aelin strode for them. "Anchor them to the mainmast and make sure there's enough room for them to reach right ... here." She pointed to where she now stood in the heart of the deck. Enough space clear of everyone, enough space for her and Rowan to work.

Rolfe barked an order to begin rowing, glancing once at Fenrys and Gavriel—who each manned an oar themselves, teeth bared as they threw their considerable strength into the motion.

Slowly, the ship began moving—the others around them stirring as well.

But they had to be out of the bay first, had to get past the boundary of Ship-Breaker.

Rolfe's men looped the chains around the mast, leaving enough length to reach Aelin.

Iron would provide a bite, an anchor to remind her who she was, what she

was. Iron would keep her tethered when the sheer vastness of her magic, of Rowan's magic, threatened to sweep her away.

The *Sea Dragon* inched over the harbor, the call and grunting of Rolfe's men as they rowed drowning out the din of the town behind them.

She flicked a glance toward either watchtower to see Dorian arrive—then Aedion's golden hair racing up the outer spiral staircase to the enormous mounted harpoon at the top. Her heart strained for a moment as she flashed between now and a time when she'd seen Sam running up those same stairs—not to defend this town, but to wreck it.

She shook off the icy grip of memory and turned to Lysandra, standing at the deck rail, watching her cousin as well. "Now."

Even Rolfe paused his ordering at the word.

Lysandra gracefully sat on the broad wooden railing, pivoted her legs over the side ... and dropped into the water.

Rolfe's men rushed to the rail. People in boats flanking them did the same, spotting the woman plunge into the vivid blue.

But it was not a woman who came out.

Below, deep down, Aelin could make out the glow and shift and spread. Men began cursing.

But Lysandra kept growing and growing beneath the surface, along the sandy harbor floor.

Faster, the men rowed.

But the ship's speed was nothing compared to the speed of the creature that emerged from the waves.

A broad jade-green snout, peppered with shredding white teeth, huffed a mighty breath then arced back under the water, revealing a flash of a massive head and cunning eyes as she disappeared.

Some men screamed. Rolfe braced a hand on the wheel. His first mate, that sea dragon sword freshly polished at his side, dropped to his knees.

Lysandra dove, and she let them see the long, powerful body that broke the surface bit by bit as she plunged down, her jade scales gleaming like jewels in the blinding midday sun. See the legend straight from their prophecies: the Mycenians would only return when the sea dragons did.

And so Aelin had ensured that one appeared right in their gods-damned harbor.

"Holy gods," Fenrys muttered from where he rowed.

Indeed, that was about the only reaction Aelin could muster as the sea dragon

dove down deep, then swam ahead.

For those were mighty fins—*wings* that Lysandra spread beneath the water, tucking in her small front arms and back legs, her massive, spiked tail acting as a rudder.

Some of Rolfe's men were murmuring, "A dragon—a dragon to defend our own ship ... The legends of our fathers..." Indeed, Rolfe's face was pale as he stared toward where Lysandra had vanished into the blue, still clutching the wheel as if it'd keep him from falling.

Two sea-wyverns ... against one sea dragon.

For all the fire in the world would not work beneath the sea. And if they were to stand a chance of decimating those ships, there could be no interference from beneath the surface.

"Come on, Lysandra," Aelin breathed, and sent a prayer to Temis, the Goddess of Wild Things, to keep the shifter swift and unfaltering beneath the waves.



Aedion chucked off the shield from his back and slammed into the seat before the giant iron harpoon, its length perhaps a hand taller than him, its head bigger than his own. There were only three spears. He'd have to make his shots count.

Across the bay, he could just make out the king taking up a position along the battlement on the lowest level of the tower.

In the bay itself, Rolfe's ship rowed closer and closer to Ship-Breaker's lowered chain.

Aedion stomped on one of the three operating pedals that allowed him to pivot the mounted launcher, gripping the handles on either side that positioned the spear into place. Carefully, precisely, he aimed the harpoon toward the very outer edge of the bay, where the two branches of the island leaned toward each other to provide a narrow passage into the harbor.

Waves broke just beyond—a reef. Good for breaking ships against—and no doubt where Rolfe would plant his ship, in order to fool Morath's fleet into skewering themselves on it.

"What the hell is that?" one of the sentries manning the gunner breathed, pointing toward the bay waters.

A mighty, long shadow swept under the water ahead of the *Sea Dragon*, faster than the ship, faster than a dolphin. Its long, serpentine body soared

through the sea, carried on wings that might have also been fins.

Aedion's heart stopped dead. "It's a sea dragon," he managed to say.

Well, at least he now knew what secret form Lysandra had been working on.

And why Aelin had insisted on getting inside Brannon's temple. Not just to see the king, not just to reclaim the city for the Mycenians and Terrasen, but ... for Lysandra to study the life-size, detailed carvings of those sea dragons. To become a living myth.

The two of them ... Oh, those crafty, scheming devils. A queen of legends indeed.

"How ... how..." The sentry turned toward the others, babbling among themselves. "It's gonna defend us?"

Lysandra approached Ship-Breaker, still lowered under the surface, twirling and arcing, banking along rocks as if getting a feel for her new form. Getting a feel for it in whatever little time they had. "Yes," Aedion breathed as terror flooded his veins. "Yes, she is."



The water was warm, and quiet, and ageless.

And she was a scaled shadow that set the jewel-colored fish darting into their coral homes; she was a soaring menace through the water that made the white birds bobbing on the surface scatter into flight as they sensed her passing below.

Sunbeams streamed in pillars through the water, and Lysandra, in the small part of her that remained human, felt as if she were gliding through a temple of light and shadow.

But there—far out, carried on echoes of sound and vibration—she felt them.

Even the larger predators of these waters flitted off, taking to the open seas beyond the islands. Not even the promise of water stained red could keep them in the path of the two forces about to collide.

Ahead, the mighty links of Ship-Breaker sagged into the deep, like the colossal necklace of some goddess leaning down to drink the sea.

She had been reading about them—the long-forgotten and long-dead sea dragons—at Aelin's behest. Because her friend had known that strong-arming Rolfe with the Mycenians would only get them so far, but if they were to wield the power of myth instead ... its people might rally around it. And with a home to finally offer them, among these islands and in Terrasen...

Lysandra had studied the carvings of the sea dragons at the temple, once

Aelin had burned away the dirt on them. Her magic had filled in gaps the carvings didn't show. Like the nostrils that picked apart each scent on the current, the ears that unraveled varying layers of sound.

Lysandra swept for the reef just beyond the parted lips of the island. She'd have to retract the wings, but here ... here she would make her stand.

Here she would have to unleash every wild instinct, yielding the part of her that felt and cared.

These beasts, however they were made, were only that: beasts. Animals.

They would not fight with morals and codes. They would fight to the death, and fight for survival. There would be no mercy, no compassion.

She would have to fight as they did. She had done so before—had turned feral not just that day the glass castle had shattered, but the night she'd been captured and those men had tried to take Evangeline. This would be no different.

Lysandra dug her bone-shredding, curved talons into the reef shelf to hold her position against the current's nudging, and peered into the silent blue stretching endlessly ahead.

So she began her death vigil.

Perched on the rail of the *Sea Dragon*, gripping the rope ladder flowing from the looming mast, Aelin savored the cooling spindrift that sprayed her face as the ship plowed through the waves. Once the ship was clear of the others, Rowan had let his winds fill its sails, setting the *Sea Dragon* flying toward the mammoth chain.

It was hard not to look back as they passed over the submerged chain ... and then Ship-Breaker began to rise from the water.

Sealing them out of the bay—where Rolfe’s other ships would wait safely behind the chain’s line—to guard the town now silently watching them.

If all went well, they would only need this boat, she’d told Rolfe.

And if it went badly, then his ships wouldn’t make a difference anyway.

Tightly grasping the rope, Aelin leaned out, the vibrant blue and white below passing in a swift blur. *Not too fast*, she’d told Rowan. *Don’t waste your strength—you barely slept last night.*

He’d just leaned in to nip at her ear before sliding onto Gavriel’s bench to concentrate.

He was still there, his power letting the men cease their rowing and prepare for what swept toward them. Aelin again looked ahead—toward those black sails blotting the horizon.

The Wyrdkey at her chest murmured in response.

She could feel them—her magic could *taste* their corruption on the wind. No sign of Lysandra, but she was out there.

The sun was blinding on the waves as Rowan’s magic slowed, bringing them into a steady glide toward the two peaks of the island that curved toward each other.

It was time.

Aelin swung off the railing, boots thudding on the soaked wood of the deck. So many eyes turned to her, to the chains spread across the main deck.

Rolfe stalked toward her, descending from the raised quarterdeck, where he’d been manning the wheel himself.

She picked up a heavy iron chain, wondering who it'd previously held. Rowan rose to his feet in a steady, graceful movement. He reached her when Rolfe did.

The captain demanded, "What now?"

Aelin jerked her chin toward the ships near enough to make out figures crammed onto the various decks. Many, *many* figures. "We draw them in as close as we can. When you can see the whites of their eyes, you shout at us."

Rowan added, "And then you lay anchor off the starboard side. Swing us around."

"Why?" Rolfe asked as Rowan helped her fasten the manacle around her wrist.

She balked at the iron, her magic twisting. Rowan gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger, making her meet his unflinching gaze, even as he said to Rolfe, "Because we don't want the masts in the way when we open fire. They seem like a rather important part of the ship."

Rolfe growled and stalked off.

Rowan's fingers slid to cup her jaw, his thumb brushing her cheek. "We draw out our power, slow and steady."

"I know."

He angled his head, brows lifting. A half smile curved his sinful mouth. "You've been spiraling down into your power for days now, haven't you?"

She nodded. It had taken most of her focus, had been such an effort to stay in the present, to stay active and aware while she was burrowing down and down, drawing up as much of her power as she could without attracting any notice. "I didn't want to take any chances here. Not if you were drained from saving Dorian."

"I've recovered, I'll have you know. So this morning's little display..."

"A way to take off the power's full edge," she said wryly. "And make Rolfe piss himself." He chuckled and released her face to pass her the other manacle. She hated its ancient, hideous touch on her skin, on his, as she clamped it around his tattooed wrist.

"Hurry," Rolfe said from where he'd returned to his spot at the wheel.

Indeed, the ships were gaining on them. No sign of those sea-wyverns—though the shifter also remained out of sight.

Rowan palmed his hunting knife, the steel bright in the blazing sun. High noon.

Precisely why she'd gone into Rolfe's office nearly two hours beforehand.

She'd practically rung the dinner bell for the host in the Dead End. She'd gambled that they wouldn't wait until nightfall, but they apparently feared the wrath of their master if she slipped their nets more than they feared the light itself. Or were too stupid to realize Mala's heir would be at her most powerful.

"Do you want to do the honors, or should I?" Rowan said. Fenrys and Gavriel had risen to their feet, blades out as they monitored from a safe distance. Aelin held out her free hand, her palm scarred, and took the knife from him. A quick slice had her skin stinging, warm blood heating her seawater-sticky skin.

Rowan had the knife a heartbeat later, and the scent of his blood filled her nose, set her senses on edge. But she extended her bloodied palm.

Her magic swirled into the world with it, crackling in her veins, her ears. She reined in the urge to tap her foot on the ground, to roll her shoulders.

"Slow," Rowan repeated, as if sensing the hair-trigger that her power was now on, "and steady." His shackled arm slid around her waist to hold her to him. "I'll be with you every step of the way."

She lifted her head to study his face, the harsh planes and the curving tattoo. He leaned in to brush a kiss to her mouth. And as his lips met hers, he joined their bleeding palms.

Magic jolted through her, ancient and wicked and cunning, and she arched against him, knees buckling as his cataclysmic power roared into her.

All anyone on deck saw, she knew, was two lovers embracing.

But Aelin tunneled down, down, down into her power, felt him doing the same with his, felt every ounce of ice and wind and lightning go slamming from him into her. And when it reached her, the core of his power yielded to her own, melted and became embers and wildfire. Became the molten heart of the earth, shaping the world and birthing new lands.

Deeper and deeper, she went.

Aelin had a vague sense of the ship rocking beneath them, felt the faint bite of the iron as it rejected her magic, felt the presence of Fenrys and Gavriel flickering around them like candles.

It had been months since she'd drawn from so deep in the abyss of her power.

During the time she'd trained with Rowan in Wendlyn, her power's limit had been self-imposed. And then that day with the Valg, she'd broken through it—had discovered an entire hidden level beneath. She had drawn from it when she'd encircled Doranelle with her power, had taken a whole day to tunnel that far, to draw up what she needed.

Aelin had begun this descent three days ago.

She'd expected it to stop after the first day. To hit that bottom she'd sensed once before.

She had not.

And now ... now with Rowan's power joining hers...

Rowan's arm still held her tightly against him, and she had the distant, murky sensation of his coat scratching lightly against her face, of the hardness of the weapons strapped beneath, the scent of him washing over her, soothing her.

She was a stone plunked into the sea of her power—their power.

Down

and

down

and

down

There—there was the bottom. The ash-lined bottom, the pit of a dormant crater.

Only the feeling of her own feet against the wood deck kept her from sinking into that ash, learning what might slumber beneath it.

Her magic whispered to start digging through that ash and silt. But Rowan's grip tightened on her waist. "Easy," he murmured in her ear. "Easy."

Still more of his power flowed into her, wind and ice churning with her power, eddying into a maelstrom.

"Close now," Rolfe warned from nearby—from another world.

"Aim for the middle of the fleet," Rowan ordered her. "Send the flanking ships scattering onto the reef." Where they'd founder, leaving any survivors to be picked off with arrows shot by Fenrys and Rolfe's men. Rowan had to be alert, then—watching the approaching force.

She could feel them—feel her magic's hackles rise in response to the blackness gathering beyond the horizon of her consciousness.

"Almost in range," Rolfe called.

She began pulling up, dragging the abyss of flame and embers with her.

"Steady," Rowan murmured.

Higher, higher, Aelin rose, back toward the sea and sunlight.

Here, that sunlight seemed to beckon. *To me*.

Her magic surged for it, for that voice.

"*Now!*" Rolfe barked.

And like a feral beast freed of its leash, her magic erupted.



She'd been doing well as Rowan had handed over his power to her.

She'd balked and bobbed a few times, but ... she had the descent under control.

Even if her power ... the well had gone deeper than before. It was easy to forget she was still growing—that her power would mature with her.

And when Rolfe shouted, *Now!* Rowan knew he had forgotten to his detriment.

A pillar of flame that did not burn erupted from Aelin, slamming into the sky, turning the world into red and orange and gold.

Aelin was ripped from his arms with the force of it, and Rowan grabbed her hand in a crushing grip, refusing to let her break that line of contact. Men around them stumbled back, falling onto their asses as they gawked upward in terror and wonder.

Higher, that column of flame swirled, a maelstrom of death and life and rebirth.

“Holy gods,” Fenrys whispered behind him.

Still Aelin's magic poured into the world. Still she burned hotter, wilder.

Her teeth were gritted, her head arched back as she panted, eyes shut.

“Aelin,” Rowan warned. The pillar of flame began expanding, laced now with blue and turquoise. Flame that could melt bone, crack the earth.

Too much. He had given her too much, and she had delved too deep into her power—

Through the flames encasing them, Rowan glimpsed the frantic enemy fleet, now hurling themselves into motion to flee, to get out of range.

Aelin's ongoing display was not for them.

Because there was no escape, not with the power she'd dragged up with her.

The display was for the others, for the city watching them.

For the world to know she was no mere princess playing with pretty embers.

“Aelin,” Rowan said again, trying to tug on that bond between them.

But there was nothing.

Only the gaping maw of some immortal, ancient beast. A beast that had opened an eye, a beast that spoke in the tongue of a thousand worlds.

Ice flooded his veins. She was wearing the Wyrdkey.

“*Aelin.*” But Rowan felt it then. Felt that bottom of her power crack open as if the beast within that Wyrdkey stomped its foot, and ash and crusted rock

crumbled away beneath it.

And revealed a roiling, molten core of magic beneath it.

As if it were the fiery heart of Mala herself.

Aelin plunged into that power. Bathed in it.

Rowan tried to move, tried to scream at her to stop—

But Rolfe, eyes wide with what could only be terror and awe, roared at her, “*Open fire!*”

She heard that. And as violently as it had pierced the sky, that pillar of fire shot down, shot back into *her*, coiling and wrapping inside her, fusing into a kernel of power so hot it sizzled into him, searing his very soul—

The flames winked out at the same second she reached into Rowan with burning hands and *tore* the last remnants of his power from him.

Just as she ripped her hand from his. Just as her power and the Wyrdkey between her breasts merged.

Rowan collapsed to his knees, and there was a crack inside his head, as if thunder cleaved through him.

As Aelin opened her eyes, he realized it wasn’t thunder—but the sound of a door slamming open.

Her face turned expressionless. Cold as the gaps between the stars. And her eyes...

Turquoise burned bright ... around a core of silver. No hint of gold to be found.

“That’s not Aelin,” Fenrys breathed.

A faint smile blossomed on her full mouth, born of cruelty and arrogance, and she examined the iron chain wrapped around her wrist.

The iron melted away, molten ore sizzling through the wooden deck and into the dark below. The creature that stared out through Aelin’s eyes furled her fingers into a fist. Light leaked through her clenched fingers.

Cold white light. Tendrils flickered—silver flame...

“Get away,” Gavriel warned him. “*Get away and don’t look.*”

Gavriel was indeed on his knees, head bowed and eyes averted. Fenrys followed suit.

For what gazed at the dark fleet assembled, what had filled his beloved’s body ... He knew. Some primal, intrinsic part of him knew.

“Deanna,” Rowan whispered. She flicked her eyes to him in question and confirmation.

And she said to him, in a voice that was deep and hollow, young and old,

“Every key has a lock. Tell the Queen Who Was Promised to retrieve it soon, for all the allies in the world shall make no difference if she does not wield the Lock, if she does not put those keys back with it. Tell her flame and iron, together bound, merge into silver to learn what must be found. A mere step is all it shall take.” Then she looked away again.

And Rowan realized what the power in her hand was. Realized that the flame she would unleash would be so cold it burned, realized it was the cold of the stars, the cold of stolen light.

Not wildfire—but moonfire.



One moment she was there. And then she was not.

And then she was shoved aside, locked into a box with no key, and the power was not hers, her body was not hers, her name was not hers.

And she could feel the Other there, filling her, laughing silently as she marveled at the heat of the sun on her face, at the damp sea breeze coating her lips with salt, at the pain of the hand now healed of its wound.

So long—it had been so long since the Other had felt such things, felt them *wholly* and not as something in between and diluted.

And those flames—*her* flames and her beloved’s magic ... they belonged to the Other now.

To a goddess who had walked through the temporary gate hanging between her breasts and seized her body as if it were a mask to wear.

She had no words, for she had no voice, no self, *nothing*—

And she could only watch as if through a window as she felt the goddess, who had perhaps not protected her but *hunted* her the entirety of her life, for this moment, this opportunity, examine the dark fleet ahead.

So easy to destroy it.

But more life glimmered—*behind*. More life to obliterate, to hear their dying cries with her own ears, to witness firsthand what it was to cease to be in a way the goddess never could...

She watched as her own hand, wreathed in pulsing white flame, began to move from where it had been aimed toward the dark fleet.

Toward the unprotected city at the heart of the bay.

Time slowed and stretched as her body pivoted toward that town, as her own arm lifted, her fist aimed toward the heart of it. There were people on the docks,

the scions of a lost clan, some running from the display of fire she'd unleashed moments ago. Her fingers began to unfurl.

“No!”

The word was a roar, a plea, and silver and green flashed in her vision.

A name. A name clanged through her as he hurled himself in the path of that fist, that moonfire, not just to save those innocents in the city, but to spare *her* soul from the agony if she destroyed them all—

Rowan. And as his face became clear, his tattoo stark in the sun, as that fist full of unimaginable power now opened toward *his* heart—

There was no force in any world that could keep her contained.

And Aelin Galathynius remembered her own name as she shattered through the cage that goddess had shoved her into, as she grabbed that goddess by the damned *throat* and hurled her *out, out, out* through that gaping hole where she had infiltrated her, and sealed it—

Aelin snapped into her body, her power.

Fire like ice, fire stolen from the stars—

Rowan's hair was still moving as he slammed into a stop before her uncoiling fist.

Time launched again, full and fast and unrelenting. Aelin had only enough of it to throw herself sideways, to angle that now-open fist away from him, point it *anywhere* but at him—

The ship beneath her, the center and left flank of the dark fleet beyond her, and the outer edge of the island behind it blew apart in a storm of fire and ice.

There was such quiet beneath the waves, even as the muffled sounds of shouting, of collision, of death echoed toward her.

Aelin drifted down, as she had drifted into her power, the weight of the Wyrdkey around her neck like a millstone—

Deanna. She didn't know how, didn't know why—

The Queen Who Was Promised.

Her lungs constricted and burned.

Shock. Perhaps this was shock.

Down she drifted, trying to feel her way back into her body, her mind.

Salt water stung her eyes.

A large, strong hand gripped the back of her collar and *yanked*, hauling her up in tugs—in steady strokes.

What had she done what had she done what had she done—

Light and air shattered around her, and that hand grasping her collar now banded around her chest, tugging her against a hard male body, keeping her head above the roiling waves.

“I've got you,” said a voice that was not Rowan's.

Others. There had been others on the ship, and she had as good as killed them all—

“Majesty,” the male said, a question and quiet order.

Fenrys. That was his name.

She blinked, and her name, her title, her gutted power came thrashing back into her—the sea and the battle and the threat of Morath swarming.

Later. Later, she'd deal with that rutting goddess who had thought to use *her* like some temple priestess. Later, she'd contemplate how she'd shred through every world to find Deanna and make her pay.

“Hold on,” Fenrys said over the chaos now filtering in: the screaming of men, the groaning of breaking things, the crackle of flames. “Don't let go.”

Before she could remember how to speak, they vanished into—nothing. Into darkness that was both solid and insubstantial as it squeezed her tightly.

Then they were in the water again, bobbing beneath the waves as she reoriented herself and sputtered for air. He'd moved them, somehow—jumped between distances, judging by the wholly different flotsam spinning around them.

Fenrys held her against him, his panting labored. As if whatever magic he possessed to leap between short distances took everything he had. He sucked in a deep breath.

Then they were gone again, into that dark, hollow, yet squeezing space. Only a handful of heartbeats passed before the water and sky returned.

Fenrys grunted, arm tightening around her as he swam with the other toward the shore, shoving aside debris. His breathing was a wet rasp now. Whatever that magic was, it was spent.

But Rowan—where was *Rowan*—

She made a sound that might have been his name, might have been a sob.

Fenrys panted, “He’s on the reef—he’s fine.”

She didn’t believe him. Thrashing against the Fae warrior’s arm until he released her, she slid into the cold open water and twisted toward where Fenrys had been headed. Another small sound cracked from her as she beheld Rowan standing knee-deep in water atop the reef. His arm was already outstretched, even though thirty yards still separated them.

Fine. Unscathed. Alive. And an equally soaked Gavriel stood beside him, facing—

Oh, gods, oh, gods.

Blood stained the water. There were bodies everywhere. And Morath’s fleet...

Most of it was gone. Nothing more than black wood splintered across the archipelago and burning bits of canvas and rope. But three ships remained.

Three ships now converging on the ruins of the *Sea Dragon* as it took on water, looming like thunderclouds—

“You have to swim,” Fenrys growled beside her, his sodden golden hair plastered to his head. “Right now. As fast as you can.”

She whipped her head toward him, blinking away burning seawater.

“Swim *now*,” Fenrys snapped, canines flashing, and she didn’t let herself consider what was prowling *beneath* them as he grabbed her collar again and practically *threw* her ahead of him.

Aelin didn’t wait. She focused on Rowan’s outstretched hand as she swam, his face so carefully calm—the commander on a battlefield. Her magic was

barren, her magic was a wasteland, and his ... She had stolen his power from him—

Think of that later. Aelin shoved through and ducked under larger bits of debris, past...

Past men. Rolfe's men. Dead in the water. Was the captain among them somewhere?

She'd likely killed her first and only human ally in this war—and her only direct path to that Lock. And if news of the former spread—

"Faster!" Fenrys barked.

Rowan sheathed his sword, his knees bent—

Then he was swimming to her, fast and smooth, cutting between and beneath the waves, the water seeming to part for him. She wanted to growl she could make it herself, but—

He reached her, saying nothing before he slipped behind her. Guarding with Fenrys.

And what could he do in the water with no magic, against a gaping maw of a sea-wyvern?

She ignored the crushing tightness in her chest and hurtled for the reef, Gavriel now waiting where Rowan had been. Beneath her, the shelf of the coral at last spread, and she nearly sobbed, her muscles trembling as Gavriel crouched so she could reach his outstretched hand.

The Lion easily hauled her out of the water. Her knees buckled as her boots steadied on the uneven coral heads, but Gavriel kept his grip on her, subtly letting her lean against him. Rowan and Fenrys were out a heartbeat later, and the prince instantly was there, hands on her face, slicking back her soaked hair, scanning her eyes.

"I'm fine," she rasped, her voice hoarse. From the magic or the goddess or the salt water she'd swallowed. "I'm me."

That was good enough for Rowan, who faced the three ships now bearing down on them.

On her other side, Fenrys had doubled over, hands on his knees as he panted. He lifted his head at her gaze, hair dripping, but said to Rowan, "I'm out—we'll have to either wait for it to replenish or swim to shore."

Rowan gave him a sharp nod that Aelin interpreted as understanding and thanks, and she glanced behind them. The reef seemed to be an extension of the black rocky shore far behind, but with the tide out, they'd indeed have to swim in spots. Have to risk what was beneath the water...

Beneath the water. With Lysandra.
There was no sign of wyvern or dragon.
Aelin didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.



Aelin and the Fae males had made it to the reef and now stood knee-deep in water atop it.

Whatever had happened ... it had gone horribly wrong. So wrong that Lysandra could have sworn the feral, wild presence who had never once forgotten her had ducked into her long shadow as the world above exploded.

She'd tumbled off the coral, the current cleaving and eddying. Wood and rope and canvas rained onto the surface, some plunging deep. Then bodies and arms and legs.

But—there were the captain and his first mate thrashing against the flotsam that tangled them, trying to drag them down to the sandy floor.

Shaking off her shock, Lysandra swept for them both.

Rolfe and his man froze at her approach, reaching for weapons at their sides beneath the waves. But she ripped away the debris surely drowning them, then let herself go still—let them grab on to her. She didn't have much time...

Rolfe and his first mate latched on to her legs, clinging like barnacles as she propelled them through the water—past the now-scorched ruin. The work of a minute had her depositing them onto a rocky shelf, and she emerged only long enough to gulp down a breath before diving.

There were more men struggling in the water. She aimed for them, dodging debris, until—

Blood laced the current. And not the puffs that had been staining the water since the ship exploded.

Great, roiling clouds of blood. As if massive jaws clamped around a body and squeezed.

Lysandra launched forward, mighty tail snapping back and forth, body undulating, racing for the three boats bearing down on the survivors. She had to act *now*, while the wyverns were distracted with glutting themselves.

The stench of the black boat reached her even under the waves. As if the dark wood had been soaked in rotted blood.

And as she approached the closest ship's fat underbelly, two mighty shapes took form out in the blue.

Lysandra felt their attention lock on her the moment she slammed her tail into the hull.

Once. Twice.

Wood cracked. Muffled shouts reached her from above.

She drifted back, coiling, and slammed her tail into the hull a third time.

Wood tore and ripped into her, peeling away scales, but the damage was done. Water sucked in past her, more and more, tearing through the wood as its death-wound grew and grew. She backtracked out of the water's pull—flipping down, down, down as the two wyverns feasting on frantic men paused.

Lysandra raced for the next ship. Get the ships sinking, then their allies could pick off the struggling soldiers one by one as they swam to shore.

The second ship was wiser.

Spears and arrows whizzed through the water, lancing for her. She dove to the sandy floor, then shot up, up, up, aiming for the vulnerable belly of the ship, body bracing for impact—

She didn't reach the ship before another impact came.

Faster than she could sense, slipping around the side of the ship, the sea-wyvern slammed into her.

Talons tore and sliced, and she flipped on instinct, whipping her tail so hard that the wyvern went tumbling out into the water.

Lysandra lunged back, getting an eyeful of it as it stared her down.

Oh, gods.

It was nearly double her size, made of the deepest blue, its underside white and speckled with paler blue. The body was almost serpentine, wings little more than fins along its sides. Built not for speed or cruising through oceans, but ... but for the long, curving talons, for the maw that was now open, tasting the blood and salt and scent of her, revealing teeth as narrow and sharp as an eel's.

Hooked teeth. For clamping down and shredding.

Behind the wyvern, the other fell into formation.

Men were splashing and screaming above her. If she did not get those enemy ships down...

Lysandra tucked her wings in tight. She wished she had taken a bigger gulp of air, had filled these lungs to capacity. Fanning her tail in the current, she let the blood still leaking from where the ship's wood had pierced her hide drift to them.

She knew the moment it reached the wyverns.

The moment they realized she was not just an ordinary animal.

And then Lysandra dove.

Fast and smooth, she plunged into the deep. If they had been bred for brute killing, then she'd use speed.

Lysandra swept beneath them, passing under their dark shadows before they could so much as pivot. Toward the open ocean.

Come on, come on, come on—

Like hounds after a hare, they gave chase.

There was a sandbar flanked by reefs just to the north.

She aimed for it, swimming like hell.

One of the wyverns was faster than the other, swift enough that its snapping maw rippled the water at her tail—

The water became clearer, brighter. Lysandra shot straight for the reef looming up out of the deep, a pillar of life and activity gone still. She curved around the sandbar—

The other wyvern appeared in front of her, the second still close on her tail.

Clever things.

But Lysandra threw herself to the side—into the shallows of the sandbar, and let momentum flip her, over and over, closer and closer to that narrow spit of sand. She dug her claws in deep, slowing to a stop, sand spraying and crusting her, and had her tail lifted, her body so much heavier out of the water—

The wyvern that had thought to catch her off guard by swimming around the other way launched itself out of the water and onto the sandbar.

She struck, fast as an asp.

Its neck exposed, she clamped her jaws around it and bit down.

It bucked, tail slashing, but she slammed her own onto its spine. Cracking its back as she cracked its neck.

Black blood that tasted of rancid meat flooded her throat.

Dropping the dead wyvern, she scanned the turquoise seas, the flotsam, the two remaining ships and harbor—

Where was the second wyvern? Where the hell was it?

Clever enough, she realized, to know when death was upon it and to seek an easier quarry.

For that was a spiked dorsal fin now submerging. Heading toward...

Toward where Aelin, Rowan, Gavriel, and Fenrys stood atop the reef, swords out. Surrounded by water on all sides.

Lysandra plunged into the waves, sand and blood washing away. One more—just one more wyvern, then she could wreck the boats...

The remaining wyvern reached the coral outcropping, gathering speed, as if it'd leap from the water and swallow the queen down whole.

It didn't get within twenty feet of the surface.

Lysandra hurled into it, both of them hitting the coral so hard it shuddered beneath them. But her claws were in its spine, her mouth around the back of its neck, shaking, yielding wholly to the song of survival, to the screaming demands of this body to *kill, kill, kill*—

They tumbled into open water, the wyvern still fighting, her grip on its neck loosening—

No. A warship loomed overhead, and Lysandra dug down deep, rallying her strength one last time as she spread those wings and flapped *up*—

She slammed the sea-wyvern into the hull of the boat now above them. The beast roared its fury. She slammed it again, and again. The hull snapped. And so did the sea-wyvern's body.

She watched the beast go limp. Watched the water rush into the cleaved belly of the ship. Listened to the soldiers aboard begin shouting.

She eased her claws from the beast and let it drift to the bottom of the sea.

One more ship. Just one more...

She was so tired. Shifting afterward might not even be possible for a few hours.

Lysandra broke the surface, drawing down air, bracing herself.

Aelin's screaming hit her before she could submerge again.

Not in pain ... but warning. One word, over and over. One word for her.

Swim.

Lysandra craned her head toward where the queen stood atop the reef. But Aelin was pointing behind Lysandra. Not at the remaining ship ... but the open water.

Where three massive forms raged through the waves, aiming right for her.

Aedion’s queen was on the reef, Rowan beside her, his father and Fenrys flanking them. Rolfe and most of his men had made it to the opposite side of the narrow bay mouth—atop the reef there.

And through the channel between them...

One warship.

One sea dragon.

And three sea-wyverns.

Adult sea-wyverns. The first two ... they hadn’t been full-grown.

“Oh, shit,” the sentry beside Aedion on the watchtower began chanting. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit.”

The sea-wyverns that, Rolfe had claimed, would go to the ends of the earth to slaughter whoever killed their offspring. Only being in the heart of the continent might save you—but even then, waterways would never be safe.

And Lysandra had just killed two.

It seemed they had not come alone. And from the cheering of the Valg soldiers on that remaining warship ... it had been a trap. The offspring had been the bait.

They had been only slightly bigger than Lysandra. The adults—the bulls—were thrice her size.

Longer than the warship now sitting there, archers firing at the men trying to swim ashore in the channel that had become a death trap for the green sea dragon.

The green sea dragon who now stood between the three monstrous creatures and his queen, stranded on those rocks with not even an ember of magic left in her veins. His queen, screaming over and over and over at Lysandra to *swim*, to *shift*, to *run*.

But Aedion had seen Lysandra take on the two offspring.

By the second, she’d been lagging. And he’d seen her change shapes so often these past months to know she couldn’t shift fast enough now, perhaps might not have enough strength left to do it at all.

She was stranded in her form, as surely as his companions were stuck on the reef. And if Lysandra even tried to climb onto shore ... He knew the bulls would reach her before she could so much as haul her body out of the shallows.

Faster and faster, those three bulls closed in. Lysandra remained at the mouth of the bay.

Holding the line.

Aedion's heart stopped.

"She's dead," one of the sentries hissed. "Oh, gods, she's dead—"

"*Shut your rutting mouth,*" Aedion snarled, scanning the bay, slipping into that cold, calculating place that allowed him to make decisions in battle, to weigh the costs and risks.

Dorian, however, got the idea before he did.

Across the bay, hand uplifted and flickering bright as a star, Dorian signaled Lysandra again and again with his power. *Come to me, come to me, come to me,* the king seemed to call.

The three bulls sank beneath the waves.

Lysandra turned, plunging down—

But not toward Dorian.

Aelin stopped shouting. And Dorian's magic winked out.

Aedion could only watch as the shape-shifter's shadow soared toward the three bulls, meeting them head-on.

The three wyverns spread out, so huge Aedion's throat went dry.

And for the first time, he hated his cousin.

He hated Aelin for asking this of Lysandra, both to defend them and to secure the Mycenians to fight for Terrasen. Hated the people who had left such scars on the shifter that Lysandra was so willing to throw her life away. Hated ... hated himself for being stuck in this useless tower, with a war machine only capable of firing one shot at a time.

Lysandra aimed for the wyvern in the middle, and when only a hundred yards separated them, she veered left.

They broke formation, one diving low, one keeping to the surface, and the other falling back. They were going to herd her. Herd her to a spot where they'd surround her from every angle and then rip her to shreds. It would be messy and vicious.

But Lysandra shot across the channel. Headed—

Headed right for the final remaining warship.

Arrows rained down on her.

Blood bloomed as some found their mark through her jade scales.

She kept swimming, her blood sending the bull closest to her, the one near the surface, into a frenzy, pushing himself faster to grab her, bite her—

Lysandra neared the ship, taking arrow after arrow, and leaped out of the water.

She crashed into soldiers and wood and the mast, rolling, writhing, and bucking, the twin masts snapping under her tail.

She hit the other side, flipping down into the water, red blood shining everywhere—

Just as the wyvern on her ass leaped onto the ship in a mighty arc that took Aedion's breath away. But with the jagged stumps of the masts jutting up like lances...

The bull landed atop them with a crunch that Aedion heard across the bay.

He bucked, but—that was wood now piercing through his back.

And beneath his enormous weight ... the ship began to crack and sink.

Lysandra wasted no time in getting clear, and Aedion could barely draw breath as she shot across the bay again, the two bulls so horribly close that their wakes merged.

One dove, the depths swallowing him from sight. But the second one, still on her tail...

Lysandra led that one right into Dorian's range.

She drew in as close to the shore and looming tower as she could get, bringing the second bull with her. The king stretched out both hands.

The bull raged past—only to halt as ice lashed across the water. Solid ice, such as there had never been here.

The sentries beside Aedion fell silent. The bull roared, trying to wrest himself free—but the king's ice grew thicker, trapping the wyvern within its frozen grip. When the beast stopped moving, hoarfrost like scales covered him from snout to tail.

Dorian loosed a battle cry.

And Aedion had to admit the king wasn't that useless after all as the catapult behind Dorian sprang free, and a rock the size of a wagon jettisoned into the bay.

Right atop the frozen wyvern.

Rock met ice and flesh. And the wyvern shattered into a thousand pieces.

Rolfe and some of his men were cheering—people were cheering from the docks in town.

But there was one bull left in the harbor. And Lysandra was...

She had no idea where the bull was.

The long green body thrashed in the water, dipping beneath the waves, near-frantic.

Aedion scanned the bay, rotating in the gunner chair as he did, searching for any hint of that colossal dark shadow—

“*YOUR LEFT!*” Gavriel roared across the bay, magic no doubt amplifying his voice.

Lysandra twisted—and there the bull was, speeding out of the depths, as if he were a shark ambushing prey.

Lysandra threw herself into movement. A field of floating debris lay around her, the sinking ships of their enemy like islands of death, and there was the chain ... If she could maybe get on it and climb high ... No, she was too heavy, too slow.

She again streaked past Dorian’s tower, but the bull wouldn’t get near. He knew doom awaited him there. He kept just out of range, playing with her as she launched back into the field of debris between the enemy ships. Toward the open sea.

Aelin and the others watched helplessly from the reef outcropping as the two monsters swept by, the bull sending bits of broken hulls and masts into the air—aiming at the shifter.

One struck Lysandra in the side, and she went down.

Aedion shot out of his seat, a roar on his lips. But there she was, blood streaming from her as she swam and swam, as she led that bull through the heart of debris, then cut back—sharply. The bull followed through the blood clouding the water, blasting through debris that she nimbly dodged.

She’d worked him into a blood-frenzy.

And Lysandra, damn her, led him to the remnants of enemy ships, where Valg soldiers were trying to save themselves. The bull exploded through soldier and wood as if they were veils of gossamer.

Leaping through the water, twining around debris and coral and bodies, the sunlight glinting on green scales and ruby blood, Lysandra led the bull into a dance of death.

Each movement slower as more of her blood leaked into the water.

And then she changed course. Heading into the bay. To the chain.

And cut north—toward him.

Aedion examined the massive bolt before him.

Three hundred yards of open water separated her from the range of his arrow.

“SWIM,” Aedion roared, even if she couldn’t hear. “SWIM, *LYSANDRA!*”

Silence fell across the entirety of Skull’s Bay as that jade sea dragon swam for her life.

The bull gained on her, diving down.

Lysandra passed under the links of the chain, and the shadow of the bull spread beneath her.

So small. She was so small compared to him—one bite was all it would take.

Aedion slammed himself back into the gunner chair, gripping the levers and pivoting the machine as she swam and swam for him.

One shot. That was all he’d have. One gods-damned shot.

Lysandra hurled herself forward, and Aedion knew she was aware of the death that loomed. Knew she was pushing that sea dragon’s heart to near-stopping. Knew that the bull had reached the bottom and now launched himself up, up, up toward her vulnerable belly.

Only a few more yards, only a few more heartbeats.

Sweat slid down Aedion’s brow, his own heart hammering so violently all he could hear was its thunder. He shifted the spear, slightly, adjusting his aim.

The bull raged up from the deep, maw open, ready to rip her in half with one blow.

Lysandra passed into range and leaped—leaped clean out of the water, all sparkling scales and blood. The bull jumped with her, water streaming from his open jaws as they arced up.

Aedion fired, slamming his palms into the lever.

Lysandra’s long body arched away from those jaws as the bull lifted clean out of the water, baring his white throat—

As Aedion’s massive spear went clean through it.

Blood spurted from the open jaws, and the creature’s eyes went wide as he reared back.

Lysandra slammed into the water, sending a plume so high it blocked out the sight of both of them as they crashed into the sea.

When it subsided, there was only the shadow of them—and a growing pool of black blood.

“You ... you ... ,” the sentry babbled.

“*Load another one,*” he ordered, standing from his seat to scan the bubbling water.

Where was she, where was she—

Aelin was perched on Rowan’s shoulders, scanning the bay.

And then a green head shot from the water, black blood spraying like spindrift as she hurled the severed head of the bull across the waves.

Cheering—riotous, wild cheering—exploded from every corner of the bay.

But Aedion was already up and running, half leaping down the stairs that would take him toward the beach that Lysandra now swam for, her own blood replacing the black ichor that stained the water.

So slow, each of her movements was so painfully slow. He lost track of her as he descended below the tree line, his chest heaving.

Roots and stones wrenched at him, but his Fae-swift feet flew over the loam until it turned to sand, until light broke through the trees and there she was, sprawled on the beach, bleeding everywhere.

Beyond them, out in the bay, Ship-Breaker dropped low, and Rolfe's fleet swept out to pick off the surviving soldiers—and save any of their own still out there.

He vaguely noted Aelin and the others diving into the sea, swimming hard for land.

Aedion dropped to his knees, wincing as sand sprayed onto her. Her scaled head was nearly as big as he was, but her eyes ... those green eyes, the same color as her scales...

Full of pain. And exhaustion.

He lifted a hand toward her, but she showed her teeth—a low snarl slipping out of her.

He held up his hands, scooting back.

It was not the woman who looked at him, but the beast she'd become. As if she had given herself so fully to its instincts, that it had been the only way to survive.

There were gashes and slices everywhere. All dribbling blood, soaking the white sand.

Rowan and Aelin—one of them could help. If they could summon any power after what the queen had done. Lysandra closed her eyes, her breathing shallow.

“Open your gods-damned eyes,” Aedion snarled.

She snarled back but cracked open an eye.

“You made it this far. Don't die on the rutting beach.”

The eye narrowed—with a hint of female temper. He had to get the woman back. Let her take control. Or else the beast would never allow them near enough to help.

“You can thank me when your sorry ass is healed.”

Again, that eye watched him warily, temper flickering. But an animal remained.

Aedion drawled, even as his relief began to crumble his mask of arrogant calmness, “The useless sentries in the watchtower are now all half in love with you,” he lied. “One said he wanted to marry you.”

A low snarl. He yielded a foot but held eye contact with her as he grinned. “But you know what I told them? I said that they didn’t stand a chance in hell.” Aedion lowered his voice, holding her pained, exhausted stare. “Because *I* am going to marry you,” he promised her. “One day. I am going to marry you. I’ll be generous and let you pick when, even if it’s ten years from now. Or twenty. But one day, you are going to be my wife.”

Those eyes narrowed—in what he could only call female outrage and exasperation.

He shrugged. “Princess Lysandra Ashryver sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

And then the dragon huffed. In amusement. Exhaustion, but ... amusement.

She opened her jaws, as if she’d try to speak, but realized she couldn’t in this body. Blood leaked through her enormous teeth, and she shuddered in pain.

Brush snapped and crashed, and there were Aelin and Rowan, and his father and Fenrys. All of them soaked, covered in sand, and gray as death.

His queen staggered for Lysandra with a sob, flinging herself onto the sand before Aedion could bark a warning.

But Lysandra only winced as the queen laid a hand on her, saying over and over, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Fenrys and Gavriel, who had maybe saved her life with that amplified shout about the bull’s location, lingered near the tree line as Rowan approached, surveying the wounds.

Fenrys spotted Aedion’s glance, spotted the warning wrath on his face if either of them got near the shifter, and said, “That was one hell of a shot, boyo.” His father nodded in silent agreement.

Aedion ignored them both. Whatever well of magic his cousin and Rowan had depleted was already refilling. The shifter’s wounds knitted closed, one by one. Slowly—painfully slowly, but ... the bleeding stopped.

“She lost a lot of blood,” Rowan observed to none of them in particular. “Too much.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that in my life,” Fenrys murmured. None of them had.

Aelin was trembling, a hand on her friend—face so white and drawn that any

harsh words he'd reserved for her were unnecessary. His queen knew the cost. It had taken her so damn long to trust any of them to do anything. If Aedion roared at her now, even if he still yearned to ... Aelin might never delegate again. Because if Lysandra hadn't been in the water when things had gone so, so badly...

"What happened?" he breathed, catching Aelin's eye. "What the hell happened out there?"

"I lost control," Aelin said hoarsely. As if she couldn't help it, her hand drifted to her chest. Where, through the white of her shirt, he could make out the Amulet of Orynth.

He knew then. Knew precisely what Aelin carried. What would have snagged Rolfe's interest on that map of his—similar enough to the Valg essence to get him to come running.

Knew why it had been so important, so vital, she risk everything to get it from Arobynn Hamel. Knew that she had used a *Wyrdkey* today, and it had almost killed them all—

He was shaking now, that rage indeed taking over. But Rowan snarled at him, low and vicious, "Save it for later." Because Fenrys and Gavriel had tensed—watching.

Aedion growled right back at him. Rowan gave him a cold, steady look that said if he so much as began to hint at what their queen carried, he'd rip out his tongue. Literally.

Aedion shoved down the anger. "We can't carry her, and she's too weak to shift."

"Then we wait here until she can," Aelin said. But her eyes drifted to the bay, where Rolfe was now being helped onto those rescue ships. And to the city beyond, still cheering.

A victory—but very nearly a loss. The remnants of the Mycenians, saved by one of their long-lost sea dragons. Aelin and Lysandra had woven ancient prophecies into tangible fact.

"I'll stay," Aedion said. "You deal with Rolfe."

His father offered from behind him, "I can get some supplies from the watchtower."

"Fine," he said.

Aelin groaned, getting to her feet, but stared down at him before she took Rowan's extended hand. She said softly, "I'm sorry."

Aedion knew she meant it. He still didn't bother replying.

Lysandra groaned, the reverberations running up his knees and straight into his gut, and Aedion whirled back to the shifter.

Aelin left without further good-bye.



The Lion lingered in the brush, keeping out of sight and sound as the Wolf watched over the dragon still sprawled across the beach.

For hours, the Wolf remained there. While the outgoing tide cleared the harbor of blood. While the Pirate Lord's ships sent any remaining enemy bodies to the crushing blue. While the young queen returned to the city in the heart of the bay to handle any fallout.

Once the sun had begun to set, the dragon stirred, and slowly, her form shimmering and shrinking, scales were smoothed into skin, a snout melted back into a flawless human face, and stumpy limbs lengthened into golden legs. Sand crusted her naked body, and she tried and failed to rise. The Wolf moved then, slinging his cloak around her and sweeping her into his arms.

The shifter didn't object, and her eyes were again closed by the time the Wolf began striding up the beach to the trees, her head leaning against his chest.

The Lion remained out of sight and held in the offer of help. Held in the words he needed to say to the Wolf, who had downed a sea-wyvern with one arrow. Twenty-four years old and already a myth whispered over campfires.

Today's events would no doubt be told around fires in lands even the Lion had not roamed in all his centuries.

The Lion watched the Wolf vanish into the trees, heading for the town at the end of the sandy road, the shifter unconscious in his arms.

And the Lion wondered if he himself would ever be mentioned in those whispered stories—if his son would ever allow the world to know who had sired him. Or even care.

The meeting with Rolfe once the harbor was again safe was quick. Frank.

And Aelin knew if she didn't get the hell out of this city for an hour or two, she might very well explode again.

Every key has a lock, Deanna had said, a little reminder of Brannon's order. Using *her* voice. And had called her that title ... that title that struck some chord of horror and understanding in her, so deep she was still working out what it meant. *The Queen Who Was Promised*.

Aelin stormed onto a spit of beach on the far side of the island, having run here, needing to get her blood roaring, needing it to silence the thoughts in her head. Behind her, Rowan's steps were quiet as death.

Only the two of them had been in that meeting with Rolfe. Bloodied, soaked, the Pirate Lord had met them in the main room of his inn, the name of it now a permanent reminder of the ship she'd wrecked. He demanded, "What the *hell* happened?"

And she had been so tired, so pissed off and full of disgust and despair, that it had been nearly impossible to muster the swagger. "When you are blessed by Mala, you find that sometimes your control can slip."

"*Slip*? I don't know what you fools were talking about down there, but from where I was standing, it looked like you lost your gods-damned mind and were about to fire on *my* town."

Rowan, leaning against the edge of a nearby table, explained, "Magic is a living thing. When you are that deep in it, remembering yourself, your purpose, is an effort. That my queen did so before it was too late is a feat in itself."

Rolfe wasn't impressed. "It looks to me like you were a little girl playing with power too big for you to handle, and only your prince jumping in your path made you decide *not* to slaughter my innocent people."

Aelin closed her eyes for a heartbeat, the image of Rowan leaping in front of that fist of moonfire flashing before her. When she opened her eyes, she let the crackling assuredness fade into something frozen and hard. "It looks to *me*," she said, "like the Pirate Lord of Skull's Bay and long-lost Mycenian heir has just

allied with a young queen so powerful she can decimate *cities* if she wishes. It looks to me like you have made yourself untouchable with that alliance, and any fool who seeks to harm you, usurp you, will have *me* to contend with. So I suggest you salvage what you can of your precious ship, mourn the dozen men I take full responsibility for losing and whose families I will compensate accordingly, and shut your rutting mouth.”

She turned toward the door, exhaustion and rage nipping at her bones.

Rolfe said to her back, “Do you want to know what the cost of this map was?”

She halted, Rowan glancing between them, face unreadable.

She smirked over her shoulder. “Your soul?”

Rolfe let out a hoarse laugh. “Yes—in a way. When I was sixteen, I was barely more than a slave on one of these festering ships, my Mycenian heritage just a one-way ticket to a beating.” He laid a tattooed hand on the *Thresher’s* lettering. “Every coin I earned came back here—to my mother and sister. And one day the ship I was on got caught in a storm. The captain was a haughty bastard, refused to find safe harbor, and the ship was destroyed. Most of the crew drowned. I drifted for a day, washed up on an island at the edge of the archipelago, and awoke to find a man staring down at me. I asked if I was dead, and he laughed and inquired what I wanted for myself. I was so delirious I told him that I wanted to be captain—I wanted to be Pirate Lord of Skull’s Bay and make the arrogant fools like the captain who had killed my friends *bow* before me. I thought I was dreaming when he explained that if he were to grant me the skills to do it, there would be a price. What I valued most in the world, he would have. I said I’d pay it—whatever it was. I had no belongings, no wealth, no people anyway. A few coppers would be nothing. He smiled before he vanished into sea mist. I awoke with the ink on my hands.”

Aelin waited.

Rolfe shrugged. “I made it back here, finding friendly ships using the map the stranger had inked there. A gift from a god—or so I thought. But it wasn’t until I saw the black sheets over my cottage’s windows that I began to worry. And it wasn’t until I learned that my mother and sister had used their little money to hire a skiff to go looking for me—and that the skiff had returned to harbor but they had not—that I realized the price I’d handed over. That’s what the sea claimed. What *he* claimed. And it made me soulless enough that I loosed myself upon this city, this archipelago.” Rolfe’s green eyes were as merciless as the Sea God who had gifted and damned him. “That was the price of my power.

What shall yours be, Aelin Galathynius?”

She didn't reply to him before storming out. Though Deanna's voice had echoed in her mind.

The Queen Who Was Promised.

Now, standing on that empty beach and monitoring the glimmering expanse of the sea as the last of the sun vanished, Rowan said beside her, “Did you willingly use the key?”

No hint of judgment, of condemnation. Just curiosity—and concern.

Aelin rasped, “No. I don't know what happened. One minute it was us ... then *she* came.” She rubbed at her chest, avoiding the touch of the golden chain against it. Her throat tightened as she took in that spot on his own chest, right between his pectorals. Where her fist had been aimed.

“How could you?” she breathed, a tremor running through her. “How could you put yourself in front of me like that?”

Rowan took a step closer but no farther. The crashing of waves and cries of gulls heading home for the night filled the space between them. “If you had destroyed that city, it would have destroyed *you*, and any sort of hope at an alliance.”

Shaking began in her hands, spreading to her arms, her chest, her knees. Flame and ash curled on her tongue. “If I had killed you,” she hissed, but choked on the words, unable to finish the thought, the idea of it. Her throat burned, and she squeezed her eyes shut, warm flames rippling around her. “I thought I'd found the bottom of my power,” she admitted, magic already overflowing, so soon, too soon after she'd emptied herself. “I thought what I found in Wendlyn was the bottom. I had no idea it was all just an ... antechamber.”

Aelin lifted her hands, opening her eyes to find her fingers wreathed in flame. Darkness spread over the world. Through the veil of gold and blue and red, she looked at her prince. She raised her burning hands helplessly between them. “*She stole me—she took me.* And I could feel her—feel her consciousness. It was like she was a spider, waiting in a web for *decades*, knowing I'd one day be strong and stupid enough to use my magic and the key together. I might as well have rung the dinner bell.” Her fire burned hotter, brighter, and she let it build and rise and flicker.

A wry, bitter smile. “It seems she wants us to make finding this Lock a priority, if you were given the message *twice*.”

Indeed. “Isn't it enough to contend with Erawan and Maeve, to do the bidding of Brannon and Elena? Now I have to face the gods breathing down my

neck about it as well?”

“Perhaps it was a warning—perhaps Deanna wished to show you how a not-so-friendly god might use you if you’re not careful.”

“She enjoyed every rutting second of it. She *wanted* to see what my power might do, what she could do with my body, with the key.” Her flames burned hotter, shredding through her clothes until they were ash, until she was naked and clothed in only her own fire. “And what she called me—the Queen Who Was Promised. Promised when? To whom? To do what? I’ve never heard that phrase in my life, not even before Terrasen fell.”

“We’ll figure it out.” And that was that.

“How can you be so ... *fine* with this?” Embers sprayed from her like a swarm of fireflies.

Rowan’s mouth tightened. “Trust me, Aelin, I am anything but *fine* with the idea that you are fair game to those immortal bastards. I am anything but *fine* with the idea that you could be taken from me like that. If I could, I would hunt Deanna down and pay her back for it.”

“She’s the Goddess of the Hunt. You might be at a disadvantage.” Her flames eased a bit.

A half smile. “She’s a haughty immortal. She’s bound to slip up. And besides ... ” A shrug. “I have her sister on my side.” He angled his head, studying her fire, her face. “Perhaps that’s why Mala appeared to me that morning, why she gave me her blessing.”

“Because you’re the only one arrogant and insane enough to hunt a goddess?”

Rowan shucked off his boots, tossing them onto the dry sand behind him. “Because I’m the only one arrogant and insane enough to ask Mala Fire-Bringer to let me stay with the woman I love.”

Her flames turned to pure gold at the words—at that word. But she said, “Perhaps you’re just the only one arrogant and insane enough to love *me*.”

That unreadable mask cracked. “This new depth to your power, Aelin, changes nothing. What Deanna did changes nothing. You are still young; your power is still growing. And if this new well of power gives us even the slightest advantage against Erawan, then thank the rutting darkness for it. But you and I will learn to manage your power together. You do not face this alone; you do not decide that you are unlovable because you have powers that can save *and* destroy. If you start to resent that power...” He shook his head. “I do not think we will win this war if you start down that road.”

Aelin strode into the lapping waves and sank to her knees in the surf, steam rising around her in great plumes. “Sometimes,” she admitted over the hissing water, “I wish someone else could fight this war.”

Rowan stepped into the bubbling surf, his magic shielding against the heat of her. “Ah,” he said, kneeling beside her as she still gazed out over the dark sea, “but who else would be able to get under Erawan’s skin? Never underestimate the power of that insufferable swagger.”

She chuckled, starting to feel the cool kiss of the water on her naked body. “As far as memory serves, Prince, it was that insufferable swagger that won your cranky, immortal heart.”

Rowan leaned into the thin veil of flame now melting into night-sweet air and nipped her lower lip. A sharp, wicked bite. “There’s my Fireheart.”

Aelin let him pivot her in the surf and sand to face him fully, let him slide his mouth along her jaw, the curve of her cheekbone, the point of her Fae ear. “These,” he said, nibbling at her earlobe, “have been tempting me for months.” His tongue traced the delicate tip, and her back arched. The strong hands at her hips tightened. “Sometimes, you’d be sleeping beside me at Mistward, and it’d take all my concentration *not* to lean over and bite them. Bite you all over.”

“Hmmm,” she said, tipping back her head to grant him access to her neck.

Rowan obliged her silent demand, pressing kisses and soft, growling nips to her throat. “I’ve never taken a woman on a beach,” he purred against her skin, sucking gently on the space between her neck and shoulder. “And look at that—we’re far from any sort of ... collateral.” One hand drifted from her hip to caress the scars on her back, the other sliding to cup her backside, drawing her fully against him.

Aelin spread her hands over his chest, tugging his white shirt over his head. Warm waves crashed against them, but Rowan held her fast—unmovable, unshakable.

Aelin remembered herself enough to say, “Someone might come looking for us.”

Rowan huffed a laugh against her neck. “Something tells me,” he said, his breath skittering along her skin, “you might not mind if we were discovered. If someone saw how thoroughly I plan to worship you.”

She felt the words dangling there, felt herself dangling there, off the edge of the cliff. She swallowed. But Rowan had caught her each time she had fallen—first, when she had plummeted into that abyss of despair and grief; second, when

that castle had shattered and she had plunged to the earth. And now this time, this third time ... She was not afraid.

Aelin met Rowan's stare and said clearly and baldly and without a speckle of doubt, "I love you. I am in love with you, Rowan. I have been for a while. And I know there are limits to what you can give me, and I know you might need time —"

His lips crushed into hers, and he said onto her mouth, dropping words more precious than rubies and emeralds and sapphires into her heart, her soul, "I love you. There is no limit to what I can give to you, no time I need. Even when this world is a forgotten whisper of dust between the stars, I will love you."

Aelin didn't know when she started crying, when her body began shaking with the force of it. She had never said such words—to anyone. Never let herself be that vulnerable, never felt this burning and unending *thing*, so consuming she might die from the force of it.

Rowan pulled back, wiping away her tears with his thumbs, one after another. He said softly, barely audible over the crashing waves around them, "Fireheart."

She sniffed back tears. "Buzzard."

He roared a laugh and she let him lay her down on the sand with a gentleness near reverence. His sculpted chest heaved slightly as he ran an eye over her bare body. "You ... are so beautiful."

She knew he didn't just mean the skin and curves and bones.

But Aelin still smiled, humming. "I know," she said, lifting her arms above her head, setting the Amulet of Orynth onto a safe, high part of the beach. Her fingers dug into the soft sand as she arched her back in a slow stretch.

Rowan tracked every movement, every flicker of muscle and skin. When his gaze lingered on her breasts, gleaming with seawater, his expression turned ravenous.

Then his gaze slid lower. Lower. And when it lingered on the apex of her thighs and his eyes glazed, Aelin said to him, "Are you going to stand there gawking all night?"

Rowan's mouth parted slightly, his breathing shallow, his body already showing her precisely where this was going to end.

A phantom wind hissed through the palms, whispered over the sand. Her magic tingled as she felt, more than saw, Rowan's shield fall into place around them. She sent her own power tracing over it, knocking and tapping at the shield in sparks of flame.

Rowan's canines gleamed. "Nothing is getting past that shield. And nothing is going to hurt me, either."

Something tight in her chest eased. "Is it that different? With someone like me."

"I don't know," Rowan admitted. Again, his eyes slid along her body, as if he could see through skin to her burning heart beneath. "I've never been with ... an equal. I've never allowed myself to be that unleashed."

For every bit of power she threw at him, he'd throw back at her. She braced herself on her elbows, lifting her mouth to the new scar on his shoulder, the wound small and jagged—as broad as an arrowhead. She kissed it once, twice.

Rowan's body was so tense above hers she thought his muscles would snap. But his hands were gentle as they drifted to her back, stroking her scars and the tattoos he'd inked over them.

The waves tickled and caressed her, and he made to settle over her, but she lifted a hand to his chest—halting him dead. She smiled against his mouth. "If we're equals, then I don't understand why you're still half clothed."

She didn't give him the chance to explain as she traced her tongue over the seam of his lips, as her fingers unlatched the buckle of his worn sword belt. She wasn't sure he was breathing.

And just to see what he'd do, she palmed him through his pants.

Rowan barked a curse.

She laughed quietly, kissed his newest scar again, and dragged a finger down lazily, indolently, holding his gaze for every single inch she touched.

And when Aelin laid her palm flat on him again, she said, "You are mine."

Rowan's breathing started again, jagged and savage as the waves breaking around them. She flicked open the top button of his pants. "I'm yours," he ground out.

Another button popped free. "And you love me," she said. Not a question.

"To whatever end," he breathed.

She popped the third and final button free, and he let go of her to toss his pants into the sand nearby, taking his undershorts with them. Her mouth went dry as she took in the sight of him.

Rowan had been bred and honed for battle, and every inch of him was pure-blooded warrior.

He was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Hers—he was *hers*, and—

"You are mine," Rowan breathed, and she felt the claiming in her bones, her soul.

“I am yours,” she answered.

“And you love me.” Such hope and quiet joy in his eyes, beneath all that fierceness.

“To whatever end.” For too long—for too long had he been alone and wandering. No longer.

Rowan kissed her again. Slow. Soft. A hand slid up the plane of her torso while he lowered himself over her, his hips nestling against hers. She gasped a bit at the touch, gasped a bit more as his knuckle grazed the heavy, aching underside of her breast. As he leaned down to kiss the other.

His teeth grazed over her nipple, and her eyes drifted closed, a moan slipping out of her.

Oh, gods. Oh, burning, rutting gods. Rowan knew what he was doing; he really gods-damned did.

His tongue flicked against her nipple, and her head tipped back, her fingers digging into his shoulders, urging him to take more, take *harder*.

Rowan growled his approval, her breast still in his mouth, on his tongue, his hand making lazy strokes from her ribs down her waist, down her thighs, then back up. She arched in silent demand—

A phantom touch, like the northern wind given form, flicked over her bare breast.

Aelin burst into flames.

Rowan laughed darkly at the reds and golds and blues that erupted around them, illumining the palms that towered over the edge of the beach, the waves breaking behind him. She might have panicked, might have been mortified, had he not lifted his mouth to hers, had those phantom hands of ice-kissed wind not kept working her breasts, had his own hand not continued stroking, closer and closer to where she needed him. “You’re magnificent,” he murmured onto her lips, his tongue sliding into her mouth.

The hardness of him pushed against her, and she bucked her hips, needing to grind herself against him, to do anything to ease the building ache between her legs. Rowan groaned, and she wondered if there was any other male in the world who would be so naked and prone with a woman on fire, who would not look at those flames with any ounce of fear.

She slid her hand between them, and when she closed her fingers around him, marveling at the velvet-wrapped steel, Rowan groaned again, pushing into her hand. She pulled her mouth from his, staring into those pine-green eyes as she slid her hand along him. He lowered his head—not to kiss her, but to watch

where she stroked him.

A roaring wind full of ice and snow blasted around them. And it was her turn to huff a laugh. But Rowan gripped her wrist, drawing her hand away. She opened her mouth in protest, wanting to touch more, *taste* more. “Let me,” Rowan growled onto the sea-slick skin between her breasts. “Let me touch you.” His voice trembled enough that Aelin lifted his chin with her thumb and forefinger.

A flicker of fear and relief shone beneath the glazed lust. As if doing this, touching her, was as much to remind him that she had made it today, that she was safe, as it was to pleasure her. She leaned up, brushing her mouth against his. “Do your worst, Prince.”

Rowan’s smile was nothing short of wicked as he pulled away to run a broad hand from her throat down to the juncture of her thighs. She shuddered at the sheer possession in the touch, her breath coming in tight pants as he gripped either thigh and spread her legs, baring her fully for him.

Another wave crashed, parting around them, the cool water like a thousand kisses along her skin. Rowan kissed her navel, then her hip.

Aelin couldn’t take her eyes from his silver hair shining with salt water and moonlight, from the hands holding her wide for him as his head dipped between her legs.

And as Rowan tasted her on that beach, as he laughed against her slick skin while her hoarse cries of his name shattered across palm trees and sand and water, Aelin let go of all pretense at reason.

She moved, hips undulating, begging him to *go, go, go*. So Rowan did, sliding a finger into her as his tongue flicked that one spot, and oh, gods, she was going to explode into starfire—

“Aelin,” he growled, her name a plea.

“Please,” she moaned. “*Please.*”

The word was his undoing. Rowan rose over her again, and she let out a sound that might have been a whimper, might have been his name.

Then Rowan had a hand braced in the sand beside her head, fingers twining in her hair, while the other guided himself into her. At the first nudge of him, she forgot her own name. And as he slid in with gentle, rolling thrusts, filling her inch by inch, she forgot that she was queen and that she had a separate body and a kingdom and a world to look after.

When Rowan was seated deep in her, trembling with restraint as he let her adjust, she lifted her burning hands to his face, wind and ice tumbling and

roaring around them, dancing across the waves with ribbons of flame. There were no words in his eyes; none in hers, either.

Words did not do it justice. Not in any language, in any world.

He leaned in, claiming her mouth as he began to move, and they let go entirely.

She might have been crying, or it might have been his tears on her face, turning to steam amid her flames.

She dragged her hands down his powerful, muscled back, over scars from battles and terrors long since past. And as his thrusts turned deeper, she dug in her fingers, dragging her nails across his back, claiming him, marking him. His hips slammed home at the blood she drew, and she arched, baring her throat to him. For him—only him.

Rowan's magic went wild, though his mouth on her neck was so careful, even as his canines dragged along her skin. And at the touch of those lethal teeth against her, the death that hovered nearby and the hands that would always be gentle with her, always love her—

Release blasted through her like wildfire. And though she could not remember her name, she remembered Rowan's as she cried it while he kept moving, wringing every last ounce of pleasure from her, fire searing the sand around them to glass.

Rowan's own release barreled through him at the sight of it, and he groaned her name so that she remembered it at last, lightning joining wind and ice over the water.

Aelin held him through it, sending the fire-opal of her magic to twine with his power. On and on, as he spilled himself in her, lightning and flame danced on the sea.

The lightning continued to strike, silent and lovely, even after he stilled. The sounds of the world came pouring back in, his breathing as ragged as the hiss of the crashing waves while he brushed lazy kisses to her temple, her nose, her mouth. Aelin drew her eyes away from the beauty of their magic, the beauty of *them*, and found his face to be the most beautiful of all.

She was trembling—and so was Rowan as he remained in her. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and shoulder, his uneven breath warming her skin. "I never ...," he tried, voice hoarse. "I didn't know it could be..."

She ran her fingers down his scarred back, over and over. "I know," she breathed. "I know."

Already, she wanted more, already she was calculating how long she'd have

to wait. “You once told me that you don’t bite the females of other males.” Rowan stiffened a bit. But she went on coyly, “Does that mean ... you’ll bite your own female, then?”

Understanding flashed in those green eyes as he raised his head from her neck to study the spot where those canines had once pierced her skin. “That was the first time I really lost control around you, you know. I wanted to chuck you off a cliff, yet I bit you before I knew what I was doing. I think my body knew, my magic knew. And you tasted...” Rowan loosed a jagged breath. “So good. I hated you for it. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I’d wake up at night with that taste on my tongue—wake up thinking about your foul, beautiful mouth.” He traced his thumb over her lips. “You don’t want to know the depraved things I’ve thought about this mouth.”

“Hmmm, likewise, but you didn’t answer my question,” Aelin said, even as her toes curled in the wet sand and warm water.

“Yes,” Rowan said thickly. “Some males enjoy doing it. To mark territory, for pleasure...”

“Do females bite males?”

He began to harden again inside her as the question lingered. Oh, gods—Fae lovers. Everyone should be so damn lucky to have one. Rowan rasped, “Do you *want* to bite me?”

Aelin eyed his throat, his glorious body, and the face she had once so fiercely hated. And she wondered if it were possible to love someone enough to die from it. If it were possible to love someone enough that time and distance and death were of no concern. “Am I limited to your neck?”

Rowan’s eyes flared, and his answering thrust was answer enough.

They moved together, undulating like the sea before them, and when Rowan roared her name again into the star-flecked black, Aelin hoped the gods themselves heard it and knew their days were now numbered.

Rowan didn't know whether to be amused, thrilled, or slightly terrified that he'd been blessed with a queen and lover who had so little care for public decency. He'd taken her three times on that beach—twice in the sand, then a third out in the warm waters. And yet his very blood was still electrified. And yet he still wanted more.

They'd swum into the shallows to wash off the sand crusted on them, but Aelin had wrapped her legs around his waist, kissed his neck, then licked his ear the way he'd nibbled hers, and he was buried in her again. She knew why he needed the contact, why he'd needed to taste her on his tongue, and then with the rest of his body. She'd needed the same.

He still needed it. When they'd finished after that first time, he'd been left reeling, to pull his sanity back together after the joining that had ... unleashed him. Broken and remade him. His magic had been a song, and she had been...

He'd never had anything like her. Everything he'd given her, she'd given right back to him. And when she had bit him during that second coupling in the sand ... His magic had left six nearby palm trees in splinters as he'd climaxed hard enough that he thought his body would shatter.

But once they were finished, when she'd actually made to walk back to Skull's Bay in nothing but her flames, he'd given her his shirt and belt. Which did little to cover her up, especially those beautiful legs, but at least it was less likely to start a riot.

Barely, though. And it'd be obvious what they'd done on that beach the moment they stepped within scenting range of anyone with a preternatural sense of smell.

He'd marked her—richer than the scent that had clung to her before. Marked her deep and true, and there was no undoing it, no washing it away. She'd claimed him, and he'd claimed her, and he knew she was well aware of what that claiming meant—just as he knew ... He knew it had been a choice on her part. A final decision regarding the matter of who would be in her royal bed.

He would try to live up to that honor—try to find *some* way to prove he

deserved it. That she hadn't bet on the wrong horse. Somehow. He'd earn it. Even with so little to offer beyond his own magic and heart.

But he also knew his queen. And knew that despite the enormity of what they'd done, Aelin had also kept him on that beach to avoid the others. Avoid answering their questions and demands. But he made it one foot inside the Ocean Rose, saw the light in Aedion's room, and knew their friends would not be so easily deterred.

Indeed, Aelin was scowling up at the light—though worry quickly replaced it as she remembered the shifter who had been so thoroughly unconscious. Her bare feet were silent on the stairs and hallway as she hurried for the room, not bothering to knock before flinging open the door.

Rowan loosed a sharp breath, trying to draw up his magic to cool the fire still in his blood. To calm the instincts roaring and raging at him. Not to take her—but to eliminate any other threat.

A dangerous time, for any Fae male, when they first took a lover. Worse, when it meant something more.

Dorian and Aedion sat in the two armchairs before the darkened fireplace, arms crossed.

And her cousin's face went pale with what might have been terror as he scented Aelin—the markings both seen and invisible on them.

Lysandra sat in bed, face drawn but eyes narrowed at the queen. It was the shifter who purred, "Enjoy your ride?"

Aedion didn't dare move and was giving Dorian a warning look to do the same. Rowan bit down against the rage at the sight of other males near his queen, reminding himself that they were his friends, but—

That primal rage stumbled as he felt Aelin's shuddering relief upon finding the shifter mostly healed and lucid. But his queen only shrugged. "Isn't that all these Fae males are good for?"

Rowan raised his brows, chuckling as he debated reminding her how she'd begged him throughout, how she'd said words like *please*, and *oh, gods*, and then a few extra *pleases* thrown in for good measure. He'd enjoy wringing those rarely seen manners from her again.

Aelin shot him a glare, daring him to say it. And despite just having her, despite the fact that he could still taste her, Rowan knew that whenever they found their bed again, she would not get the rest she wanted. Color stained Aelin's cheeks, as if she saw his plans unfold, but she lifted the amulet from around her neck, dropped it onto the low-lying table between Aedion and

Dorian, and said, “I learned that this was the third Wyrddkey when I was still in Wendlyn.”

Silence.

Then, as if she hadn’t shattered any sense of safety they still possessed, Aelin withdrew the mangled Eye of Elena from her pack, chucked it once in the air, and jerked her chin at the King of Adarlan. “I think it’s time you met your ancestor.”



Dorian listened to Aelin’s story.

About the Wyrddkey she’d secretly carried, about what had happened today in the bay, about how she’d tricked Lorcan and how it would eventually lead the warrior back to them—hopefully with the other two keys in his hands. And, if they were lucky, they would have already found this Lock she had been ordered twice now to retrieve from the Stone Marshes—the only thing capable of binding the Wyrddkeys back into the gate from which they’d been hewn and ending the threat of Erawan forever.

No number of allies would make a difference if they could not stop Erawan from using those keys to unleash the Valg hordes from his own realm upon Erilea. His possession of two keys had already led to such darkness. If he gained the third, gained mastery over the Wyrddgate and could open it to any world at will, use it to summon any conquering army ... They had to find that Lock to nullify those keys.

When the queen was done, Aedion was silently fuming, Lysandra was frowning, and Aelin was now snuffing out the candles in the room with hardly a wave of her hand. Two ancient tomes, withdrawn from Aedion’s crammed saddlebags, lay open on the table. He knew those books—he had no idea she’d taken them from Rifthold. The warped metal of the Eye of Elena amulet sat atop one of them as Aelin double-checked the markings on an age-spotted page.

Darkness fell as she used her own blood to etch those markings on the wooden floor.

“Looks like our bill of damages to this city is going to rise,” Lysandra muttered.

Aelin snorted. “We’ll just move the rug to cover it.” She finished making a mark—a Wyrddmark, Dorian realized with a chill, and stepped back, plucking up the Eye in her fist.

“Now what?” Aedion said.

“Now we keep our mouths shut,” Aelin said sweetly.

The moonlight spread on the floor, devoured by the dark lines she’d etched. Aelin drifted over to where Rowan sat on the edge of the bed, still shirtless thanks to the queen currently *wearing* his shirt, and took up a spot beside him, a hand on his knee.

Lysandra was the first to notice.

She sat up in the bed, green eyes glowing with animal brightness as the moonlight on the blood-marks seemed to shimmer. Aelin and Rowan jerked to their feet. Dorian just stared at the marks, at the moonlight, at the beam of it shining through the open balcony doors.

As if the light itself were a doorway, the shaft of moonlight turned into a humanoid figure.

It flickered, its form barely there. Like a figment of a dream.

The hair on Dorian’s arms rose. And he had the good sense to slide out of his chair and onto a knee as he bowed his head.

He was the only one who did so. The only one, he realized, who had spoken to Elena’s mate, Gavin. Long ago—another lifetime ago. He tried not to consider what it meant that he now carried Gavin’s sword, Damaris. Aelin had not asked for it back—did not seem inclined to do so.

A muffled female voice, as if it were calling from far away, flickered in and out with the image. “Too—far,” a light, young voice said.

Aelin stepped forward and shut those ancient spellbooks before stacking them with a thump. “Well, Rifthold isn’t exactly available, and your tomb is trashed, so *tough luck*.”

Dorian’s head lifted as he glanced between the flickering figure of moonlight and the young queen of flesh and blood.

Elena’s roughly formed body vanished, then reappeared, as if the wind itself disturbed her. “Can’t—hold—”

“Then I’ll make it quick.” Aelin’s voice was sharp as a blade. “No more games. No more half-truths. *Why* did Deanna arrive today? I get it: finding the Lock is important. But *what* is it? And tell me what she meant by calling me the Queen Who Was Promised.”

As if the words jolted the dead queen like lightning, his ancestor appeared, fully corporeal.

She was exquisite: her face young and grave, her hair long and silvery-white—like Manon’s—and her eyes ... Startling, dazzling blue. They now fixed on

him, the pale gown she wore fluttering on a phantom breeze. “Rise, young king.”

Aelin snorted. “Can we not play the holier-than-thou-ancient-spirit game?”

But Elena surveyed Rowan, Aedion. Her slender, fair neck bobbed.

And Aelin, gods above, snapped her fingers at the queen—once, twice—drawing her attention back to her. “Hello, Elena,” she drawled, “so nice to see you. It’s been a while. Care to answer some questions?”

Irritation flickered in the dead queen’s eyes. But Elena’s chin remained high, her slender shoulders back. “I do not have much time. The connection is too hard to maintain so far from Rifthold.”

“What a surprise.”

The two queens stared each other down.

Elena, Wyrld damn him, broke first. “Deanna is a god. She does not have rules and morals and codes the way we do. *Time* does not exist for her the way it does for us. You let your magic touch the key, the key opened a door, and Deanna happened to be watching at that exact moment. That she spoke to you at all is a gift. That you managed to shove her out before she was ready ... She will not soon forget that insult, *Majesty*.”

“She can get in line,” Aelin said.

Elena shook her head. “There is ... there is so much I did not get to tell you.”

“Like the fact that you and Gavin never killed Erawan, lied to everyone about it, and then left him for us to deal with?”

Dorian risked a glance at Aedion, but his face was hard, calculating, ever the general—fixed on the dead queen now standing in this room with them. Lysandra—Lysandra was gone.

No, in ghost leopard form, slinking through the shadows. Rowan’s hand was resting casually on his sword, though Dorian’s own magic swept the room and realized the weapon was to be the physical distraction from the magical blow he’d deal Elena if she so much as looked funny at Aelin. Indeed, a hard shield of air now lay between the two queens—and sealed this room, too.

Elena shook her head, her silver hair flowing. “You were meant to retrieve the Wyrldkeys before Erawan could get this far.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Aelin snapped. “Forgive me if you weren’t entirely *clear* on your directions.”

Elena said, “I do not have time to explain, but know it was the *only* choice. To save us, to save Erilea, it was the *only* choice I could make.” And for all their snapping at each other, the queen exposed her palms to Aelin. “Deanna and my father spoke true. I’d thought ... I’d thought it was broken, but if they told you to

find the Lock ... ” She bit her lip.

Aelin said, “Brannon said to go to the Stone Marshes of Eyllwe to find the Lock. *Where*, precisely, in the marshes?”

“There was once a great city in the heart of the marshes,” Elena breathed. “It is now half drowned on the plain. In a temple at its center, we laid the remnants of the Lock. I didn’t ... My father attained the Lock at terrible cost. The cost ... of my mother’s body, her mortal life. A Lock for the Wyrkeys—to seal shut the gate, and bind the keys inside them forever. I did not understand what it had been intended for; my father never told me about any of it until it was too late. All I knew was that the Lock was only able to be used once—its power capable of sealing *anything* we wished. So I stole it. I used it for myself, for my people. I have been paying for that crime since.”

“You used it to seal Erawan in his tomb,” Aelin said quietly.

The pleading faded from Elena’s face. “My friends died in the valley of the Black Mountains that day so I might have the chance to stop him. I heard their screaming, even in the heart of Erawan’s camp. I will not apologize for trying to end the slaughter so that the survivors could have a future. So *you* could have a future.”

“So you used the Lock, then chucked it into a ruin?”

“We placed it inside the holy city on the plain—to be a commemoration of the lives lost. But a great cataclysm rocked the land decades later ... and the city sank, the marsh water flowed in, and the Lock was forgotten. No one ever retrieved it. Its power had already been used. It was just a bit of metal and glass.”

“And now it’s not?”

“If both my father and Deanna mentioned it, it must be vital in stopping Erawan.”

“Forgive me if I do not trust the word of a goddess who tried to use me like a puppet to blow this town into smithereens.”

“Her methods are roundabout, but she likely meant you no harm—”

“Bullshit.”

Elena flickered again. “Get to the Stone Marshes. Find the Lock.”

“I told Brannon, and I’ll tell you: we have more pressing matters at hand—”

“My mother *died* to forge that Lock,” Elena snapped, eyes blazing bright. “She let go of her mortal body so that she could forge the Lock for my father. I was the one who broke the promise for how it was to be used.”

Aelin blinked, and Dorian wondered if he should indeed be worried when

even she was speechless. But Aelin only whispered, “Who was your mother?”

Dorian ransacked his memory, all his history lessons on his royal house, but couldn’t recall.

Elena made a sound that might have been a sob, her image fading into cobwebs and moonlight. “She who loved my father best. She who blessed him with such mighty gifts, and then bound herself in a mortal body and offered him the gift of her heart.”

Aelin’s arms slackened at her sides.

Aedion blurted, “Shit.”

Elena laughed humorlessly as she said to Aelin, “Why do you think you burn so brightly? It is not just Brannon’s blood that is in your veins. But Mala’s.”

Aelin breathed, “Mala Fire-Bringer was your mother.”

Elena was already gone.

Aedion said, “Honestly, it’s a miracle you two didn’t kill each other.”

Dorian didn’t bother to correct him that it was technically impossible, given that one of them was already dead. Rather, he weighed all that the queen had said and demanded. Rowan, remaining silent, seemed to be doing the same. Lysandra sniffed around the blood-marks, as if testing for whatever remnants of the ancient queen might be around.

Aelin stared out the open balcony doors, eyes hooded and mouth a tight line. She unfurled her fist and examined the Eye of Elena, still held in her palm.

The clock struck one in the morning. Slowly, Aelin turned to them. To him.

“Mala’s blood flows in our veins,” she said hoarsely, fingers closing around the Eye before she slipped it into the shirt’s pocket.

He blinked, realizing that it indeed did. That perhaps both of them had been so considerably gifted because of it. Dorian said to Rowan, if only because he might have heard or witnessed something in all his travels, “Is it truly possible—for a god to become mortal like that?”

Rowan, who had been watching Aelin a bit warily, twisted to him. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. But ... Fae have given up their immortality to bind their lives to that of their mortal mates.” Dorian had the distinct feeling Aelin was deliberately examining a spot on her shirt. “It’s certainly possible Mala found a way to do it.”

“It’s not just possible,” Aelin murmured. “She *did* it. That ... pit of power I uncovered today ... That was from Mala herself. Elena might be many things, but she wasn’t lying about that.”

Lysandra shifted back into her human form, swaying enough that she set

herself down on the bed before Aedion could move to steady her. “So what do we do now?” she asked, her voice gravelly. “Erawan’s fleet squats in the Gulf of Oro; Maeve sails for Eyllwe. But neither knows that we possess this Wyrdkey—or that this Lock exists ... and lies directly between their forces.”

For a heartbeat, Dorian felt like a useless fool as they all, including him, looked to Aelin. He was King of Adarlan, he reminded himself. Equal to her. Even if his lands and people had been stolen, his capital captured.

But Aelin rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger, loosing a long breath. “I really, really hate that old windbag.” She lifted her head, surveying them all, and said simply, “We sail for the Stone Marshes in the morning to hunt down that Lock.”

“Rolfe and the Mycenians?” Aedion asked.

“He takes half his fleet to find the rest of the Mycenians, wherever they’re hiding. Then they all sail north to Terrasen.”

“Rifthold lies between here and there, with wyverns patrolling it,” Aedion countered. “And this plan depends on *if* we can trust Rolfe to actually follow through on his promise.”

“Rolfe knows how to stay out of range,” Rowan said. “We have little choice but to trust him. And he honored the promise he made to Aelin regarding the slaves two and a half years ago.” No doubt why Aelin had made him confirm it so thoroughly.

“And the other half of Rolfe’s fleet?” Aedion pushed.

“Some remain to hold the archipelago,” Aelin said. “And some come with us to Eyllwe.”

“You can’t fight Maeve’s armada with a fraction of Rolfe’s fleet,” Aedion said, crossing his arms. Dorian bit back his own agreement, leaving the general to it. “Let alone Morath’s forces.”

“I’m not going there to pick a fight,” was all Aelin said. And that was that.

They dispersed then, Aelin and Rowan slipping off to their own room.

Dorian lay awake, even when his companions’ breathing became deep and slow. He mulled over each word Elena had uttered, mulled over that long-ago appearance of Gavin, who had awoken him to stop Aelin from opening that portal. Perhaps Gavin had done it not to spare Aelin from damnation, but to keep those waiting, cold-eyed gods from seizing her as Deanna had today.

He tucked the speculation away to consider when he was less prone to leaping to conclusions. But the threads lay in a lattice across his mind, in hues of red and green and gold and blue, glimmering and thrumming, whispering their

secrets in languages not spoken in this world.



An hour past dawn, they departed Skull's Bay on the swiftest ship Rolfe could spare. Rolfe didn't bother to say good-bye, already preoccupied with readying his fleet, before they sailed out of the sparkling harbor and into the lush archipelago beyond. He did grant Aelin one parting gift: vague coordinates for the Lock. His map had found it—or rather, the general location. Some sort of wards must be placed around it, the captain warned them, if his tattoo could not pinpoint its resting place. But it was better than nothing, Dorian supposed. Aelin had grumbled as much.

Rowan circled high above in hawk form, scouting behind and ahead. Fenrys and Gavriel were at the oars, helping row them out of the harbor—Aedion doing so as well, at a comfortable distance from his father. Dorian himself stood at the wheel beside the surly, short captain—an older woman who had no interest in speaking to him, king or not. Lysandra swam in the surf below in some form or another, guarding them from any threats beneath the surface.

But Aelin stood alone on the prow, her golden hair unbound and flowing behind her, so still that she might have been the twin to the figurehead mere feet beneath. The rising sun cast her in shimmering gold, no hint of the moonfire that had threatened to destroy them all.

But even as the queen stood undimming before the shadows of the world ... a lick of cold traced the contours of Dorian's heart.

And he wondered if Aelin was somehow watching the archipelago, and the seas, and the skies, as if she might never see them again.



Three days later, they were nearly out of the archipelago's strangling grasp. Dorian was again at the helm, Aelin at the prow, the others scattered on various rounds of scouting and resting.

His magic felt it before he did. A sense of awareness, of warning and awakening.

He scanned the horizon. The Fae warriors fell silent before the others.

It looked like a cloud at first—a wind-tossed little cloud on the horizon. Then a large bird.

When the sailors began rushing for their weapons, Dorian's mind at last spat

out a name for the beast that swept toward them on shimmering, wide wings. *Wyvern.*

There was only one. And only one rider atop it. A rider who did not move, whose white hair was unbound—listing toward the side. As the rider now was.

The wyvern dropped lower, skimming over the water. Lysandra was instantly ready, waiting for the queen's order to shift into whatever form would fight it—

“No.” The word ripped from Dorian's lips before he could think. But then it came out, over and over, as the wyvern and rider sailed closer to the ship.

The witch was unconscious, her body leaning to the side because she was not awake, because that was blue blood all over her. *Don't shoot; don't shoot—*

Dorian was roaring the order as he hurtled for where Fenrys had drawn his longbow, a black-tipped arrow aimed at the witch's exposed neck. His words were swallowed by the shouting of the sailors and their captain. Dorian's magic swelled as he unsheathed Damaris—

But then Aelin's voice cut over the fray—*Hold your fire!*

All of them halted. The wyvern sailed close, then banked, circling the boat.

Blue blood crusted the beast's scarred sides. So much blood. The witch was barely in the saddle. Her tan face was leached of color, her lips paler than whale bone.

The wyvern completed its circle, sweeping lower this time, readying to land as near the boat as possible. Not to attack ... but for help.

One moment, the wyvern was soaring smoothly over the cobalt waves. Then the witch listed so far that her body seemed to go boneless. As if in that heartbeat, when help was mere feet away, whatever luck had kept her astride at last abandoned her.

Silence fell on the ship as Manon Blackbeak tumbled from her saddle, falling through wind and spindrift, and hit the water.

PART TWO

FIREHEART

The smoke had been stinging Elide's eyes for the better part of the gray muggy morning.

Just farmers burning fields left to fallow, Molly had claimed, so the ashes might fertilize the earth for next year's harvest. They had to be miles away, but the smoke and ash would travel far on the brisk northward wind. The wind that led home to Terrasen.

But they weren't headed to Terrasen. They were headed due east, straight toward the coast.

Soon she'd have to cut northward. They had passed through one town—only one, and its denizens had already been fatigued of roving carnivals and performers. Even with the night barely under way, Elide already knew they would likely only make enough money to cover their expenses for staying.

She had attracted a grand total of four customers to her little tent so far, mostly young men looking to know which of the village girls fancied them, barely noticing that Elide—beneath the makeup pasted thick as cream on her face—was no older than they were. They'd scampered off when their friends had rushed by, whispering through the star-painted flaps that a swordsman was putting on the show of a lifetime, and his arms were nearly the size of tree trunks.

Elide had glowered, both at the feckless young men who vanished—one without paying—and at Lorcan, for stealing the show.

She waited all of two minutes before shoving out of the tent, the enormous, ridiculous headdress Molly had plunked on her hair snagging on the flaps. Bits of dangling beads and charms hung from the arching crest, and Elide batted them out of her eyes, nearly tripping over her matching bloodred robes as she went to see what all the fuss was about.

If the young men of the town had been impressed by Lorcan's muscles, it was nothing on what those muscles were doing to the young women.

And older women, Elide realized, not bothering to squeeze through the tightly packed crowd before the makeshift stage on which Lorcan stood, juggling

and throwing swords and knives.

Lorcan was not a natural performer. No, he had the gall to actually look *bored* up there, bordering on outright sullen.

But what he lacked in charm he made up for with his shirtless, *oiled* body. And holy gods...

Lorcan made the young men who had visited her tent look like ... children.

He balanced and hurled his weapons as if they were nothing, and she had the feeling the warrior was merely going through one of his daily exercise routines. But the crowd still *oohed* and *aahed* at every twist and toss and catch, and coins still trickled into the pan at the edge of the stage.

With the torches around him, Lorcan's dark hair seemed to swallow the light, his onyx eyes flat and dull. Elide wondered if he was contemplating the murder of everyone drooling over him like dogs around a bone. She couldn't blame him.

A trickle of sweat slid through the crisp spattering of dark hair on his sculpted chest. Elide watched, a bit transfixed, as that bead of sweat wended down the muscled grooves of his stomach. Lower.

No better than those ogling women, she said to herself, about to head back into her tent when Molly observed from beside her, "Your husband could just be sitting up there, fixing your stockings, and women would empty their pockets for the chance to stare at him."

"He had that effect wherever we went with our former carnival," Elide lied.

Molly clicked her tongue. "You're lucky," she murmured as Lorcan hurled his sword high in the air and people gasped, "that he still looks at you the way he does."

Elide wondered if Lorcan would look at her at all if she told him what her name was, who she was, what she carried. He'd slept on the floor of the tent each night—not that she'd ever once bothered to offer him the roll. He usually came in after she'd fallen asleep, and left before she awoke. To do what, she had no idea—perhaps exercise, since his body was ... like that.

Lorcan chucked three knives in the air, bowing without one bit of humility or amusement to the crowd. They gasped again as the blades aimed for his exposed spine.

But in an easy, beautiful maneuver, Lorcan rolled, catching each blade, one after another.

The crowd cheered, and Lorcan coolly looked at his pan of coins.

More copper—and some silver—flowed, like the patter of rain.

Molly let out a low laugh. "Desire and fear can loosen any purse strings." A

sharp glance. “Shouldn’t you be in your tent?”

Elide didn’t bother responding as she left, and could have sworn she felt Lorcan’s gaze narrow on her, on the headdress and swaying beads, on the long, voluminous robes. She kept going, and endured a few more young men—and some young women—asking about their love lives before she found herself again alone in that silly tent, the dark only illuminated by dangling crystal orbs with tiny candles inside.

She was waiting for Molly to finally shout the carnival was over when Lorcan shouldered through the flaps, wiping his face with a scrap of fabric that was most definitely not his shirt.

Elide said, “Molly will be begging you to stay, you realize.”

He slid into the folding chair before her round table. “Is that your professional prediction?”

She swatted at a strand of beads that swayed into her eyes. “Did you sell your shirt, too?”

Lorcan gave a feral grin. “Got ten coppers from a farmer’s wife for it.”

Elide scowled. “That’s disgusting.”

“Money is money. I suppose you don’t need to worry about it, with all the gold you’ve got stashed.”

Elide held his stare, not bothering to look pleasant. “You’re in a rare good mood.”

“Having two women and one man offer a spot in their beds tonight will do that to a person.”

“Then why are you here?” It came out sharper than she intended.

He surveyed the hanging orbs, the woven carpet, the black tablecloth, and then her hands, scarred and calloused and small, gripping the edge of the table. “Wouldn’t it ruin your ruse if I slipped off into the night with someone else? You’d be expected to throw me out on my ass—to be heartbroken and raging for the rest of your time here.”

“You might as well enjoy yourself,” she said. “You’re going to leave soon anyway.”

“So are you,” he reminded her.

Elide tapped a finger on the tablecloth, the rough fabric scratching against her skin.

“What is it?” he demanded. As if it were an inconvenience to be polite.

“Nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing, though. She knew why she’d been delaying that turn

northward, the inevitable departure from this group and final trek on her own.

She could barely make an impact at a backwater carnival. What the hell would she do in a court of such powerful people—especially without being able to read? While Aelin could destroy kings and save cities, what the hell would she do to prove her worth? Wash their clothes? Clean their dishes?

“Marion,” he said roughly.

She looked up, surprised to find him still there. Lorcan’s dark eyes were unreadable in the dimness. “You had plenty of young men unable to stop staring at you tonight. Why not have some fun with them?”

“Why?” she snapped. The thought of a stranger touching her, of some faceless, nameless man pawing at her in the dark...

Lorcan stilled. He said too calmly, “When you were in Morath, did someone —”

“No.” She knew what he meant. “No—it didn’t get that far.” But the memory of those men touching her, laughing at her nakedness ... She shoved it away. “I’ve never been with a man. Never had the chance or the interest.”

He cocked his head, his dark, silken hair sliding over his face. “Do you prefer women?”

She blinked at him. “No—I don’t think so. I don’t know what I prefer. Again, I’ve never ... I’ve never had the opportunity to feel ... that.” Desire, lust, she didn’t know. And she didn’t know how or why they’d wound up talking about this.

“Why?” And with all of Lorcan’s considerable focus honed in on her, with the way he’d glanced at her red-painted mouth, Elide wanted to tell him. About the tower, and Vernon, and her parents. About why, if she were to ever feel desire, it’d be a result of trusting someone so much that those horrors faded away, a result of knowing they would fight tooth and claw to keep her free and never lock her up or hurt her or leave her.

Elide opened her mouth. Then the screaming started.



Lorcan didn’t know why the hell he was in Marion’s ridiculous little oracle’s tent. He needed to wash, needed to clean away the sweat and oil and *feel* of all those ogling eyes on him.

But he’d spotted Marion in the crowd while he’d finished up his piss-poor performance. He hadn’t seen her earlier in the evening before she’d put on that

headdress and those robes, but ... maybe it was the cosmetics, the heavy kohl around her eyes, the way the red-painted lips made her mouth look like a fresh piece of fruit, but ... he'd noticed her.

Noticed the way the men had spotted her, too. Some had outright gawked, wonder and lust written across their bodies, as Marion lingered, oblivious, at the edge of the crowd and watched Lorcan instead.

Beautiful. After a few weeks of eating, of safety, the terrified, gaunt young woman had somehow gone from pretty to beautiful. He'd ended his performance sooner than he'd intended, and by the time he looked up again, Marion was gone.

Like a gods-damned dog, he'd picked up her scent among the crowd and followed her back to this tent.

In the shadows and glowing lights within, with the headdress and dangling beads and dark red robes ... the oracle incarnate. Serene, exquisite ... and utterly forbidden.

And he'd been so focused on cursing himself for staring at that ripe, sinful mouth while she admitted she was still untouched, that he hadn't detected anything amiss until the screaming started.

No, he'd been too busy contemplating what sounds might come from that full mouth if he slowly, gently, taught her the art of the bedroom.

The attack, Lorcan supposed, was Hellas's way of telling him to keep his cock in his pants and mind out of the gutter.

"Get under a wagon and stay there," he snapped before hurtling out of the tent. He didn't wait to see if she obeyed. Marion was smart—she knew she'd stand a better chance at survival if she listened to him and found shelter.

Lorcan loosed his gift through the panicking carnival site—a wave of dark, terrible power sweeping out in a ripple, then rushing back to tell him what it sensed. His power was gleeful, breathless in a way he knew too well: death.

At one end of the field lay the outskirts of the little town. At the other, a copse of trees and endless night—and wings.

Towering, sinewy forms plunged down from the skies—his magic picked up four. Four ilken as they landed, claws out and baring those flesh-shredding teeth. The leathery wings, it seemed, marked them as some slight variation of the ones who had tracked them in Oakwald. A variation—or a refining of an already ruthless hunter.

People ran, screaming—toward the town, toward the cover of the dark fields beyond.

Those distant fires had not been set by farmers to burn their idle fields.

They had been set to cloud the skies, to hide the scent of these beasts. From him. Or any other gifted warriors.

Marion. They were hunting Marion.

The carnival was in chaos, the horses were shrieking and bucking. Lorcan plunged toward where the four ilken had landed in the heart of the camp, right where he'd been performing minutes before, in time to see one land atop a fleeing young man and flip him onto his back.

The young man was still screaming for gods who would not answer as the ilken leaned down, flicking free a long talon, and opened up his belly in a smooth swipe. He was still screaming when the ilken lowered his mutilated face and feasted.

“What in burning hell *are* those beasts?” It was Ombriel, a long-sword out—and gripped in a way that told him she knew how to wield it. Nik came thundering up behind her, two rough, near-rusted blades in his meaty hands.

“Soldiers from Morath,” was all Lorcan supplied. Nik was eyeing the blade and hatchet Lorcan had drawn, and he didn't think to pretend to not know how to use either, to be a simple man from the wilds, as he said with cold precision, “They're naturally able to cut through most magic—and only beheading will keep them down.”

“They're nearly eight feet,” Ombriel said, face pale.

Lorcan left them to their assessments and fear, stepping into the ring of light in the heart of the camp as the four ilken finished playing with the young man. The human was still alive, silently mouthing pleas for help.

Lorcan lashed out with his power and could have sworn the young man had gratitude in his eyes as death kissed him in greeting.

The ilken looked up as one, hissing softly. Blood slid from their teeth.

Lorcan tunneled into his power, preparing to distract and addle them, if their resistance to magic held true. Perhaps Marion would have time to run. The ilken who had ripped open the belly of the young man said to him, laughter dancing on its gray tongue, “Are you the one in charge?”

Lorcan simply said, “Yes.”

It told him enough. They did not know who he was, his role in Marion's escape.

The four ilken smiled. “We seek a girl. She murdered our kin—and several others.”

They blamed her for the ilken's death those weeks ago? Or was it an excuse

to further their own ends? “We tracked her to the Acanthus crossing ... She may be hiding here, among your people.” A sneer.

Lorcan willed Nik and Ombriel to keep their mouths shut. If they so much as started to reveal them, the hatchet in his hands would move.

“Check another carnival. We’ve had this crew for months.”

“She is small,” it went on, those too-human eyes flickering. “Crippled on one leg.”

“We don’t know anyone like that.”

They’d hunt her to the ends of the earth.

“Then line up your crew so we might ... inspect them.”

Make them walk. Look them over. Look for a dark-haired young woman with a limp and whatever other markers her uncle had provided.

“You’ve scared them all away. It might be days before they return. And, again,” Lorcan said, hatchet flicking a bit higher, “there is no one in my caravan who matches such a description.” Behind him, Nik and Ombriel were silent, their terror a reek that shoved itself up his nose. Lorcan willed Marion to remain hidden.

The ilken smiled—the most hideous smile Lorcan had beheld in all his centuries. “We have gold.” Indeed, the ilken beside it had a hip-pouch sagging with it. “Her name is Elide Lochan. Her uncle is Lord of Perranth. He will reward you handsomely to turn her over.”

The words hit Lorcan like stones. Marion—*Elide* had ... lied. Had managed to keep him from even sniffing the lie on her, had used enough truths and her own general fear to keep the scent of it hidden—

“We know no one by such a name,” Lorcan said again.

“Pity,” the sentinel crooned. “For if you had her in your company, we would have taken her and left. But now...” The ilken smiled at its three companions, and their dark wings rustled. “Now it seems we have flown a very long way for nothing. And we are very hungry.”

Elide had squeezed herself into a hidden floor compartment in the largest of the wagons and prayed that no one discovered her. Or began burning things. Her frantic breathing was the only sound. The air grew tight and hot, her legs trembled and cramped from staying curled in a ball, but still she waited, still she kept hidden.

Lorcan had run out—he'd just run into the fray. She'd fled the tent in time to see four ilken—*winged* ilken—descend upon the camp. She had not lingered long enough to see what happened after.

Time passed—minutes or perhaps hours, she couldn't tell.

She had done this. She had brought these things here, to these people, to the caravan...

The screaming grew louder, then faded. Then nothing.

Lorcan might be dead. Everyone might be dead.

Her ears strained, and she tried to quiet her breathing to *listen* for any sounds of life, of action beyond her small, hot hiding space. No doubt, it was usually reserved for smuggling contraband—not at all intended for a human being.

She couldn't stay hidden much longer. If the ilken slaughtered them all, they'd search for any survivors. Could likely sniff her out.

She would have to make a run for it. Have to break out, observe what she could, and sprint for the dark fields and pray no others waited out there. Her feet and calves had gone numb minutes before and now tingled incessantly. She might very well not even be able to walk, and her stupid, useless leg—

She listened again, praying to Anneith to turn the ilken's attention elsewhere.

Only silence greeted her. No more screaming.

Now. She should go *now*, while she had the cover of darkness.

Elide did not give her fear another heartbeat to whisper its poison into her blood. She had survived Morath, survived weeks alone. She'd make it, she *had* to make it, and she wouldn't at all mind being the queen's gods-damned dishwasher if it meant she could *live*—

Elide uncoiled, shoulders aching as she quietly eased the trapdoor up, the

little area rug sliding back. She scanned the interior of the wagon—the empty benches on either side—then studied the night beckoning beyond. Light spilled from the camp behind her, but ahead ... a sea of blackness. The field was perhaps thirty feet away.

Elide winced as the wood groaned while she hefted the trapdoor high enough for her to slither, belly-down, over the floorboards. But her robe snagged, yanking her into a stop. Elide gritted her teeth, tugging blindly. But it had caught inside the crawl space. Anneith save her—

“Tell me,” drawled a deep male voice behind her, from near the driver’s seat. “What would you have done if I were an ilken soldier?”

Relief turned her bones to liquid, and Elide held in her sob. She twisted to find Lorcan covered in black blood, sitting on the bench behind the driver’s seat, legs spread before him. His axe and sword lay discarded beside him, coated in that black blood as well, and Lorcan idly chewed on a long stalk of wheat as he gazed at the canvas wall of the wagon.

“The first thing I might have done in your place,” Lorcan mused, still not looking at her, “would have been to ditch the robe. You’d fall flat on your face if you ran—and the red would be as good as ringing the dinner bell.”

She tugged at the robe again, and the fabric ripped at last. Scowling, she patted where it had come free and found a loose bit of wood paneling.

“The second thing I might have done,” Lorcan went on, not even bothering to wipe away the blood splattered on his face, “is tell me the gods-damned truth. Did you know those ilken beasts *love* to talk with the right encouragement? And they told me some very, very interesting things.” Those dark eyes at last slid to her, utterly vicious. “But you didn’t tell me the truth, did you, Elide?”



Her eyes were wide, her face leached of color beneath the cosmetics. She’d lost the headdress somewhere, and her dark sheet of hair slid free of some of its pins as she climbed from the hidden compartment. Lorcan watched every movement, assessing and weighing and debating what, exactly, to do with her.

Liar. Cunning little liar.

Elide Lochan, rightful Lady of Perranth, crawled out, slamming the trapdoor shut and glaring at him from where she knelt on the floor. He glared right back. “Why should I have trusted you,” she said with impressive coldness, “when you were stalking me for *days* in the forest? Why should I have told you a thing

about me when you could have sold me to the highest bidder?”

His body ached; his head throbbed from the slaughter he'd barely managed to survive. The ilken had gone down—but not willingly. And the one he'd kept alive, the one Nik and Ombriel had begged him to kill and be done with, had told him very little, actually.

But Lorcan had decided his *wife* didn't need to know that. Decided it was time to see what she might reveal if he let some lies of his own fool her.

Elide glanced at his weapons, at the reeking blood coating him like oil. “You killed them all?”

He lowered the wheat stalk from his mouth. “Do you think I'd be sitting here if I hadn't?”

Elide Lochan wasn't some mere human trying to return to her homeland and serve her queen. She was a royal-blooded *lady* who wanted to get back to that fire-breathing bitch in the North to offer whatever aid she could. She and Aelin would be well suited for each other, he decided. The sweet-faced liar and the insufferable, haughty princess.

Elide slumped onto the bench, massaging her feet and calves.

“I'm risking my neck for you,” he said too quietly, “and yet you decided not to tell me that your uncle isn't just a mere commander at Morath, but Erawan's right hand—and *you* are his prized possession.”

“I told you enough of the truth. Who I am makes no difference. And I am no one's possession.”

His temper yanked at the leash he'd been careful to keep short before tracking her scent to this wagon. Outside, the others were hurriedly packing, readying to flee into the night before the villagers decided to blame them for the disaster. “It does make a difference who you are. With your queen on the move, your uncle knows she'd pay a steep price to get you back. You are not a mere breeding asset—you are a negotiation tool. You might very well be what brings that bitch to her knees.”

Rage flashed in her fine-boned face. “You keep plenty of secrets, too, *Lorcan*.” She spat his name like a curse. “And I still haven't been able to decide if I find it insulting or amusing that you think I'm too stupid to notice. That you thought I was some fear-addled girl, too grateful for the presence of such a strong, brooding warrior to even question why you were there or what you wanted or what your stake in all this is. I gave you exactly what you wanted to see: a lost young woman in need of help, perhaps a bit skilled at lying and deceit, but ultimately not worth more than a few seconds' consideration. And you, in all

your immortal arrogance, didn't think twice. Why should you, when humans are so useless? Why should you even bother, when you planned to abandon me the moment you got what you needed?"

Lorcan blinked, bracing his feet on the floor. She didn't back down an inch.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone had spoken to him like that. "I would be careful what you say to me."

Elide gave him a hateful little smile. "Or what? You'll sell me to Morath? Use me as your ticket in?"

"I hadn't thought to do that, but thank you for the idea."

Her throat bobbed, the only sign of her fear. And she said clearly and without a hint of hesitation, "If you try to bring me to Morath, I will end my own life before you can carry me over the Keep's bridge."

It was the threat, the promise, that checked his anger, his utter *rage* that ... that she had indeed played into his expectations of her, his arrogance and prejudices. He said carefully, "What is it that you're carrying that makes them hunt you so relentlessly? Not your royal blood, not your magic and use for breeding. The object you carry with you—what is it?"

Perhaps it was a night for truth, perhaps death hovered close enough to make her a bit reckless, but Elide said, "It's a gift—for Celaena Sardothien. From a woman kept imprisoned in Morath, who had waited a long time to repay her for a past kindness. More than that, I don't know."

A gift for an assassin—not the queen. Perhaps nothing of note, but— "Let me see it."

"No."

They stared each other down again. And Lorcan knew that if he wanted, he could wait until she was asleep, take it for himself, and vanish. See what might make her so protective of it.

But he knew ... some small, stupid part of him knew that if he took from this woman who had already had too much stolen from her ... He didn't know if there was any coming back from that. He'd done such despicable, vicious things over the centuries and hadn't thought twice. He'd reveled in them, relished them, the cruelty.

But this ... there was a line. Somehow ... somehow there was a gods-damned line here.

She seemed to pick up on his decision—with whatever gift she had. Her shoulders slumped, and she stared blankly at the canvas wall as the sounds of their group now grew closer, their urging to hurry and pack, leave what could be

spared.

Elide said quietly, “Marion was my mother’s name. She died defending Aelin Galathynius from her assassin. My mother bought Aelin time to run—to get away so she could one day return to save us all. My uncle, Vernon, watched and smiled as my father, the Lord of Perranth, was executed outside our castle. Then he took my father’s title and lands and home. And for the next ten years, my uncle locked me in the highest tower of Perranth Castle, with only my nursemaid for company. When I broke my foot and ankle, he did not trust healers enough to let them treat it. He kept bars on the tower windows to keep me from killing myself, and shackled my ankles to keep me from running. I left for the first time in a decade when he shoved me into a prison wagon and dragged me down to Morath. There, he made me work as a servant—for the humiliation and terror he delights in. I planned and dreamed of escaping every day. And when the time came ... I took my chance. I did not know about the ilken, had only heard rumors of fell things being bred in the mountains beyond the Keep. I have no lands, no money, no army to offer Aelin Galathynius. But I will find her—and help her in whatever way I can. If only to keep just one girl, just *one*, from ever enduring what I did.”

He let the truth in her words sink into him. Let them adjust his view of her. His ... plans.

Lorcan said roughly, “I am over five hundred years old. I am blood-sworn to Queen Maeve of the Fae, and I am her second-in-command. I have done great and terrible things in her name, and I will do more before death comes to claim me. I was born a bastard on the streets of Doranelle, ran wild with the other discarded children until I realized my talents were different. Maeve noticed, too. I can kill faster—I can sense when death is near. I think my magic *is* death, given to me by Hellas himself. I am in these lands on behalf of my queen—though I came without her permission. She might very well hunt me down and kill me for it. If her sentinels arrive looking for me, it is in your best interest to pretend not to know who and what I am.” There was more, but ... Elide had remaining secrets, too. They’d offered each other enough for now.

No fear tainted her scent—not even a trace of it. All Elide said was, “Do you have a family?”

“No.”

“Do you have friends?”

“No.” His cabal of warriors didn’t count. Gods-damned Whitethorn hadn’t seemed to care when he abandoned them to serve Aelin Galathynius; Fenrys

made no secret he hated the bond; Vaughan was barely around; he couldn't stand Gavriel's unbreakable restraint; and Connall was too busy rutting Maeve like an animal most of the time.

Elide angled her head, her hair sliding across her face. He almost lifted a hand to brush it back and read her dark eyes. But his hands were covered in that filthy blood. And he had the feeling Elide Lochan did not wish to be touched unless she asked to be.

"Then," she murmured, "you and I are the same in that regard, at least."

No family, no friends. It hadn't seemed quite so pathetic until she said it, until he suddenly saw himself through her eyes.

But Elide shrugged, rising to her feet as Molly's voice barked from nearby. "You should clean up—you look like a warrior again."

He wasn't sure if she meant it as a compliment. "Nik and Ombriel, unfortunately, realized you and I are perhaps not what we seem."

Alarm flashed in her eyes. "Should we leave—"

"No. They'll keep our secrets." If only because they'd seen Lorcan lay into those ilken, and knew precisely what he could do to them if they so much as breathed wrong in their direction. "We can stay awhile yet—until we get clear of this."

Elide nodded, her limp deep as she headed for the back of the wagon. She sat on the edge before climbing off, her wrecked ankle too weak and painful to ever jump. Yet she moved with quiet dignity, hissing a little as her foot made contact with the ground.

Lorcan watched her limp into the night without so much as a backward glance at him.

And he wondered what the hell he was doing.

Death smelled like salt and blood and wood and rot.

And it hurt.

Darkness embrace her, it hurt like hell. The Ancient Ones had lied that it cured all ills, if the slice of pain across her abdomen was any indication. Not to mention the pounding headache, the sheer dryness of her mouth, the burning sting in the other cut on her arm.

Perhaps the Darkness was another world, another realm. Perhaps she'd gone to the hell-realm the humans so feared.

She hated Death.

And Death could go to hell, too—



Manon Blackbeak cracked open eyelids that were too heavy, too burning, and squinted against the flickering lantern light that swayed upon the wood panels of the room in which she lay.

Not a real bedroom, she realized by the reek of salt and rocking and creaking of the world around her. A cabin—on a ship.

A small, dingy one, with barely space for this bed, a porthole too small for her shoulders to even squeeze through—

She bolted upright. Abraxos. Where was *Abraxos*—

“Relax,” drawled a too-familiar female voice from the shadowed space near the foot of the bed.

Pain flared in Manon's belly, a delayed response to her sudden movement, and she glanced between the white bandages that now scratched against her fingers and the young queen, lounging in the chair by the door. Glanced between the woman and the chains now around Manon's wrists, around her ankles—anchored into the walls with what appeared to be freshly drilled holes.

“Looks like you owe me a life debt once more, Blackbeak,” Aelin Galathynius said, cold humor in her turquoise eyes. *Elide*. Had *Elide* made it

here—

“Your fussy nursemaid of a wyvern is fine, by the way. I don’t know how you wound up with a sweet thing like that for a mount, but he’s content to sprawl in the sun on the foredeck. Can’t say it makes the sailors particularly happy—especially cleaning up after him.”

Find somewhere safe, she’d told Abraxos. Had he somehow found the queen? Somehow known this was the only place she might stand a chance of surviving?

Aelin braced her feet on the floor, boots thudding softly. There was a frank sort of impatience with any sort of bullshit that had not been there the last time Manon had seen the woman. As if the warrior who had laughed her way through their battle atop Temis’s temple had lost a bit of that wicked amusement but gained more of the cunning cruelty.

Manon’s belly gave a throb of pain that made her bite her lip to keep from hissing.

“Whoever gave you that wound wasn’t joking,” the queen said. “Trouble at home?”

It wasn’t the queen’s business, or anyone else’s. “Let me heal, and then I’ll be on my way,” Manon rasped, her tongue a dried, heavy husk.

“Oh, no,” Aelin purred. “You’re not going anywhere. Your mount may do whatever he pleases, but you are now officially our prisoner.”

Manon’s head started spinning, but she forced herself to say, “Our?”

A knowing little smile. Then the queen rose gracefully. Her hair was longer, face leaner, those turquoise eyes hard and haunted. The queen said simply, “Here are the rules, Blackbeak. You try to escape, you die. You hurt anyone, you die. You somehow bring any of us into trouble ... I think you get where I’m going with this. You step one foot out of line, and I’ll finish what we started that day in the forest, life debt or no. This time I don’t need steel to do it.”

As she spoke, gold flames seemed to flicker in her eyes. And Manon realized with no small thrill, even with her pain, that the queen could indeed end her before she’d get close enough to kill.

Aelin turned for the door, her scarred hand on the knob. “I found iron splinters in your belly before I healed you. I suggest you don’t lie to whoever can tolerate being around you long enough to get the full story.” She jerked her chin toward the floor. A pitcher and cup lay there. “Water’s next to the bed. If you can reach it.”

Then she was gone.

Manon listened to her steady footsteps fade. No other voices or sounds beyond the lap of waves against the ship, the groan of the wood, and—gulls. They had to still be within range of the coast, then. Sailing to where ... she'd have to figure that out.

Once she healed. Once she got out of these irons. Once she got onto Abraxos.

But to go where? To whom?

There was no aerie to receive her, no Clan who would shield her from her grandmother. And the Thirteen ... Where were they now? Had they been hunted down?

Manon's stomach burned, but she reached for the water. Pain lashed her hard enough that she gave up after a heartbeat.

They had heard, no doubt—what she was. The Thirteen had heard.

Not just a half-blooded Crochan ... but the last Crochan Queen.

And her sister ... her half sister...

Manon stared at the shadowed, wooden ceiling.

She could feel that Crochan's blood on her hands. And her cape ... that red cape was draped over the edge of the bed. Her sister's cape. That her grandmother had made her wear, knowing who it belonged to, knowing whose throat Manon had slit.

No longer the Blackbeak heir, Crochan blood or no.

Despair curled like a cat around the pain in Manon's belly. She was no one and nothing.

She did not remember falling asleep.



The witch slept for three days after Aelin reported that she had awakened. Dorian went into that cramped cabin with Rowan and the queen every time they healed a little bit more of her, observing the way their magic worked, but not daring to try it on the unconscious Blackbeak.

Even unconscious, Manon's every breath, every twitch, was a reminder that she was a born predator, her agonizingly beautiful face a careful mask to lure the unwary to their doom.

It felt fitting, somehow, considering that *they* were likely sailing to their own doom.

As Rolfe's two ships had escorted them down the coast of Eyllwe, they'd

kept well away from the shore. A wicked storm had them mooring among the small cluster of islands off Leriba's waters, and they'd only survived thanks to Rowan's own winds shielding them. Most of them had still spent the entirety of it with their head in a bucket. Himself included.

They were nearing Banjali now—and Dorian had tried and failed not to think of his dead friend with every league closer to the lovely city. Tried and failed not to consider if Nehemia would have been with them on this very ship had things not gone so terribly wrong. Tried and failed not to contemplate if that touch she'd once given him—the Wyrmark she'd sketched over his chest—had somehow ... awakened that power of his. If it had been a curse as much as a blessing.

He hadn't had the nerve to ask what Aelin was feeling, though he found her frequently staring toward the coast—even if they couldn't see it, even if they wouldn't get close.

Another week—perhaps less, if Rowan's magic helped—would have them at the eastern edge of the Stone Marshes. And once they were in range ... they'd have to trust Rolfe's vague directions to guide them.

And avoid Melisande's armada—Erawan's armada now, he supposed—waiting just around the peninsula in the Gulf of Oro.

But for now ... Dorian was on watch in Manon's room, none of them taking any risks where the Blackbeak heir was concerned.

He cleared his throat as her eyelids shifted, her dark lashes bobbing up—then lifting wholly.

Gold sleep-murky eyes met his.

“Hello, witchling,” he said.

Her full, sensuous mouth tightened slightly, either in a repressed grimace or smile, he couldn't tell. But she sat up, her moon-white hair sliding forward—her chains clanking. “Hello, princeling,” she said. Gods, her voice was like sandpaper.

He glanced at the water jug. “Care for a drink?”

She had to be parched. They'd barely been able to get a trickle down her throat, not wanting to risk her choking or freeing those iron teeth from wherever she kept them.

Manon studied the pitcher, then him. “Am I your prisoner, too?”

“My life debt is paid,” he said simply. “You're nothing to me at all.”

“What happened,” she rasped. An order—and one he allowed her to make.

But he filled the glass, trying not to look like he was calculating her range in

those chains as he handed it to her. No sign of her iron nails as her slim fingers wrapped around the cup. She winced slightly, winced a bit more as she lifted it to her still-pale lips—and drank. And drank.

She drained the glass. Dorian silently refilled it for her. Once. Twice. Thrice.

When she at last finished, he said, “Your wyvern flew straight as an arrow for us. You tumbled off the saddle and into the water barely fifty yards from our ship. How he found us, we don’t know. We got you out of the water—Rowan himself had to temporarily bind your stomach on the deck before we could even move you down here. It’s a miracle you’re not dead from blood loss alone. Never mind infection. We had you down here for a week, Aelin and Rowan working on you—they had to cut you open again in some spots to get the bad flesh out. You’ve been in and out of it since.”

Dorian didn’t feel like mentioning that he’d been the one who’d jumped into the water. He’d just ... acted, as Manon had acted when she’d saved him in his tower. He owed her nothing less. Lysandra, in sea dragon form, had caught up to them moments later, and he’d held the water-heavy Manon in his arms as he’d climbed onto the shifter’s back. The witch had been so pale, and the wound on her stomach ... He’d almost lost his breakfast at the sight of it. She looked like a fish who’d been sloppily gutted.

Gutted, Aelin had confirmed an hour later when she held up a small sliver of metal, by someone with very, very sharp iron nails.

None of them had mentioned that it might have been punishment—for saving him.

Manon was assessing the room with eyes quickly clearing. “Where are we.”
“On the sea.”

Aelin had ordered he not give her any information about their plans and whereabouts.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, wondering what, exactly, she might eat.

Indeed, those gold eyes slashed to his throat.

“Really?” He lifted a brow.

Her nostrils flared slightly. “Only for sport.”

“Aren’t you ... partially human, at least?”

“Not in the ways that count.”

Right—because the other parts ... Fae, Valg ... It was Valg blood that had shaped the witches. The very prince that had infested him shared blood with her. From the black pit of his memory, images and words slithered out—of that prince seeing the gold eyes Dorian now met, screeching at him to get away ...

Eyes of the Valg kings. He said carefully, “So would you consider yourself more Valg than human, then?”

“The Valg are my enemy—Erawan is my enemy.”

“And does that make us allies?”

She revealed no indication either way. “Is there a young woman in your company named Elide?”

“No.” Who in hell was that? “We’ve never encountered anyone with that name.”

Manon closed her eyes for a heartbeat. Her slender throat bobbed. “Have you heard news of my Thirteen?”

“You’re the first rider and wyvern we’ve seen in weeks.” He contemplated why she’d asked, why she’d gone so still. “You don’t know if they’re alive.”

And with those iron shavings in her gut...

Manon’s voice was flat and cold as death. “Tell Aelin Galathynius not to bother using me for negotiations. The Blackbeak Matron will not acknowledge me, either as heir or witch, and all you will get out of it is revealing your precise location.”

His magic flickered. “What happened after Rifthold?”

Manon lay back down, angling her head away from him. Spindrift from the open porthole caught in her white hair and set it shimmering in the dim cabin. “Everything has a price.”

And it was those words, the fact that the witch had turned her face away and seemed to be waiting for death to claim her, that made him croon, “I once told you to find me again—it seems like you couldn’t wait to see my handsome face.”

Her shoulders stiffened slightly. “I’m hungry.”

He smiled slowly.

As if she’d heard that smile, Manon glared. “*Food.*”

But there was still an edge—a too-fragile edge limning every line of her body. Whatever had happened, whatever she had endured ... Dorian draped an arm along the back of his chair. “It’s coming in a few minutes. I’d hate for you to waste away into nothing. It’d be a shame to lose the most beautiful woman in the world so soon into her immortal, wicked life.”

“I am not a woman,” was all she said. But hot temper laced those molten gold eyes.

He gave her an indolent shrug, perhaps only because she was indeed in chains, perhaps because, even though the death she radiated thrilled him, it did

not strike a chord of fear. “Witch, woman ... as long as the parts that matter are there, what difference does it make?”

She eased into a sitting position, disbelief and exhausted outrage on that perfect face. She bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

Dorian offered a lazy grin in return. “Believe it or not, this ship has an unnatural number of attractive men and women on board. You’ll fit right in. And fit in with the cranky immortals, I suppose.”

She glanced toward the door moments before he heard approaching footsteps. They were silent until the knob turned, revealing Aedion’s frowning face. “Awake and ready to rip out throats, it seems,” the general said by way of greeting. Dorian rose, taking the tray of what looked to be fish stew from him. He wondered if he should test it for poison from the look Aedion was giving Manon. She glared right back at the golden-haired warrior.

Aedion said, “I would have shot you and your runt of a wyvern clean out of the sky if given my way. Be grateful my queen finds you more useful alive.”

Then he was gone.

Dorian set the tray within Manon’s reach and watched her sniff at it. She took a slow, cautious bite—as if letting it slide into her healing belly and seeing how it settled there. As if indeed testing it for poison. While she waited, Manon said, “You don’t give orders on this ship?”

It was a focused effort not to bristle. “You know my circumstances. I am now at the mercy of my friends.”

“And the Queen of Terrasen is your friend?”

“There is no one else I’d want guarding my back.” Other than Chaol, but ... it was no use even thinking about him, missing him.

Manon at last took another bite of her fish stew. Then another. And another.

And he realized she was avoiding speaking to him. Enough so that he asked, “It was your grandmother who did that to you, wasn’t it?”

Her spoon stilled in the chipped wooden bowl. Slowly, she turned her face toward him. Unreadable, a face crafted of nightmares and midnight fantasies.

“I’m sorry,” he admitted, “if the cost of saving me that day in Rifthold was ... was this.”

“Find out if my Thirteen are alive, princeling. Do that, and I am yours to command.”

“Where did you last see them?”

Nothing. She swallowed another spoonful.

He pushed, “Were they present when your grandmother did that to you?”

Her shoulders curved a bit, and she scooped another spoonful of cloudy liquid but didn't sip. "The cost of Rifthold was the life of my Second. I refused to pay it. So I bought my Thirteen time to run. The moment I swung my sword at my grandmother, my title, my legion, was forfeit. I lost the Thirteen while I fled. I do not know if they are alive, or if they have been hunted down." Her eyes snapped to his, bright from more than the steam of her stew. "*Find them* for me. Learn if they live or if they have returned to the Darkness."

"We're in the middle of the ocean. There won't be news of anything for a while."

She went back to eating. "They are all I have left."

"Then I suppose you and I are both heirs without crowns."

A humorless snort. Her white hair shifted in the sea breeze.

Dorian rose and walked to the door. "I'll do what I can."

"And—Elide."

Again, that name. "Who is she?"

But Manon was back at her stew. "Just tell Aelin Galathynius that Elide Lochan is alive—and looking for her."



The conversation with the king took everything out of her. Once that food was in her belly, once she'd downed more water, Manon lay back in bed and slept.

And slept.

And slept.

The door banged open at one point, and she had the vague recollection of the Queen of Terrasen, then her general-prince, demanding answers about something. Elide, perhaps.

But Manon had lain there, half awake, unwilling to think or speak. She wondered if she would have stopped bothering to breathe, if her body hadn't done it all on its own.

She had not realized how impossible the survival of the Thirteen might indeed have been until she was practically begging Dorian Havilliard to find them for her. Until she had found herself desperate enough to sell her sword for any news of them.

If they even wanted to serve her after everything. A Blackbeak—and a Crochan.

And her parents ... murdered by her grandmother. They had promised the

world a child of peace. And she had let her grandmother hone her into a child of war.

The thoughts swirled and eddied, sapping her strength, muting colors and sounds. She awoke and saw to her needs when necessary, ate when food was left, but she let that heavy, meaningless sleep take hold.

Sometimes, Manon dreamed that she was in that room in the Omega, her half sister's blood on her hands and in her mouth. Sometimes, she stood beside her grandmother, a witch fully grown and not the witchling she'd been at the time, and helped the Matron carve up a handsome, bearded man who begged for her life—his offspring's life. Sometimes, she flew over a lush green land, the song of a western wind singing her home.

Often, the dream was that a great cat, pale and speckled like old snow on granite, sat in the cabin with her, its long tail slashing back and forth when it noticed her glazed attention. Sometimes, it was a grinning white wolf. Or a calm-eyed golden mountain lion.

Manon wished they'd put their jaws around her throat and crunch down.

They never did.

So Manon Blackbeak slept. And so she dreamed.

Lorcan was still wondering what the hell he was doing three days later. They'd left that plains town far behind them, but the terror of that night lay draped over the carnival caravan like a heavy blanket with each mile the wagons hurried down the roads.

The others hadn't wised up to how, exactly, they'd survived the ilken—hadn't realized the ilken were near-impossible to kill, and no mere mortal could have slain one, let alone four. Nik and Ombriel gave him and Elide a wide berth—and only catching their wary, examining stares at the dinner campfire every night revealed they were still piecing together who and what he was.

Elide kept well away from him, too. They hadn't had a chance to set up their usual tents thanks to fleeing so quickly, but tonight, safely within the walls of a small plains town, they'd have to share a room at the cheap inn Molly had begrudgingly paid for.

It was hard not to watch Elide as she took in the town, then the inn—the keen-eyed observation, the hint of surprise and confusion that sometimes crossed her face.

He used a tendril of his magic to keep her foot stabilized. She never commented on it. And sometimes that dark, fell magic of his would brush up against whatever it was she carried—the gift from a dying woman to a hotheaded assassin—and recoil.

Lorcan hadn't pushed to see it since that night, though he'd spent a great deal of time contemplating what might have come out of Morath. Collars and rings were likely the start of it.

Whitethorn and the bitch-queen had no idea about the ilken—perhaps about the majority of horrors Elide had shared with him. He wondered what a wall of wildfire would do to the creatures—wondered if the ilken were somehow training against Aelin Galathynius's arsenal. If Erawan was smart, he'd have something in mind.

While the others trudged into the ramshackle inn in search of food and rest, Elide informed Molly that she was going on a walk along the river, and headed

into the cobblestone streets. And though his stomach was grumbling, Lorcan trailed her, ever the husband wishing to guard his beautiful wife in a town that had seen better days—decades. No doubt caused by Adarlan’s relentless road-building across the continent and the fact that this town had been left far from any artery through the land.

The thunderstorm he’d scented building on the horizon lumbered toward the stone-wrought town, the light shifting from gold to silver. Within minutes, the thick humidity was washed away by a sweep of welcome coolness. Lorcan gave Elide all of three blocks before he fell into step beside her and said, “It’s going to rain.”

She slid a flat glance at him. “I do know what thunder means.”

The walled town had been built on either side of a small, half-forgotten river—two large water gates on either end demanding tolls to enter the city and tracking the goods that passed through. Old water, fish, and rotting wood reached him before the sight of the muddy, calm waters did, and it was precisely at the edge of the river docks that Elide paused.

“What are you looking for?” he asked at last, an eye on the darkening skies. The dockworkers, sailors, and merchants monitored the clouds, too, as they scurried about. Some lingered to tie up the long, flat-bellied barges and latch down the smooth poles they used to navigate the river. He’d seen a kingdom, perhaps three hundred years ago, that relied on barges to sail its goods from one end to another. Its name eluded him, lost to the catacombs of his memory. Lorcan wondered if it still existed, tucked away between two mountain ranges on the other side of the world.

Elide’s bright eyes tracked a group of well-dressed men heading into what looked to be a tavern. “Storms mean looking for shelter,” she murmured. “Shelter means being stuck inside with nothing to do but gossip. Gossip means news from merchants and sailors about the rest of the land.” Those eyes cut to him, dry humor dancing there. “*That* is what thunder means.”

Lorcan blinked as she followed after the men who’d entered the dockside tavern. The first fat drops of the storm plunked onto the moss-speckled cobblestones of the quay.

Lorcan followed Elide inside the tavern, some part of him admitting that for all his five hundred years of surviving and killing and serving, he’d never quite encountered someone so ... unimpressed with him. Even gods-damned Aelin had some sense of the threat he posed. Maybe living with monsters had stripped away a healthy fear of them. He wondered how Elide hadn’t become one in the

process.

Lorcan took in the details of the taproom by instinct and training, finding nothing worth a second thought. The reek of the place—unwashed bodies, piss, mold, wet wool—threatened to suffocate him. But in the span of a few moments, Elide had grabbed herself a table near a cluster of those people from the docks and ordered two tankards of ale and whatever was the lunch special.

Lorcan slid into the ancient wooden chair beside hers, wondering if the damn thing would collapse under him as it groaned. Thunder cracked overhead, and all eyes shifted to the bay of windows overlooking the quay. Rain fell in earnest, setting the barges bobbing and swaying.

Lunch was dropped before them, the bowls clattering and sending the goopy brown stew splashing over the chipped rims. Elide didn't so much as look at it, or touch the ales that were plunked down with equal disinterest for a tip, as she scanned the room.

“Drink,” Elide commanded him.

Lorcan debated telling her not to give him orders, but ... he liked seeing this small, fine-boned creature in action. Liked seeing her size up a room of strangers and select her prey. Because it was a hunt—for the best and safest source of information. The person who wouldn't report to a town garrison still under Adarlan's control that a dark-haired young woman was asking questions about enemy forces.

So Lorcan drank and watched her while she watched others. So many calculating thoughts beneath that pale face, so many lies ready to spill from those rosebud lips. Part of him wondered if his own queen could find her useful—if Maeve would also pick up on the fact that it was perhaps Anneith herself who'd taught the girl to look and listen and lie.

Part of him dreaded the thought of Elide in Maeve's hands. What she'd become. What Maeve would ask her to do as a spy or courtier. Perhaps it was good that Elide was mortal, life span too short for Maeve to bother honing her into quite possibly her most vicious sentinel.

He was so damn busy thinking about it that he nearly didn't notice when Elide leaned back casually in her chair and interrupted the table of merchants and captains behind them. “What do you mean, Rifthold is gone?”

Lorcan snapped to attention. But they'd heard the news weeks ago.

The captain nearest them—a woman in her early thirties—sized up Elide, then Lorcan, then said, “Well, it's not gone, but ... witches now control it, on behalf of Duke Perrington. Dorian Havilliard's been ousted.”

Elide, the cunning little liar, looked outright shocked. “We’ve been in the deep wild for weeks. Is Dorian Havilliard dead?” She whispered the words, as if in horror ... and as if to avoid being heard.

Another person at the table—an older, bearded man—said, “They never found his body, but if the duke’s declaring him not to be king anymore, I’d assume he’s alive. No use making proclamations against a dead man.”

Thunder rattled, almost drowning out her whisper as she said, “Would he—would he go to the North? To ... her?”

They knew precisely who Elide meant. And Lorcan knew exactly why she’d come here.

She was going to leave. Tomorrow, whenever the carnival rolled out. She’d likely hire one of these boats to take her northward, and he ... he would go south. To Morath.

The companions swapped glances, weighing the appearance of the young woman—and then Lorcan. He attempted to smile, to look bland and unthreatening. None of them returned the look, though he must have done something right, because the bearded man said, “She’s not in the North.”

It was Elide’s turn to go still.

The bearded man went on, “Rumor has it, she was in Ilium, trouncing soldiers. Then they say she was in Skull’s Bay last week, raising hell. Now she’s sailing elsewhere—some say to Wendlyn, some say to Eyllwe, some say she’s fleeing to the other side of the world. But she’s not in the North. Won’t be for a while, it seems. Not wise to leave your home undefended, if you ask me. But she’s barely a woman; she can’t know much about warfare at all.”

Lorcan doubted that, and doubted the bitch didn’t make a move without Whitethorn or Gavriel’s son weighing in. But Elide loosed a shuddering breath. “Why leave Terrasen at all?”

“Who knows?” The woman turned back to her food and company. “Seems like the queen has a habit of showing up where she’s least expected, unleashing chaos, and vanishing again. There’s good money to be had from the betting pool about where she’ll show up next. I say Banjali, in Eyllwe—Vross here says Varese in Wendlyn.”

“Why Eyllwe?” Elide pushed.

“Who knows? She’d be a fool indeed to announce her plans.” The woman gave Elide a sharp look as if to say to keep quiet about it.

Elide returned to her food and ale, the rain and thunder drowning the chatter in the room.

Lorcan watched her drink the entire tankard in silence. And when it seemed the least suspicious, she rose and left.

Elide went to two other taverns in the town—followed the same exact pattern. The news shifted slightly with each recounting, but the general consensus was that Aelin was on the move, perhaps south or east, and no one knew what to expect.

Elide walked out of the third tavern, Lorcan on her heels. They hadn't spoken once since she'd gone into that first inn. He'd been too lost in contemplating what it would be like to suddenly travel on his own again. To leave her ... and never see her again.

And now, staring up at the rain and the thunder, Elide said, "I was supposed to go north."

Lorcan found himself not wanting to confirm or object. Like a useless fool, he found himself ... hesitating to push her toward that original path.

She lowered her face, water and light gilding her high cheekbones. "Where do I head now? How do I find her?"

He dared say, "What did you glean from the rumors?" He'd been analyzing each tidbit of information, but wanted to see that clever mind at work.

And some small part of him wanted to see what she'd decide about their splitting ways, too.

Elide said softly, "Banjali—in Eyllwe. I think she's going to Banjali."

He tried not to look too relieved. He'd arrived at the same conclusion, if only because it was what Whitethorn would have done—and he'd trained the prince himself for a few decades.

She scrubbed at her face. "How ... how far is it?"

"Far."

She lowered her hands, her features stark and bone white. "How do I get there? How do ...?" She rubbed at her chest.

"I can get you a map," he found himself saying. Just to see if she'd ask him to stay.

Her throat bobbed, and she shook her head, her black hair flowing. "It'd be no use."

"Maps are always useful."

"Not if you can't read."

Lorcan blinked, wondering if he'd heard her right. But color stained her pale cheeks, and that was indeed shame and despair clouding her dark eyes. "But you ..." There had been no opportunity for it these weeks, he realized—no chance

where she might have revealed it.

“I learned my letters, but when—when everything happened,” she said, “and I was put in that tower ... My nursemaid was illiterate. So I never learned more. So I forgot what I did know.”

He wondered if he would have ever noticed if she hadn’t told him. “You seem to have survived rather impressively without it.”

He spoke without considering, but it seemed to be the right thing to say. The corners of her mouth twitched upward. “I suppose I have,” she mused.

Lorcan’s magic picked up on the garrison before he heard or scented them.

It slithered along their swords—rudimentary, half-rusted weapons—and then bathed in their rising fear, excitement, perhaps even a tinge of bloodlust.

Not good. Not when they were headed right to them.

Lorcan closed the distance to Elide. “It seems our friends at the carnival wanted to make an easy silver coin.”

The helpless desperation on her face sharpened into wide-eyed alertness. “Guards are coming?”

Lorcan nodded, the footsteps now close enough for him to count how many approached from the garrison in the heart of the town, no doubt meant to trap them between their swords and the river. If he were the betting sort, he’d gamble that the two bridges that spanned the river—ten blocks up on either side of them—were already full of guards.

“You get a choice,” he said. “Either I can end this matter here, and we can go back to the inn to learn if Nik and Ombriel wanted to get rid of us ...” Her mouth tightened, and he knew her choice before he offered, “Or we can get on one of those barges and get the hell out right now.”

“The second,” she breathed.

“Good,” was his only reply as he gripped her hand and tugged her forward. Even with his power supporting her leg, she was too slow—

“Just do it,” she snapped.

So Lorcan hauled her over a shoulder, freeing his hatchet with his other hand, and ran for the water.



Elide bounced and slammed into Lorcan’s broad shoulder, craning her head enough to watch the street behind them. No sign of guards, but ... that little voice who often whispered in her ear now tugged and begged her to go. To get

out.

“The gates at the city entrance,” she gasped as muscle and bone pummeled into her gut. “They’ll be there, too.”

“Leave them to me.”

Elide tried not to imagine what that meant, but then they were at the docks, Lorcan sprinting for a barge, thundering down the steps of the quay and onto the long wooden dock. The barge was smaller than the others, its one-room chamber in the center painted bright green. Empty—aside from a few boxes of cargo on its prow.

Lorcan pocketed the axe he’d thumbed free, and Elide gripped his shoulder, fingers digging into muscle, as he set her over the high lip of the barge and onto the wooden planks. She stumbled a step as her legs adjusted to the bobbing of the river, but—

Lorcan was already whirling toward the reed-slim man who barreled toward them, a knife out. “That’s *my* boat,” he bleated. He realized who, exactly, he would be fighting as he cleared the short wooden ladder onto the dock and took in Lorcan’s size, the hatchet *and* sword now in the warrior’s broad hands, and the expression of death surely on his face.

Lorcan said simply, “It’s our boat now.”

The man glanced between them. “You—you won’t clear the bridges or the city walls—”

Moments. They had only moments before the guards came—

Lorcan said to the man, “Get in. *Now.*”

The man began backing away.

Elide braced her hand on the broad, raised side of the boat and said calmly, “He will kill you before you clear the ladder. Get us out of the city, and I swear you’ll be set free once we’re clear.”

“You’ll slit my throat then, as good as you will now,” the man said, gulping in air.

Indeed, Lorcan’s hatchet bobbed in that way she’d learned meant he was about to throw it.

“I would ask you to reconsider,” Elide said.

Lorcan’s wrist twitched ever so slightly. He’d do it—he’d kill this innocent man, just to get them free—

The man’s knife drooped, then vanished into the sheath at his side. “There’s a bend in the river past the town. Drop me off there.”

That was all Elide needed to hear as the man rushed toward them, untying

lines and leaping into the boat with the ease of someone who'd done it a thousand times. He and Lorcan grabbed the poles to push out into the river, and as soon as they were loose, Lorcan hissed, "If you betray us, you'll be dead before the guards can even board." The man nodded, now steering them toward the eastern exit of the town, as Lorcan dragged her into the one-room cabin.

The cabin interior was lined with windows, all clean enough to suggest the man took some pride in his boat. Lorcan half shoved her under a table in its center, the embroidered cloth covering it shielding her from anything but sounds: Lorcan's footsteps going silent, though she could feel him taking up a hiding place to monitor the proceedings from within the cabin; the patter of rain on the flat roof; the thud of the pole as it occasionally knocked into the side of the barge.

Her body soon ached from holding herself still and quiet.

Was this to be her life for the foreseeable future? Hunted and hounded across the world?

And finding Aelin ... How would she ever do that? She could go back to Terrasen, but she didn't know who ruled from Orynth. If Aelin had not taken back her throne ... Perhaps it was an unspoken message that danger lay there. That all was not well in Terrasen.

But to go to Eyllwe on a bit of speculation ... Of all the rumors Elide had listened to in the past two hours, that captain's reasons had been the wisest.

The world seemed to still with some unspoken tension, a ripple of fear.

But then the man's voice was calling out again, and metal groaned—a gate. The city gates.

She stayed under the table, counting her breaths, thinking through all that she'd heard. She doubted the carnival would miss them.

And she'd bet all the money in her boot that Nik and Ombriel had been the ones who'd set the guards on them, deciding she and Lorcan were too much of a threat—especially with the ilken hunting her. She wondered if Molly had known all along, from that very first meeting, that they were liars and had let Nik and Ombriel sell them out when the bounty was too good to pass up, the cost of loyalty too great.

Elide sighed through her nose. A splash sounded, but the boat ambled onward.

At least she'd taken the little bit of stone with her, though she'd miss her clothes, shabby as they were. These leathers were growing stuffy in the oppressive heat, and if she were to go to Eyllwe, they'd be sweltering—

Lorcan's footsteps sounded. "Get out."

Wincing as her ankle barked in pain, she crawled from under the table and peered around. "No trouble?"

He shook his head. He was splattered with rain or river water. She peered around him to where the man had been steering the boat. No one there—or in the rear of the boat.

"He swam to shore back at the bend," Lorcan explained.

Elide loosed a breath. "He might very well run to town and tell them. It won't take long for them to catch up."

"We'll deal with it," Lorcan said, turning away. Too fast. He avoided her eyes too fast—

She took in the water, the stains now on the sleeves of his shirt. Like ... like he'd washed his hands quickly, sloppily.

She glanced at the hatchet at his side as he strode out of the cabin. "You killed him, didn't you?" That was what the splash had been. A body being dumped over the side.

Lorcan halted. Looked over a broad shoulder. There was nothing human in his dark eyes. "If you want to survive, you have to be willing to do what is necessary."

"He might have had a family depending on him." She'd seen no wedding ring, but it didn't mean anything.

"Nik and Ombriel didn't give us that consideration when they reported us to the garrison." He stalked onto the deck, and she stormed after him. Lush trees lined the river, a living shield around them.

And there—there was a *stain* on the planks, shining and dark. Her stomach rose.

"You planned to lie to me about it," she seethed. "But how would you explain *that*?"

A shrug. Lorcan took up the pole and moved with fluid grace to the side of the barge, where he pushed them away from an approaching sandbank.

He had *killed* that man— "I *swore* to him he'd be set free."

"You swore it, not me."

Her fingers curled into fists. And that thing—that stone—wrapped in that bit of cloth inside her jacket began to stir.

Lorcan stilled, the pole gripped tight in his hands. "What is that," he said too softly.

She held her ground. Like hell she'd back down from him, like hell she'd

allow him to intimidate her, overrule her, *kill people* so they could escape—

“What. Is. That.”

She refused to speak, to even touch the lump in her pocket. It thrummed and grumbled, a beast opening an eye, but she didn’t dare to reach out, to so much as acknowledge that strange, otherworldly presence.

Lorcan’s eyes widened slightly, then he was setting down the pole and stalking across the deck and into the cabin. She lingered by the edge, unsure whether to follow or perhaps jump into the water and swim to shore, but—

There was a thud of metal on metal, as if something was being cracked open, and then—

Lorcan’s roar shook the boat, the river, the trees. Long-legged river birds hauled themselves into flight.

Then Lorcan flung open the door, so violently it nearly ripped off its hinges, and hurled what looked to be the shards of a broken amulet into the river. Or he tried to. Lorcan threw it hard enough that it cleared the river entirely and slammed into a tree, gouging out a chunk of wood.

He whirled, and Elide’s anger stumbled a step at the blistering wrath twisting his features. He prowled for her, grabbing the pole as if to keep from throttling her, and said, “*What is it that you carry?*”

And the demand, the violence and entitlement and arrogance, had her seeing red, too. So Elide said with quiet venom, “Why don’t you just slit my throat and find out for yourself?”

Lorcan’s nostrils flared. “If you have a problem with my killing someone who *reeked* of itching to betray us the moment he got the chance, then you are going to *love* your queen.”

For a while now, he’d hinted that he knew of her, that he knew of her well enough to call her horrible things, but— “What do you mean?”

Lorcan, gods above, looked as if his temper had at last slipped its leash as he said, “Celaena Sardothien is a nineteen-year-old assassin—who calls herself the best in the world.” A snort. “She killed and reveled and shopped her way through life and never once apologized for it. She gloried in it. And then this spring, one of *my* sentinels, Prince Rowan Whitethorn, was tasked to deal with her when she washed up on Wendlyn’s shores. Turns out, he fell in love with her instead, and she with him. Turns out, whatever they were doing up in the Cambrian Mountains got her to stop calling herself Celaena and start going by her true name again.” A brutal smile. “Aelin Galathynius.”

Elide could barely feel her body. “What?” was about the only word she could

manage.

“Your fire-breathing queen? She’s a gods-damned assassin. Trained to be a killer from the moment your mother died defending her. Trained to be no better than the man who butchered your mother and your royal family.”

Elide shook her head, her hands slackening. “What?” she said again.

Lorcan laughed mirthlessly. “While you were locked in that tower for ten years, she was indulging in the riches of Rifthold, spoiled and coddled by her master—the King of the Assassins—whom she murdered in cold blood this spring. So you’ll find that your long-lost savior is little better than I am. You’ll find that she would have killed that man the same as I did, and would have as little tolerance for your whining as I do.”

Aelin ... an assassin. Aelin—the same person she’d been tasked to give the stone to ...

“You knew,” she said. “This whole time we’ve been together—you knew I was looking for the same person.”

“I told you that to find one would be to find the other.”

“You *knew*, and you didn’t tell me. Why?”

“You still haven’t told me your secrets. I don’t see why I should tell all of mine, either.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the dark stain on the wood—trying to soothe the sting of his words and seal the hole that had opened beneath her feet. What had been in that amulet? Why had he roared and—

“Your little queen,” Lorcan sneered, “is a murderer, and a thief, and a liar. So if you’re going to call me such things, then be prepared to fling them at her, too.”

Her skin was too tight, her bones too brittle to bear the anger that took control. She scrambled for the right words to hurt him, wound him, as if they were fistfuls of rocks that she could hurl at Lorcan’s head.

Elide hissed, “I was wrong. I said you and I were the same—that we had no family, no friends. But I have none because land and circumstance separate me from them. You have none because no one can stomach being around you.” She tried—and succeeded, if the ire that rippled in his eyes was any indication—to look down her nose at him, even with him towering over her. “And you know what is the biggest lie you tell everyone, Lorcan? It’s that you prefer it that way. But what I hear, when you rant about my *bitch-queen*? All I hear are the words of someone who is deeply, deeply jealous, and lonely, and *pathetic*. All I hear are the words of someone who saw Aelin and Prince Rowan fall in love and resented them for their happiness—because *you* are so unhappy.” She couldn’t stop the

words once they started flinging out. “So call Aelin a murderer and a thief and a liar. Call her a bitch-queen and a fire-breather. But forgive me if I take it upon myself to be the judge of those things when I meet her. Which I *will* do.” She pointed to the muddy gray river flowing around them. “I’m going to Eyllwe. Take me ashore and I’ll wash my hands of you as easily as you washed the blood of that man off yours.”

Lorcan looked her over, teeth bared enough to show those slightly elongated canines. But she didn’t care about his Fae heritage, or his age, or his ability to kill.

After a moment, he went back to pushing the pole against the river bottom—not to bring them to shore, but to guide them along.

“Did you not hear what I said? *Take me to shore.*”

“No.”

Her rage overcame any sort of common sense, any warning from Anneith as she stormed over to him. “*No?*”

He let the pole drag in the water and turned his face to her. No emotion—not even anger lingered there. “The river veered southward two miles ago. From the map in the cabin, we can take it straight south, then find the fastest route to Banjali.” She wiped the rain from her dripping brow as Lorcan brought his face close enough for them to share breath. “Turns out, I now have business with Aelin Galathynius, too. Congratulations, Lady. You just got yourself a guide to Eyllwe.”

A cold, killing light was in his eyes, and she wondered what the hell he’d roared about.

But those eyes dipped to her mouth, clamped tight in her rage. And a part of her that had nothing to do with fear went still at the attention, even as other parts went a bit molten.

Lorcan’s eyes at last found her own, and his voice was a midnight growl as he said, “As far as anyone’s concerned, you’re still my wife.”

Elide didn’t object—even as she walked back into the cabin, his insufferable magic helping with her limp, and slammed the door shut so hard the glass rattled.



Storm clouds drifted away to reveal a star-flecked night and a moon bright enough for Lorcan to navigate the narrow, sleepy river.

He steered them hour after hour, contemplating precisely how he was going to murder Aelin Galathynius without Elide or Whitethorn getting in the way, and then how he was going to slice up her corpse and feed it to the crows.

She had lied to him. She *and* Whitethorn had tricked him that day the prince had handed over the Wyrdkey.

There'd been nothing inside the amulet but one of those rings—an utterly useless Wyrdstone ring, wrapped in a bit of parchment. And on it was written in a feminine scrawl:

Here's hoping you discover more creative terms than "bitch" to call me when you find this.

With all my love,

A.A.G.

He'd kill her. Slowly. Creatively. He'd been forced to swear a blood promise that Mala's ring truly offered immunity from the Valg when it was worn—he hadn't thought to demand that their Wyrdkey was real, too.

And Elide—what Elide carried, what had made him realize it ... He'd think about that later. Contemplate what to do with the Lady of Perranth later.

His only consolation was that he'd stolen Mala's ring back, but the little *bitch* still had the key. And if Elide needed to go to Aelin anyway ... Oh, he'd find Aelin for Elide.

And he'd make the Queen of Terrasen crawl before the end of it.

The world began and ended in fire.

A sea of fire with no room for air, for sound beyond the cascading molten earth. The true heart of fire—the tool of creation and destruction. And she was drowning in it.

Its weight smothered her as she thrashed, seeking a surface or a bottom to push off from. Neither existed.

As it flooded her throat, surging into her body and melting her apart, she began screaming noiselessly, begging it to halt—

Aelin.

The name, roared into the core of flame at the heart of the world, was a beacon, a summons. She'd been born waiting to hear that voice, had blindly sought it her whole life, would follow it unto the ending of all things—

“AELIN.”

Aelin bowed off the bed, flame in her mouth, her throat, her eyes. Real flame.

Golds and blues wove among simmering swaths of reds. Real flame, erupting from her, the sheets scorched, the room and the rest of the bed spared from incineration, the *ship in the middle of the sea* spared from incineration, by an uncompromising, unbreakable wall of air.

Hands wrapped in ice squeezed her shoulders, and through the flame, Rowan's snarling face appeared, commanding her to breathe—

She took a breath. More flame rushed down her throat.

There was no tether, no leash to bring her magic to heel. Oh, gods—oh, gods, she couldn't even feel a burnout threatening nearby. There was nothing but this flame—

Rowan gripped her face in his hands, steam rippling where his ice and wind met her fire. “You are its master; *you* control it. Your fear grants it the right to take over.”

Her body arced off the mattress again, utterly naked. She must have burned her clothes—Rowan's favorite shirt. Her flames burned wilder.

He gripped her hard, forcing her to meet his eyes as he snarled, “I see you. I see every part of you. And I am not afraid.”

I will not be afraid.

A line in the burning brightness.

My name is Aelin Ashryver Galathynius ...

And I will not be afraid.

As surely as if she grabbed it in her hand, the leash appeared.

Darkness flowed in, blessed and calm where that burning pit of flame had raged.

She swallowed once, twice. “Rowan.”

His eyes gleamed with near-animal brightness, scanning every inch of her.

His heartbeat was rampant, thundering—panicked. “Rowan,” she repeated.

Still he did not move, did not stop staring at her, searching for signs of harm. Something in her own chest shifted at his panic.

Aelin grasped his shoulder, digging in her nails at the violence rampant on every line of his body, as if he’d loosed whatever leashes he kept on himself in anticipation of fighting to keep *her* in this body and not some goddess or worse. “Calm down. *Now.*”

He did no such thing. Rolling her eyes, she tugged his hands from her face to lean over and throw the sheets off them. “I am fine,” she said, enunciating each word. “You saw to that. Now, get me some water. I’m thirsty.”

A basic, easy command. To serve, in the way he’d explained that Fae males *liked* to be needed, to fulfill some part of them that wanted to fuss and dote. To drag him back up to that level of civilization and reason.

Rowan’s face was still harsh with feral wrath—and the insidious terror running beneath it.

So Aelin leaned in, nipped his jaw, making sure her canines scratched, and said onto his skin, “If you don’t start acting like a prince, you can sleep on the floor.”

Rowan pulled back, his savage face not wholly of this world, but slowly, as if the words sank in, his features softened. He was still looking pissy, but not so near *killing* that invisible threat against her, as he leaned in, nipping her jaw in return, and said into her ear, “I’m going to make you regret using such threats, Princess.”

Oh, gods. Her toes curled, but she gave him a simpering smile as he rose to his feet, every muscle in his naked body rippling with the movement, and watched him pad with feline grace to the washstand and ewer atop it.

The bastard had the nerve to look her over as he lifted the jug. And then give her a satisfied, male smile as he poured a glass right to the brim, halting with expert precision.

She debated sending a lick of flame to burn his bare ass as he set down the jug with emphasized care and calm. And then stalked back to the bed, eyes on her every step of the way, and set the water on the small table beside it.

Aelin rose on surprisingly steady knees and faced him.

Only the creaking of the ship and hissing of the waves against it filled the room.

“What was that?” she asked quietly.

His eyes shuttered. “It was ... me losing control.”

“Why?”

He glanced at the porthole and moon-kissed sea beyond. So rare for him to avoid her stare.

“Why?” she pushed.

Rowan at last met her gaze. “I didn’t know if she’d taken you again.” No matter that the Wyrdkey now lay beside the bed and not around her neck. “Even when I realized you were just in the magic’s thrall, I still ... The magic took you away. It’s been a long time since I wasn’t certain ... since I didn’t know how to get you back.” He bared his teeth, loosing a jagged breath, the wrath now directed inward. “Before you call me a territorial Fae bastard, allow me to apologize and explain that it is *very* difficult—”

“Rowan.” He stilled. She crossed the small lingering distance between them, every step like the answer to some question she’d asked from the moment her soul had sparked into existence. “You are not human. I do not expect you to be.”

He almost seemed to recoil. But she put a hand on his bare chest, over his heart. It still thundered beneath her palm.

She said softly, feeling that heart beneath her hand, “I do not care if you are Fae, or human, if you are Valg or a gods-damned skinwalker. You are what you are. And what I want ... what I *need*, Rowan, is someone who does not apologize for it. For who they are. You have never once done so.” She leaned forward to kiss the bare skin where her hand had been. “Please don’t start doing it now. Yes, sometimes you piss me the hell off with that Fae territorial nonsense, but ... I heard your voice. It woke me up. It led me out of that ... place.”

He bowed his head until his brow leaned against hers. “I wish I had more to offer you—during this war, and beyond it.”

She slid her arms around his bare waist. “You offer me more than I ever

hoped for.” He seemed to object, but she said, “And I figured since both Darrow and Rolfe informed me I needed to sell my hand in marriage for the sake of this war, I should do the opposite.”

A snort. “Typical. But if Terrasen needs—”

“Here is the way I see it,” she said, pulling back to examine his harsh face. “We do not have the luxury of time. And a marriage to a foreign kingdom, with its contracts and distances, plus the months it takes to raise and send an army ... we do not *have* that time. We only have *now*. And what I don’t need is a husband who will try to get into a pissing contest with me, or who I’ll have to cloister somewhere for his own safety, or who will hide in a corner when I wake up with flames all around me.” She kissed his tattooed chest again, right over that mighty, thundering heart. “This, Rowan—*this* is all I need. Just this.”

The reverberations of his deep, rattling breath echoed into her cheek, and he stroked a hand over her hair, along her bare back. Lower. “A court that can change the world.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth. “We’ll find a way—together.” The words he’d given her once, the words that had begun the healing of her shattered heart. And his own. “Did I hurt—” Her words were a rasp.

“No.” He brushed a thumb over her cheekbone. “No, you didn’t hurt me. Or anything else.”

Something in her chest caved in, and Rowan gathered her in his arms as she buried her face in his neck. His calloused hands caressed her back, over each and every scar and the tattoos he’d inked on her.

“If we survive this war,” she murmured after a while onto his bare chest, “you and I are going to have to learn how to relax. To sleep through the night.”

“If we survive this war, Princess,” he said, running a finger down the groove of her spine, “I’ll be happy to do anything you want. Even learn how to relax.”

“And if we never have a moment’s peace, even after we get the Lock, the keys, and send Erawan back to his hellhole realm?”

The amusement faded, replaced by something more intent as his fingers stilled on her back. “Even if we have threats of war every other day, even if we have to host fussy emissaries, even if we have to visit god-awful kingdoms and play nice, I’ll be happy to do it, if you’re at my side.”

Her lips trembled. “Och, you. Since when did you learn to make such pretty speeches?”

“I just needed the right excuse to learn,” he said, kissing her cheek.

Her body went taut and molten in all the right places as his mouth moved

lower, pressing gentle, biting kisses to her jaw, her ear, her neck. She dug her fingers into his back, baring her throat as his canines scratched lightly.

“I love you,” Rowan breathed onto her skin, and flicked his tongue over the spot where his canines had scratched. “I’d walk into the burning heart of hell itself to find you.”

He almost had mere minutes ago, she wanted to say. But Aelin only arched her back a bit more, a small, needy noise coming out of her. This—*him* ... Would it ever stop—the wanting? The need to not only be near him, but to have him so deep in her she felt their souls twining, their magic dancing ... The tether that had led her out of that burning core of madness and destruction.

“Please,” she breathed, nails digging into his lower back in emphasis.

Rowan’s low groan was his only answer as he hoisted her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, letting him carry her not to the bed, but to the wall, and the sensation of the cool wood against her back, compared to the heat and hardness of him pushing into her front—

Aelin panted through her gritted teeth as he again dragged his tongue over that spot on her neck. “*Please.*”

She felt his smile against her skin as Rowan thrust into her in a long, powerful stroke—and bit down on her neck.

A claiming, mighty and true, that she understood he so desperately needed. That *she* needed, and with his teeth in her, his body in her ... She was going to combust, she was going to splinter apart from the overwhelming *need*—

Rowan’s hips began to move, setting a lazy, smooth pace as he kept his canines buried in her neck. As his tongue slid along the twin points of pleasure edged with finest pain, and he tasted her very essence as if it were wine.

He laughed, low and wicked, as release had her biting down on his shoulder to keep from screaming loud enough to wake the creatures sleeping on the bottom of the sea.

When Rowan finally drew his mouth away from her neck, his magic healing the small holes he’d left, his hands tightened on her thighs, pinning her to the wall as he moved deeper, harder.

Aelin only dragged her fingers through his hair as she gave him a savage kiss, and tasted her own blood on his tongue.

She whispered onto his mouth, “I’ll always find a way back to you.”

This time, when Aelin went over the edge, Rowan plummeted with her.



Manon Blackbeak awoke.

There had been no sound, no smell, no hint of *why* she'd awoken, but those predatory instincts had sensed something amiss and sent her tumbling from sleep.

She blinked as she sat up, her wound now a dull ache—and found her head clear of whatever that haze had been.

The room was near-black, save for the moonlight that trickled through the porthole to illuminate her cramped cabin. How long had she been lost to sleep and hideous melancholy?

She listened carefully to the creaking of the ship. A faint grumbling sounded from above—Abraxos. Still alive. Still—sleeping, if she knew that drowsy, wheezing grumble.

She tested the manacles on her wrists, lifting them to peer at the lock. A clever sort of contraption, the chains thick and anchored soundly into the wall. Her ankles were no better.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in chains. How had Elide endured it for a decade?

Maybe she'd find the girl once she got out of here. She doubted the Havilliard king had any news of the Thirteen anyway. She'd sneak onto Abraxos's back, fly for the coast, and find Elide before tracking down her coven. And then ... she didn't know what she'd do. But it was better than lying here like a worm in the sun, letting whatever despair had seized control these days or weeks wreak havoc on her.

But as if she'd summoned him, the door opened.

Dorian stood there, a candle in his—

Not a candle. Pure flame wreathed his fingers. It set his sapphire eyes glowing bright as he found her lucid. "Was it you—who sent that ripple of power?"

"No." Though it didn't take much guessing to suspect who it'd been, then. "Witches don't have magic like that."

He angled his head, his blue-black hair stained gold by his flames. "But you're long-lived."

She nodded, and he took that as an invitation to slide into his usual chair. "It's called the Yielding," she said, a chill brushing down her spine. "The bit of magic we have. We usually cannot summon or wield, but for one moment in a witch's life, she can summon great power to unleash upon her enemies. The cost is that she is incinerated in the blast, her body yielded to the Darkness. In the

witch wars, witches on both sides made Yieldings during every battle and skirmish.”

“It’s suicide—to blow yourself into smithereens ... and take enemies with you.”

“It is, and it’s not pretty. As the Ironteeth witch yields life to the Darkness, its power fills her, and unleashes from her in an ebony wave. A manifestation of what lies in our souls.”

“Have you seen it done?”

“Once. By a scared young witch who knew she wouldn’t win glory any other way. Only, she took out half our Ironteeth force as well as the Crochans.”

Her mind snagged on the word. *Crochans*. Her people—

Not her people. She was a gods-damned Blackbeak—

“Will the Ironteeth use it on us?”

“If you’re facing lower-level covens, yes. Older covens are too arrogant, too skilled to choose the Yielding instead of fighting their way out. But younger, weaker covens get spooked, or wish to win valor through sacrifice.”

“It’s murder.”

“It’s war. War is sanctioned murder, no matter what side you’re on.” Ire flickered on his face, and she asked, “Have you ever killed a man?”

He opened his mouth to say no, but the light in his hand died.

He had. When he’d been collared, she guessed. The Valg inside him had done it. Multiple times. And not cleanly.

“Remember what they made you do,” Manon said, “when you face them again.”

“I doubt I’ll ever forget it, witchling.” He stood, heading for the door.

Manon said, “These chains are rubbing my skin raw. Surely you’ve some sympathy for chained things.” Dorian paused. She lifted her hands, displaying the chains. “I’ll give my word not to do any harm.”

“It’s not my call. Now that you’re talking again, maybe telling Aelin what she’s been pushing you about will get you on her good side.”

Manon had no idea what the queen had been demanding of her. None. “The longer I stay in here, *princeling*, the more likely I am to do something stupid when you release me. Let me at least feel the wind on my face.”

“You’ve got a window. Go stand in front of it.”

Part of her sat up straight at the harshness, the *maleness* in that tone, in the set of those broad shoulders. She purred, “If I had been asleep, would you have lingered to stare at me for a while?”

Icy amusement gleamed there. “Would you have objected?”

And perhaps she was reckless and wild and still a bit stupid from blood loss, but she said, “If you plan to sneak in here in the darkest hours of the night, you should at least have the decency to ensure I get something out of it.”

His lips twitched, though the smile was cold and sensuous in a way that made her wonder what playing with a king blessed with raw magic might be like. If he’d make her beg for the first time in her long life. He looked capable of it—perhaps willing to let a little cruelty into the bedroom. Her blood thrummed. “As tempting as seeing you naked and chained might be ...” A soft lover’s laugh. “I don’t think you’d enjoy the loss of control.”

“And you’ve been with so many women to be able to judge a witch’s wants so easily?”

That smile turned lazy. “A gentleman never tells.”

“How many?” He was only twenty—though he was a prince, now a king. Women had likely been falling over themselves for him since his voice had deepened.

“How many men have *you* been with?” he countered.

She smirked. “Enough to know how to handle the needs of mortal princelings. To know what will make you beg.” Never mind that she was contemplating the opposite.

He drifted across the room, past the range of her chains, right into her own breathing space. He leaned over her, nearly nose-to-nose, nothing at all amused in his face, in the cut of his cruel, beautiful mouth, as he said, “I don’t think you can handle the sort of things I need, witchling. And I am never begging for anything again in my life.”

And then he left. Manon stared after him, a hiss of rage slipping from her own lips. At the opportunity she hadn’t taken to grab him, hold him hostage, and demand her freedom; at the arrogance in his assumption; at the heat that had gathered in her core and now throbbed insistently enough that she clamped her legs together.

She had never been denied. Men had fallen to pieces, sometimes literally, to crawl into her bed. And she ... She didn’t know what she would have done if he had taken up her offer, if she would have decided to learn what the king could do, exactly, with that beautiful mouth and toned body. A distraction—and an excuse to loathe herself even more, she supposed.

She was still seething at the door when it opened again.

Dorian leaned against the aged wood, his eyes still glazed in a way she

couldn't tell was lust or hatred or both. He slid the lock shut without looking at it.

Her heartbeat picked up, her entire immortal focus narrowed to his steady, unhurried breathing, the unreadable face.

His voice was rough as he said, "I won't waste my breath telling you how stupid it would be to try to take me hostage."

"I won't waste mine telling you to take only what I offer you and nothing more."

Her ears strained to listen, but even his damned heart was a solid beat. Not a whiff of fear. He said, "I need to hear you say yes." His eyes flicked to the chains.

It took her a moment to comprehend, but she let out a low laugh. "So considerate, princeling. But yes. I do this of my own free will. It can be our little secret."

She was nothing and no one now anyway. Sharing a bed with her enemy was nothing compared to the Crochan blood that flowed in her veins.

She began to unbutton the white shirt she'd been wearing for gods knew how long, but he growled, "I'll do it myself."

Like hell he would. She touched the second button.

Invisible hands wrapped around her wrists, tightly enough that she dropped the shirt.

Dorian prowled to her. "I said that I'd do it." Manon took in each inch of him as he towered over her, and a shiver of pleasure rippled through her. "I suggest you listen."

The pure male *arrogance* in that statement alone—

"You're courting death if you—"

Dorian lowered his mouth to hers.

It was a featherlight graze, barely a whisper of touch. Intent, calculated, and so unexpected she arched into it a bit.

He kissed the corner of her mouth with the same silken gentleness. Then the other corner. She didn't move, didn't even breathe—like every part of her body was waiting to see what he'd do next.

But Dorian pulled back, studying her eyes with a cool detachment. Whatever he beheld there made him step away.

The invisible fingers on her wrists vanished. The door unlatched. And that cocky grin returned as Dorian shrugged with one shoulder and said, "Maybe another night, witchling."

Manon almost bellowed as he slipped out the door—and didn't return.

The witch was lucid but pissed off.

Aedion had the pleasure of serving her breakfast and tried not to note the lingering scent of female arousal in the cabin, or that Dorian's scent was entwined among it.

The king was entitled to move on, Aedion reminded himself hours later as he scanned the late afternoon horizon from the ship's helm. In the quiet hours of his watches, he'd often mulled over the thorough scolding Lysandra had given him regarding his anger and cruelty toward the king. And maybe—just maybe—Lysandra was right. And maybe the fact that Dorian could even look at a female with interest after seeing Sorscha beheaded was a miracle. But ... the witch? *That* was what he wanted to tangle with?

He asked Lysandra as much when she joined him thirty minutes later, still soaked from patrolling the waters ahead. All clear.

Lysandra finger-combed her inky sheet of hair, frowning. "I had clients who lost their wives or lovers, and wanted something to distract them. Wanted the opposite of who their beloved had been, perhaps to make the act feel wholly separate. What he went through would change anyone. He might very well find himself now attracted to dangerous things."

"He already had a penchant for them," Aedion murmured, glancing to where Aelin and Rowan sparred on the main deck, sweat gleaming golden as the afternoon light shifted toward evening. Dorian perched on the nearby steps up to the quarterdeck, Damaris braced over his knees, half awake in the heat. Part of Aedion smiled, knowing Rowan would no doubt kick his ass for it.

"Aelin was dangerous, but still human," Lysandra observed. "Manon is ... not. He probably likes it that way. And I'd stay out of it if I were you."

"I'm not getting in the middle of that disaster, don't worry. Though I wouldn't let those iron teeth near my favorite part if I were him." Aedion grinned as Lysandra tipped her head back and laughed. He added, "Besides, watching Aelin and the witch go head-to-head this morning about Elide was enough to remind me to stay the hell back and enjoy the spectacle."

Little Elide Lochan—alive and out there, searching for them. Gods above. The look on Aelin’s face when Manon had revealed detail after detail, what Vernon had tried to do to the girl ...

There would be a reckoning in Perranth for that. Aedion himself would hang the lord by his intestines. While Vernon was still breathing. And then he’d get started on paying Vernon back for the ten years of horror Elide had endured. For the maimed foot and the chains. For the tower.

Locked in a tower—in a city he’d visited so many times in the past ten years he had no count. She might have even watched the Bane from that spire as they came and left the city. Possibly thinking he’d forgotten or didn’t care about her, either.

And now she was out there. Alone.

With a permanently mangled foot, no training, and no weapons. If she was lucky, perhaps she’d run into the Bane first. His commanders would recognize her name, protect her. That is, if she dared to reveal herself at all.

It had taken all his self-control not to strangle Manon for abandoning the girl in the middle of Oakwald, for not flying her right to Terrasen.

Aelin, however, hadn’t bothered with restraint.

Two strikes, both so fast even the Wing Leader didn’t see them.

A backhanded blow to Manon’s face. For leaving Elide.

And then a ring of fire around Manon’s throat, slamming her into the wood, as Aelin made her swear the information was correct.

Rowan had drily reminded Aelin that Manon was responsible for Elide’s escape and rescue, too. Aelin had merely said if Manon hadn’t been, the fire would already be down her throat.

And that was that.

Aelin, from the fervor with which she sparred with Rowan across the deck, was still pissed.

The witch, from the snarling and scent in her cabin, was still pissed.

Aedion was more than ready to get to the Stone Marshes—even if what awaited them there might not be so pleasant.

Three more days lay between them and the eastern coast. And then ... then they’d all see how much Rolfe’s alliance was worth, if the man could be trusted.

“You can’t avoid him forever, you know,” Lysandra said, drawing his attention to the *other* reason he needed to get off this ship.

His father sat near where Abraxos had curled along the prow, guarding and observing the wyvern. Learning how to kill them—where to strike.

No matter that the wyvern was little more than an oversized hound, docile enough that they hadn't bothered to chain him. They had none big enough anyway, and the beast would likely refuse to leave this ship until Manon did. Abraxos only moved to hunt for fish or larger game, Lysandra escorting him in sea dragon form beneath the waves. And when the beast was sprawled on the deck ... the Lion kept him company.

Aedion had barely spoken to Gavriel since Skull's Bay.

"I'm not avoiding him," Aedion said. "I just have no interest in talking to him."

Lysandra flipped her wet hair over a shoulder, frowning at the damp splotches on her white shirt. "I, for one, would like to hear the story of how he crossed paths with your mother. He's kind—for one of Maeve's cadre. Better than Fenrys."

Indeed, Fenrys made Aedion want to shatter things. That laughing face, the swaggering, dark arrogance ... It was another mirror, he realized. But one who tracked Aelin everywhere like some dog. Or wolf, he supposed.

Aedion hadn't pitted himself against the male in the sparring ring, but he'd carefully watched Fenrys take on Rowan and Gavriel, both of whom had trained the male. Fenrys fought as he'd expect a warrior with centuries of training by two lethal killers to fight. But he had not glimpsed another whisper of the magic that allowed Fenrys to leap between places as if walking through some invisible doorway.

As if his thoughts summoned the immortal warrior, Fenrys swaggered out from the shadows below deck and smirked at them all before taking up his sentry position near the foremast. They were all on a schedule of watches and patrols, Lysandra and Rowan usually tasked with flying far out of sight to survey behind and ahead or communicate with the two escort ships. Aedion hadn't dared tell the shifter that he often counted the minutes until she returned, that his chest always felt unbearably tight until he spotted whatever winged or finned form she wore returning to them.

Like his cousin, he had no doubt the shifter wouldn't take well to his *fussing*.

Lysandra was carefully watching Aelin and Rowan, their blades like quicksilver, as they met each other blow for blow. "You've been doing well with your lessons," Aedion told the shifter.

Lysandra's green eyes crinkled. They'd all been taking turns walking the shifter through handling various weapons and hand-to-hand combat. Lysandra knew some from her time with Arobynn—he'd taught her as a way of ensuring

the survival of his *investment*, she'd told him.

But she wanted to know more. How to kill men in a myriad of ways. It shouldn't have thrilled him as much as it had. Not when she'd laughed off the claim Aedion had made on the beach that day in Skull's Bay. She hadn't mentioned it again. He hadn't been stupid enough to, either.

Aedion trailed Lysandra, unable to help it, as she drifted toward where the queen and prince sparred, Dorian scooting over on the steps to silently offer her a space. Aedion marked the gesture and the king's respect, shoving aside his own warring feelings about it as he lingered above them, and focused on his cousin and Rowan.

But they'd worked themselves into an impasse—enough so that Rowan called it off and sheathed his sword. Then flicked Aelin's nose when she looked pissy at not winning. Aedion laughed under his breath, glancing to the shifter as the queen and prince strode for the water jug and glasses against the stair railing and helped themselves.

He was about to offer Lysandra a final round in the ring before the sun set when Dorian braced his arms on his knees and said to Aelin through the stair railing, "I don't think she'll do anything if we let her out."

Aelin took a dainty sip of her water, still breathing hard. "Did you arrive at that conclusion before, during, or after you visited her in the middle of the night?"

Oh, gods. It was going to be that sort of conversation.

Dorian gave a half smile. "You have a preference for immortal warriors. Why can't I?"

It was the faint click of her glass on the small table that made Aedion brace himself—really start calculating the layout of the various decks. Fenrys still monitored them from the foremast, Lysandra remained on Dorian's other side. He supposed that, standing above Dorian on the stairs and Aelin beside them, he'd be right in the middle.

Exactly where he'd sworn not to be.

Rowan, on the other side of Aelin, said to Dorian, "Is there a reason, Majesty, that you believe the witch should be free?"

Aelin shot him a look of pure flame. Good—let the prince deal with her wrath. Even days after the claiming that had left everyone pretending they didn't notice the two puncture wounds on Rowan's neck or the delicate, vicious scratches over his shoulders, the Fae Prince still looked like a male who had barely survived a storm and had enjoyed every wild second of it.

Not to mention the twin wounds on Aelin's neck this morning. He'd almost begged her to find a scarf.

"Why don't we lock one of you in a room"—Dorian pointed with his chin at the Fae warriors across the deck, at Lysandra to his right—"and see how well you fare after so much time."

Aelin said, "Every inch of her has been designed to ensnare men. To make them think she's harmless."

"Trust me, Manon Blackbeak is anything but harmless."

Aelin charged on, "She and her kind are killers. They are raised without conscience. Regardless of what her grandmother did to her, she will always be that way. I will not endanger the lives of the people on this ship so you can sleep better at night." Her eyes shone with the unspoken jab.

They all shifted, and Aedion was about to ask Lysandra to spar, conversation closed, when Dorian said a bit too quietly, "I am king, you know."

Turquoise-and-gold eyes snapped to Dorian. Aedion could almost see the words Aelin fought to think through, her temper begging her to shut down the challenge. With a few choice sentences, she could fillet his spirit like a fish, further shredding the scraps of the man who remained after the Valg prince had violated him. And in doing so, lose a strong ally she'd need not just in this war, but if they survived it. And—those eyes softened a bit. A friend. She'd lose that, too.

Aelin rubbed at the scars on her wrists, stark in the golden light of the setting sun. Ones that made Aedion sick to look at. She said to Dorian after a moment, "Controlled movements. If she leaves the room, she stays under guard—one of the Fae at any given time, plus one of us. Shackles on her wrists, not feet. No chains for the room, but a guard outside the door."

Aedion caught the thumb Rowan brushed over one of those scars on her wrist.

Dorian just said, "Fine."

Aedion debated telling the king that a compromise from Aelin should be outright celebrated.

Aelin's voice dropped to that lethal purr. "After you finished flirting with her that day in Oakwald, she and her coven tried to kill me."

"You provoked her," Dorian countered. "And I sit here today because of what she risked when she came to Rifthold *twice*."

Aelin wiped the sweat from her brow. "She has her own reasons, and I highly doubt it was because she, in her one hundred years of killing, decided your pretty

face would turn her good.”

“Yours turned Rowan from three centuries of a blood oath.”

It was Aedion’s father who said calmly as he left his perch near Abraxos on the prow to approach them, “I’d suggest, Majesty, that you pick another argument.”

Indeed, Aedion’s every instinct came to attention at the frozen anger now limning the prince’s every muscle.

Dorian noticed it, too, and said, perhaps a bit guiltily, “I meant no offense, Rowan.”

Gavriel angled his head, golden hair sliding over his broad shoulder, and said with a ghost of a smile, “Don’t worry, Majesty. Fenrys has given Whitethorn enough shit for it to last him another three centuries.”

Aedion blinked at the humor, the hint of a smile.

But Aelin saved him the effort of deciding whether or not to answer that smile by saying to Dorian, “Well? Let’s see if the Wing Leader would like to take a turn about the deck before dinner.”

Dorian was right to look wary, Aedion decided. But Aelin was already heading for the opposite side of the deck, Fenrys peeling off from his post by the foremast, that edged, bitter gaze sliding over them all while they passed.

But Fenrys would follow, no doubt. Like hell would they unleash the witch without all of them there. Even the cadre seemed to understand that.

So Aedion trailed after his queen into the dimness of the ship, night setting in above them, and prayed Aelin and Manon weren’t about to rip the boat to shreds.



Climbing into bed with a witch. Aelin ground her teeth as she headed for Manon’s room.

Dorian had once been notorious when it came to women, but *this* ... Aelin snorted, wishing Chaol were present, if only to see the look on *his* face.

Even if it eased something tight in her chest to know Chaol and Faliq were in the South. Perhaps raising an army to cross the Narrow Sea and march northward. If they were all lucky.

If. Aelin hated that word. But ... her friendship with Dorian was precarious enough. She’d yielded to his request partially out of some scrap of kindness, but mostly because she knew there was more Manon had to tell them about Morath. About Erawan. Lots more.

And she doubted the witch would be forthcoming—especially when Aelin had lost her temper just a *little* bit this morning. And maybe it made her a conniving, hideous person for using Dorian’s interest as a veil to butter up the witch, but ... it was war.

Aelin flexed her hand as she neared the witch’s room, the lights swaying in the rougher waves they’d encountered since midday.

Rowan had healed the bruise on the back of her knuckles from the blow she’d dealt the witch—and she’d thanked him by locking the door to their room and getting on her knees before him. She could still feel his fingers fisted in her hair, still hear his groan—

Rowan, now a step beside her, whipped his head in her direction. *What the hell are you thinking about?*

But his pupils had flared enough that she was well aware he knew precisely where her mind had gone as they walked down to the witch’s cabin. That Fenrys hung far back down the hall told her enough about the change in her scent.

The usual things, she shot back at Rowan with a simpering smile. *Killing, crocheting, how to make you emit those noises again—*

Rowan’s face took on a pained expression that had her grinning. Especially as his throat bobbed while he swallowed—hard. *Round two*, he seemed to say. *As soon as this is dealt with. We’re having round two. This time, I get to see what noises you make.*

Aelin nearly walked into the doorpost of Manon’s open cabin. Rowan’s low laugh made her focus, made her stop smiling like a lust-addled, lovesick idiot—

Manon was sitting upright in bed, golden eyes darting between Rowan and Dorian and her.

Fenrys slid in behind them, his attention going right to the witch. No doubt stunned by the beauty, the grace, the *blah-blah-blah* perfectness of her.

Manon said, low and flat, “Who is this?”

Dorian lifted a brow, following her gaze. “You’ve met him before. He’s Fenrys—sworn warrior of Queen Maeve.”

It was the narrowing of Manon’s eyes that had some instinct pricking. The flare of the witch’s nostrils as she scented the male, his smell barely detectable in the cramped cabin—

“No, he’s not,” Manon said.

The witch’s iron nails flashed out a heartbeat before Fenrys struck.

It was still instinct to go for a knife before Aelin went for her magic.

And as Fenrys leaped for Manon with a snarl, it was Rowan's power that sent him slamming through the room.

Before the male had finished sliding across the floor, Aelin had a wall of flame up between them. "What the *hell*," she spat.

On his knees, Fenrys clawed at his throat—at the air Rowan was choking off.

The cabin was too small for them all to fit without getting too close. Ice danced at Dorian's fingertips as he slid beside Manon, still chained by the bed.

"What did you mean, that's not Fenrys?" Aelin said to the witch without taking her eyes off him. Rowan let out a grunt behind her.

And Aelin watched with a mix of horror and fascination as Fenrys's chest expanded in a mighty breath. As he got to his feet and surveyed that wall of flame.

As if Rowan's magic had worn off.

And as Fenrys's skin seemed to glow and melt away, as a creature as pale as fresh snow emerged from the vanishing illusion, Aelin gave Aedion a subtle look over her shoulder.

Her cousin instantly moved, keys to Manon's chains appearing from his pocket.

But Manon didn't move as the thing took form, all the spindly limbs, its wings tucked in tight; the hideous warped face sniffing them—

Manon's chains clanked free.

Aelin said to the thing beyond her wall of flame, "What are you?"

Manon answered for it. "Erawan's Bloodhound."

The thing smiled, revealing rotted black stumps of teeth. "At your service," it said. *She* said, Aelin realized as she noted the small, shriveled breasts on its narrow chest. "So your guts stayed in," it purred to Manon.

"Where is Fenrys?" Aelin demanded.

The Bloodhound's smile didn't falter. "On patrol of the ship, on another level, I assume. Unaware, just as you were unaware, that one of your own wasn't

truly with you while I—”

“Ugh, another talker,” Aelin said, flipping her braid over a shoulder. “Let me guess: you killed a sailor, took his place, learned what you needed to about how to get Manon off this ship and our patrols, and ... what? You planned to carry her off into the night?” Aelin frowned at the thing’s thin body. “You look like you could barely lift a fork—and haven’t in months.”

The Bloodhound blinked at her—then hissed.

Manon let out a low laugh.

Aelin said, “Honestly? You could have just snuck in here and saved yourself a thousand stupid steps—”

“*Shifter*,” the thing hissed, hungrily enough that Aelin’s words stumbled.

Its enormous eyes had gone right to Lysandra, snarling softly in the corner in ghost leopard form.

“*Shifter*,” it hissed again, that longing twisting its features.

And Aelin had a feeling she knew what this thing had begun as. What Erawan had trapped and mutilated in the mountains around Morath.

“As I was saying,” Aelin drawled as best she could, “you really brought this upon yourself—”

“I came for the Blackbeak heir,” the Bloodhound panted. “But look at you all: a trove worth your weight in gold.”

Its eyes went murky, as if it were no longer here, as if it had drifted into another room—

Shit.

Aelin attacked with her flame.

The Bloodhound screamed—

And Aelin’s flame melted away into steam.

Rowan was instantly there, shoving her back, sword out. Her magic—

“You should have given me the witch,” the Bloodhound laughed, and ripped the porthole clean out of the side of the ship. “Now he knows who you travel with, what ship you sail ...”

The creature lunged for the hole it had hewn in the side of the ship, spindrift misting in.

A black-tipped arrow slammed into its knee, then another one.

The Bloodhound went down an inch from freedom.

Snarling as he stepped into the room, Fenrys fired another, pinning its shoulder into the wood planks.

Apparently, he didn’t take well to being impersonated. He gave Rowan a

seething look that said as much. And that demanded how they all hadn't noticed the difference.

But the Bloodhound wrenched herself up, black blood spraying the room, filling it with her reek. Aelin had a dagger angled, ready to fly; Manon was about to pounce; Rowan's hatchet was cocked—

The Bloodhound chucked a strap of black leather into the center of the room. Manon stopped dead.

"Your Second screamed when Erawan broke her," the Bloodhound said. "His Dark Majesty sends this to remember her by."

Aelin didn't dare take her eyes off the creature. But she could have sworn Manon swayed.

And then the Bloodhound said to the witch, "A gift from a King of the Valg ... to the last living Crochan Queen."



Manon stared and stared at that braided leather band—the one Asterin had worn every day, even when battle did not demand it—and did not care what the Bloodhound had declared to the others. Did not care if she was heir to the Blackbeak Witch-Clan or Queen of the Crochans. Did not care if—

Manon did not finish the thought over the roar that silenced everything in her head.

The roar that came out of her mouth as she launched herself at the Bloodhound.

The arrows through the beast scratched at Manon as she tackled that dewy, bony body into the wood. Claws and teeth slashed for her face, but Manon got her hands around that neck, and iron tore through damp skin.

Then those claws were pinned in the wood beneath phantom hands as Dorian sauntered over, face so unyieldingly unmoved. The Bloodhound thrashed, those claws trying to wrench free—

The creature screamed as those invisible hands crunched down on bone.

Then through it.

Manon gaped at the severed hands a moment before the Bloodhound screamed, so loud her own ears rang. But Dorian crooned, "Be done with it."

Manon lifted her other hand, wanting iron to shred her and not steel.

The others watched behind them, weapons ready.

But the Bloodhound panted, "Don't you want to know what your Second

said before she died? What she *begged* for?”

Manon hesitated.

“What a horrible brand on her stomach—*unclean*. Did you do that yourself, Blackbeak?”

No. No, no, no—

“A baby; she said she’d birthed a stillborn witchling.”

Manon froze entirely.

And didn’t particularly care as the Bloodhound lunged for her throat, teeth bared.

It was not flame or wind that snapped the Bloodhound’s neck.

But invisible hands.

The crunch echoed through the room, and Manon whirled on Dorian Havilliard. His sapphire eyes were utterly merciless. Manon snarled. “How *dare* you take my kill—”

Men on the deck began screaming, and Abraxos roared.

Abraxos.

Manon turned on her heel and sprinted through the wall of warriors, careening down the hall, up the stairs—

Her iron nails tore chunks out of the slippery wood as she hauled herself up, stomach aching. Muggy night air hit her, then the sea’s scent, then—

There were six of them.

Their skin was not bone white like the Bloodhound’s, but rather a mottled darkness—bred for shadows and stealth. Winged, all with humanoid faces and bodies—

Ilken, one of them hissed as it disemboweled a man in one swipe of its claws. *We are the ilken, and we have come to feast*. Indeed, pirates were dead on the deck, blood a coppery tang that filled her senses as she raced for where Abraxos’s roar had sounded.

But he was airborne, flapping high, tail swinging.

The shape-shifter in wyvern form at his side.

Taking on three of the smaller figures, so much more nimble as they—

Flame blasted into the night, along with wind, and ice.

One ilken melted. The second had its wings snapped. And the third—the third froze into a solid block and shattered upon the deck.

Eight more ilken landed, one ripping into a screaming sailor’s neck on the foredeck—

Manon’s iron teeth snapped down. Flame blasted again, spearing for the

approaching terrors.

Only for them to sail through it.

The ship became a melee as wings and talons tore into delicate human hides, as the immortal warriors unleashed themselves upon the ilken that landed on the deck.



Aedion hurtled after Aelin the moment the wyvern roared.

He got as far as the main deck before those *things* attacked.

Before Aelin's flame ruptured from the deck ahead, and he realized his cousin could look after herself because *shit*, the Valg king had been busy. *Ilken*, they'd called themselves.

There were two of them now before him on the quarterdeck, where he'd run to spare the first mate and captain from having their organs ripped out of their bellies. Both beasts were nearly eight feet and born of nightmares, but in their eyes ... those were human eyes. And their scents ... like rotted meat, but ... human. Partially.

They stood between him and the stairs back to the main deck. "What a bounty this hunt has yielded," one said.

Aedion didn't dare take his attention off them, though he vaguely heard Aelin ordering Rowan to go help the other ships. Vaguely heard a wolf and a lion's snarl, and felt the kiss of cold as ice slammed into the world.

Aedion gripped his sword, flipping it once, twice. Had the Pirate Lord sold them out to Morath? The way that Bloodhound had looked at Lysandra—

His rage became a song in his blood.

They sized him up, and Aedion flipped his sword again. Two against one—he might stand a chance.

That was when the third lunged from the shadows behind him.



Aelin killed one with Goldryn. Beheading.

The other two ... They hadn't been too pleased by it, if their incessant shrieking in the moments following was any indication.

A lion's roar cleaved the night, and Aelin prayed Gavriel was with Aedion somewhere—

The two in front of her, blocking the way belowdecks, finally stopped their

hissy fits long enough to ask, “Where are your flames now?”

Aelin opened her mouth. But then Fenrys leaped out of a patch of night as if he’d simply run through a doorway, and slammed into the one nearest. He had a score to settle, it seemed.

Fenrys’s jaws went around the ilken’s throat, and the other whirled, claws out.

She was not fast enough to stop it as two sets of claws slashed through the white coat, through the shield he kept on himself, and Fenrys’s cry of pain barked across the water.

Twin swords of flame plunged through two ilken necks.

Heads rolled onto the blood-slick deck.

Fenrys staggered back, making it all of a step before he crashed to the planks. Aelin surged for him, swearing.

Blood and bone and greenish slime—poison. Like those on the wyverns’ tails.

Like blowing out a thousand candles, she pushed aside her flame, rallied that healing water. Fenrys shifted back into a male, his teeth clenched, swearing low and vicious, a hand against his torn ribs. “*Don’t move,*” she told him.

She’d immediately sent Rowan to the other ships, and he’d tried to argue, but ... had obeyed. She had no idea where the Wing Leader was—the *Crochan Queen*. Holy gods.

Aelin readied her magic, trying to calm her raging heart—

“The others,” panted Aedion, limping for them, coated in black blood, “are fine.” She almost sobbed in relief—until she noticed the way her cousin’s eyes shone, and that ... that Gavriel, bloodied and limping worse than Aedion, was a step behind his son. What the hell had happened?

Fenrys groaned, and she focused on his wounds, that poison slithering into his blood. She opened her mouth to tell Fenrys to lower his hand when wings flapped.

Not the kind she loved.

Aedion was instantly before them, sword out, grimacing in pain—but one of the ilken lifted a claw-tipped hand. *Parley*.

Her cousin halted. But Gavriel shifted imperceptibly closer to the ilken as it sniffed at Fenrys and smiled.

“Don’t bother,” the thing told Aelin, laughing quietly. “He won’t have much longer to live.”

Aedion snarled, palming his fighting knives. Aelin rallied her flame. Only

the hottest of her fire could kill them—anything less and they remained unscathed. She'd think about the long-term implications of it later.

“I was sent to deliver a message,” the ilken said, smiling over a shoulder toward the horizon. “Thank you for confirming in Skull's Bay that you carry what His Dark Majesty seeks.”

Aelin's stomach dropped to her feet.

The key. Erawan knew she had the Wyrdkey.

Rowan hauled ass back to their ship, his magic near-flinging him through the air.

The other two ships had been left undisturbed—they'd even had the nerve to demand what the hell all the shouting was about.

Rowan hadn't bothered to explain other than an enemy attack and to drop anchor until it was over before he'd left. He'd returned to carnage.

Returned with his heart beating so wildly he thought he'd vomit with relief as he swept in for the landing and beheld Aelin kneeling on the deck. Until he saw Fenrys bleeding beneath her hands.

Until that last ilken landed before them.

His rage honed itself into a lethal spear, his magic rallying as he dove through the sky, aiming for the deck. Concentrated bursts, he'd discovered, could get through whatever repellant had been bred into them.

He'd rip the thing's head right off.

But then the ilken laughed right as Rowan landed and shifted, looking over its thin shoulder. "Morath looks forward to welcoming you," the creature smirked, and launched skyward before Rowan could lunge for it.

But Aelin wasn't moving. Gavriel and Aedion, bloodied and limping, were barely moving. Fenrys, his chest a bloody mess with greenish slime—*poison* ...

Power glowed at Aelin's hands as she knelt over Fenrys, concentrating on that bit of water she'd been given, a drop of water in a sea of fire ...

Rowan opened his mouth to offer to help when Lysandra panted from the shadows, "Is anyone going to deal with that thing, or should I?"

Indeed, the ilken was flapping for the distant coast, barely more than a bit of blackness against the darkened sky, hurtling for the coast, no doubt to fly right to Morath to report.

Rowan snatched up Fenrys's fallen bow and quiver of black-tipped arrows.

None of them stopped him as he strode to the railing, blood splashing beneath his boots.

The only sounds were the tapping waves, the whimpering of the injured, and the groan of the mighty bow as he nocked an arrow and drew back the string.

Farther and farther. His arms strained, but he honed in on that dark speck flapping away.

“A gold coin says he misses,” Fenrys rasped.

“Save your breath for healing,” Aelin snapped.

“Make it two,” Aedion said behind him. “I say he hits.”

“You can all go to hell,” Aelin snarled. But then added, “Make it five. Ten says he downs it with the first shot.”

“Deal,” Fenrys groaned, his voice thick with pain.

Rowan gritted his teeth. “Remind me why I bother with any of you.”

Then he fired.

The arrow was nearly invisible as it sailed through the night.

And with his Fae sight, Rowan saw with perfect clarity as that arrow found its mark.

Right through the thing’s head.

Aelin laughed quietly as it hit the water, its splash visible even from the distance.

Rowan turned and scowled down at her. Light shimmered at her fingertips as she held them over Fenrys’s ravaged chest. But he turned his glare on the male, then on Aedion, and said, “Pay up, pricks.”

Aedion chuckled, but Rowan caught the shadow in Aelin’s eyes as she resumed healing his former sentinel. Understood why she’d made light of it, even with Fenrys injured before her. Because if Erawan now knew their whereabouts ... they had to move. Fast.

And pray Rolfe’s directions to the Lock weren’t wrong.



Aedion was sick of surprises.

Sick of feeling his heart stop dead in his chest.

As it had when Gavriel had leaped to save his ass with the ilken, the Lion tearing into them with a ferocity that had left Aedion standing there like a novice with his first practice sword.

The stupid bastard had injured himself in the process, earning a swipe down his arm and ribs that set the male roaring in pain. The venom coating those claws, mercifully, had been used up on other men.

But it was the tang of his father’s blood that launched Aedion into action—that coppery, mortal scent. Gavriel had only blinked at him as Aedion had

ignored the throbbing pain in his leg, courtesy of a blow moments before right above his knee, and they'd fought back-to-back until those creatures were nothing but twitching heaps of bone and flesh.

He hadn't said a word to the male before sheathing sword and shield across his back and stalking to find Aelin.

She still knelt over Fenrys, offering Rowan nothing more than a pat on his thigh as he stormed past to help with the other wounded. A pat on the thigh—for making a shot that Aedion was fairly certain most of his Bane would have judged to be impossible.

Aedion set down the pail of water she'd asked him to get for Fenrys, trying not to wince as she wiped away the green poison that oozed out. A few feet away, his father was tending to a blubbering pirate—who had barely more than a tear to the thigh.

Fenrys hissed, and Aelin let out a grunt of pain herself. Aedion pushed in. "What?"

Aelin shook her head once, a sharp dismissal. But he watched as she locked eyes with Fenrys—locked and held them in a way that told Aedion whatever she was about to do would hurt. He'd seen that same look pass between healer and soldier a hundred times on killing fields and in the healers' tents afterward.

"Why," Fenrys panted, "didn't"—another pant—"you just melt them?"

"Because I wanted to get some information out of them before you charged in, you bossy Fae bastard." She gritted her teeth again, and Aedion braced a hand on her back as the poison no doubt brushed against her magic. As she tried to wash it out. She leaned a bit into his touch.

"Can heal on my own," Fenrys rasped, noting the strain. "Get to the others."

"Oh, please," she snapped. "You're all insufferable. That thing had *poison* on its claws—"

"The others—"

"Tell me how your magic works—how you can leap between places like that." A clever, easy way to keep him focused elsewhere.

Aedion scanned the deck, making sure he wasn't needed, and then carefully sopped up the blood and poison leaking from Fenrys's chest. It had to hurt like hell. The insistent throbbing in his leg was likely nothing by comparison.

"No one knows where it comes from—what it is," Fenrys said between shallow breaths, fingers curling and uncurling at his sides. "But it lets me slip between folds in the world. Only short distances, and only a few times before I'm drained, but ... it's useful on a killing field." He panted through his clenched

teeth as the outer edges of his gash began to reach for each other. “Aside from that, I’ve got nothing special. Speed, strength, swift healing ... more than the average Fae, but the same stock of gifts. I can shield myself and others, but can’t summon an element.”

Aelin’s hand wavered slightly over his wound. “What’s your shield made of, then?”

Fenrys tried and failed to shrug. But Gavriel muttered from where he worked on the still-whimpering pirate, “Arrogance.”

Aelin snorted, but didn’t dare take her eyes off Fenrys’s injury as she said, “So you do have a sense of humor, Gavriel.”

The Lion of Doranelle gave a wary smile over his shoulder. The rare-sighted, restrained twin to Aedion’s own flashing grins. Aelin had called him *Uncle Kitty-Cat* all of one time before Aedion had snarled viciously enough to make her think carefully before using the term again. Gavriel, to his credit, had merely given Aelin a long-suffering sigh that seemed to be used only when she or Fenrys were around.

“That sense of humor only appears about once every century,” Fenrys rasped, “so you’d better hope you Settle, or else that’s the last time you’ll see it.” Aelin chuckled, though it faded quickly. Something cold and oily slid into Aedion’s gut. “Sorry,” Fenrys added, wincing either at the words or the pain.

Aelin asked before Aedion let his words sink in, “Where did you come from? Lorcan, I know, was a bastard in the slums.”

“Lorcan was a bastard in Maeve’s palace, don’t worry,” Fenrys smirked, his bronze face wan. Aelin’s lips twitched toward a smile. “Connall and I were the sons of nobles who dwell in the southeastern part of Maeve’s lands ...” He hissed.

“Your parents?” Aedion pressed when Aelin herself seemed to be straining for words. He’d seen her heal little cuts, and slowly repair Manon’s wound over days, but ...

“Our mother was a warrior,” Fenrys said, each word labored. “She trained us as such. Our father was, too, but was often away at war. She was tasked with defending our home, our lands. And reporting to Maeve.” Rasping, laboring breaths from both of them. Aedion shifted so that Aelin could lean wholly against him, biting down on the weight it put on his already-swollen knee. “When Con and I were thirty, we were straining at the leash to go to Doranelle with her—to see the city, meet the queen, and do ... what young males like to do with money in their pockets and youth on their sides. Only Maeve took one look

at us and ...” He needed longer to catch his breath this time. “It didn’t go well from there.”

Aedion knew the rest; so did Aelin.

The last of the green slime slid out of Fenrys’s chest. And Aelin breathed, “She knows you hate the oath, doesn’t she?”

“Maeve knows,” Fenrys said. “And I have no doubt she sent me here, hoping I’d be tortured by the temporary freedom.”

Aelin’s hands were shaking, her body shuddering against his own. Aedion slipped an arm around her waist. “I’m sorry you’re bound to her,” was all Aelin managed.

The wounds in Fenrys’s chest began knitting together. Rowan stalked over as if sensing she was fading.

Fenrys’s face was still grayish, still taut, as he glanced up at Rowan and said to Aelin, “This is what we are meant to do—protect, serve, cherish. What Maeve offers is ... a mockery of that.” He surveyed the wounds now healing on his chest, mending so slowly. “But it is what calls to a Fae male’s blood, what guides him. What we’re all looking for, even when we say we’re not.”

Aedion’s father had gone still over the wounded pirate.

Aedion, surprising even himself, said over his shoulder to Gavriel, “And do you find Maeve fulfills that—or are you like Fenrys?”

His father blinked, about all the shock he’d show, and then straightened, the wounded sailor before him now sleeping off the healing. Aedion bore the brunt of his tawny stare, tried to shut out the kernel of hope that shone in the Lion’s eyes. “I come from a noble house as well, the youngest of three brothers. I wouldn’t inherit or rule, so I took to soldiering. It earned Maeve’s eye, and her offer. There was—is no greater honor.”

“That’s not an answer,” Aedion said quietly.

His father rolled his shoulders. Fidgeting. “I only hated it once. Only wanted to leave once.”

He didn’t continue. And Aedion knew what the unspoken words were.

Aelin brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “You loved her that much?”

Aedion tried not to let his gratitude that she’d asked for him show.

Gavriel’s hands were white-knuckled as they folded into fists. “She was a bright star in centuries of darkness. I would have followed that star to the ends of the earth, if she had let me. But she didn’t, and I respected her wishes to stay away. To never seek her out again. I went to another continent and didn’t let myself look back.”

The ship's creaking and the groaning of the injured were the only sounds. Aedion clamped down on the urge to stand and walk away. He'd look like a child—not a general who'd fought his way through knee-deep gore on killing fields.

Aelin said, again because Aedion couldn't bring himself to say the words, "You would have tried to break the blood oath for her? For them?"

"Honor is my code," Gavriel said. "But if Maeve had tried to harm either you or her, Aedion, I would have done everything in my power to get you out."

The words hit Aedion, then flowed through him. He didn't let himself think about it, the truth he'd felt in each word. The way his name had sounded on his father's lips.

His father checked the injured pirate for any lingering injuries, then moved on to another. Those tawny eyes slid to Aedion's knee, swollen beneath his pants. "You need to tend to that, or it'll be too stiff to function in a few hours."

Aedion felt Aelin's attention snap to him, scanning him for injury, but he held his father's gaze and said, "I know how to treat my own injuries." The battlefield healers and the Bane had taught him enough over the years. "Tend to your own wounds." Indeed, the male had blood crusting his shirt. Lucky—so lucky the venom had already been wiped off those claws. Gavriel blinked down at himself, his band of tattoos bobbing as he swallowed, then continued without another word.

Aelin pushed off Aedion at last, trying and failing to get to her feet. Aedion reached for her as the focus went out of her now-dull eyes, but Rowan was already there, smoothly sweeping her up before she kissed the planks. Too fast—she must have drained her reserves too fast, and without any food in her system.

Rowan held his stare, Aelin's hair limp as she rested her head against his chest. The strain—Aedion's guts twisted at it. Morath knew what it was going up against. *Who* it was going up against. Erawan had built his commanders accordingly. Rowan nodded as if in confirmation of Aedion's thoughts, but only said, "Elevate that knee."

Fenrys had slipped into a light sleep before Rowan carried Aelin below.

So Aedion kept his own company for the rest of the night: first on watch, then sitting against the mast on the quarterdeck for a few hours, knee indeed elevated, unwilling to descend into the cramped, dim interior.

Sleep was finally starting to tug at him when wood groaned a few feet behind, and he knew it did so only because she willed it, to keep from startling him.

The ghost leopard sat beside him, tail twitching, and met his eyes for a moment before she laid her enormous head on his thigh.

In silence, they watched the stars flicker over the calm waves, Lysandra nuzzling her head against his hip.

The starlight stained her coat with muted silver, and a smile ghosted Aedion's lips.

They worked through the night, weighing anchor only long enough for the crew to patch up the hole in Manon's room. It would hold for now, the captain told Dorian, but gods help them if they hit another storm before they got to the marshes.

They tended to the wounded for hours, and Dorian was grateful for the little healing magic Rowan had taught him as he pieced flesh back together. Pretending it was a puzzle, or bits of torn cloth, kept his meager dinner from coming back up. But the poison ... He left that to Rowan, Aelin, and Gavriel.

By the time the morning had shifted into a sickly gray, their faces were sallow, dark smudges etched deep beneath their eyes. Fenrys, at least, was limping around, and Aedion had let Aelin tend to his knee only long enough to get him walking again, but ... They'd seen better days.

Dorian's legs were wobbling a bit as he scanned the blood-soaked deck. Someone had dumped the creatures' bodies overboard, along with the worst of the gore, but ... If what the Bloodhound had said was true, they didn't have the luxury of pulling into a harbor to fix the rest of the damage to the ship.

A low, rumbling growl sounded, and Dorian looked across the deck, to the prow.

The witch was still there. Still tending to Abraxos's wounds, as she had been all night. One of the creatures had bit him a few times—thankfully, no poison in their teeth, but ... he'd lost some blood. Manon had not let anyone near him.

Aelin had tried once, and when Manon snarled at her, Aelin had cursed enough to make everyone else halt, saying she'd rutting deserve it if the beast died. Manon had threatened to rip out her spine, Aelin had given her a vulgar gesture, and Lysandra had been forced to monitor the space between them for an hour, perched in the rigging of the mainmast in ghost leopard form, tail swaying in the breeze.

But now ... Manon's white hair was limp, the warm morning wind tugging lazily at the strands as she leaned against Abraxos's side.

Dorian knew he was toeing a dangerous line. The other night, he'd been

ready to slowly strip her naked, to put those chains to good use. And when he'd found her gold eyes devouring him as intently as he wanted to devour other parts of her ...

As if sensing his stare, Manon peered over at him.

Even from across the deck, every inch between them went taut.

Of course, Aedion and Fenrys instantly noted it, pausing where they now washed blood off the deck, and the latter snorted. Both had healed enough to walk, but neither moved to interfere as Manon prowled toward him. If she hadn't fled or attacked yet, they must have decided she wasn't going to bother doing so now.

Manon took up a space at the rail, gazing out at the endless water, the wisps of pink clouds smeared along the horizon. Dark blood stained her shirt, her palms. "Do I have you to thank for this freedom?"

He braced his forearms on the wooden rail. "Maybe."

Gold eyes slid to him. "The magic—what is it?"

"I don't know," Dorian said, studying his hands. "It felt like an extension of me. Like real hands I could command."

For a heartbeat, he thought of how they'd felt pinning her wrists—how her body had reacted, loose and tense where he usually liked it to be, while his mouth had barely caressed hers. Her golden eyes flared as if recalling it as well, and Dorian found himself saying, "I wouldn't harm you."

"You liked killing the Bloodhound, though."

He didn't bother keeping the ice from his eyes. "Yes."

Manon stepped close enough to brush a finger over the pale band around his throat, and he forgot that there was a ship full of people watching. "You could have made her suffer—you went for a clean blow instead. Why?"

"Because even with our enemies, there's a line."

"Then you have your answer."

"I didn't ask a question."

Manon snorted. "You've had that look in your eyes all night—if you're becoming a monster like the rest of us. The next time you kill, remind yourself of that line."

"Where do you stand on that line, witchling?"

She met his gaze, as if willing him to see a century of all that she'd done. "I am not mortal. I do not play by your rules. I have killed and hunted men for sport. Do not mistake me for a human woman, *princeling*."

"I have no interest in human women," he purred. "Too breakable."

Even as he said it, the words struck some deep, aching wound in him.

“The ilken,” he said, pushing past that pain. “Did you know about them?”

“I assume they are a part of whatever is in those mountains.”

A hoarse female voice snapped, “What do you mean, *whatever is in those mountains?*”

Dorian nearly leaped out of his skin. Aelin, it seemed, had been taking some notes from her ghost leopard friend. Even Manon blinked at the blood-drenched queen now behind them.

Manon eyed Aedion and Fenrys as they heard Aelin’s demand and came over, followed by Gavriel. Fenrys’s shirt was still hanging in strips. At least Rowan was now keeping watch from the rigging, and Lysandra was off flying overhead, scouting for danger.

The witch said, “I never saw the ilken. Only heard of them—heard their screaming as they died, then their roaring as they were remade. I didn’t know that’s what they were. Or that Erawan would send them so far from their aerie. My Shadows caught a glimpse of them, just once. Their description matches what attacked last night.”

“Are the ilken mostly scouts or warriors?” Aelin said.

The fresh air seemed to have made Manon amenable to divulging information, because she leaned her back against the railing, facing the cabal of killers around them. “We don’t know. They used the cloud cover to their advantage. My Shadows can find anything that doesn’t want to be found, and yet they could not hunt or track these things.”

Aelin tensed a bit, scowling at the water flowing past them. And then she said nothing, as if the words had vanished and exhaustion—something heavier than that—had set in.

“Snap out of it,” Manon said.

Aedion loosed a warning growl.

Aelin slowly lifted her eyes to the witch, and Dorian braced himself.

“So you miscalculated,” Manon said. “So they tracked you. Don’t get distracted with the minor defeats. This is war. Cities will be lost, people slaughtered. And if I were you, I would be more concerned about *why* they sent so few of the ilken.”

“If you were me,” Aelin murmured in a tone that had Dorian’s magic rising, ice cooling his fingertips. Aedion’s hand slid to his sword. “If you were me.” A low, bitter laugh. Dorian had not heard that sound since ... since a blood-soaked bedroom in a glass castle that no longer existed. “Well, you are *not* me,

Blackbeak, so I'll trust you to keep your musings on the matter to yourself."

"I am not a Blackbeak," Manon said.

They all stared at her. But the witch merely watched the queen.

Aelin said with a wave of her scar-flecked hand, "Right. *That* matter of business. Let's hear the story, then."

Dorian wondered if they would come to blows, but Manon simply waited a few heartbeats, looked toward the horizon again, and said, "When my grandmother stripped me of my title as heir and Wing Leader, she also stripped my heritage. She told me that my father was a Crochan Prince, and she had killed my mother and him for conspiring to end the feud between our peoples and break the curse on our lands."

Dorian glanced to Aedion. The Wolf of the North's face was taut, his Ashryver eyes shining bright, churning at the possibilities of all that Manon implied.

Manon said a bit numbly, as if it was the first time she'd even spoken it to herself, "I am the last Crochan Queen—the last direct descendant of Rhiannon Crochan herself."

Aelin only sucked on a tooth, brows lifting.

"And," Manon continued, "whether my grandmother acknowledges it or not, I am heir to the Blackbeak Clan. My witches, who have fought at my side for a hundred years, have spent most of it killing Crochans. Dreaming of a homeland that *I* promised to return them to. And now I am banished, my Thirteen scattered and lost. And now I am heir to our enemy's crown. So you are not the only one, *Majesty*, who has plans that go awry. So get yourself together and figure out what to do next."

Two queens—there were two queens among them, Dorian realized.

Aelin closed her eyes and let out a rough, breathy laugh. Aedion again tensed, as if that laugh might easily end in violence or peace, but Manon stood there. Weathering the storm.

When Aelin opened her eyes, her smile subdued but edged, she said to the Witch-Queen, "I knew I saved your sorry ass for a reason."

Manon's answering smile was terrifying.

The males all seemed to loosen a tight breath, Dorian himself included.

But then Fenrys pulled at his lower lip, scanning the skies. "What I don't get is why wait so long to do any of this? If Erawan wants you lot dead"—a nod toward Dorian and Aelin—"why let you mature, grow powerful?"

Dorian tried not to shudder at the thought. How unprepared they'd been.

“Because I escaped Erawan,” Aelin said. Dorian tried not to remember that night ten years ago, but the memory of it snapped through him, and her, and Aedion. “He thought I was dead. And Dorian ... his father shielded him. As best he could.”

Dorian shut out that memory, too. Especially as Manon angled her head in question.

Fenrys said, “Maeve knew you were alive. Odds are, so did Erawan.”

“Maybe she told Erawan,” Aedion said.

Fenrys whipped his head to the general. “She’s never had any contact with Erawan, or Adarlan.”

“As far as you know,” Aedion mused. “Unless she’s a talker in the bedroom.”

Fenrys’s eyes darkened. “Maeve does not share power. She saw Adarlan as an inconvenience. Still does.”

Aedion countered, “Everyone can be bought for a price.”

“Nameless is the price of Maeve’s allegiance,” Fenrys snapped. “It can’t be purchased.”

Aelin went utterly still at the warrior’s words.

She blinked at him, her brows narrowing as her lips silently mouthed the words he’d said.

“What is it?” Aedion demanded.

Aelin murmured, “Nameless is my price.” Aedion opened his mouth, no doubt to ask what had snagged her interest, but Aelin frowned at Manon. “Can your kind see the future? See it as an oracle can?”

“Some,” Manon admitted. “The Bluebloods claim to.”

“Can other Clans?”

“They say that for the Ancients, past and present and future bleed together.”

Aelin shook her head and walked toward the door that led to the hall of cramped cabins. Rowan swooped off the rigging and shifted, his feet hitting the planks just as he finished. He didn’t so much as look at them as he followed her into the hall and shut the door behind them.

“What was that about?” Fenrys asked.

“An Ancient,” Dorian mused, then murmured to Manon, “Baba Yellowlegs.”

They all turned to him. But Manon’s fingers brushed against her collarbone—where the necklace of Aelin’s scars from Yellowlegs still ringed her neck in stark white.

“This winter, she was at your castle,” Manon said to him. “Working as a

fortune-teller.”

“And what—she said something to that degree?” Aedion crossed his arms. He’d known of the visit, Dorian recalled. Aedion had always kept an eye on the witches—on all the power players of the realm, he’d once said.

Manon stared the general down. “Yellowlegs *was* a fortune-teller—a powerful oracle. I bet she knew who the queen was the moment she saw her. And saw things she planned to sell to the highest bidder.” Dorian tried not to flinch at the memory. Aelin had butchered Yellowlegs when she’d threatened to sell *his* secrets. Aelin had never implied a threat against her own. Manon continued, “Yellowlegs wouldn’t have told the queen anything outright, only in veiled terms. So it’d drive the girl mad when she figured it out.”

A pointed glance at the door through which Aelin had vanished.

None of them said anything else, even as they later ate cold porridge for breakfast.

The cook, it seemed, hadn’t made it through the night.



Rowan knocked on the door of their private bathing room. She’d locked it. Walked into their room, then into the bathing room, and locked him out.

And now she was puking her guts up.

“Aelin,” he growled softly.

A ragged intake of breath, then retching, then—more vomiting.

“*Aelin*,” he snarled, debating how long until it was socially acceptable for him to break down the door. *Act like a prince*, she’d snarled at him the other night.

“I don’t feel well,” was her muffled response. Her voice was hollow, flat in a way he hadn’t heard for some time now.

“Then let me in so I can take care of you,” he said as calmly and rationally as he could.

She’d locked him out—*locked him out*.

“I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“I’ve seen you wet yourself. I can handle vomiting. Which I have *also* seen you do before.”

Ten seconds. Ten more seconds seemed like a fair enough amount of time before he crunched down on the handle and splintered the lock.

“Just—give me a minute.”

“What was it about Fenrys’s words that set you off?” He’d heard it all from his post on the mast.

Utter silence. Like she was spooling the raw terror back into herself, shoving it down into a place where she wouldn’t look at it or feel it or acknowledge it. Or tell him about it.

“*Aelin.*”

The lock turned.

Her face was gray, her eyes red-rimmed. Her voice broke as she said, “I want to talk to Lysandra.”

Rowan looked at the bucket she’d half filled, then at her bloodless lips. At the sweat beaded on her brow.

His heart stopped dead in his chest as he contemplated that ... that she might not be lying.

And why she might be ill. He tried to scent her, but the vomit was too overpowering, the space too small and full of brine. He stumbled back a step, shutting out the thoughts. Without another word, he left their room.

He was numb as he hunted down the shifter, now returned and in human form as she devoured a cold, soggy breakfast. With a concerned look, Lysandra silently did as he commanded.

Rowan shifted and soared so high that the ship turned into a bobbing speck below. Clouds cooled his feathers; the wind roared over the pure panic thundering in his heart.

He planned to lose himself in the awakening sky while scouting for danger, to sort himself out before he returned to her and started asking questions that he might not be ready to hear the answers to.

But the coast appeared—and only his magic kept him from tumbling out of the sky at what the first rays of the sun revealed.

Broad, sparkling rivers and snaking streams flowed throughout the undulating emerald and gold of the grasslands and reeds lining them, the burnt gold of the sandbanks flanking either side.

And where little fishing villages had once watched over the sea ... Fire.

Dozens of those villages burning.

On the ship beneath him, the sailors began to shout, calling to one another as the coast at last broke over the horizon and the smoke became visible.

Eyllwe.

Eyllwe was burning.

Elide didn't speak to Lorcan for three days.

She wouldn't have spoken to him for another three, maybe for three damn months, if necessity hadn't required them to break their hateful silence.

Her cycle had come. And through whatever steady, healthy diet she'd been consuming this past month, it had gone from an inconsistent trickle to the deluge she'd awoken to this morning.

She'd hurtled from the narrow bed in the cabin to the small privy on board, rifled through every drawer and box she could find, but ... clearly, a woman had never spent any time on this infernal boat. She resorted to ripping up the embroidered tablecloth for liners, and by the time she'd cleaned herself up, Lorcan was awake and already steering the boat.

She said flatly to him, "I need supplies."

"You still reek of blood."

"I suspect I *will* reek of blood for several more days, and it will get worse before it gets better, so I *need* supplies. *Now.*"

He turned from his usual spot near the prow, sniffing once. Her face was burning, her stomach a knotted mess of cramping. "I'll stop at the next town."

"When will that be?" The map was of no use to her.

"By nightfall."

They'd sailed right through every town or outpost along the river, surviving on the fish Lorcan had caught. She'd been so annoyed at her own helplessness that after the first day, she'd started copying his movements—and had earned herself a fat trout in the process. She'd made him kill it and gut it and cook it, but ... she'd at least caught the thing.

Elide said, "Fine."

Lorcan said, "Fine."

She aimed for the cabin to find some other fabrics to tide her over, but Lorcan said, "You barely bled the last time."

The last thing she wanted to do was have this conversation. "Perhaps my body finally felt safe enough to be normal."

Because even with him murdering that man, lying, and then spitting the truth about Aelin in her face ... Lorcan would go up against any threat without a second thought. Perhaps for his own survival, but he'd promised her protection. She was able to sleep through the night because he lay on the floor between her and the door.

"So ... there's nothing wrong, then." He didn't bother to look at her as he said it.

But she cocked her head, studying the hard muscles of his back. Even while refusing to speak to him, she'd watched him—and made excuses to watch as he went through his exercises each day, usually shirtless.

"No, there's nothing wrong," she said. At least, she hoped. But Finnula, her nursemaid, had always clicked her tongue and said her cycles were spotty—too light and irregular. For this one to have come precisely a month later ... She didn't feel like wondering about it.

Lorcan said, "Good. It'd delay us if it were otherwise."

She rolled her eyes at his back, not at all surprised by the answer, and limped into the cabin.



He'd needed to stop anyway, Lorcan told himself as he watched Elide barter with an innkeeper in town for the supplies she needed.

She'd wrapped her dark hair in a discarded red kerchief she must have scrounged up on that pitiful little barge, and even used a nasally accent while she spoke to the woman, her entire countenance a far cry from the graceful, quiet woman he'd spent three days ignoring.

Which had been fine. He'd used these three days to sort out his plans for Aelin Galathynius, how he'd return the favor she'd dealt him.

The inn seemed safe enough, so Lorcan left Elide to her bartering—turned out, she wanted new *clothes*, too—and wandered the ramshackle streets of the backwater town in search of supplies.

The streets were abuzz with river traders and fisherfolk mooring for the night. Lorcan managed to intimidate his way into buying a crate of apples, dried venison, *and* some oats for half their usual price. Just to get him away, the merchant along the crumbling quay threw in a few pears—for the lovely lady, he'd said.

Lorcan, arms full of his wares, was almost to the barge when the words

echoed in his head, an off-kilter pealing.

He hadn't taken Elide past that section of the quay. Hadn't spied the man while he'd been docking, or when they'd left. Rumor could account for it, but this was a river town: strangers were always coming and going, and paid for their anonymity.

He hurried back to the barge. Fog had rippled in from the river, clouding the town and the opposite bank. By the time he dumped the crate and wares onto the boat, not even bothering to tie them down, the streets had emptied.

His magic stirred. He scanned the fog, the splotches of gold where candles shone in windows. *Not right, not right, not right*, his magic whispered.

Where was she?

Hurry, he willed her, counting the blocks they'd taken to the inn. She should have been back by now.

The fog pressed in. Squeaking sounded at his boots.

Lorcan snarled at the cobblestones as rats streamed past—toward the water. They flung themselves into the river, crawling and clawing over one another.

Something wasn't coming—something was *here*.



The innkeeper insisted she try on the clothes before she bought them. She bundled them in Elide's arms and pointed her toward a room in the back of the inn.

Men stared at her—too eagerly—as she passed and strode down a narrow hall. Typical of Lorcan to leave her while he sought whatever he needed. Elide shoved into the room, finding it black and chilled. She twisted, scanning for a candle and flint.

The door snapped shut, sealing her in.

Elide lunged for the handle as that little voice whispered, *Run run run run run run*.

She slammed into something muscled, bony, and leathery.

It reeked of spoiled meat and old blood.

A candle sparked to life across the room. Revealing a wooden table, an empty hearth, sealed windows, and ...

Vernon. Sitting on the other side of the table, smiling at her like a cat.

Strong hands tipped in claws clamped on her shoulders, nails cutting through her leathers. The ilken held her firmly as her uncle drawled, "What an adventure

you've had, Elide.”

“How did you find me?” Elide breathed, the reek of the ilken nearly enough to make her vomit.

Her uncle rose to his feet in a fluid, unhurried movement, straightening his green tunic. “Asking questions to buy yourself time? Clever, but expected.” He jerked his chin to the creature. It loosed a low, guttural clicking sound.

The door opened behind it, revealing two other ilken now crowding the hall with their wings and hideous faces. Oh gods. Oh, gods.

Think think think think think.

“Your companion, last we heard, was putting supplies on his boat and unmooring it. You probably should have paid him more.”

“He’s my husband,” she hissed. “You have no right to take me from him—*none*.” Because once she was married, Vernon’s wardenship over her life ended.

Vernon let out a low laugh. “Lorcan Salvaterre, Maeve’s second-in-command, is your husband? Really, Elide.” He waved a lazy hand to the ilken. “We depart now.”

Fight now—now, before they had the chance to move her, to get her away.

But where to run? The innkeeper had sold her out, someone had betrayed their location on this river—

The ilken tugged at her. She planted her heels onto the wooden slats, little good it would do.

It let out a low laugh and brought its mouth to her ear. “Your blood smells clean.”

She recoiled, but it gripped her hard, its grayish tongue tickling the side of her neck. Thrashing, she still could do nothing as it twisted them into the hall and toward the two waiting ilken in it. To the back door, not ten feet away, already open to the night beyond.

“You see what I shielded you from at Morath, Elide?” Vernon crooned, falling into step behind them. She slammed her feet into the wooden floor, over and over, straining for the wall, for anything to have leverage to push and fight

against it—

No.

No.

No.

Lorcan had left—he'd gotten everything he needed from her and left. She'd slowed him down, had brought enemy after enemy after him.

“And whatever will you do back at Morath,” Vernon mused, “now that Manon Blackbeak is dead?”

Elide's chest cracked open at the words. *Manon—*

“Gutted by her own grandmother and thrown off the side of the Keep for her disobedience. Of course, I'll shield you from your *relatives*, but ... Erawan will be interested to learn what you've been up to. What you ... took from Kaltain.”

The stone in her jacket's breast pocket.

It thrummed and whispered, awakening as she bucked.

No one in the now-silent inn at the opposite end of the hall bothered to come around the corner and investigate her wordless shouting. Another ilken stepped into view just beyond the open back door.

Four of them. And Lorcan had left—

The stone at her breast began to seethe.

But a voice that was young and old, wise and sweet, whispered, *Do not touch it. Do not use it. Do not acknowledge it.*

It had been inside Kaltain—had driven her mad. Had made her into that ... shell.

A shell for something else to fill.

The open door loomed.

Think think think.

She couldn't breathe enough to think, the ilken reek around her promising the sort of horrors she'd endure when they got her back to Morath—

No, she wouldn't go. She wouldn't let them take her, break and use her—

One shot. She'd have one shot.

No, whispered the voice in her head. *No—*

But there was a knife at her uncle's side as he strolled ahead and out the door. It was all she'd need. She'd seen Lorcan do it enough while hunting.

Vernon paused in the back courtyard, a large, rectangular iron box waiting before him.

There was a small window in it.

And handles on two of its edges.

She knew what the ilken were for as the three others fell into place around it. They'd shove her inside, lock the door, and *fly* her back to Morath. The box was little bigger than a coffin standing upright. Its door was already open.

The ilken would have to release her to throw her inside. For a heartbeat, they'd let go. She'd have to use it to her advantage.

Vernon loitered beside the box. She didn't dare look at his knife.

A sob broke from her throat. She'd die here—in this filthy courtyard, with these awful things around her. She'd never see the sun again, or laugh, or hear music—

The ilken stirred around the box, wings rustling.

Five feet. Four. Three.

No, no, no, the wise voice begged her.

She would not be taken back to Morath. She would not let them touch her and corrupt her—

The ilken shoved her forward, a violent thrust meant to send her staggering into the box.

Elide twisted, slamming face-first into the edge instead, her nose crunching, but she whirled on her uncle. Her ankle roared as she set her weight on it to lunge for the knife at his side.

Vernon didn't have time to realize what she intended as she whipped the knife free from its sheath at his hip. As she flipped the knife in her fingers, her other hand wrapping around the hilt.

As her shoulders curved inward, her chest caving, and she drove the blade home.



Lorcan had the kill shot.

Hidden in the fog, the four ilken couldn't detect him as the man he was certain was Elide's uncle had that ilken haul her toward that prison-box.

It was on him that Lorcan had trained his hatchet.

Elide was sobbing. In terror and despair.

Each sound whetted his rage into something so lethal Lorcan could barely see straight.

Then the ilken threw her into that iron box.

And Elide proved she wasn't bluffing in her claim to never return to Morath.

He heard her nose break as she hit the rim of the box, heard her uncle's cry of surprise as she rebounded and lunged for him—

And grabbed his dagger. Not to kill him.

For the first time in five centuries, Lorcan knew true fear as Elide turned that knife on herself, the blade angled to plunge up and into her heart.

He threw his hatchet.

As the tip of that dagger pierced the leather over her ribs, the wooden handle of his hatchet slammed into her wrist.

Elide went down with a cry, the dagger flying wide—

Lorcan was already moving as they whirled toward where he'd perched on the rooftop. He leaped to the nearest one, to the weapons he'd positioned there minutes before, knowing they'd emerge from this door—

His next knife went through the wing of an ilken. Then another to keep it down before they pinpointed his location. But Lorcan was already sprinting to the third rooftop flanking the courtyard. To the sword he'd left there. He hurled it right through the face of the closest one.

Two left, along with Vernon, screaming now to get the girl in the box—

Elide was running like hell for the narrow alley out of the courtyard, not the broad street. The alley, too small for the ilken to fit, especially with all the debris and trash littered throughout. Good girl.

Lorcan leaped and rolled onto the next roof, to the two remaining daggers—

He threw them, but the ilken had already learned his aim, his throwing style.

They hadn't learned Elide's.

She hadn't just gone into the alley to save herself. She'd gone after the hatchet.

And Lorcan watched as that woman crept up behind the distracted ilken and drove the hatchet into its wings.

With an injured wrist. With her nose leaking blood down her face.

The ilken screamed, thrashing to grab her, even as it crashed to its knees.

Where she wanted it.

The axe was swinging again before its scream finished sounding.

The sound was cut off a heartbeat later as its head bounced to the stones.

Lorcan hurtled off the roof, aiming for the one remaining ilken now seething at her—

But it pivoted and ran to where Vernon was cowering by the door, his face bloodless.

Sobbing, her own blood sprayed on the stones, Elide whirled toward her

uncle, too. Axe already lifting.

But the ilken reached her uncle, snatched him up in its strong arms, and launched them both into the sky.

Elide threw the hatchet anyway.

It missed the ilken's wing by a whisper of wind.

The axe slammed to the cobblestones, taking out a chunk of rock. Right near the ilken with the shredded wings—now crawling toward the courtyard exit.

Lorcan watched as Elide picked up his axe and walked toward the hissing, broken beast.

It lashed at her with its claws. Elide easily sidestepped the swipe.

It screamed as she stomped on its wrecked wing, halting its crawl to freedom.

When it fell silent, she said in a quiet, merciless voice he'd never heard her use, clear despite the blood clogging one nostril, "I want Erawan to know that the next time he sends you after me like a pack of dogs, I'll return the favor. I want Erawan to know that the next time I see him, I will carve Manon's name on his gods-damned heart." Tears rolled down her face, silent and unending as the wrath that now sculpted her features into a thing of mighty and terrible beauty.

"But it seems like tonight isn't really your night," Elide said to the ilken, lifting the hatchet again over a shoulder. The ilken might have been whimpering as she smiled grimly. "Because it takes only one to deliver a message. And your companions are already on their way."

The axe fell.

Flesh and bone and blood spilled onto the stones.

She stood there, staring at the corpse, at the reeking blood that dribbled from its neck.

Lorcan, perhaps a bit numbly, walked over and took the axe from her hands. How she'd been able to use it with the sore wrist—

She hissed and whimpered at the movement. As if whatever force had rushed through her blood had vanished, leaving only pain behind.

She clutched her wrist, utterly silent as he circled the dead ilken and severed their heads from their bodies. One after another, retrieving his weapons as he went.

People inside the inn were stirring, wondering at the noise, wondering if it was safe to come out to see what had happened to the girl they'd so willingly betrayed.

For a heartbeat, Lorcan debated ending that innkeeper.

But Elide said, “Enough death.”

Tears streaked through the splattered black blood on her cheeks—blood that was a mockery of the smattering of freckles. Blood, crimson and pure, ran from her nose down her mouth and chin, already caking.

So he sheathed the hatchet and scooped her into his arms. She didn’t object.

He carried her through the fog-wrapped town, to where their boat was tied. Already, onlookers had gathered, no doubt to scavenge their supplies when the ilken left. A snarl from Lorcan had them skittering into the mist.

As he stepped onto the barge, the boat rocking beneath him, Elide said, “He told me you’d left.”

Lorcan still didn’t set her down, holding her aloft with one arm as he untied the ropes. “You believed him.”

She wiped at the blood on her face, then winced at the tender wrist—and broken nose. He’d have to tend to that. Even then, it might very well be slightly crooked forever. He doubted she’d care.

Knew she’d perhaps see that crooked nose as a sign that she’d fought and survived.

Lorcan put her down at last, atop the crate of apples—right where he could see her. She sat silently as he took up the pole and pushed them away from the dock, from that hateful town, glad for the cover of mist as they drifted downstream. They could perhaps afford two more days on the river before they’d have to cut inland to shake any enemies trailing them. Good thing they were close enough to Eyllwe now to make it in a matter of days on foot.

When there was nothing but wafting mist and the lapping of the river against the boat, Lorcan spoke again. “You wouldn’t have stopped that dagger.”

She didn’t respond, and the silence went on long enough that he turned to where she perched on the crate.

Tears rolled down her face as she stared at the water.

He didn’t know how to comfort, how to soothe—not in the way she needed.

So he set down the pole and sat beside her on the crate, the wood groaning. “Who is Manon?”

He’d heard most of what Vernon had hissed inside that private dining room while he’d been setting his trap in the courtyard, but some details had evaded him.

“The Wing Leader of the Ironteeth legion,” Elide said, voice trembling, the words snagging on the blood clogging her nose.

Lorcan took a shot in the dark. “She was the one who got you out. That day

—she was why you’re in witch leathers, why you wound up wandering in Oakwald.”

A nod.

“And Kaltain—who was she?” The person who’d given her that thing she carried.

“Erawan’s mistress—his slave. She was my age. He put the stone inside her arm and made her into a living ghost. She bought me and Manon time to run; she incinerated most of Morath in the process, and herself.”

Elide reached into her jacket, her breathing thick with tears still sliding down her face. Lorcan’s breath caught as she pulled out a scrap of dark fabric.

The scent clinging to it was female, foreign—broken and sad and cold. But there was another scent beneath it, one he knew and hated ...

“Kaltain said to give this to Celaena—not to Aelin,” Elide said, shaking with her tears. “Because Celaena ... she gave her a warm cloak in a cold dungeon. And they wouldn’t let Kaltain take the cloak with her when they brought her to Morath, but she managed to save this scrap. To remember to repay Celaena for that kindness. But ... what sort of gift is this thing? What *is* this?” She pulled back the fold of cloth, revealing a dark sliver of stone.

Every drop of blood in his body went cold and hot, awake and dead.

She was sobbing quietly. “Why is this payment? My very bones say to not touch it. My—a voice told me not to even think about it ...”

It was wrong. The thing in her beautiful, filthy hand was wrong. It did not belong here, should not *be* here—

The god who had watched over him his whole life had recoiled.

Even death feared it.

“Put it away,” he said roughly. “Right now.”

Hand shaking, she did so. Only when it was hidden inside her jacket did he say, “Let’s clean you up first. Set that nose and wrist. I’ll tell you what I know while I do.”

She nodded, gaze on the river.

Lorcan reached out, grasping her chin and forcing her to look at him. Hopeless, bleak eyes met his. He brushed away a stray tear with his thumb. “I made a promise to protect you. I will not break it, Elide.”

She made to pull away, but he gripped her a little harder, keeping her eyes on him.

“I will always find you,” he swore to her.

Her throat bobbed.

Lorcan whispered, "I promise."



Elide sifted through all Lorcan had told her while he cleaned her face, inspected her nose and wrist, bound the latter in soft cloth, and quickly, but not viciously, set her nose.

Wyrdkeys. Wyrdgates.

Aelin had one Wyrdkey. Was looking for the other two.

Soon to be only one more, once Elide gave her the key she carried.

Two keys—against one. Perhaps they would win this war.

Even if Elide didn't know how Aelin could use them and not destroy herself. But ... she'd leave it up to her. Erawan might have the armies, but if Aelin had two keys ...

She tried not to think about Manon. Vernon had lied about Lorcan leaving—to break her spirit, to get her to come willingly. Perhaps Manon was not dead, either.

She wouldn't believe it until she had proof. Until the whole world screamed at her that the Wing Leader was gone.

Lorcan was back at the prow by the time she'd changed into one of his own shirts while her leathers dried. Her wrist throbbed, a dull, insistent ache, her face was no better and Lorcan had promised she'd likely have a black eye from it, but ... her head was clear.

She came up beside him, watching him push the pole against the mucky bottom of the river. "I killed those things."

"You did a fine job of it," he said.

"I don't regret it."

Dark, depthless eyes slid to her. "Good."

She didn't know why she said it, why she felt a need or like it was worth anything to him at all, but Elide stood on her toes, kissed his stubble-rough cheek, and said, "I will always find you, too, Lorcan."

She felt him staring at her, even when she'd climbed into bed minutes later.

When she awoke, clean strips of linen for her cycle were next to the bed.

His own shirt, washed and dried overnight—now cut up for her to use as she would.

Eyllwe's coast was burning.

For three days, they sailed past village after village. Some still burning, some only cinders. And at each of them, Aelin and Rowan had labored to put out those flames.

Rowan, in his hawk form, could fly in, but ... It killed her. Absolutely killed her that they could not afford to halt long enough to go to shore. So she did it from the ship, burrowing deep into her power, stretching it as far as it could go across sea and sky and sand, to wink out those fires one by one.

By the end of the third day, she was flagging, so thirsty that no amount of water was able to slake it, her lips chapped and peeling.

Rowan had gone to shore three times now to ask who had done it.

Each time the answer was the same: darkness had swept over them in the night, the kind that blotted out the stars, and then the villages were burning beneath flaming arrows not spotted until they had found their targets.

But where that darkness, where Erawan's forces were ... there was no sign of them.

No sign of Maeve, either.

Rowan and Lysandra had flown high and wide, searching for either force, but ... nothing.

Ghosts, some villagers were now claiming, had attacked them. The ghosts of their unburied dead, raging home from distant lands.

Until they started whispering another rumor.

That Aelin Galathynius herself was burning Eyllwe, village by village. For vengeance that they had not aided her kingdom ten years ago.

No matter that she was putting out the flames. They did not believe Rowan when he tried to explain who soothed their fires from aboard the distant ship.

He told her not to listen, not to let it sink in. So she tried.

And it had been during one of those times that Rowan had run his thumb over the scar on her palm, leaning to kiss her neck. He'd breathed her in, and she knew he detected an answer to the question that had caused him to flee that

morning on the ship. No, she was not carrying his child.

They had only discussed the matter once—last week. When she'd crawled off him, panting and coated in sweat, and he'd asked if she was taking a tonic. She merely told him no.

He'd gone still.

And then she had explained that if she'd inherited so much of Mab's Fae blood, she might very well have inherited the Fae's struggle to conceive. And even if the timing was horrible ... if this was to be the one shot she had of providing Terrasen a bloodline, a future ... she would not waste it. His green eyes turned distant, but he'd nodded, kissing her shoulder. And that had been that.

She hadn't mustered the nerve to ask if he wanted to sire her children. If he *wanted* to have children, given what had happened to Lyria.

And during that brief moment before he'd flown back to shore to put out more flames, she hadn't possessed the nerve to explain why she'd hurled her guts up that morning, either.

The past three days had been a blur. From the moment Fenrys had uttered those words, *Nameless is my price*, everything had been a blur of smoke and flame and waves and sun.

But as the sun set on the third day, Aelin again shoved those thoughts away as the escort ship began signaling ahead, the crew frantically working to drop anchor.

Sweat beaded on her brow, her tongue parchment-dry. But she forgot her thirst, her exhaustion, as she beheld what Rolfe's men had spied moments ago.

A flat, waterlogged land under a cloudy sky spread inland as far as the eye could see. Moldy green and bone-white grasses crusted the bumps and hollows, little islands of life among the mirror-smooth gray water between them. And among them all, jutting up from brackish water and humped land like the limbs of an ill-buried corpse ... ruins. Great, crumbling ruins, a once-lovely city drowned on the plain.

The Stone Marshes.



Manon let the humans and Fae meet with the captains of the other two ships.

She heard the news soon enough: what they sought lay about a day and a half inland. Precisely where, they didn't know—or how long it'd take to find its exact

location. Until they returned, the ships would remain anchored here.

And Manon, it seemed, would join them on their trip inland. As if the queen suspected that if she were left behind, their little fleet would not be intact when they returned.

Clever woman.

But that was the other problem. The one facing Manon right now, already looking anxious and put-out.

Abraxos's tail lashed a bit, the iron spikes scraping and scratching the pristine ship deck. As if he'd heard the queen's order a minute ago: *the wyvern has to go*.

On the flat, open expanse of the marshes, he'd be too noticeable.

Manon placed a hand on his scarred snout, meeting those depthless black eyes. "You need to lie low somewhere."

A warm, sorrowful huff into her palm.

"Don't whine about it," Manon said, even as something twisted and roiled in her belly. "Stay out of sight, keep alert, and come back in four days' time." She allowed herself to lean forward, resting her brow against his snout. His growl rumbled her bones. "We've been a pair, you and I. A few days is nothing, my friend."

He nudged her head with his own.

Manon swallowed hard. "You saved my life. Many times. I never thanked you for it."

Abraxos let out another low whine.

"You and me," she promised him. "From now until the Darkness claims us."

She made herself pull away. Made herself stroke his snout just once more. Then backed a step. Then another. "Go."

He didn't move. She bared her iron teeth. "Go."

Abraxos gave her a look full of reproach, but his body tensed, wings lifting.

And Manon decided she had never hated anyone more than she hated the Queen of Terrasen and her friends. For making him leave. For causing this parting, when so many dangers had not been able to cleave them.

But Abraxos was airborne, the sails groaning in the wind of his wings, and Manon watched until he was a speck on the horizon, until the longboats were being readied to bring them to the high grasses and stagnant gray water of the marshes beyond.

The queen and her court readied, donning weapons like some people adorned themselves with jewelry, moving about in question and answer to one another.

So similar, to her Thirteen—similar enough that she had to turn away, ducking into the shadows of the foremast and schooling her breathing into an even rhythm.

Her hands trembled. Asterin was not dead. The Thirteen were not dead.

She'd kept the thoughts about it at bay. But now, with that flower-smelling wyvern vanishing over the horizon ...

The last piece of the Wing Leader had vanished with him.

A muggy wind tugged her inland—toward those marshes. Dragging her red cape with it.

Manon ran a finger down the crimson cloak she'd made herself wear this morning.

Rhiannon.

She'd never heard a whisper that the Crochan royal bloodline had walked off that final killing field five centuries ago. She wondered if any of the Crochans beyond her half sister knew the child of Lothian Blackbeak and a Crochan Prince had survived.

Manon unfastened the brooch clasp the cloak at her shoulders. She weighed the thick bolt of red fabric in her hands.

A few easy swipes of her nails had her clutching a long, thin strip of the cloak. A few more motions had her tying it around the end of her braid, the red stark against the moon white of her hair.

Manon stepped out of the shadows behind the foremast and peered over the edge of the ship.

No one commented when she dumped her half sister's cloak into the sea.

The wind carried it a few feet over the waves before it fluttered like a dying leaf to land atop the swells. A pool of blood—that's how it looked from the distance as the tide carried it out, out, out into the ocean.

She found the King of Adarlan and Queen of Terrasen waiting at the railing of the main deck, their companions climbing into the awaiting longboat bobbing on the waves.

She met eyes of sapphire, then those of turquoise and gold.

She knew they'd seen it. Perhaps not understood what the cloak had meant, but ... understood the gesture for what it was.

Manon flicked her iron teeth and nails back into their slits as she approached them.

Aelin Galathynius said quietly, "You never stop seeing their faces."

It was only when they were rowing for the shore, spindrift soaking them, that

Manon realized the queen hadn't meant the Thirteen. And Manon wondered if Aelin, too, had watched that cloak floating out to sea and thought it looked like spilled blood.

36

The atrophy in his legs ... It was reversing.

Three weeks later, Yrene marveled at it. They'd regained movement up through his knee, but not higher. Chaol could bend his legs now, but couldn't move his thighs. Couldn't stand on them.

But the morning workouts with the guards, the afternoons spent healing, tangled in darkness and memory and pain ...

That was muscle, packing back onto his legs. Filling out those already-broad shoulders and that impressive chest. Thanks to training in the morning sun, his tan had deepened to a rich brown, the color lying well over arms rippling with muscle.

They worked every day in easy rhythm, settling into a routine that became as much a part of Yrene as washing her face and cleaning her teeth and craving a cup of *kahve* when she woke.

He'd joined her again at the defense lessons, the youngest acolytes still hopelessly giggly around him, but at least they'd never once been late since he'd arrived. He'd even taught Yrene herself new maneuvers regarding taking on larger assailants. And while there were often smiles aplenty in the Torre courtyard, he and Yrene were grave as he walked her through those methods, as they considered when she might need them.

But there had been no whisper of whoever had attacked her—no confirmation that it was indeed one of the Valg. A small mercy, Yrene supposed.

But still she paid attention in his lessons, and still Chaol carefully trained her.

The royal siblings had come and gone and come back again, and she had seen nothing of Kashin beyond the dinner where she'd sought him out to thank him for his help and generosity the night of the attack. He'd said it was unnecessary, but she had touched his shoulder in thanks anyway. Before taking her seat at the safety of Chaol's side.

Chaol's own, separate cause with the khagan ... Chaol and Yrene didn't risk talking about the war—the need for armies. And the Aksara Oasis and well of knowledge, which might be hidden away beneath the palms, regarding why this place *had* such information on the Valg ... Neither of them had come up with a way to manipulate Hasar into bringing them without raising her suspicions. Without risking the princess becoming aware of those scrolls Yrene and Chaol still had hidden in his room.

But Yrene knew time pressed on him. Saw how his eyes sometimes turned distant, as if staring toward a far-off land. Remembering the friends who fought there. For their people. He'd always push himself harder after that—and each inch of movement gained in his legs was as much due to himself as it was to her own magic.

But Yrene pushed herself, too. Wondered if the battles had begun; wondered if she'd ever make it in time to even help. Wondered what might be left for her to return to.

The darkness they encountered when she did heal him, from the demon that had dwelled inside the man who had destroyed so much of the world ... They worked through that, too. She had not been dragged into his memories as she had before, had not been forced to witness the horrors of Morath or endure the attentions of the *thing* that lingered in him, but her magic still shoved against that wound, swarming it like a thousand dots of white light, eating and gobbling and clawing at it.

He endured the pain, wading through whatever that darkness showed him.

Never recoiling from it, day after day. Only stopping when her own strength flagged and he insisted Yrene break for food or a nap on the gold couch or just some conversation over chilled tea.

Yrene supposed that their steady pace had to end at some point.

She thought it'd likely be due to an argument between them. Not news from afar.

The khagan returned to the nightly formal dinner, after two weeks away at a seaside estate to escape the summer heat, ensconced with his still-mourning wife. A merry gathering—or so it had seemed from afar. With no further attacks in the palace or Torre, the hushed watchfulness had lifted considerably these last few weeks.

But as Yrene and Chaol entered the great hall, as she read the simmering tension along those seated at the high table, she debated telling him to leave. Viziers shifted in their seats. Arghun, who had certainly *not* been missed while he'd joined his parents at the seaside, smirked.

Hasar smiled broadly at Yrene—knowingly. Not good.

They got perhaps fifteen minutes into dinner before the princess pounced. Hasar leaned forward and said to Chaol, “You must be pleased tonight, Lord Westfall.”

Yrene kept perfectly straight in her chair, her fork unfaltering as she lifted a bite of lemon-kissed sea bass to her mouth and forced herself to swallow.

Chaol countered smoothly, drinking from his goblet of water, “And why might that be, Your Highness?”

Hasar's smiles could be awful. Deadly. And the one she wore when she spoke next made Yrene wonder why she had ever bothered to answer the princess's summons. “Well, if one does the calculations, Captain Faliq should be returning with my brother tomorrow.”

Yrene's hand tightened around her fork as she tallied the days.

Three weeks. It had been three weeks since Nesryn and Sartaq had left for the

Tavan Mountains.

Nesryn would return tomorrow. And though nothing—*nothing*—had happened between Yrene and Chaol ...

Yrene could not stop the sensation of her chest caving in. Couldn't halt the sense that there was about to be a door very permanently slammed in her face.

They hadn't spoken of Nesryn. Of whatever was between them. And he'd never touched Yrene more than was necessary, never looked at her as he had that night of the party.

Because of course—of course he was waiting for Nesryn. The woman he ... he was loyal to.

Yrene made herself eat another bite, even as the fish turned sour in her mouth.

Fool. She was a *fool*, and—

“Didn't you hear the news?” Chaol drawled, just as irreverently as the princess. He set down his goblet, his knuckles brushing Yrene's where she'd rested her hand on the table.

To any, it might have been an accidental brush, but with Chaol ... His every movement was controlled. Focused. The brush of his skin against hers, a whisper of reassurance, as if he could sense that the walls were indeed closing in around her—

Hasar shot Yrene a displeased look. *Why did you not inform me of this?*

Yrene gave her an innocent wince back. *I did not know.* It was the truth.

“I suppose you shall tell us?” Hasar replied coolly to the lord.

Chaol shrugged. “I received word today—from Captain Faliq. She and your brother have decided to extend their trip by another three weeks. It turns out, her skill with a bow and arrow was in high demand amongst his rukhin. They have begged to keep her for a while longer. She obliged them.”

Yrene schooled her face into neutrality. Even as relief and shame washed through her.

A good woman—a brave woman. That was who she was so relieved to hear was *not* returning. Not ... interrupting.

“Our brother is wise,” Arghun said from down the table, “to keep such a skilled warrior for as long as possible.”

The barb was there, buried deep.

Chaol again shrugged. “He is wise indeed, to know how special she is.” The words were spoken with truth, yet ...

She was inventing things. Reading into it, assuming his tone had no affection beyond pride.

Arghun leaned forward to say to Hasar, “Well, then there’s the matter of the *other* news, sister. Which I assume Lord Westfall has also heard.”

A few places down, the khagan’s conversation with his closest viziers faltered.

“Oh, yes,” Hasar said, swirling her wine as she sprawled in her chair. “I’d forgotten.”

Yrene tried to catch Renia’s eye, to get the princess’s lover to reveal *something* about what she now felt building, the wave about to crash. The reason the room was so charged. But Renia only watched Hasar, a hand on her arm as if to say, *Caution*.

Not for what she was to reveal, but *how* Hasar was to reveal it.

Chaol glanced between Arghun and Hasar. From the prince and princess’s smirking, it was clear enough they were aware he hadn’t heard. But Chaol still seemed to be debating the merits of appearing knowledgeable, or admitting the truth—

Yrene spared him from the choice. “I have not heard it,” she said. “What has happened?”

Under the table, Chaol’s knee brushed hers in thanks. She told herself it was merely pleasure at the fact he *could* move that knee that coursed through her. Even as dread coiled in her gut.

“Well,” Hasar began, the opening chords to a dance she and Arghun had coordinated before this meal, “there have been some ... developments on the neighboring continent, it seems.”

Yrene now pressed *her* knee into Chaol’s, a silent solidarity. *Together*, she tried to say through touch alone.

Arghun said to Yrene, to Chaol, and then down to his father, “So many developments up north. Royals gone missing, now revealing themselves once more. Both Dorian Havilliard and the Terrasen Queen. The latter did it in such dramatic fashion, too.”

“Where,” Yrene whispered, because Chaol could not. Indeed, the breath had gone out of him at the mention of his own king.

Hasar smiled at Yrene—that pleased smile she’d given her upon arrival.

“Skull’s Bay.”

The lie, the guess that Chaol had given her to feed to the princess ... It had proved true.

She felt Chaol tense, though his face revealed nothing but bland interest. “A pirate port in the south, Great Khagan,” Chaol explained to Urus, seated down the table, as if he were indeed aware of this news—and a part of this conversation. “In the middle of a large archipelago.”

The khagan glanced to his visibly displeased viziers, and frowned with them. “And why would they appear in Skull’s Bay?”

Chaol had no answer, but Arghun was more than happy to supply it. “Because Aelin Galathynius thought to go head-to-head against the army Perrington had camped at the edge of the archipelago.”

Yrene slid her hand off the table—to grip Chaol’s knee. Tension radiated through every hard line of his body.

Duva asked, a hand on her growing belly, “Was the win in her favor, or Perrington’s?” As if it were a sporting match. Her husband was indeed peering down the table to see the heads swivel.

“Oh, in hers,” Hasar said. “We had eyes in the town already, so they were able to dispatch a full report.” That smug, secret smile again in Yrene’s direction. Spies she had sent using Yrene’s information. “Her power is considerable,” she added to her father. “Our sources say it burned the sky itself. And then wiped out most of the fleet assembled against her. In a single blow.”

Holy gods.

The viziers shifted, and the khagan’s face hardened. “The rumors of the glass castle’s destruction were not exaggerated, then.”

“No,” Arghun said mildly. “And her powers have grown since then. Along with her allies. Dorian Havilliard travels with her court. And Skull’s Bay and its Pirate Lord now kneel before her.”

Conqueror.

“They fight *with* her,” Chaol cut in. “Against Perrington’s forces.”

“Do they?” Hasar took up the assault, parrying with ease. “For it is not Perrington who is now sailing down Eyllwe’s coast, burning villages as he pleases.”

“That is a lie,” Chaol said too softly.

“Is it?” Arghun shrugged, then faced his father, the portrait of the concerned son. “No one has seen her, of course, but entire villages have been left in ash and ruin. They say she sails for Banjali, intent on strong-arming the Ytger family into mustering an army for her.”

“That is a *lie*,” Chaol snapped. His teeth flashed, viziers tittered and gasped, but he said to the khagan, “I know Aelin Galathynius, Great Khagan. It’s not her style, not in her nature. The Ytger family ...” He stalled.

Is important to her. Yrene felt the words on his tongue, as if they were on her own. The princess and Arghun leaned forward, waiting for confirmation. Proof of Aelin Galathynius’s potential weakness.

Not in magic, but in who was vital to her. And Eyllwe, lying between Perrington’s forces and the khaganate ... She could see the wheels turning in

their heads.

“The Ytger family would be better used as an ally from the south,” Chaol corrected, shoulders stiff. “Aelin is clever enough to know this.”

“And I’d suppose you know,” Hasar said, “since you were her lover at some point. Or was that King Dorian? Or both? The spies were never accurate on who was in her bed and when.”

Yrene swallowed her surprise. Chaol—and Aelin Galathynius?

“I know her well, yes,” Chaol said tightly.

His knee pressed into her own, as if to say, *Later. I will explain later.*

“But this *is* war,” Arghun countered. “War makes people do things they might not ordinarily consider.”

The condescension and mockery were enough to make Yrene grind her teeth. This was a planned attack, a temporary alliance between two siblings.

Kashin cut in, “Does she set her sights on these shores?” It was a soldier’s question. Meant to assess the threat to his land, his king.

Hasar picked at her nails. “Who knows? With such power ... Perhaps we’re all hers for the taking.”

“Aelin has one war to fight already,” Chaol ground out. “And she is no conqueror.”

“Skull’s Bay and Eyllwe would suggest otherwise.”

A vizier whispered in the khagan’s ear. Another leaned in to listen. Already calculating.

Chaol said to Urus, “Great Khagan, I know some might spin these tidings to appear to Aelin’s disadvantage, but I swear to you the Queen of Terrasen means only to liberate our land. My king would not ally with her if it were otherwise.”

“*Would* you swear it, though?” Hasar mused. “Swear on Yrene’s life?”

Chaol blinked at the princess.

“From all you have seen,” Hasar went on, “all you’ve witnessed of her character ... would you swear it upon Yrene Towers’s life that Aelin Galathynius

might not use such tactics? Might not try to *take* armies, rather than raise them? Including our own?”

Say yes. Say yes.

Chaol didn't so much as look at Yrene as he stared down Hasar, then Arghun. The khagan and his viziers pulled apart.

Chaol said nothing. Swore nothing.

Hasar's small smile was nothing short of triumphant. "I thought so."

Yrene's stomach turned.

The khagan took Chaol's measure. "If Perrington and Aelin Galathynius are rallying armies, perhaps they'll destroy each other and spare me the trouble."

A muscle flickered in Chaol's jaw.

"Perhaps if she's so powerful," Arghun mused, "she can take on Perrington by herself."

"Don't forget King Dorian," Hasar chimed in. "Why, I'd bet the two of them could handle Perrington and whatever army he's built without much assistance. Better to let them deal with it, than waste our blood on foreign soil."

Yrene was shaking. Trembling with—with *rage* at the careful play of words, the game Hasar and her brother had constructed to keep from sailing to war.

"But," Kashin countered, seeming to note Yrene's expression, "it might also be said that if we *do* assist such powerful royals, the benefits in years of peace might be far worth the risks now." He twisted to the khagan. "If we go to their aid, Father, should we ever face such a threat, imagine that power turned against our enemies."

"Or turned against us, if she finds it easier to break her oaths," Arghun cut in.

The khagan studied Arghun, his eldest son now frowning with distaste at Kashin. Duva, a hand still on her pregnant belly, only watched. Unnoted and unasked for, even by her husband.

Arghun turned back to his father. "Our people's magic is minimal. The Eternal Sky and the thirty-six gods blessed our healers mostly." A frown at

Yrene. “Against such power, what is steel and wood? Aelin Galathynius took Rifthold, then took Skull’s Bay, and now seems poised to take Eyllwe. A wise ruler would have gone north, fortified her kingdom, then pushed south from the borders. Yet she stretches her forces thin, dividing them between north and south. If she is not a fool, then her advisors are.”

“They are well-trained warriors, who have seen more war and battle than you ever will,” Chaol said coldly.

The eldest prince stiffened. Hasar laughed quietly.

The khagan again weighed the words around him. “This remains a matter to discuss in council rooms, not dinner tables,” he said, though there was no reassurance in it. Not for Chaol, not for Yrene. “Though I am inclined to agree with what the bare facts offer.”

To his credit, Chaol did not argue further. Did not flinch or scowl. He only nodded once. “I thank you for the honor of your continued consideration, Great Khagan.”

Arghun and Hasar swapped sneering looks. But the khagan just returned to his meal.

Neither Yrene nor Chaol touched the rest of their food.



Bitch. The princess was a bitch, and Arghun was as fine a bastard as any Chaol had ever encountered.

There was some truth to their reluctance—their fear of Aelin’s powers and the threat she might pose. But he read them. Knew Hasar simply did not *want* to leave the comforts of her home, her lover’s arms, to sail to war. Did not want the messiness of it.

And Arghun ... The man dealt in power, in knowledge. Chaol had no doubt Arghun’s arguing against him was more to force Chaol into a spot where he’d be desperate.

Even more than he was. Willing to offer anything up for their aid.

Kashin would do whatever his father told him. And as for the khagan ...

Hours later, Chaol was still grinding his teeth as he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. Yrene had left him with a squeeze to his shoulder, promising to see him the next day.

Chaol had barely been able to reply.

He should have lied. Should have sworn he trusted Aelin with his life.

Because Hasar had known that if she asked him to swear upon Yrene's life ...

Even if their thirty-six gods did not care about him, he couldn't risk it.

He had seen Aelin do terrible things.

He still dreamed of her gutting Archer Finn in cold blood. Still dreamed of what she'd left of Grave's body in that alley. Still dreamed of her butchering men like cattle, in Rifthold and in Endovier, and knew just how unfeeling and brutal she could turn. He had quarreled with her earlier this summer about it—the checks on her power. The lack of them.

Rowan was a good male. Utterly unafraid of Aelin, her magic. But would *she* listen to his counsel? Aedion and Aelin were as likely to come to blows as they were to agree, and Lysandra ... Chaol didn't know the shifter well enough to judge whether she'd keep Aelin in line.

Aelin had indeed changed—grown into a queen. Was still growing into one.

But he knew that there were no restraints, no inner ones, on how far Aelin would go to protect those she loved. Protect her kingdom. And if someone stood in her way, barred her from protecting them ... No lines existed to cross within Aelin in regard to that. No lines at all.

So he had not been able to swear it, on Yrene's life, that he believed Aelin might be above those sorts of methods. With her fraught history with Rolfe, she likely had used the might of her magic to intimidate him into joining their cause.

But with Eyllwe ... Had they given some sign of resistance, to prompt her to terrorize them? He couldn't imagine it, that Aelin would *consider* hurting

innocent people, let alone the people of her beloved friend. And yet she knew the risks that Perrington—Erawan posed. What he'd do to them all, if she did not band them together. By whatever means necessary.

Chaol rubbed his face. If Aelin had kept herself in check, if she'd played the part of distressed queen ... It would have made his task far easier.

Perhaps Aelin had cost them this war. This one shot at a future.

At least Dorian was accounted for—undoubtedly as safe as could be expected with Aelin's court for companions.

Chaol sent a silent prayer of thanks into the night for that small mercy.

A soft knock had him shooting up. Not from the foyer, but the glass doors to the garden.

His legs twitched, bending slightly at the knee—more reaction than controlled movement. He and Yrene had been going through the grueling leg routines twice a day, the various therapies buying him movement inch by inch. Along with the magic she poured into his body while he endured the darkness's horde of memories. He never told her what he saw, what left him screaming.

There was no point. And telling Yrene how badly he'd failed, how wrongly he'd judged, it made him just as nauseated. But what stood in the night-veiled garden ... Not a memory.

Chaol squinted into the dark at the tall male figure standing there, a hand raised in quiet greeting—Chaol's own hand drifting to the knife beneath his pillow. But the figure stepped closer to the lantern light, and Chaol blew out a breath and waved the prince in.

With a flick of a small knife, Kashin unlocked the garden door and slipped in.

"Lock-picking isn't a skill I'd expect a prince to possess," Chaol said by way of greeting.

Kashin lingered just inside the doorway, the lantern from outside illuminating enough of his face for Chaol to make out a half smile. "Learned more for sneaking in and out of ladies' bedrooms than stealing, I'm afraid."

“I thought your court was a bit more open in regard to that sort of thing than my own.”

That smile grew. “Perhaps, but cranky old husbands remain the same on either continent.”

Chaol chuckled, shaking his head. “What can I do for you, Prince?”

Kashin studied the door to the suite, Chaol doing the same—searching for any flickering shadows on the other side. When they both found none, Kashin said, “I assume you have discovered nothing within my court about who might be tormenting Yrene.”

“I wish I could say otherwise.” But with Nesryn gone, he’d had little chance to hunt through Antica for any signs of a would-be Valg agent. And things had indeed been quiet enough these three weeks that part of him had hoped they’d just ... left. A considerably calmer atmosphere had settled over the palace and Torre since then, as if the shadows were indeed behind them all.

Kashin nodded. “I know Sartaq departed with your captain to seek answers regarding this threat.”

Chaol didn’t dare confirm or deny. He wasn’t entirely certain where Sartaq had left things with his family, if he’d received his father’s blessing to go.

Kashin went on, “That might just be why my siblings mounted such a unified front against you tonight. If Sartaq himself takes this threat seriously, they know they might have a limited window to convince our father not to join this cause.”

“But if the threat is real,” Chaol said, “if it might spill into these lands, why not fight? Why not stop it before it can reach these shores?”

“Because it is war,” Kashin said, and the way he spoke, the way he stood, it somehow made Chaol feel young indeed. “And though the manner in which my siblings presented their argument was unpleasant, I suspect Arghun and Hasar are aware of the costs that joining your cause requires. Never before has the entire might of the khaganate’s armies been sent to a foreign land. Oh, some legions, whether it be the rukhin or the armada or my own horse-lords.

Sometimes united, but never all, never what you require. The cost of life, the sheer drain on our coffers ... it will be great. Don't make the mistake of believing my siblings don't understand that very, very well."

"And their fear of Aelin?"

Kashin snorted. "I cannot speak to that. Perhaps it is well founded. Perhaps it is not."

"So you snuck into my room to tell me?" He should speak with more respect, but—

"I came to tell you one more piece of information, which Arghun chose not to mention."

Chaol waited, wishing he weren't sitting in bed, bare from the waist up.

Kashin said, "We received a report from our vizier of foreign trade that a large, lucrative order had been placed for a relatively new weapon."

Chaol's breathing snagged. If Morath had found some way—

"It is called a firelance," Kashin said. "Our finest engineers made it by combining various weapons from across our continent."

Oh, gods. If Morath had it in its arsenal—

"Captain Rolfe ordered them for his fleet. Months ago."

Rolfe—"And when news arrived of Skull's Bay falling to Aelin Galathynius, it also came with an order for even more firelances to be shipped northward."

Chaol sorted through the information. "Why wouldn't Arghun say this at dinner?"

"Because the firelances are very, very expensive."

"Surely that's good for your economy."

"It is." And *not* good for Arghun's attempt to avoid this war.

Chaol fell silent for a heartbeat. "And you, Prince? Do you wish to join this war?"

Kashin didn't answer immediately. He scanned the room, the ceiling, the bed, and finally Chaol himself. "This will be the great war of our time," Kashin said

quietly. “When we are dead, when even our grandchildren’s grandchildren are dead, they will still be talking about this war. They will whisper of it around fires, sing of it in the great halls. Who lived and died, who fought and who cowered.” His throat bobbed. “My *sulde* blows northward—day and night, the horsehairs blow north. So perhaps I will find my destiny on the plains of Fenharrow. Or before the white walls of Orynth. But it is northward that I shall go—if my father will order me.”

Chaol mulled it over. Looked to the trunks against the wall near the bathing chamber.

Kashin had turned to leave when Chaol asked, “When does your father next meet with his foreign trade vizier?”

Nesryn had run out of time.

Falkan required ten days to recover, which had left her and Sartaq with too little time to visit the other watchtower ruins to the south. She'd tried to convince the prince to go without the shape-shifter, but he'd refused. Even with Borte now intent on joining them, he was taking no risks.

But Sartaq found other ways to fill their time. He'd taken Nesryn to other aeries to the north and west, where he met with the reigning hearth-mothers and the captains, both male and female, who led their forces.

Some were welcoming, greeting Sartaq with feasts and revels that lasted long into the night.

Some, like the Berlad, were aloof, their hearth-mothers and other various leaders not inviting them to stay for longer than necessary. Certainly not bringing out jugs of the fermented goat's milk that they drank—and that was strong enough to put hair on Nesryn's chest, face, and teeth. She'd nearly choked to death the first time she'd tried it, earning hearty claps on the back and a toast in her honor.

It was the warm welcome that still surprised her. The smiles of the rukhin who asked, some shyly, some boldly, for demonstrations with her bow and arrow. But for all she showed them, she, too, learned. Went soaring with Sartaq through the mountain passes, the prince calling out targets and Nesryn striking them, learning how to fire into the wind, *as the wind*.

He even let her ride Kadara alone—just once, and enough for her to again wonder how they let four-year-olds do it, but ... she'd never felt so unleashed.

So unburdened and unbridled and yet settled in herself.

So they went, clan to clan, hearth to hearth. Sartaq checking up on the riders and their training, stopping to visit new babes and ailing old folk. Nesryn remained his shadow—or tried to.

Anytime she lingered a step back, Sartaq nudged her forward. Anytime there was a task to be done with the others, he asked her to do it. The washing-up after a meal, the returning of arrows from target practice, the cleaning-out of the ruk droppings from halls and nests.

The last task, at least, the prince joined her in. No matter his rank, no matter his status as captain, he did every chore without a word of complaint. No one was above work, he told her when she'd asked one night.

And whether she was scraping crusted droppings from the ground or teaching young warriors how to string a bow, something restless in her had settled.

She could no longer picture it—the quiet meetings at the palace in Rifthold where she had given solemn guards their orders and then parted ways amongst marble floors and finery. Could not remember the city barracks, where she'd lurked in the back of a crowded room, gotten her orders, and then stood on a street corner for hours, watching people buy and eat and argue and walk about.

Another lifetime, another world.

Here in the deep mountains, breathing in the crisp air, seated around the fire pit to hear Houlun narrate tales of rukhin and the horse-lords, tales of the first khagan and his beloved wife, whom Borte had been named after ... She could not remember that life before.

And did not want to go back to it.

It was at one such fire, Nesryn combing out the tight braid that Borte had taught her to plait, that she surprised even herself.

Houlun had settled in, a whetstone in hand as she honed a dagger, preparing

to work while she talked to the small gathering—Sartaq, Borte, a gray-faced and limping Falkan, and six others who Nesryn had learned were Borte’s cousins of sorts. The hearth-mother scanned their faces, golden and flickering with the flame, and asked, “What of a tale from Adarlan instead?”

All eyes had turned to Nesryn and Falkan.

The shape-shifter winced. “I’m afraid mine are rather dull.” He considered. “I did have an interesting visit to the Red Desert once, but ...” He gestured as much as he could to Nesryn. “I should like to hear one of your stories first, Captain.”

Nesryn tried not to fidget under the weight of so many stares. “The stories I grew up with,” she admitted, “were mostly of you all, of these lands.” Broad smiles at that. Sartaq only winked. Nesryn ducked her head, face heating.

“Tell a story of the Fae, if you know them,” Borte suggested. “Of the Fae Prince you met.”

Nesryn shook her head. “I don’t have any of those—and I do not know him that well.” As Borte frowned, Nesryn added, “But I can sing for you.”

Silence.

Houlun set down her whetstone. “A song would be appreciated.” A scowl at Borte and Sartaq. “Since neither of my children can carry a tune to save their lives.” Borte rolled her eyes at her hearth-mother, but Sartaq bowed his head in apology, a crooked grin now on his mouth.

Nesryn smiled, even as her heart pounded at her bold offer. She’d never really performed for anyone, but this ... It was not performing, as much as it was sharing. She listened to the wind whispering outside the cave mouth for a long moment, the others falling quiet.

“This is a song of Adarlan,” she said at last. “From the foothills north of Rifthold, where my mother was born.” An old, familiar ache filled her chest. “She used to sing this to me—before she died.”

A glimmer of sympathy in Houlun’s steely gaze. But Nesryn glanced to Borte as she spoke, finding the young woman’s face unusually soft—staring at Nesryn

as if she had not seen her before. Nesryn gave her a small, subtle nod. *It is a weight we both bear.*

Borte offered a small, quiet smile in return.

Nesryn listened to the wind again. Let herself drift back to her pretty little bedroom in Rifthold, let herself feel her mother's silken hands stroking her face, her hair. She had been so taken with her father's stories of his far-off homeland, of the ruks and horse-lords, that she had rarely asked for anything about Adarlan itself, despite being a child of both lands.

And this song of her mother's ... One of the few stories she had, in the form she loved best. Of her homeland in better days. And she wanted to share it with them—that glimpse into what her land might again become.

Nesryn cleared her throat. Took a bracing breath.

And then she opened her mouth and sang.

The crackle of the fire her only drum, Nesryn's voice filled the Mountain-Hall of Altun, wending through the ancient pillars, bouncing off the carved rock.

She had the sense of Sartaq going very still, had the sense that there was nothing hard or laughing on his face.

But she focused on the song, on those long-ago words, that story of distant winters and speckles of blood on snow; that story of mothers and their daughters, how they loved and fought and tended to each other.

Her voice soared and fell, bold and graceful as a ruk, and Nesryn could have sworn that even the howling winds paused to listen.

And when she finished, a gilded, high note of the spring sun breaking across cold lands, when silence and the crackling fire filled the world once more ...

Borte was crying. Silent tears streaming down her pretty face. Houlun's hand was tightly wrapped around her granddaughter's, the whetstone set aside. A wound still healing—for both of them.

And perhaps Sartaq, too—for grief limned his face. Grief, and awe, and perhaps something infinitely more tender as he said, "Another tale to spread of

Neith's Arrow."

She ducked her head again, accepting the praise of the others with a smile. Falkan clapped as best he could manage and called for another song.

Nesryn, to her surprise, obliged them. A merry, bright mountain song her father had taught her, of rushing streams amid blooming fields of wildflowers.

But even as the night moved on, as Nesryn sang in that beautiful mountain-hall, she felt Sartaq's stare. Different from any he'd given before.

And though she told herself she should, Nesryn did not look away.



A few days later, when Falkan had at last healed, they dared venture down to the three other watchtowers Houlun had discovered.

They found nothing at the first two, both far enough to require separate trips. Houlun had forbidden them from camping in the wilds—so rather than risk her wrath, they returned each night, then stayed a few days to let Kadara and Arcas, Borte's sweet ruk, rest from being pushed so hard.

Sartaq warmed only a fraction to the shape-shifter. He watched Falkan as carefully as Kadara did, but at least attempted to make conversation now and then.

Borte, on the other hand, peppered Falkan with an endless stream of questions while they combed through ruins that were little more than rubble. *What does it feel like to be a duck, paddling beneath water but gliding so smoothly over the surface?*

When you eat as an animal, does the meat all fit in your human stomach?

Do you have to wait between eating as an animal and shifting back into a human because of it?

Do you defecate as an animal?

The last one earned a sharp laugh from Sartaq at least. Even if Falkan had gone red and avoided answering the question.

But after visiting two watchtowers, they had found nothing on why they had been built and who those long-ago guardians had battled—or *how* they had defeated them.

And with one tower left ... Nesryn had done a tally of the days and realized that the three weeks she had promised Chaol were over.

Sartaq had known, too. Had sought her out as she stood in one of the ruk nests, admiring the birds resting or preening or sailing out. She often came here during quieter afternoons, just to observe the birds: their sharp-eyed intelligence, their loving bonds.

She was leaning against the wall beside the door when he emerged. For several minutes, they stood watching a mated pair nuzzle each other before one hopped to the edge of the massive cave mouth and dropped into the void below.

“That one over there,” the prince said at last, pointing to a reddish-brown ruk sitting by the opposite wall. She’d seen the ruk often—mostly noting that he was alone, never visited by a rider, unlike some of the others. “His rider died a few months back. Clutched at his chest in a meal and died. The rider was old, but the ruk ...” Sartaq smiled sadly at the bird. “He’s young—not yet four.”

“What happens to the ones whose riders die?”

“We offer them freedom. Some fly off to the wilds. Some remain.” Sartaq crossed his arms. “He remained.”

“Do they ever get new riders?”

“Some do. If they accept them. It is the ruk’s choice.”

Nesryn heard the invitation in his voice. Read it in the prince’s eyes.

Her throat tightened. “Our three weeks are up.”

“Indeed they are.”

She faced the prince fully, tilting her head back to see his face. “We need more time.”

“So what did you say?”

A simple question.

But she'd taken hours to figure out how to word her letter to Chaol, then given it to Sartaq's fastest messenger. "I asked for another three weeks."

He angled his head, watching her with that unrelenting intensity. "A great deal can happen in three weeks."

Nesryn made herself keep her shoulders squared, chin high. "Even so, at the end of it, I must return to Antica."

Sartaq nodded, though something like disappointment guttered his eyes. "Then I suppose the ruk in the aerie will have to wait for another rider to come along."

That had been a day ago. The conversation that left her unable to look too long in the prince's direction.

And during the hours-long flight this morning, she'd snuck a glance or two over to where Kadara sailed, Sartaq and Falkan on her back.

Now Kadara swung wide, spying the final tower far below, located on a rare plain amid the hills and peaks of the Tavan Mountains. This late in the summer, it was awash with emerald grasses and sapphire streams—the ruin little more than a heap of stone.

Borte steered Arcas with a whistle through her teeth and a tug on the reins, the ruk banking left before leveling out. She was a skilled rider, bolder than Sartaq, mostly thanks to her ruk's smaller size and agility. She'd won the past three annual racing contests between all the clans—competitions of agility, speed, and quick thinking.

"Did you pick Arcas," Nesryn asked over the wind, "or did she pick you?"

Borte leaned forward to pat the ruk's neck. "It was mutual. I saw that fuzzy head pop out of the nest, and I was done. Everyone told me to pick a bigger chick; my mother herself scolded me." A sad smile at that. "But I knew Arcas was mine. I saw her, and I knew."

Nesryn fell silent while they aimed for the pretty plain and ruin, the sunlight dancing on Kadara's wings.

“You should take that ruk in the aerie for a flight sometime,” Borte said, letting Arcas descend into a smooth landing. “Test him out.”

“I’m leaving soon. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.”

“I know. But perhaps you should, anyway.”



Borte loved finding the traps hidden by the Fae.

Which was fine by Nesryn, since the girl was far better at sussing them out.

This tower, to Borte’s disappointment, had suffered a collapse at some point, blocking the lower levels. And above them, only a chamber open to the sky remained.

Which was where Falkan came in.

As the shifter’s form blended and shrank, Sartaq did not bother to hide his shudder. And he shuddered once more when the fallen block of stone Falkan had been sitting on now revealed a millipede. Who promptly stood up and waved to them with its countless little legs.

Nesryn cringed with distaste, even as Borte laughed and waved back.

But off Falkan went, slithering between the fallen stones, to glean what might remain below.

“I don’t know why it bothers you so,” Borte said to Sartaq, clicking her tongue. “I think it’s delightful.”

“It’s not *what* he is,” Sartaq admitted, watching the pile of rock for the millipede’s return. “It’s the idea of bone melting, flesh flowing like water ...” He shivered and turned to Nesryn. “Your friend—the shifter. It never bothered you?”

“No,” Nesryn answered plainly. “I didn’t even see her shift until that day your scouts reported on.”

“The Impossible Shot,” Sartaq murmured. “So it truly was a shifter that you saved.”

Nesryn nodded. “Her name is Lysandra.”

Borte nudged Sartaq with an elbow. “Don’t you wish to go north, brother? To meet all these people Nesryn talks of? Shifters and fire-breathing queens and Fae Princes ...”

“I’m beginning to think your obsession with anything related to the Fae might be unhealthy,” Sartaq grumbled.

“I only took a dagger or two,” Borte insisted.

“You carried so many back from the last watchtower that poor Arcas could barely get off the ground.”

“It’s for my trading business,” Borte huffed. “Whenever our people get their heads out of their asses and remember that we *can* have a profitable one.”

“No wonder you’ve taken so much to Falkan,” Nesryn said, earning a jab in the ribs from Borte. Nesryn batted her away, chuckling.

Borte put her hands on her hips. “I will have you both know—”

The words were cut off by a scream.

Not from Falkan below.

But from outside. From Kadara.

Nesryn had an arrow drawn and aimed before they rushed out onto the field.

Only to find it filled with ruks. And grim-faced riders.

Sartaq sighed, shoulders slumping. But Borte shoved past them, cursing filthily as she kept her sword out—indeed an Asterion-forged blade from the arsenal at the last watchtower.

A young man of around Nesryn’s age had dismounted from his ruk, the bird a brown so dark it was nearly black, and he now swaggered toward them, a smirk on his handsome face. It was to him that Borte stormed, practically stomping through the high grasses.

The unit of rukhin looked on, imperious and cold. None bowed to Sartaq.

“What in *hell* are you doing here?” Borte demanded, a hand on her hip as she stopped a healthy distance from the young man.

He wore leathers like hers, but the colors of the band around his arm ... The Berlad. The least welcoming of all the aeries they'd visited, and one of the more powerful. Its riders had been meticulously trained, their caves immaculately clean.

The young man ignored Borte and called to Sartaq, "We spotted your ruks while flying overhead. You are far from your aerie, Captain."

Careful questions.

Borte hissed, "Be gone, Yeran. No one invited you here."

Yeran lifted a cool brow. "Still yapping, I see."

Borte spat at his feet. The other riders tensed, but she glared at them.

They all lowered their stares.

Behind them, stone crunched, and Yeran's eyes flared, his knees bending as if he'd lunge for Borte—to hurl her behind him as Falkan emerged from the ruin.

In wolf form.

But Borte stepped out of Yeran's reach and declared sweetly, "My new pet."

Yeran gaped between girl and wolf as Falkan sat beside Nesryn. She couldn't resist scratching his fuzzy ears.

To his credit, the shape-shifter let her, even turning his head into her palm.

"Strange company you keep these days, Captain," Yeran managed to say to Sartaq.

Borte snapped her fingers in his face. "You cannot address me?"

Yeran gave her a lazy smile. "Do you finally have something worth hearing?"

Borte bristled. But Sartaq, smiling faintly, strolled to his hearth-sister's side. "We have business in these parts and stopped for refreshment. What brings you so far south?"

Yeran wrapped a hand around the hilt of a long knife at his side. "Three hatchlings went missing. We thought to track them, but have found nothing."

Nesryn's stomach tightened, imagining those spiders scuttling through the aeries, between the ruks, to the fuzzy chicks so fiercely guarded. To the human

families sleeping so close by.

“When were they taken?” Sartaq’s face was hard as stone.

“Two nights ago.” Yeran rubbed his jaw. “We suspected poachers, but there was no human scent, no tracks or camp.”

Look up. The bloody warning at the Watchtower of Eidolon rang through her mind.

Through Sartaq’s, if the tightening of his jaw was any indication.

“Go back to your aerie, Captain,” Sartaq said to Yeran, pointing to the wall of mountains beyond the plain, the gray rock so bare compared to the life humming around them. Always—the Dagul Fells always seemed to be watching. Waiting. “Do not track any farther than here.”

Wariness flooded Yeran’s brown eyes as he glanced between Borte and Sartaq, then over to Nesryn and Falkan. “The *kharankui*.”

The riders stirred. Even the ruks rustled their wings at the name, as if they, too, knew it.

But Borte declared, loud for all to hear, “You heard my brother. Crawl back to your aerie.”

Yeran gave her a mocking bow. “Go back to yours, and I will return to mine, Borte.”

She bared her teeth at him.

But Yeran mounted his ruk with easy, powerful grace, the others flapping away at a jerk of his chin. He waited until they had all soared into the skies before saying to Sartaq, “If the *kharankui* have begun to stir, we need to muster a host to drive them back. Before it is too late.”

A wind tugged at Sartaq’s braid, blowing it toward those mountains. Nesryn wished she could see his face, what might be on it at the mention of a host.

“It will be dealt with,” Sartaq said. “Be on your guard. Keep children and hatchlings close.”

Yeran nodded gravely, a soldier receiving an order from a commander—a

captain ordered by his prince. Then he looked over to Borte.

She gave him a vulgar gesture.

Yeran only winked at her before he whistled to his ruk and shot into the skies, leaving a mighty breeze behind that set Borte's braids swinging.

Borte watched Yeran until he was sailing toward the mass of the others, then spat on the ground where his ruk had stood. "Bastard," she hissed, and whirled, storming to Nesryn and Falkan.

The shifter changed, swaying as his human form returned. "Nothing down below worth seeing," he announced as Sartaq prowled over to where they had gathered.

Nesryn frowned at the Fells. "I think it's time we craft a different strategy anyway."

Sartaq followed her gaze, coming close enough to her side that the heat from his body leaked into hers. Together, they stared toward that wall of mountains. What waited beyond.

"That young captain, Yeran," Falkan said carefully to Borte. "You seem to know him well."

Borte scowled. "He's my betrothed."

They didn't get to Leriba. Or to Banjali. They didn't even get close.

Lorcan felt the push on his shoulder that had guided and shaped the course of his life—that invisible, insistent hand of shadow and death. So they went south, then west, sailing swiftly down the network of waterways through Eyllwe.

Elide didn't object or question when he explained that if Hellas himself was nudging him, that the queen they hunted was likely in that direction. Wherever it would lead. There were no cities out there, only endless grasslands that skirted Oakwald's southernmost tip, then marshes. The abandoned peninsula full of ruins among the marshes.

But if that was where he was told to go ... The dark god's touch on his shoulder had never steered him wrong. So he'd see what he'd find.

He did not let himself dwell too long on the fact that Elide carried a Wyrkey. That she was trying to bring it to his enemy. Perhaps his power's summons would lead them both to it—to her.

And then he'd have two keys, if he played his cards right.

If he was smarter and faster and more ruthless than the others.

Then the most dangerous part of all: traveling with two keys in his possession, into the heart of Morath, to hunt down the third. Speed would be his best ally and only shot at survival.

And he'd likely never see Elide or any of the others again.

They'd at last abandoned their barge that morning, cramming whatever supplies would fit into their packs before setting off through the rippling grasses. Hours later, Elide's breathing was ragged as they ascended a steep hill deep in the plain. He'd been scenting brine for two days now—they had to be close to the edge of the marshes. Elide swallowed hard, and he passed her the canteen as they crested the summit of the hill.

But Elide halted, arms slackening at her sides.

And Lorcan himself froze at what spread before them.

“What is this place?” Elide breathed, as if fearful the land itself would hear.

As far as the eye could see, flowing into the horizon, the land had sunk a

good thirty feet—a severe, brutal crack from the edge of the cliff, not hill, on which they stood, as if some furious god had stomped a foot across the plain and left an imprint.

Silvery brackish water covered most of it, still as a mirror, interrupted only by grassy islands and mounds of earth—and crumbling, exquisite ruins.

“This is a bad place,” Elide whispered. “We shouldn’t be here.”

Indeed, the hair on his arms had risen, every instinct on alert as he scanned the marshes, the ruins, the brambles, and thick foliage that had choked some of the islands.

Even the god of death halted his nudging and ducked behind Lorcan’s shoulder.

“What do you sense?”

Her lips were bloodless. “Silence. Life, but such ... silence. As if ...”

“As if what?” he pushed.

Her words were a shudder of breath. “As if all the people who once lived here, long ago, are still trapped inside—still ... beneath.” She pointed to a ruin—a curved, broken dome of what had likely been a ballroom attached to the spire. A palace. “I don’t think this is a place for the living, Lorcan. The beasts in these waters ... I do not think they tolerate trespassers. Nor do the dead.”

“Is it the stone or the goddess who watches you telling you such things?”

“It’s my heart that murmurs a warning. Anneith is silent. I don’t think she wants to be anywhere near. I don’t think she will follow.”

“She came to Morath, but not here?”

“What is inside these marshes?” she asked instead. “Why is Aelin headed into them?”

That, it seemed, was the question. For if they picked up on it, surely the queen and Whitethorn would sense it, too—and only a great reward or threat would drive them here.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “No towns or outposts exist anywhere nearby.” Yet this was where the dark god had led him—and where that hand still pushed him to venture, even if it quaked.

Nothing but ruins and dense foliage on those too-small islands of safety from whatever dwelled beneath the glassy water.

But Lorcan obeyed the nudging god at his shoulder and led the Lady of Perranth onward.



“Who lived here?” Elide asked, staring at the weather-worn face of the statue jutting from a near-collapsed stone wall. It teetered on the outer edge of the little island they were standing on, and the moss-speckled woman carved there had no doubt once been beautiful, as well as a bit of support for beams and a roof that had since rotted away. But the veil she’d been carved wearing now seemed like a death shroud. Elide shivered.

“This place was forgotten and wrecked centuries before I was even born,” Lorcan said.

“Did it belong to Eyllwe?”

“It was a part of a kingdom that is now gone, a lost people who wandered and merged with those of different lands.”

“They must have been very talented, to have made such beautiful buildings.”

Lorcan grunted in agreement. It had been two days of inching across the marshes—no sign of Aelin. They had slept in the shelter of the ruins, though neither of them really got true rest. Elide’s dreams had been filled with the pale, milky-eyed faces of people she’d never met, crying out in supplication as water shoved down their throats, their noses. Even waking, she could see them, hear their cries on the wind.

Just the breeze through the stones, Lorcan grumbled that first day.

But she’d seen it in his eyes. He heard the dead, too.

Heard the thunder of the cataclysm that had dropped the land right from underneath them, heard the rushing water that devoured them all before they could run. Curious beasts from sea and swamp and river had converged in the years following, making the ruins a hunting ground, feasting on one another when the waterlogged corpses ran out. Changing, adapting—growing fatter and cleverer than their ancestors had been.

It was thanks to those beasts that it took so long to cross the marshes. Lorcan would scan the too-still water between those islands of safety. Sometimes it was clear to wade through the chest-deep, salty water. Sometimes it was not.

Sometimes even the islands were not safe. Twice now, she’d spotted a long, scaled tail—plated like armor—sliding behind a stone wall or broken pillar. Thrice, she’d seen great golden eyes, slitted down the pupil, watching from the reeds.

Lorcan had hauled her over a shoulder and run whenever they realized they were not alone.

Then there were the snakes—who liked to dangle from the wraithlike trees draining an existence from the islands. And the incessant, biting midges, who

were nothing compared to the clouds of mosquitoes that sometimes hounded them for hours. Or until Lorcan sent a wave of his dark power into them and they all dropped to the earth in a dark rain.

But every time he killed ... she felt the earth shudder. Not in fear of him ... but as if it were awakening. Listening.

Wondering who dared walk across it.

On the fourth night, Elide was so tired, so on edge, she wanted to whimper as they curled into a rare sanctuary: a ruined hall, with part of its mezzanine intact. It was open to the sky, and vines choked the three walls, but the stone stair had been solid—and was high enough off the island that nothing might crawl out of the water to prey upon them. Lorcan had rigged the base and top of the stairs with trip wires of vines and branches—to alert them if any beasts slithered up the steps.

They didn't dare risk a fire, but it was warm enough that she didn't miss one. Lying beside Lorcan, his body a solid wall between her and the stone to her left, Elide watched the flickering stars, the drowsy buzz of insects a constant drone in her ears. Something roared in the distance.

The insects paused. The marsh seemed to turn its attention toward that feral, deep roar.

Slowly, life resumed again—though quieter. Lorcan murmured, “Sleep, Elide.”

She swallowed, her fear thick in her blood. “What was that?”

“One of the beasts—either a mating call or territorial warning.”

She didn't want to know how big they were. Glimpses of eyes and tails were enough.

“Tell me about her,” Elide whispered. “Your queen.”

“I doubt it'll help you sleep any better.”

She turned onto her other side, finding him lying on his back, watching the sky. “Will she truly kill you for what you've done?” A nod. “Yet you risk it—for her sake.” She propped her head up with a fist. “Do you love her?”

Those eyes, darker than the gaps between the stars, slid to her. “I have been in love with Maeve since I first laid eyes on her.”

“Are you—are you her lover?” She had not dared ask it, hadn't really wanted to know.

“No. I offered once. She laughed at me for the insolence.” His mouth tightened. “So I have made myself invaluable in other ways.”

Again, that roar in the distance that silenced the world for a few heartbeats.

Was it closer, or had she imagined it? When she glanced back at him, Lorcan's eyes were on her mouth.

She said, "Perhaps she uses your love to her own advantage. Perhaps it's in her best interest to drag you along. Maybe she'll change her mind when you seem the most likely to ... leave."

"I am blood-sworn to her. I will never leave."

Her chest hurt at that. "Then she can rest assured knowing you'll pine after her for eternity."

The words came out sharper than she intended, and she made to look at the stars, but Lorcan gripped her chin, faster than she could detect. He peered into her eyes, scanning them. "Do not make the mistake of believing me to be a romantic fool. I do not hold any shred of hope for her."

"Then that does not seem like love at all."

"And what do you know of love?" He was so close—had neared without her realizing it.

"I think love should make you happy," Elide said, remembering her mother and father. How often they had smiled and laughed, how they had gazed at each other. "It should make you into the best possible version of yourself."

"Are you implying I am neither of those things?"

"I don't think you even know what happiness is."

His face grew grave—thoughtful. "I do not mind ... being around you."

"Is that a compliment?"

A half smile cut across his granite-hewn face. And she wanted ... wanted to touch it. That smile, that mouth. With her fingers, her own lips. It made him younger, made him ... handsome.

So she reached up with trembling fingers and touched his lips.

Lorcan froze, still half above her, his eyes solemn and intent.

But she traced the contours of his mouth, finding the skin there soft and warm, such a contrast to the harsh words that usually came out of it.

She reached the outer corner of his lips, and he turned his face into her hand, resting his rough cheek against her palm. His eyes grew heavy-lidded as she brushed a thumb over the hard plane of his cheekbone.

Elide whispered, "I would hide you. In Perranth. If you ... if you do what you need to do, and need somewhere to go ... You would have a place there. With me."

His eyes snapped open, but there was nothing hard, nothing cold, about the light shining in them. "I would be a dishonored male—it'd reflect poorly upon

you.”

“If anyone thinks that, they would have no place in Perranth.”

His throat bobbed. “Elide, you need to—”

But she rose up slightly, replacing her mouth where her fingers had been.

The kiss was soft, and quiet, and brief. Barely a grazing of her lips against his.

She thought Lorcan might have been trembling as she pulled back. As heat bloomed across her cheeks. But she made herself say, surprised to find her voice steady, “You don’t need to answer me now. Or ever. You could show up on my doorstep in ten years, and the offer would still stand. But there is a place for you, in Perranth—if you should ever need or wish for it.”

Something like agony rippled in his eyes, the most human expression she’d seen him make.

But he leaned forward, and despite the marshes, despite what gathered in the world, for the first time in ten years, Elide found herself not at all afraid as Lorcan caressed her lips with his own. Not afraid of anything as he did it again, kissing one corner of her mouth, then the other.

Such gentle, patient kisses—his hands equally so as they stroked the hair back from her brow, as they trailed over her hips, her ribs. She lifted her own hands to his face and dragged her fingers into his silken hair as she arched up into him, craving the weight of his body on hers.

Lorcan’s tongue brushed against the seam of her mouth, and Elide marveled at how natural it felt to open for him, how her body *sang* at the contact, his hardness against her softness. Lorcan groaned at the first caress of his tongue against her own, his hips grinding against hers in a way that made heat scorch through her, made her own body undulate against his in answer and demand.

He kissed her deeper at that request, a hand sliding down to grip her thigh, spreading her legs a bit wider so he could settle fully between them. And as all of him lined up with her ... She was panting, she realized, as she ground herself against him, as Lorcan tore his mouth from hers and kissed her jaw, her neck, her ear. She was trembling—not with fear, but with *want* as Lorcan breathed her name over and over onto her skin.

Like a prayer, that was how her name sounded on his lips. She took his face in her hands, finding his eyes blazing, his breathing as ragged as her own.

Elide dared to run her fingers from his cheek down his neck, right beneath the collar of his shirt. His skin was like heated silk. He shuddered at the touch, head bowing so that his inky hair spilled onto her brow, and his hips drove into

hers just enough that a small gasp came out of her. More, she realized—she wanted *more*.

His eyes met hers in silent question, her hand pausing over the skin above his heart. It was a raging, thunderous beat.

She lifted her head to kiss him, and as her mouth again met his, she whispered her answer—

Lorcan's head snapped up. He was instantly on his feet, whirling toward the northeast.

Where a darkness had begun to spread across the stars, wiping them out one by one.

Any bit of heat, of desire, winked out of her.

“Is that a storm?”

“We need to run,” Lorcan said. But it was the dead of the night—dawn was at least six hours off. To cross the marshes now ... More and more stars were gobbled up by that gathering darkness.

“What is that?” It spread farther with each heartbeat. Far out, even the marsh beasts stopped roaring.

“Ilken,” Lorcan murmured. “That is an army of ilken.”

Elide knew they weren't coming for her.

Though Kashin might have been loath to push his father in public or private, he certainly was not without his resources. And as Chaol approached the sealed doors to the khagan's trade meeting, he hid his grin when he discovered Hashim, Shen, and two other guards he'd trained with stationed outside. Shen winked at him, his armor glinting in the watery morning sunlight, and swiftly knocked with his artificial hand before opening the door.

Chaol didn't dare give Shen, Hashim, or the other guards so much as a nod of gratitude or acknowledgment. Not as he wheeled his chair into the sun-drenched council room and found the khagan and three golden-robed viziers around a long table of black polished wood.

They all stared at him in silence. But Chaol kept approaching the table, his head high, face set in a pleasant, subdued smile. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but there is a matter I should like to discuss."

The khagan's lips pressed into a tight line. He wore a light green tunic and dark trousers, cut close enough to reveal the warrior's body still lurking beneath the aged exterior. "I have told you time and again, Lord Westfall, that you should speak to my Chief Vizier"—a nod to the sour-faced man across from him—"if you wish to arrange a meeting."

Chaol halted before the table, flexing and shifting his feet. He'd gone through as much of his leg exercises as he could this morning after his workout with the palace guard, and though he'd regained movement up to his knees, placing

weight on them, *standing* ...

He cast the thought from his mind. Standing or sitting had nothing to do with it—this moment.

He could still speak with dignity and command whether he stood on his feet or was laid flat on his back. The chair was no prison, nothing that made him lesser.

So Chaol bowed his head, smiling faintly. “With all due respect, Great Khagan, I am not here to meet with you.”

Urus blinked, his only show of surprise as Chaol inclined his head to the man in sky-blue robes whom Kashin had described. “I am here to speak to your foreign trade vizier.”

The vizier glanced between his khagan and Chaol, as if ready to proclaim his innocence, even as interest gleamed in his brown eyes. But he did not dare speak.

Chaol held the khagan’s stare for long seconds.

He didn’t remind himself that he had interrupted a private meeting of perhaps the most powerful man in the world. Didn’t remind himself that he was a guest in a foreign court and the fate of his friends and countrymen depended on what he accomplished here. He just stared at the khagan, man to man, warrior to warrior.

He had fought a king before and lived to tell.

The khagan at last jerked his chin to an empty spot at the table. Not a ringing welcome, but better than nothing.

Chaol nodded his thanks and approached, keeping his breathing even while he looked all four men in the eye and said to the vizier of foreign trade, “I received word that two large orders of firelances have been placed by Captain Rolfe’s armada, one prior to Aelin Galathynius’s arrival in Skull’s Bay, and an even larger one afterward.”

The khagan’s white brows flicked up. The foreign trade vizier shifted in his

seat, but nodded. “Yes,” he said in Chaol’s tongue. “That is true.”

“How much, exactly, would you say each firelance costs?”

The viziers glanced among one another, and it was another man, whom Chaol presumed to be the domestic trade vizier, that named the sum.

Chaol only waited. Kashin had told him the astronomical number last night. And, just as he’d gambled, the khagan whipped his head to the vizier at that cost.

Chaol asked, “And how many are now being sent to Rolfe—and thus to Terrasen?”

Another number. Chaol let the khagan do the math. Watched from the corner of his eye as the khagan’s brows rose even higher.

The Chief Vizier braced his forearms on the table. “Are you trying to convince us of Aelin Galathynius’s good or ill intentions, Lord Westfall?”

Chaol ignored the barb. He simply said to the foreign trade vizier, “I would like to place another order. I would like to double the Queen of Terrasen’s order, actually.”

Silence.

The foreign trade vizier looked like he’d flip over in his chair.

But the Chief Vizier sneered, “With what money?”

Chaol turned a lazy grin on the man. “I came here with four trunks of priceless treasure.” A kingdom’s ransom, as it were. “I think it should cover the cost.”

Utter quiet once more.

Until the khagan asked his foreign trade vizier, “And will it cover the cost?”

“The treasure would have to be assessed and weighed—”

“It is already being done,” Chaol said, leaning back in his chair. “You shall have the number by this afternoon.”

Another beat of silence. Then the khagan murmured in Halha to the foreign trade vizier, who gathered up his papers and scurried out of the room with a wary glance at Chaol. A flat word from the khagan to his Chief Vizier and the

domestic trade vizier, and both men also left, the former throwing another cold sneer Chaol's way before departing.

Alone with the khagan, Chaol waited in silence.

Urus rose from his chair, stalking to the wall of windows that overlooked a blooming, shaded garden. "I suppose you think you are very clever, to use this to get an audience with me."

"I spoke true," Chaol said. "I wished to discuss the deal with your foreign trade vizier. Even if your armies will not join us, I don't see how anyone can object to our purchase of your weapons."

"And no doubt, this was meant to make me realize how lucrative this war might be, if your side is willing to invest in our resources."

Chaol remained silent.

The khagan turned from the garden view, the sunlight making his white hair glow. "I do not appreciate being manipulated into this war, Lord Westfall."

Chaol held the man's stare, even as he gripped the arms of his chair.

The khagan asked quietly, "Do you even know what warfare *is*?"

Chaol clenched his jaw. "I suppose I'm about to find out, aren't I."

The khagan didn't so much as smile. "It is not mere battles and supplies and strategy. Warfare is the absolute dedication of one army against their enemies." A long, weighing look. "That is what you stand against—Morath's rallied, solid front. Their conviction in decimating you into dust."

"I know that well."

"Do you? Do you understand what Morath is doing to you already? They build and plan and strike, and you can barely keep up. You are playing by the rules Perrington sets—and you will lose because of it."

His breakfast turned over in his stomach. "We might still triumph."

The khagan shook his head once. "To do that, your triumph must be complete. Every last bit of resistance squashed."

His legs itched—and he shifted his feet just barely. *Stand*, he willed them.

Stand.

He pushed his feet down, muscles barking in protest.

“Which is why,” Chaol snarled as his legs refused to obey, “we need your armies to aid us.”

The khagan glanced toward Chaol’s straining feet, as if he could see the struggle waging in his body. “I do not appreciate being hunted like some prize stag in a wood. I told you to wait; I told you to grant me the respect of grieving for my daughter—”

“And what if I told you that your daughter might have been murdered?”

Silence, horrible and hollow, filled the space between them.

Chaol snapped, “What if I told you that agents of Perrington might be here, and might already be hunting *you*, manipulating *you* into or out of this?”

The khagan’s face tightened. Chaol braced himself for the roaring, for Urus to perhaps draw the long, jeweled knife at his side and slam it into his chest. But the khagan only said quietly, “You are dismissed.”

As if the guards had listened to every word, the doors cracked open, a grim-faced Hashim beckoning Chaol toward the wall.

Chaol didn’t move. Footsteps approached from behind. To physically remove him.

He slammed his feet into the pedals of his chair, pushing and straining, gritting his teeth. Like hell they’d haul him out of here; like hell he’d let them drag him away—

“I came to not only save my people, but *all* peoples of this world,” Chaol growled at the khagan.

Someone—Shen—gripped the handles of his chair and began to turn him.

Chaol twisted, teeth bared at the guard. “*Don’t touch it.*”

But Shen didn’t release the handles, even as apology shone in his eyes. He knew—Chaol realized the guard knew just how it felt to have the chair touched, moved, without being asked. Just as Chaol knew what defying the khagan’s

order to escort him from the room might mean for Shen.

So Chaol again fixed his stare on the khagan. “Your city is the greatest I have ever laid eyes upon, your empire the standard by which all others should be measured. When Morath comes to lay waste to it, who will stand with you if we are all carrion?”

The khagan’s eyes burned like coals.

Shen kept pushing his chair toward that door.

Chaol’s arms shook with the effort to keep from shoving the guard away, his legs trembling as he tried and tried to rise. Chaol looked over his shoulder and growled, “I stood on the wrong side of the line for too damn long, and it cost me *everything*. Do not make the same mistakes that I—”

“Do not presume to tell a khagan what he must do,” Urus said, his eyes like chips of ice. He jerked his chin to the guards shifting on their feet at the door. “Escort Lord Westfall back to his rooms. Do not allow him into my meetings again.”

The threat lay beneath the calm, cold words. Urus had no need to raise his voice, to roar to make his promise of punishment clear enough to the guards.

Chaol pushed and pushed against his chair, arms straining as he fought to stand, to even rise slightly.

But then Shen had his chair through the doors, and down the gleaming bright hallways.

Still his body did not obey. Did not answer.

The doors to the khagan’s council chamber shut with a soft click that reverberated through Chaol’s every bone and muscle, the sound more damning than any word the khagan had uttered.



Yrene had left Chaol to his thoughts the night before.

Left them as she stormed back to the Torre and decided that Hasar ... Oh, she

did not mind manipulating the princess one bit. And realized precisely how she'd get the princess to invite her to that damned oasis.

But it seemed that even a morning in the training ring with the guards had not soothed the jagged edge in Chaol's own temper. The temper still simmering as he waited in the sitting room while Yrene sent Kadja off on another fool's errand—*twine, goat's milk, and vinegar*—and at last readied to work on him.

Summer was boiling toward a steamy close, the wild winds of autumn beginning to lash at the waters of the turquoise bay. It was always warm in Antica, but the Narrow Sea turned rough and unwieldy from Yulemas to Beltane. If an armada did not sail from the southern continent before then ... Well, Yrene supposed that after last night, one wouldn't sail anyway.

Sitting near their usual gold couch, Chaol didn't greet her with more than a cursory glance. Not at all like his usual grim smile. And the shadows under his eyes ... Any thought of rushing in here to tell him of her plan flowed out of Yrene's head as she asked, "Were you up all night?"

"For parts of it," he said, his voice low.

Yrene approached the couch but did not sit. Instead, she simply watched him, folding her arms across her abdomen. "Perhaps the khagan will consider. He's aware of how his children scheme. He's too smart not to have seen Arghun and Hasar working in tandem—for once—and to not be suspicious."

"And you know the khagan so well?" A cold, biting question.

"No, but I've certainly lived here a good deal longer than you have."

His brown eyes flashed. "I don't have two years to spare. To play their games."

And she did, apparently.

Yrene stifled her irritation. "Well, brooding about it won't fix anything."

His nostrils flared. "Indeed."

She hadn't seen him like this in weeks.

Had it been so long already? Her birthday was in a fortnight. Sooner than

she'd realized.

It wasn't the time to mention it, or the plan she'd hatched. It was inconsequential, really, given everything swarming around them. The burdens he bore. The frustration and despair she now saw pushing on those shoulders.

"Tell me what happened." Something had—something had shifted since they'd parted ways last night.

A cutting glance her way. She braced herself for his refusal as his jaw tightened.

But then he said, "I went to see the khagan this morning."

"You got an audience?"

"Not quite." His lips thinned.

"What happened?" Yrene braced a hand on the arm of the sofa.

"He had me hauled out of the room." Cold, flat words. "I couldn't even try to get around the guards. Try to make him listen."

"If you'd been standing, they'd have hauled you away all the same." Likely hurt him in the process.

He glared. "I didn't want to fight them. I wanted to *beg* him. And I couldn't even get onto my knees to do it."

Her heart strained as he looked toward the garden window. Rage and sorrow and fear all crossed over his face. "You've made remarkable progress already."

"I want to be able to fight alongside my men again," Chaol said quietly. "To die beside them."

The words were an icy slice of fear through her, but Yrene said stiffly, "You can do that from a horse."

"I want to do it shoulder-to-shoulder," he snarled. "I want to fight in the mud, on a killing field."

"So you'd heal here only so you can go die somewhere else?" The words snapped from her.

"Yes."

A cold, hard answer. His face equally so.

This storm brewing in him ... She wouldn't see their progress ruined by it.

And war was truly breaking across their home. Regardless of what he wished to do with himself, he did not—*they* did not have time. Her people in Fenharrow did not have time.

So Yrene stepped up to him, gripped him under a shoulder, and said, “Then get up.”



Chaol was in a shit mood, and he knew it.

The more he'd thought about it, the more he realized how easily the prince and princess had played him, toyed with him last night ... It didn't matter *what* move Aelin had made. Anything she had done, they would have turned against her. Against him. Had Aelin played the damsel, they would have called her a weak and uncertain ally. There was no way to win.

The meeting with the khagan had been folly. Perhaps Kashin had played him, too. For if the khagan had been willing to hear him out before, he certainly was not going to now. And even if Nesryn returned with Sartaq's rukhin in tow ... Her note yesterday had been carefully worded.

The rukhin are deft archers. They find my own skills intriguing, too. I should like to keep instructing. And learning. They fly free here. I'll see you in three weeks.

He didn't know what to make of it. The penultimate line. Was it an insult to him, or a coded message that the rukhin and Sartaq might disobey the commands of their khagan if he refused to let them leave? Would Sartaq truly risk treason to aid them? Chaol didn't dare leave the message unburned.

Fly free. He had never known such a feeling. It would never be his to discover. These weeks with Yrene, dining in the city under the stars, talking to

her about everything and nothing ... It had come close, perhaps. But it did not change what lay ahead.

No—they were still very much alone in this war. And the longer he lingered, with his friends now in combat, now on the move ...

He was still here. In this chair. With no army, no allies.

“Get up.”

He slowly faced Yrene as she repeated her command, a hand tightly gripped under his shoulder, her face full of fiery challenge.

Chaol blinked at her. “What.” Not quite a question.

“Get. Up.” Her mouth tightened. “You want to die in this war so badly, then *get up.*”

She was in a mood, too. Good. He’d been aching for a fight—the clashes with the guards still unsatisfactory in this gods-damned chair. But Yrene ...

He hadn’t allowed himself to touch her these weeks. Had made himself keep a distance, despite her unintentional moments of contact, the times when her head dipped close to his and all he could do was watch her mouth.

Yet he’d seen the tension in her at dinner last night, when Hasar had taunted about Nesryn’s return. The disappointment she’d tried so hard to keep hidden, then the relief when he’d revealed Nesryn’s extended trip.

He was a champion bastard. Even if he’d managed to convince the khagan to save their asses in this war ... He would leave here. Empty handed or with an army, he’d leave. And despite Yrene’s plans to return to their continent, he wasn’t certain when he’d see her again. If ever.

None of them might make it anyway.

And this one task, this one task that his friends had given him, that Dorian had given him ...

He’d failed.

Even with all he’d endured, all he’d learned ... It was not enough.

Chaol gave a pointed look to his legs. “*How?*” They’d made more progress

than he could have dreamed, yet this—

Her grip tightened to the point of pain. “You said it yourself: you don’t have two years. I’ve repaired enough now that you *should* be able to stand. So get up.” She even went so far as to tug on him.

He stared at her beneath lowered brows, letting his temper slip its leash by a few notches. “Let go.”

“Or *what?*” Oh, she was pissed.

“Who knows what the spies will feed to the royals?” Cold, hard words.

Yrene’s mouth tightened. “I have nothing to fear from their reports.”

“Don’t you? You didn’t seem to mind the privileges that came when you snapped your fingers and Kashin ran here. Perhaps he’ll grow tired of you stringing him along.”

“That is nonsense and you know it.” She tugged on his arm. “Get up.”

He did no such thing. “So a prince is not good enough for you, but the disowned son of a lord is?”

He’d never even voiced the thought. Even to himself.

“Just because you’re pissed off that Hasar and Arghun outmaneuvered you, that the khagan still won’t listen to you, doesn’t give you the right to try to drag *me* into a fight.” Her lips curled back from her teeth. “Now get up, since you’re so eager to rush off into battle.”

He yanked his shoulder out of her grip. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“I’m not going to answer the question.” Yrene didn’t grab his shoulder again, but slid her entire arm under him and grunted, as if she’d lift him herself, when he was nearly double her weight.

Chaol gritted his teeth, and just to avoid her injuring herself, he shook her off again and set his feet on the floor. Braced his hands on the arms of the chair and hauled himself forward as far as he could manage. “And?”

He could move his knees and below, and his thighs had been tingling this past week every now and then, yet ...

“And you remember how to stand, don’t you?”

He only shot back, “Why did you look so relieved when I said Nesryn would be delayed a few more weeks?”

Color bloomed on her freckled skin, but she reached for him again, looping her arms through his. “I didn’t want it to distract you from our progress.”

“Liar.” Her scent wrapped around him as she tugged, the chair groaning as he began to push down on the arms.

And then Yrene parried and went on the offensive, sleek as a snake. “I think *you* were relieved,” she seethed, her breath hot against his ear. “I think *you* were glad for her to remain away, so you can pretend that you are honor-bound to her and let that be a wall. So that when you are here, with me, you don’t need to see her watching, don’t need to *think* about what she is to you. With her away, she is a memory, a distant ideal, but when she is here, and you look at her, what do you *see*? What do you *feel*?”

“I had her in my bed, so I think that says enough about my feelings.”

He hated the words, even as the temper, the sharpness ... it was a relief, too.

Yrene sucked in a breath, but didn’t back down. “Yes, you had her in your bed, but I think she was likely a distraction, and was sick of it. Perhaps sick of being a consolation prize.”

His arms strained, the chair wobbling as he pushed and pushed upward, if only so he could stand long enough to glare into her face. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She had not mentioned Aelin at all, hadn’t asked after last night’s dinner. Until—

“Did she pick Dorian, then? The queen. I’m surprised she could stomach either of you, given your history. What your kingdom did to hers.”

Roaring filled his ears as he began shifting his weight onto his feet, willing his spine to hold while he spat at her, “You didn’t seem to mind it one bit, that night at the party. I had you practically begging me.” He didn’t know what the hell was coming out of his mouth.

Her nails dug into his back. “You’d be surprised the people that opiate makes you consider. Who you’ll find yourself willing to sully yourself with.”

“Right. A son of Adarlan. An oath-breaking, faithless traitor. That’s what I am, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know—you rarely even attempt to talk about it.”

“And you are so good at it, I suppose?”

“This is about you, not me.”

“Yet you were assigned to me because your Healer on High saw otherwise. Saw that no matter how high you climbed in that tower, you’re still that girl in Fenharrow.” A laugh came out of him, icy and bitter. “I knew another woman who lost as much as you. And do you know what she did with it—that loss?” He could barely stop the words from pouring out, could barely think over the roar in his head. “She hunted down the people responsible for it and *obliterated* them. What the hell have *you* bothered to do these years?”

Chaol felt the words hit their mark.

Felt the stillness shudder through her body.

Right as he pushed up—right as his weight adjusted and knees bent, and he found himself standing.

Too far. He’d gone too far. He’d never once believed those things. Even thought them.

Not about Yrene.

Her chest rose in a jagged breath that brushed against his, and she blinked up at him, mouth closing. And with the movement, he could see a wall rising up. Sealing.

Never again. She’d never again forgive him, smile at him, for what he’d said.

Never forget it. Standing or no.

“Yrene,” he rasped, but she slid her arms from him and backed away a step, shaking her head. Leaving him standing—alone. Alone and exposed as she retreated another step and the sunlight caught in the silver starting to line her

eyes.

It ripped his chest wide open.

Chaol put a hand on it, as if he could feel the caving within, even as his legs wavered beneath him. “I am *no one* to even mention such things. I am *nothing*, and it was *myself* that I—”

“I might not have battled kings and shattered castles,” she said coldly, voice shaking with anger as she continued her retreat, “but I am the heir apparent to the Healer on High. Through my own work and suffering and sacrifice. And you’re standing right now because of that. People are *alive* because of that. So I may not be a warrior waving a sword about, may not be worthy of your glorious tales, but at least I *save* lives—not end them.”

“I know,” he said, fighting the urge to grip the arms of the chair now seeming so far below him as his balance wavered. “Yrene, *I know*.” Too far. He had gone too far, and he had never hated himself more, for wanting to pick a fight and being so gods-damned *stupid*, when he’d really been talking about himself—

Yrene backed away another step.

“Please,” he said.

But she was heading for the door. And if she left ...

He had let them all go. Had walked out himself, too, but with Aelin, with Dorian, with Nesryn, he had let them go, and he had not gone after them.

But that woman backing toward the door, trying to keep the tears from falling—tears from the hurt *he’d* caused her, tears of the anger he so rightfully deserved—

She reached the handle. Fumbled blindly for it.

And if she left, if he let her walk out ...

Yrene pushed down on the handle.

And Chaol took a step toward her.

Chaol did not think.

He did not marvel at the sensation of being so high. At the weight of his body, the sway of it as he took that staggering step.

There was only Yrene, and her hand on the doorknob, and the tears in her furious, lovely eyes. The most beautiful he'd ever seen.

They widened as he took that step toward her.

As he lurched and swayed. But he managed another.

Yrene stumbled toward him, studying him from head to toe, a hand rising to cover her open mouth. She stopped a few feet away.

He hadn't realized how much smaller she was. How delicate.

How—how the world looked and seemed and *tasted* this way.

"Don't go," he breathed. "I'm sorry."

Yrene surveyed him again, from his feet to his face. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she tipped her head back.

"I'm sorry," Chaol said again.

Still she did not speak. Tears only rolled and rolled.

"I meant none of it," he rasped, his knees beginning to ache and buckle, his thighs trembling. "I was spoiling for a fight and—I meant none of it, Yrene. None of it. And I'm sorry."

"A kernel of it must have been in you, though," she whispered.

Chaol shook his head, the motion making him sway. He gripped the back of a

stuffed armchair to stay upright. “I meant it about myself. What you have done, Yrene, what you are willing to still do ... You did this—*all* this not for glory or ambition, but because you believe it is the right thing to do. Your bravery, your cleverness, your unfaltering will ... I do not have words for it, Yrene.”

Her face did not change.

“Please, Yrene.”

He reached for her, risking a staggering, wobbling step.

She took a step back.

Chaol’s hands curled around empty air.

He clenched his jaw as he fought to remain upright, his body swaying and strange.

“Perhaps it makes you feel better about yourself to associate with meek, pathetic little people like me.”

“I *do not* ...” He ground his teeth, and lurched another step toward her, needing to just touch her, to take her hand and squeeze it, to just *show* her he wasn’t like that. Didn’t think like that. He swayed left, throwing out a hand to balance him as he bit out, “You know I didn’t mean it.”

Yrene backed away, keeping out of reach. “Do I?”

He pushed forward another step. Another.

She dodged him each time.

“You know it, damn you,” he growled. He forced his legs into another jerking step.

Yrene sidled out of the way.

He blinked, pausing.

Reading the light in her eyes. The tone.

The witch was tricking him into walking. Coaxing him to move. To follow.

She paused, meeting his stare, not a trace of that hurt in them, as if to say, *It took you long enough to figure it out*. A little smile bloomed on her mouth.

He was standing. He was ... walking.

Walking. And this woman before him ...

Chaol made it another step.

Yrene retreated.

Not a hunt, but a dance.

He did not remove his eyes from hers as he staggered another step, and another, his body aching, trembling. But he gritted through it. Fought for each inch toward her. Each step that had her backing up to the wall.

Her breath came in shallow pants, those golden eyes so wide as he tracked her across the room. As she led him one foot after another.

Until her back hit the wall, the sconce on it rattling. As if she'd lost track of where she was.

Chaol was instantly upon her.

He braced one hand upon the wall, the wallpaper smooth beneath his palm as he put his weight upon it. To keep his body upright as his thighs shook, back straining.

They were smaller, secondary concerns.

His other hand ...

Yrene's eyes were still bright with those tears he'd caused.

One still clung to her cheek.

Chaol wiped it away. Another one he found down by her jaw.

He didn't understand—how she could be so delicate, so small, when she had overturned his life entirely. Worked miracles with those hands and that soul, this woman who had crossed mountains and seas.

She was trembling. Not with fear, not as she looked up at him.

And it was only when Yrene settled her hand on his chest, not to push him away but to feel the raging, thunderous heartbeat beneath, that Chaol lowered his head and kissed her.



He was standing. He was *walking*.

And he was kissing her.

Yrene could barely breathe, barely keep inside her skin, as Chaol's mouth settled over hers.

It was like waking up or being born or falling out of the sky. It was an answer and a song, and she could not think or feel fast enough.

Her hands curled into his shirt, fingers wrapping around fistfuls of fabric, tugging him closer.

His lips caressed hers in patient, unhurried movements, as if tracing the feel of her. And when his teeth grazed her lower lip ... She opened her mouth to him.

He swept in, pressing her farther into the wall. She barely felt the molding digging into her spine, the sleekness of the wallpaper against her back as his tongue slid into her mouth.

Yrene moaned, not caring who heard, who might be listening. They could all go to hell for all she cared. She was burning, glowing—

Chaol laid a hand against her jaw, angling her face to better claim her mouth. She arched, silently begging him to *take*—

She knew he hadn't meant what he said, knew it had been himself he'd been raging at. She'd goaded him into that fight, and even if it had hurt ... She'd known the moment he stood, when her heart had stopped dead, that he hadn't meant it.

That he would have crawled.

This man, this noble and selfless and remarkable man ...

Yrene dragged her hands around his shoulders, fingers slipping into his silken brown hair. *More, more, more*—

But his kiss was thorough. As if he wanted to learn every taste, every angle of her.

She brushed her tongue against his, and his growl had her toes curling in her slippers—

She felt the tremor go through him before she registered what it was.

The strain.

Still he kissed her, seemed intent to do so, even if it brought him crashing to the floor.

Small steps. Small measures.

Yrene broke away, putting a hand on his chest when he made to claim her mouth again. “You should sit.”

His eyes were wholly black. “I—let me—*please*, Yrene.”

Each word was a broken rasp. As if he’d freed some tether on himself.

She fought to keep her breathing steady. To gather her wits. Too long on his feet and he might strain his back. And before she could encourage the walking and—*more*, she needed to go into his wound to look around. Perhaps it had receded enough on its own.

Chaol brushed his mouth against hers, the silken heat of his lips enough to make her willing to ignore common sense.

But she shoved back against it. Gently slid out of his reach. “Now I’ll have ways to reward you,” she said, trying for humor.

He didn’t smile back. Didn’t do anything but watch her with near-predatory intent as she backed away a step and offered her arm to him. To walk back to the chair.

To *walk*.

He was *walking*—

He did so. Pushed off the wall, and swayed—

Yrene caught him, steadied him.

“I thought you never stepped in to help me,” he said drily, raising a brow.

“In the chair, yes. You have much farther to fall now.”

Chaol huffed a laugh, then leaned in to whisper in her ear, “Will it be the bed or the couch now, Yrene?”

She swallowed, daring a sidelong look up at him. His eyes were still dark, his

face flushed and lips swollen. From her.

Yrene's blood heated, her core near-molten. How the hell would she have him nearly naked before her now?

"You are still my patient," she managed to say primly, and guided him into his chair. Nearly shoved him onto it—and nearly leaped atop him, too. "And while there is no official vow about such things, I plan to keep things professional."

Chaol's answering smile was anything but. So was the way he growled, "Come here."

Yrene's heartbeat pounded through every inch of her as she closed the foot of space between them. As she held his burning gaze and settled into his lap.

His hand slid beneath her hair to cup the back of her neck, drawing her face to his as he brushed a kiss over the corner of her mouth. Then the other. She gripped his shoulder, fingers digging into the hard muscle beneath, her breathing turning jagged as he nipped at her bottom lip, as his other hand began to explore up her torso—

A door opened in the hallway, and Yrene was instantly up, striding across the sitting room for the desk—to the vials of oil there. Just as Kadja slipped through the door, a tray in her hands.

The servant girl had found the "ingredients" Yrene needed. Twine, goat's milk, and vinegar.

Yrene could barely remember words to thank the servant as the girl set the tray on the desk.

Whether Kadja saw their faces, their hair and clothes, and could read the white-hot line of tension between them, she said nothing. Yrene had no doubt she might suspect, would no doubt report it to whoever held her leash, but ... Yrene found herself not caring as she leaned against the desk, Kadja departing as silently as she had come.

Found Chaol still watching her, chest heaving.

“What do we do now?” Yrene asked quietly.

For she didn’t know—how to go *back*—

Chaol didn’t reply. He just stretched out one leg wholly in front of him. Then the other. Did it again, marveling.

“We don’t look back,” he said, meeting her stare. “It helps no one and nothing to look back.” The way he said it ... It seemed as if it meant something more. To him, at least.

But Chaol’s smile grew, his eyes lighting as he added, “We can only go on.”

Yrene went to him, unable to stop herself, as if that smile were a beacon in the dark.

And when Chaol wheeled himself to the couch and peeled off his shirt, when he lay down and she set her hands on his warm, strong back ... Yrene smiled as well.

40

Standing and walking a few steps wasn't the same as being back to full capacity.

The next week proved it. Yrene still battled with whatever lurked in Chaol's spine, still clinging—down to the very base, she explained—and still keeping him from full motion. Running, most jumping, kicking: out of the question. But thanks to the sturdy wooden cane she procured for him, he could stand, and he could walk.

And it was a gods-damned miracle.

He brought the cane and the chair to his morning training with Hashim and the guards, for the moments when he pushed himself too hard and couldn't manage the return trip to his rooms. Yrene joined him during the early lessons, instructing Hashim on where to focus in his legs. To rebuild more muscle. To stabilize him further. She'd done the same for Shen, Hashim had confided one morning—had come to supervise most of his initial training sessions after his injury.

So Yrene had been there, watching from the sidelines, that first day Chaol had taken up a sword against Hashim and dueled. Or did it as best he could with the cane in one hand.

His balance was shit, his legs unreliable, but he managed to get in a few good hits against the man. And a cane ... not a bad weapon, if the fight called for it.

Yrene's eyes had been wide as saucers when they stopped and Chaol approached her spot on the wall, leaning heavily on the cane as his body

trembled.

The color on her face, he realized with no small amount of male satisfaction, was from far more than the heat. And when they'd eventually left, walking slowly into the cool shadows of the halls, Yrene had tugged him into a curtained-off alcove and kissed him.

Leaning against a supply shelf for support, his hands had roved all over her, the generous curves and small waist, tangling into her long, heavy hair. She'd kissed and kissed him, breathless and panting, and then licked—actually *licked* the sweat from his neck.

Chaol had groaned so loudly that it was no surprise a servant appeared a heartbeat later, ripping the curtain away, as if to chide two workers for shirking their duties.

Yrene had blanched as she'd righted herself and asked the bowing and scraping male servant not to say anything. He assured her that he wouldn't, but Yrene had been shaken. She'd kept her distance for the rest of the walk back.

And maintained it every day since. It was driving him mad.

But he understood. With her position, both in the Torre and within the palace, they should be smarter. More careful.

And with Kadja always in his rooms ...

Chaol kept his hands to himself. Even when Yrene laid her own hands upon his back and healed him, pushed and pushed herself, to break through that final wall of darkness.

He wanted to tell her, debated telling her, that it was already enough. He would gladly live with the cane for the rest of his life. She had given him more than he could ever hope for.

For he saw the guards every morning. The weapons and shields.

And he thought of that war, unleashing itself at last upon his friends. His homeland.

Even if he did not bring an army with him when he returned, he'd find some

way to stand on those battlefields. Riding, at least, was now a viable option while fighting alongside them.

Fighting for—her.

He was thinking of it as they walked to dinner one night, over a week later. With the cane, it took him longer than usual, but he did not mind any extra moment spent in her company.

She was wearing her purple gown—his favorite—her hair half up and curling softly from the unusually humid day. But she was jumpy, unsettled.

“What is it?”

The royals hadn’t cared the first night he’d walked on his own two legs to dinner. Another everyday miracle of the Torre, though the khagan himself had commended Yrene. She’d beamed at the praise. Even as the khagan had ignored Chaol—as he had done since that ill-fated meeting.

Yrene rubbed at the scar on her neck as if it ached. He hadn’t asked about it—didn’t want to know. Only because if he did ... Even with a war upon them, he might very well take the time to hunt down whoever had done it and bury them.

“I convinced Hasar to throw me a party,” Yrene said quietly.

He waited until they’d passed a cluster of servants before asking, “For what reason?”

She blew out a breath. “It’s my birthday. In three days.”

“Your birthday?”

“You know, the celebration of the day of your birth—”

He nudged her with an elbow, though his spine slipped and shifted with the movement. The cane groaned as he pressed his weight upon it. “I had no idea that she-devils actually had them.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Yes, even my kind has them.”

Chaol grinned. “So you asked her to throw one for you?” Considering how the last *party* had gone ... He might very well wind up one of those people slipping away into a darkened bedroom. Especially if Yrene wore that dress

again.

“Not exactly,” Yrene said wryly. “I mentioned that my birthday was coming up, and how dull *your* plans for it were ...”

He chuckled. “Presumptuous of you.”

She batted her eyelashes. “And I *might* have mentioned that in all my years here, I’ve never been to the desert and was debating a trip of my own, but that I’d be sad to not celebrate with her ...”

“And I’m guessing that she suggested an oasis owned by her family instead?”

Yrene hummed. “A little overnight excursion to Aksara—half a day’s ride to the east, to their permanent tented camp within the oasis.”

So the healer could scheme after all. But—“It’ll be boiling in this heat.”

“The princess wants a party in the desert. So she shall have one.” She chewed on her lip, those shadows dancing again. “I also managed to ask her about it—Aksara. The history.” Chaol braced himself. “Hasar grew bored before she told me much, but she said that she’d once heard that the oasis grew atop a city of the dead. That the ruins now there were merely the gateway inside. They don’t like to risk disturbing the dead, so they never leave the spring itself—to venture into the jungle around it.”

No wonder she’d seemed concerned. “Not only caves to be found, then.”

“Perhaps Nousha means something different; perhaps there are also caves there with information.” She blew out a breath. “I suppose we’ll see. I made sure to yawn while Hasar told me, enough that I doubt she’ll wonder why I asked at all.”

Chaol kissed her temple, a swift brush of his mouth that no one might see. “Clever, Yrene.”

“I meant to tell you the other week, but then you stood, and I forgot. Some court schemer I am.”

He caressed his free hand down the length of her spine. A bit lower. “We’ve been otherwise engaged.” Her face flushed a beautiful shade of pink, but a

thought settled into him. “What do *you* really want for your birthday? And which one is it?”

“Twenty-two. And I don’t know. If it wasn’t for this, I wouldn’t have brought it up at all.”

“You weren’t going to tell me?”

She gave him a guilty frown. “I figured that with everything pressing on you, birthdays were inconsequential.” Her hand slid into her pocket—to hold that thing he’d never inquired about.

They neared the clamor of dinner in the great hall. He brushed his fingers against hers. She halted at the silent request, the hall spreading away before them, servants and viziers striding past.

Chaol leaned on his cane while they rested, letting it stabilize his weight. “Am I invited to this desert party, at least?”

“Oh, yes. You, and all my other favorite people: Arghun, Kashin, and a handful of delightful viziers.”

“I’m glad I made the cut, considering that Hasar hates me.”

“No.” Yrene’s eyes darkened. “If Hasar hated you, I don’t think you’d be alive right now.”

Gods above. This was the woman she’d befriended.

Yrene went on, “At least Renia will be there, but Duva shouldn’t be in the heat in her condition and her husband won’t leave her side. I’m sure that once we get there, information or no, I’ll probably wish I could have made a similar excuse.”

“We’ve got a few days. We could, technically, make the same one if we need to leave.”

The words settled in. The invitation and implication. Yrene’s face went delightfully red, and she smacked his arm. “Rogue.”

Chaol chuckled, and eyed the hallway for a shadowed corner. But Yrene breathed, “We can’t.”

Not about his sorry joke, but about the want she no doubt saw building in his eyes. The want he beheld simmering in hers.

He adjusted his jacket. “Well, I’ll attempt to find you a suitable present that can compare to an entire desert *retreat*, but don’t hold me to it.”

Yrene looped her arm through Chaol’s free one, no more than a healer escorting her patient to the table. “I have everything I need,” was all she said.

It took over a week to plan it.

Over a week alone for Sartaq and Houlun to dig up ancient maps of the Dagul Fells.

Most were vague and useless. What riders had assessed from the air but not dared get too close to detail. The *kharankui*'s territory was small, but had grown larger, bolder these last few years.

And it was into the dark heart of their territory that they would go.

The hardest part was convincing Borte to remain behind.

But Nesryn and Sartaq left that up to Houlun. And one sharp word from the hearth-mother had the girl falling in line. Even as Borte's eyes simmered with outrage, she bowed to her grandmother's wishes. As heir, Houlun had snapped, Borte's first obligation was to their *people*. The bloodline ended with her. Should Borte head into the dim tangle of Dagul, she might as well spit upon where her mother's *sulde* stood on the slopes of Arundin.

Borte had insisted that if she, as Houlun's heir, was to stay, then Sartaq, as the khagan's potential successor, should remain as well.

To that, Sartaq had merely stalked off into the interior hallways of Altun, saying that if being his father's successor meant sitting idly by while others fought for him, then his siblings could have the damn crown.

So only the three of them would go, Nesryn and Sartaq flying on Kadara, Falkan tucked away as a field mouse in Nesryn's pocket.

There had been a final debate last night about bringing a legion. Borte had argued for it, Sartaq against it. They did not know how many *kharankui* dwelled in the barren peaks and forested vales between them. They could not risk needlessly losing many lives, and did not have the time to waste on thorough reconnaissance. Three could sneak in—but an army of ruks would be spotted long before they arrived.

The argument had raged over the fire pit, but Houlun had settled it: the small company would go. And if they did not return within four days, an army would follow. Half a day to fly down, a day to survey the area, a day to go in, and then return with the stolen hatchlings. Perhaps even learn what the Fae had feared from the spiders, how they'd fought them. If they were lucky.

They'd been flying for hours now, the high wall of the Fells growing closer with every flap of Kadara's wings. Soon, now, they'd cross that first ridge of the gray mountains and enter into the spiders' territory. Nesryn's breakfast sat heavy in her stomach with each mile closer, her mouth as dry as parchment.

Behind her, Sartaq had been silent for most of the ride. Falkan dozed in her breast pocket, emerging only now and then to poke out his whiskered snout, sniff at the air, and then duck back inside. Conserving his strength while he could.

The shifter was still sleeping when Nesryn said to Sartaq, "Did you mean what you said last night—about refusing the crown if it meant not fighting?"

Sartaq's body was a warm wall at her back. "My father has gone to war—all khagans have. He possesses the Ebony and Ivory *sulde* precisely for that. But if it somehow became the case that I would be denied such things in favor of the bloodline surviving ... Yes. A life confined to that court is not what I want."

"And yet you are favored to become khagan one day."

"So the rumors say. But my father has never suggested or spoken of it. For all I know, he could crown Duva instead. The gods know she'd certainly be a kind ruler. And is the only one of us to have produced offspring."

Nesryn chewed her lip. "Why—why is it that you haven't married?" She'd

never had the nerve to ask. Though she'd certainly found herself wondering it during these weeks.

Sartaq's hands flexed on the reins before he answered. "I've been too busy. And the women who have been presented as potential brides ... They were not for me."

She had no right to pry, but she asked, "Why?"

"Because whenever I showed them Kadara, they either cowered, or pretended to be interested in her, or asked just how much time I'd be spending away."

"Hoping for frequent absences, or because they'd miss you?"

Sartaq chuckled. "I couldn't tell. The question itself felt like enough of a leash that I knew they were not for me."

"So your father allows you to wed where you will?" Dangerous, strange territory. She waited for him to tease her about it, but Sartaq fell quiet.

"Yes. Even Duva's arranged marriage ... She was all for it. Said she didn't want to have to sort through a court of snakes to find one good man and still pray he hadn't deceived her. I wonder if there's something to be said for it. She lucked out, anyway—quiet as he is, her husband adores her. I saw his face the moment they met. Saw hers, too. Relief, and ... something more."

And what would become of them—of their child—if another Heir were chosen for the throne? Nesryn asked carefully, "Why not end this tradition of competing with each other?"

Sartaq was silent for a long minute. "Perhaps one day, whoever takes the throne will end it. Love their siblings more than they honor the tradition. I like to believe we have moved past who we were centuries ago—when the empire was still fledgling. But perhaps now, these years of relative peace, perhaps this is the dangerous time." He shrugged, his body shifting against hers. "Perhaps war will sort the matter of succession for us."

And maybe it was because they were so high above the world, because that dim land swept ever closer, but Nesryn asked, "There is nothing that would keep

you from war if it called, then?”

“You sound as if you are reconsidering this goal of yours to drag us into the north.”

She stiffened. “I will admit that these weeks here ... It was easier before to ask for your aid. When the rukhin were a nameless, faceless legion. When I did not know their names, their families. When I did not know Houlun, or Borte. Or that Borte is *betrothed*.”

A low laugh at that. Borte had refused—outright refused—to answer Nesryn’s questions about Yeran. She said it wasn’t even worth talking about.

“I’m sure Borte would be glad to go to war, if only to compete with Yeran for glory on the battlefield.”

“A true love match, then.”

Sartaq smiled at her ear. “You have no idea.” He sighed. “It began three years ago—this competition between them. Right after her mother died.”

His pause was heavy enough that Nesryn asked, “You knew her mother well?”

It took him a moment to answer. “I mentioned to you once that I’ve been sent to other kingdoms to sort out disputes or murmurings of malcontent. The last time my father sent me, I brought a small unit of rukhin along, Borte’s mother with them.”

Again, that heavy quiet. Nesryn slowly, carefully laid her hand on his forearm that encircled her. The strong muscles beneath the leather shifted—then settled.

“It is a long story, and a hard one, but there was violence between the rukhin and the group that sought to bring down our empire. Borte’s mother ... One of them got in a coward’s shot from behind. A poisoned arrow through her neck, right when we were about to allow them to surrender.” The wind howled around them. “I didn’t let any of them walk away after that.”

The hollow, cold words said enough.

“I carried her body back myself,” Sartaq said, the words ripped away by the

wind. “I can still hear Borte’s screaming when I landed in Altun. Still see her kneeling alone on the slopes of Arundin after the burial, clinging to her mother’s *sulde* where it had been planted in the ground.”

Nesryn tightened her grip on his arm. Sartaq placed his own gloved hand upon hers and squeezed gently as he blew out a long breath.

“Six months later,” he went on, “Borte competed in the Gathering—the annual three days of contests and races among all the clans. She was seventeen, and Yeran was twenty, and they were neck and neck for the final, great race. As they neared the finish, Yeran pulled a maneuver that *might* be considered cheating, but Borte saw it coming a mile off and beat him anyway. And then beat him soundly when they landed. Literally. He leaped off his ruk and she *tackled* him to the ground, pounding his face for the shit he’d pulled that nearly got Arcas killed.” He laughed to himself. “I don’t know the particulars of what went on later at the celebration, but I saw him attempt to talk to her at one point, and saw her laugh in his face before walking away. He scowled until they left the next morning, and as far as I know, they didn’t see each other for a year. Until the next Gathering.”

“Which Borte won again,” Nesryn guessed.

“She did indeed. Barely. *She* pulled the questionable maneuver this time, getting herself banged up in the process, but she technically won. I think Yeran was secretly more terrified of how close she’d come to permanent injury or death, so he let her have the victory. She never told me the particulars of *that* celebration, but she was shaken for a few days after. We all assumed it was from her injuries, but such things had never bothered her before.”

“And this year?”

“This year, a week before the Gathering, Yeran appeared at Altun. Didn’t see Houlun, or me. Just went right to wherever Borte was in the hall. No one knows what happened, but he stayed for less than thirty minutes from landing to leaving. A week later, Borte won the race again. And when she was crowned

victor, Yeran's father stepped up to declare her engagement to his son."

"A surprise?"

"Considering that whenever Borte and Yeran are together, they're at each other's throats, yes. But also a surprise to Borte. She played it off, but I saw them arguing in the hall later. Whether or not she even *knew* about it, or wanted it revealed that way, she still won't say. But she has not disputed the betrothal. Though she hasn't embraced it, either. No day has been claimed for the wedding, even though the union would certainly ease our ... strained ties to the Berlad."

Nesryn smiled a bit. "I hope they sort it out."

"Perhaps this war will do that for them, too."

Kadara swept closer and closer to the wall of the Fells, the light turning thin and cold as clouds passed over the sun. They cleared the towering lip of the first peaks, soaring on an updraft high above as all of Dagul spread before them.

"Holy gods," Nesryn whispered.



Dark gray peaks of barren rock. Thin pine trees crusting the vales deep below. No lakes, no rivers save for the occasional trickling stream.

Barely visible through the shroud of webbing over all of it.

Some webs were thick and white, choking the life from trees. Some were sparkling nets between peaks, as if they sought to catch the wind itself.

No life. No hum of insect or cry of beast. No sighing leaves or fluttering wings.

Falkan poked his head out of her pocket as they surveyed the dead land below and let out a squeak. Nesryn nearly did the same.

"Houlun was not exaggerating," Sartaq murmured. "They have grown strong."

"Where do we even land?" Nesryn asked. "There's barely a safe spot to be seen. They could have taken the hatchlings and eggs anywhere."

She combed the peaks and valleys for any sign of movement, any flicker of those sleek black bodies scuttling about. But saw nothing.

“We’ll make a pass around the territory,” Sartaq said. “Get a sense of the layout. Perhaps figure out a thing or two regarding their feeding habits.”

Gods above. “Keep Kadara high. Fly casual. If we look like we’re hunting for something, they might emerge in force.”

Sartaq whistled sharply to Kadara, who indeed soared higher, faster than her usual ascent. As if glad to rise a little farther from the shrouded territory below.

“Stay hidden, friend,” Nesryn said to Falkan, her hands shaking as she patted her breast pocket. “If they watch us from below, we’d best keep you secret until they least expect it.”

Falkan’s tiny paws tapped in understanding, and he slid back into her pocket.

They flew in idle circles for a time, Kadara occasionally diving as if in pursuit of some eagle or falcon. On the hunt for lunch, perhaps.

“That cluster of peaks,” Sartaq said after a while, pointing toward the highest point of the Fells. Like horns spearing toward the sky, two sister-peaks jutted up so close to each other they might have very well once been a single mountain. Between their clawed summits, a shale-filled pass wended away into a labyrinth of stone. “Kadara keeps looking toward it.”

“Circle it, but keep your distance.”

Before Sartaq could give the order, Kadara obeyed.

“Something is moving in the pass,” Nesryn breathed, squinting.

Kadara flapped closer, nearer to the peaks than was wise. “Kadara,” Sartaq warned.

But the ruk pumped her wings, frantic. Rushing.

Just as the thing in the pass became clear.

Racing over the shale, bobbing and flapping fuzz-lined wings ...

A hatchling.

Sartaq swore. “Faster, Kadara. *Faster.*” The ruk needed no encouragement.

The hatchling was squawking, those too-small wings flailing as it tried and failed to lift from the ground. It had broken from the pine trees that flowed right to the edge of the pass, and now aimed for the center of the maze of rock.

Nesryn unslung her bow and nocked an arrow into place, Sartaq doing the same behind her. “*Not a sound, Kadara,*” Sartaq warned, just as the ruk opened her beak. “You will alert them.”

But the hatchling was screeching, its terror palpable even from the distance.

Kadara caught a wind and *flew*.

“Come on,” Nesryn breathed, arrow aimed at the woods, at whatever horrors the hatchling had escaped, undoubtedly barreling after it.

The baby ruk neared the broadest part of the pass mouth, balking at the wall of stone ahead. As if it knew that more waited within.

Trapped.

“Sweep in, cut through the pass, and sail out,” Sartaq ordered the ruk, who banked right, so steeply Nesryn’s abdomen strained with the effort to keep in the saddle.

Kadara leveled out, dropping foot by foot toward the hatchling now twisting about, screaming toward the sky as it beheld the ruk rushing in.

“Steady,” Sartaq commanded. “Steady, Kadara.”

Nesryn kept her arrow trained on the labyrinth of rock ahead, Sartaq twisting to cover the forest behind. Kadara sailed closer and closer to the shale-coated pass, to the grayish fuzzy hatchling now holding so still, waiting for the salvation of the claws that Kadara unfurled.

Thirty feet. Twenty.

Nesryn’s arm strained to keep the arrow drawn.

A wind shoved at Kadara, knocking her sideways, the world tilting, light shimmering.

Just as Kadara leveled out, just as her talons opened wide to scoop up the hatchling, Nesryn realized what the shimmering was. What the shift in angle

revealed ahead.

“Look out!”

The scream shattered from her throat, but too late.

Kadara’s talons closed around the hatchling, plucking it up from the ground right as she swept up through the pass peaks.

Right into the mammoth web woven between them.

The hatchling had been a trap.

It was the last thought Nesryn had as Kadara crashed into the web—the *net* woven between the two peaks. Built not to catch the wind, but *ruks*.

She only had the sense of Sartaq throwing his body into hers, anchoring her into the saddle and holding tight as Kadara screamed.

Snapping and shimmering and rock; shale and gray sky and golden feathers. Wind howling, the hatchling's piercing cry, and Sartaq's bellow.

Then twisting, slamming into stone so hard the impact sang through her teeth, her bones. Then falling, tumbling, Kadara's restrained body curving, curving as Sartaq was curled over Nesryn, shielding that hatchling in her talons from the final impact.

Then the *boom*. And the bounce—the bounce that snapped the leather straps on the saddle. Still tied to it, they were still tied together as they soared off Kadara's body, Nesryn's bow scattering from her hand, her fingers clasping on open air—

Sartaq pivoted them, his body a solid wall around hers as Nesryn realized where the sky was, where the pass floor was—

He roared as they struck the shale, as he kept her atop him, taking the full brunt of the impact.

For a heartbeat, there was only the skittering trickle of shifting shale and the thud of crumbling rock off the pass walls. For a heartbeat, she could not

remember where her body was, her breath was—

Then a scrape of wing on shale.

Nesryn's eyes snapped open, and she was moving before she had the words to name her motions.

A cut slashed down her wrist, caked with small rocks and dust. She didn't feel it, barely noticed the blood as she blindly fumbled for the straps to the saddle, snapping them free, panting through her teeth as she managed to lift her head, to dare to look—

He was dazed. Blinking up at the gray sky. But alive, *breathing*, blood sliding down his temple, his cheek, his mouth ...

She sobbed through her teeth, her legs at last coming free, allowing her to roll over to get to his own, to the tangled bits of leather shredded between them.

Sartaq was half buried in shale. His hands sliced up, but his legs—

“Not broken,” he rasped. “Not broken.” It was more to himself than her. But Nesryn managed to keep her fingers steady as she freed the buckles. The thick riding leathers had saved his life, saved his skin from being flayed off his bones. He'd taken the impact for her, moved her so that he'd hit it first—

She clawed at the shale covering his shoulders and his upper arms, sharp rock cutting into her fingers. The leather strap at the end of her braid had come free in the impact, and her hair now fell about her face, half blocking her view of the forest behind and rock around them. “Get up,” she panted. “Get up.”

He took a breath, blinking furiously. “*Get up*,” she begged him.

Shale shifted ahead, and a low, pained cry echoed off the rock.

Sartaq snapped upright. “*Kadara—*”

Nesryn twisted on her knees, scanning for her bow even as she took in the ruk.

Lying thirty feet ahead, Kadara was coated in the near-invisible silk. A phantom net, her wings pinned, her head tucked in—

Sartaq scrambled upright, swaying, slipping on the loose shale as he drew his

Asterion knife.

Nesryn managed to rise, her legs shaking, head spinning as she scanned and scanned the pass for her bow—

There. Near the pass wall. Intact.

She hurtled for it while Sartaq ran to the ruk, reaching her weapon just as he sliced the first of the webbing free.

“You’ll be fine,” he was saying to Kadara, blood coating his hands, his neck. “I’ll get you out—”

Nesryn shouldered her bow, pressing a hand to her pocket. Falkan—

A little leg pushed against her in answer. *Alive.*

She wasted no time rushing to the ruk, drawing her own Fae blade from the sheath Borte had found for her and slicing at the thick strands. It clung to her fingers, ripping away skin, but she severed and sliced, working her way down the wing as Sartaq hacked his way down the other.

They reached Kadara’s legs at the same time.

Saw that her talons were empty.

Nesryn’s head snapped up, scanning the pass, the piles of disturbed shale—

The hatchling had been thrown during the collision. As if even Kadara’s talons couldn’t keep shut against the pain of impact. The baby ruk now lay on the ground near the lip of the pass, struggling to rise, low chirps of distress echoing off the rock.

“Up, Kadara,” Sartaq commanded, his voice breaking. “*Get up.*”

Great wings shifted, shale clacking as the ruk tried to obey. Nesryn staggered toward the hatchling, blood unmistakable on its fluffy gray head, its large dark eyes wide with terror and pleading—

It happened so fast Nesryn didn’t have time to shout.

One heartbeat, the hatchling had opened its beak to cry for help.

The next it screamed, eyes flaring as a long ebony leg emerged from behind a pillar of rock and slammed through its spine.

Bone crunched and blood sprayed. And Nesryn threw herself into a stop, swaying so hard she teetered backward onto her ass, a wordless cry on her lips as the hatchling was hauled around the rock, flailing and shrieking—

It went silent.

And she had seen horrific things, things that had made her sick and kept her from sleep, and yet that baby ruk, terrified and pleading, in pain and dragged away, going *silent*—

Nesryn whirled, feet slipping on the shale as she scrambled toward Kadara, toward Sartaq, who beheld the hatchling being snatched behind that rock and screamed at Kadara to fly—

The mighty ruk tried and failed to rise.

“*FLY*,” Sartaq bellowed.

Slowly, so slowly the ruk lumbered to her legs, her scraped beak dragging through the loose rock.

She wasn’t going to make it. Wasn’t going to get airborne in time. For just beyond the web-shrouded tree line ... Shadows writhed. Scuttled closer.

Nesryn sheathed her sword and drew her bow, arrow shaking as she aimed it toward the rock the hatchling had been hauled behind, then the trees a hundred yards off.

“*Go, Kadara*,” Sartaq begged. “*Get up!*”

The bird was barely in shape to fly, let alone carry riders—

Rock clacked and skittered behind her. From the labyrinth of rock within the pass.

Trapped. They were trapped—

Falkan shifted in her pocket, trying to wriggle free. Nesryn covered him with her forearm, pressing hard. “Not yet,” she breathed. “Not yet.”

His powers were not Lysandra’s. He had tried and failed to shift into a ruk this week. But the large wolf was as big as he could manage. Anything larger was beyond his magic.

“*Kadara—*”

The first of the spiders broke from the tree line. As black and sleek as her fallen sister.

Nesryn let her arrow fly.

The spider fell back, screaming—an unholy sound that shook the rocks as that arrow sank into an eye. Nesryn instantly had another arrow drawn, backing toward Kadara, who was just now beginning to flap her wings—

The ruk stumbled.

Sartaq screamed, “*FLY!*”

Wind stirred Nesryn’s hair, sending shards of shale skittering. The ground rumbled behind, but Nesryn did not dare take her eyes off the second spider that emerged from the trees. She fired again, the song of her arrow drowned out by the flap of Kadara’s wings. A heavy, pained beat, but it held steady—

Nesryn glanced behind for a breath. Just one, just to see Kadara bobbing and waving, fighting for every wing beat upward through the narrow pass, blood and shale dripping from her. Right as a *kharankui* emerged from one of the shadows of the rocks high up the peak, legs bending as if it would leap upon the ruk’s back—

Nesryn fired, a second arrow on its tail. Sartaq’s.

Both found their marks. One through an eye, the other through the open mouth of the spider.

It shrieked, tumbling down from its perch. Kadara swung wide to dodge it, narrowly avoiding the jagged face of the peak. The spider’s splat thudded through the maze of rock ahead.

But then Kadara was up, into the gray sky, flapping like hell.

Sartaq whirled toward Nesryn just as she looked back at the pine forest.

To where half a dozen *kharankui* now emerged, hissing.

Blood coated the prince, his every breath ragged, but he managed to grab Nesryn’s arm and breathe, “*Run.*”

So they did.

Not toward the pines behind.

But into the gloom of the winding pass ahead.

Two days into the endless labyrinth of the Stone Marshes—*two*, not the day and a half that gods-damned Rolfe had suggested—Aelin was inclined to burn the whole place to the ground. With the water and humidity, she was never dry, always sweating and sticky. And worse: the insects.

She kept the little demons away with a shield of invisible flame, revealed only by the zinging as they slammed into it. She might have felt bad, had they not tried to eat her alive the first day here. Had she not scratched at the dozens of swollen red bites until her skin bled—and Rowan stepped in to heal them.

After the Bloodhound’s attack, her own healing abilities had remained depleted. So Rowan and Gavriel played healer for all of them, tending to the itching bites, the welts from stinging plants, the scratches from submerged, jagged chunks of the ruins that sliced into them if they weren’t careful while wading through the brackish water.

Only Manon seemed immune to the marshes’ drain, finding the feral, rotting beauty of the marshes to be pleasing. She indeed reminded Aelin of one of the horrid river beasts that ruled this place—with those golden eyes, those sharp, gleaming teeth ... Aelin tried not to think on it too much. Tried to imagine getting *out* of this place and onto dry, crisp land.

But in the heart of this dead, wretched sprawl was Mala’s Lock.

Rowan was scouting ahead in hawk form as the sun inched toward the horizon, Lysandra surveying the waters between the small hills as some slimy, scaled marsh thing that Aelin had grimaced at, eliciting an indignant hiss of a forked tongue before the shifter splashed into the water.

Aelin grimaced again as she trudged up one of those little hills, crusted in thorny brambles and crowned with two fallen pillars. A maze designed to scratch and stab and tear.

So she sent a blast of fire across the hill, turning it to wilting ashes. It clung to her wet boots as she passed over it, a sodden gray mush.

Fenrys chuckled at her side as they descended the hill. “Well, that’s one way to get through it.” He held out a hand to lead her through the water, and part of

her balked at the idea of being escorted, but ... she'd be damned if she fell into a watery pit. She had a very, very good idea of what was deep beneath them. She had no interest in swimming among the rotted remnants of people.

Fenrys gripped her hand tightly as they waded through the chest-deep water. He hauled her onto the bank first, then climbed out himself. He could no doubt leap the gaps between the islands in wolf form, as could Gavriel. Why they bothered staying in Fae form was beyond her.

Aelin used her magic to dry off as best she could, then used a tendril to dry Fenrys's and Gavriel's clothes, too.

A harmless, casual expenditure of power. Even if using it for three days straight on Eyllwe's burning coast had drained her. Not the flame, but just ... physically. Mentally. She still felt like she could sleep for a week. But the magic murmured. Incessantly, relentlessly. Even if *she* was tired ... the power demanded more. Drying their clothes between dips into the marsh water, at least, kept the damn thing quiet. For now.

Lysandra popped her hideous head up from a tangle of brambles, and Aelin yelped, falling back a step. The shifter grinned, revealing two very, very sharp fangs. Fenrys loosed a low laugh, scanning the shifter as she slithered a few feet ahead. "So you can change skin and bone, but the brand remains?"

Lysandra paused a few inches from the water, and on the island ahead, Aedion seemed to go tense, even as he continued on. Good. At least she wasn't the only one who'd rip out anyone's throat if they so much as mocked Lysandra. But her friend shifted, glowing and expanding, until her form became humanoid—Fae.

Until Fenrys was looking at himself, albeit a smaller version to fit into the woman's clothes. Gavriel, clearing the bank behind them, stumbled a step at the sight.

Lysandra said, her voice near-identical to Fenrys's drawl, "I suppose it shall always be my tell." She extended her wrist, pushing back the sleeve of her jacket to reveal his golden-brown skin, marred with that brand.

But she kept peering down at herself as they all continued wading and climbing, and finally remarked, "Your hearing *is* better." Lysandra ran her tongue over the slightly elongated canines. Fenrys cringed a bit. "What's the point of these?" she asked.

Gavriel edged closer and nudged the shape-shifter along, walking a few paces ahead with her. "Fenrys is the last person to ask. If you want an appropriate answer, that is."

Lysandra chuckled, smiling at the Lion as they ascended the hill. Odd—to see her smile on Fenrys’s face. Fenrys caught Aelin’s eye and grimaced again, no doubt finding it equally unnerving. She chuckled.

Wings flapped ahead, and Aelin took a moment to marvel as Rowan sailed hard and fast to them. Swift, strong—unfaltering.

Gavriel fell back a few paces as Lysandra stilled beside Aedion atop the hill and shifted into her own form. She swayed a bit, and Aelin lunged—only for Aedion to beat her to it, gripping Lysandra gently under her elbow as Rowan landed and shifted himself. They all needed a nice, long rest.

Her Fae Prince said, “Dead ahead—we’ll be there by tomorrow afternoon.”

Whenever she saw Rolfe again, they’d have a little chat about how, exactly, he calculated distances on that infernal map of his.

But Rowan’s face had paled beneath the tattoos. After a moment, he added, “I can feel it—my magic can feel it.”

“Tell me it’s not under twenty feet of water.”

A swift, cutting shake of the head. “I didn’t want to risk getting too close. But it reminds me of the Sin-Eater’s temple.”

“So, a really lovely, welcoming, and relaxing place to be, then,” she said.

Aedion laughed under his breath, eyes on the horizon. Dorian and Manon hauled themselves onto the bank below, dripping wet, the witch scanning the sea of islands ahead. If she noted anything, the witch said nothing.

Rowan surveyed the island they stood atop: high, shielded by a crumbling stone wall on one side, thorns on the other. “We’ll camp here tonight. It’s secure enough.”

Aelin nearly sagged in relief. Lysandra uttered a faint thank-you to the gods.

Within minutes, they’d cleared enough of a general area, through physical and magical toiling, to find seats among the huge blocks of stone, and Aedion set about cooking: a rather sad meal of hard bread and the swamp creatures Gavriel and Rowan had hunted, deeming them safe enough to eat. Aelin didn’t watch her cousin, preferring not to know what the hell she was about to shove down her throat.

The others seemed inclined to avert their attention as well, and though Aedion managed to wield their meager spices with surprising talent, some of the meat was ... chewy. Slimy. Lysandra had politely, but thoroughly, gagged at one point.

Night set in, a sea of stars twinkling into existence. Aelin couldn’t recall the last time she had been so far from civilization—perhaps on the ocean crossing to

and from Wendlyn.

Aedion, seated beside her, passed the too-light skin of wine. She swigged from it, glad for the sour slide that washed away any lingering taste of the meat.

“Don’t ever tell me what that was,” Aelin murmured to him, watching the others quietly finish up their own food. Lysandra muttered her agreement.

Aedion grinned a bit wickedly, surveying the others as well. A few feet away, half in shadow, Manon monitored it all. But Aedion’s gaze lingered on Dorian, and Aelin braced herself. But her cousin’s smile turned softer. “He still eats like a fine lady.”

Dorian’s head snapped up—but Aelin bit back a laugh at the memory. Ten years ago, they’d sat around a table together and she’d told the Havilliard prince what she thought of his table manners. Dorian blinked as the memory no doubt resurfaced, even as the others glanced between them.

The king gave a magnanimous bow. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” Indeed, his hands were mostly clean, his now-dry clothes immaculate.

Her own hands ... Aelin fished into a pocket for her handkerchief. The thing was as filthy as the rest of her, but ... better than using her pants. She plucked out the Eye of Elena from where it was usually wrapped inside, setting it on her knee as she wiped the smear of spices and fat from her fingers, then offered the scrap of silk to Lysandra. Aelin casually ran her fingers over the bent metal of the Eye as the shifter cleaned her hands, the blue stone in its core flickering with cobalt fire.

“As far as I recall,” Dorian went on with a sly grin, “you two—”

The attack happened so fast that Aelin didn’t sense or see it until it was over.

One moment, Manon was seated at the edge of the fire, the marshes a dark sprawl behind her.

The next, scales and flashing white teeth were snapping for her, erupting from the brush on the bank. And then—stillness and silence as the enormous marsh beast froze in place.

Halted by invisible hands—strong ones.

Manon’s sword was half out, her breathing ragged as she stared down the milky-pink maw spread wide enough to snap off her head. The teeth were each as long as Aelin’s thumb.

Aedion swore. The others didn’t so much as move.

But Dorian’s magic held the beast still, frozen with no ice to be seen. The same power as the one he’d wielded against the Bloodhound. Aelin surveyed him for any tether, any gleaming thread of power, and found none. He hadn’t

even lifted a hand to direct it. Interesting.

Dorian said to Manon, the witch still peering into the yawning death inches before her face, “Shall I kill it or set it free?”

Aelin most certainly had an opinion on the matter, but a warning look from Rowan had her shutting her mouth. And gaping a bit at her prince.

Oh, you crafty old bastard. His harsh, tattooed face revealed nothing.

Manon glanced toward Dorian. “Free it.”

The king’s face tightened—then the beast went careening off into the dark, as if a god had hurled it across the marshes. A distant splash sounded.

Lysandra sighed. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

Aelin cut her a look. The shifter grinned.

But Aelin looked back at Rowan, holding his stare. *How convenient that your shield vanished right as that thing waddled up. What an excellent opportunity for a magic lesson. What if it had gone wrong?*

Rowan’s eyes glittered. *Why do you think the hole opened up by the witch?*

Aelin swallowed her laugh of dismay. But Manon Blackbeak was taking in the king, her hand still on her sword. Aelin didn’t bother to pretend looking as if she wasn’t watching them as the witch shifted those gold eyes to her. To the Eye of Elena still balanced on Aelin’s knee.

Manon’s lip curled back from her teeth. “Where did you get that.”

The hair on Aelin’s arms rose. “The Eye of Elena? It was a gift.”

But the witch again glanced to Dorian—as if saving her from that thing ... Oh, Rowan hadn’t lowered the shield just for a magic lesson, had he? Aelin didn’t dare glance at him this time, not as Manon dipped her fingers into the muddy earth to sketch a shape.

A large circle—and two overlapping circles, one atop the other, within its circumference. “That is the Three-Faced Goddess,” Manon said, her voice low. “We call this ...” She drew a rough line in the centermost circle, in the eye-shaped space where they overlapped. “The Eye of the Goddess. *Not* Elena.” She circled the exterior again. “Crone,” she said of the outermost circumference. She circled the interior top circle: “Mother.” She circled the bottom: “Maiden.” She stabbed the eye inside: “And the heart of the Darkness within her.”

It was Aelin’s turn to shake her head. The others didn’t so much as blink.

Manon said again, “That is an Ironteeth symbol. Blueblood prophets have it tattooed over their hearts. And those who won valor in battle, when we lived in the Wastes ... they were once given those. To mark our glory—our being Goddess-blessed.”

Aelin debated chucking the gods-damned amulet into the marsh, but said, “The day I first saw Baba Yellowlegs ... the amulet turned heavy and warm in her presence. I thought it was in warning. Perhaps it was in ... recognition.”

Manon studied the necklace of scars marring Aelin’s throat. “Its power worked even with magic contained?”

“I was told that certain objects were ... exempt.” Aelin’s voice strained. “Baba Yellowlegs knew the entire history of the Wyrdkeys and gates. She was the one who told me about them. Is that a part of your history, too?”

“No. Not in those terms,” Manon said. “But Yellowlegs was an Ancient—she knew things now lost to us. She ripped down the walls of the Crochan city herself.”

“The legends claim the slaughter was ... catastrophic,” Dorian said.

Shadows flickered in Manon’s eyes. “That killing field, the last I heard, is still barren. Not a blade of grass grows on it. They say it’s from Rhiannon Crochan’s curse. Or from the blood that soaked it for the final three weeks of that war.”

“What is the curse, exactly?” Lysandra asked, brows furrowing.

Manon examined her iron nails, long enough that Aelin thought she wouldn’t answer. Aedion chucked the wineskin back into her lap, and Aelin swigged from it again as Manon at last replied. “Rhiannon Crochan held the gates to her city for three days and three nights against the three Ironteeth Matrons. Her sisters were dead around her, her children slaughtered, her consort spiked to one of the Ironteeth war caravans. The last Crochan Queen, the final hope of their thousand-year dynasty ... She did not go gently. It was only when she fell at dawn on the fourth day that the city was truly lost. And as she lay dying on that killing field, as the Ironteeth ripped down the walls of the city around her and butchered her people ... she cursed us. Cursed the three Matrons, and through them, all Ironteeth. She cursed Yellowlegs herself—who gave Rhiannon her finishing blow.”

None of them moved or spoke or breathed too loudly.

“Rhiannon swore on her last breath that we would win the war, but not the land. That for what we had done, we would inherit the land only to see it wilt and die in our hands. Our beasts would shrivel and keel over dead; our witchlings would be stillborn, poisoned by the streams and rivers. Fish would rot in lakes before we could catch them. Rabbits and deer would flee across the mountains. And the once-verdant Witch Kingdom would become a wasteland.

“The Ironteeth laughed at it, drunk on Crochan blood. Until the first

Ironteeth witchling was born—dead. And then another and another. Until the cattle rotted in the fields, and the crops withered overnight. By the end of the month, there was no food. By the second, the three Ironteeth Clans were turning on one another, ripping themselves to pieces. So the Matrons ordered us all into exile. Separated the Clans to cross the mountains and wander as we would. Every few decades, they would send groups to try to work the land, to see if the curse still held. Those groups never returned. We have been wanderers for five hundred years—the wound made worse by the fact that humans eventually took it for themselves. And the land responded to them.”

“But you plan to return to it still?” Dorian asked.

Those golden eyes were not of this earth. “Rhiannon Crochan said there was one way—only one—to break the curse.” Manon swallowed and recited in a cold, tight voice, “*Blood to blood and soul to soul, together this was done, and only together it can be undone. Be the bridge, be the light. When iron melts, when flowers spring from fields of blood—let the land be witness, and return home.*” Manon toyed with the end of her braid, the scrap of red cloak she’d tied around it. “Every Ironteeth witch in the world has pondered that curse. For five centuries, we have tried to break it.”

“And your parents ... their union was made in order to break this curse?” Aelin pushed—carefully.

A sharp nod. “I did not know—that Rhiannon’s bloodline survived.” And now ran through Manon’s blue veins.

Dorian mused, “Elena predates the witch wars by a millennium. The Eye had nothing to do with that.” He rubbed his neck. “Right?”

Manon didn’t reply, only extending a foot to wipe away the symbol she’d traced in the dirt.

Aelin drained the rest of the wine and shoved the Eye back into her pocket. “Maybe now you understand,” she said to Dorian, “why I’ve found Elena just a *bit* difficult to deal with.”



The island was wide enough that a conversation could be had without being overheard.

Rowan supposed that was precisely what his former cadre wanted as they found him on watch atop the vine-choked, crumbling spiral stairwell that overlooked the island and its surroundings. Leaning against a section that had

once been the curving wall, Rowan demanded, “What?”

Gavriel said, “You should take Aelin a thousand miles from here. Tonight.”

A wave of his magic and honed instincts told him all was safe in the immediate vicinity, calming the killing rage he’d slipped into at the thought.

Fenrys said, “Whatever awaits us tomorrow, it has been waiting for a long time, Rowan.”

“And how do either of you know this?”

Gavriel’s tawny eyes gleamed animal-bright in the darkness. “Your beloved’s life and the witch’s are entwined. They have been led here, by forces even we cannot understand.”

“Think about it,” Fenrys pushed. “Two females whose paths crossed tonight in a way we’ve rarely witnessed. Two queens, who might control either half of this continent, two sides of one coin. Both half-breeds. Manon, an Ironteeth *and* a Crochan. Aelin ...”

“Human and Fae,” Rowan finished for him.

“Between them, they cover the three main races of this earth. Between the two of them, they are mortal and immortal; one worships fire, the other Darkness. Do I need to go on? It feels as if we’re playing right into the hands of whoever has been running this game—for eons.”

Rowan gave Fenrys a stare that usually had men backing away. Even as he considered it.

Gavriel interrupted to say, “Maeve has been waiting, Rowan. Since Brannon. For someone who would lead her to the keys. For your Aelin.”

Maeve had not mentioned the Lock this spring. She hadn’t mentioned Mala’s ring, either. Rowan said slowly, his words a death promise, “Did Maeve send you because of this Lock, too?”

“No,” Fenrys said. “No—she never mentioned that.” He shifted on his feet, turning toward a distant, brutal roar. “If Maeve and Aelin go to war, Rowan, if they meet on a battlefield ...”

He tried not to let himself imagine it. The cataclysmic carnage and destruction.

Perhaps they should have remained in the North, shoring up their defenses.

Fenrys breathed, “Maeve will not allow herself to lose. Already, she’s replaced you.”

Rowan whirled on Gavriel. “*Who.*”

Those lion’s eyes darkened. “Cairn.”

Rowan’s blood iced over, colder than his magic. “Is she insane?”

“She told us of his promotion a day before we left. He was grinning like a cat with a canary in its mouth as we walked out of the palace.”

“He’s a sadist.” Cairn ... No amount of training, both off the battlefield and on it, had ever broken the Fae warrior of his penchant for cruelty. Rowan had locked him up, flogged him, disciplined him, wielded whatever shred of compassion he could muster in himself ... nothing. Cairn had been born savoring the suffering of others.

So Rowan had kicked him out of his own army—dumped him into Lorcan’s lap. Cairn had lasted about a month with Lorcan before he was packed off to an isolated legion, commanded by a general who was not cadre and had no interest in being one. The tales of what Cairn did to the soldiers and innocents he encountered ...

There were few laws against murder with the Fae. And Rowan had considered sparing the world of Cairn’s vileness every time he’d seen him. For Maeve to appoint him to the cadre, to give him almost unchecked power and influence—

“I’d bet every bit of gold I have that she’s going to let Aelin nearly break herself destroying Erawan ... then strike when she’s weakest,” Fenrys mused.

For Maeve not to have given either male a gag order through the blood oath ... She wanted him—wanted Aelin—to have this knowledge. To worry and speculate.

Fenrys and Gavriel swapped wary glances. “We still serve her, Rowan,” Gavriel murmured. “And we still have to kill Lorcan when the time comes.”

“Why bring this up at all? I won’t get in your way. Neither will Aelin, believe me.”

“Because,” Fenrys said, “Maeve’s style isn’t to execute. It’s to punish—slowly. Over years. But she wants Lorcan *dead*. And not half dead, or throat slit, but irrevocably dead.”

“Beheaded and burned,” Gavriel said grimly.

Rowan loosed a breath. “Why?”

Fenrys cast his glance over the edge of the stairs—to where Aelin slept, her golden hair shining in the moonlight. “Lorcan and you are the most powerful males in the world.”

“You forget Lorcan and Aelin can’t even stand to be in the same breathing space. I doubt there’s a chance of an alliance between them.”

“All we’re saying,” Fenrys explained, “is that Maeve does not make decisions without considerable motive. Be ready for anything. Sending her

armada, wherever it is, is only the start.”

The marsh beasts roared, and Rowan wanted to roar right back. If Aelin and Cairn ever encountered each other, if Maeve had some plan beyond her greed for the keys ...

Aelin turned in her sleep, scowling at the ruckus, Lysandra dozing beside her in ghost leopard form, that fluffy tail twitching. Rowan pushed off the wall, more than ready to join his queen. But he found Fenrys staring at her as well, his face tight and drawn. Fenrys’s voice was a broken whisper as he said, “Kill me. If that order is given. Kill me, Rowan, before I have to do it.”

“You’ll be dead before you can get within a foot of her.”

Not a threat—a promise and a plain statement of fact. Fenrys’s shoulders slumped in thanks.

“I’m glad, you know,” Fenrys said with unusual graveness, “that I got this time. That Maeve unintentionally gave me that. That I got to know what it was like—to be here, as a part of this.”

Rowan didn’t have words, so he looked to Gavriel.

But the Lion was merely nodding as he stared down at the little camp below. At his sleeping son.

The last leg of the trek the next morning was the longest yet, Manon thought.

Close—so close to this Lock the queen with a witch emblem in her pocket was seeking.

She'd fallen asleep, pondering how it could be connected, but gleaned nothing. They'd all been awake before dawn, dragged to consciousness by the oppressive humidity, so heavy it felt like a blanket weighing on Manon's shoulders.

The queen was mostly quiet from where she walked at the head of their company, her mate scouting overhead, and her cousin and the shape-shifter flanking her, the latter wearing the skin of a truly horrific swamp viper. The Wolf and the Lion brought up the rear, sniffing and listening for anything wrong.

The people who had once dwelled within these lands had not met easy or pleasant ends. She could feel their pain even now, whispering through the stones, rippling through the water. That marsh beast that had snuck up on her last night was the mildest of the horrors here. At her side, Dorian Havilliard's tense tan face seemed to suggest he felt the same.

Manon waded waist-deep through a pool of warm, thick water and asked, if only to get it out of where it rattled in her skull, "How will she use the keys to banish Erawan and his Valg? Or, for that matter, get rid of the things he's created that aren't of his original realm, but are some hybrid?"

Sapphire eyes slid toward her. "What?"

"Is there a way of weeding out who belongs and who doesn't? Or will all those with Valg blood"—she put a hand on her sodden chest—"be sent into that realm of darkness and cold?"

Dorian's teeth gleamed as he clenched them. "I don't know," he admitted, watching Aelin nimbly hop over a stone. "If she does, I assume she'll tell us when it's most convenient for her."

And the least convenient for them, he didn't need to add.

"And she gets to decide, I suppose? Who stays and who goes."

"Banishing people to live with the Valg isn't something Aelin would

willingly do.”

“But she does decide, ultimately.”

Dorian paused atop a little hill. “Whoever holds those keys gets to decide. And you’d better pray to whatever wicked gods you worship that it’s Aelin holding them in the end.”

“What about you?”

“Why should I wish to go anywhere near those things?”

“You’re as powerful as she is. You could wield them. Why not?”

The others were swiftly pulling ahead, but Dorian remained still. Even had the audacity to grip her wrist—hard. “Why not?” There was such unyielding coldness in that beautiful face. She couldn’t turn away from it. A hot, humid breeze shoved past, dragging her hair with it. The wind didn’t touch him, didn’t ruffle one raven-dark hair on his head. A shield—he was shielding himself. Against her, or whatever was in this swamp? He said softly, “Because I was the one who did it.”

She waited.

His sapphire eyes were chips of ice. “I killed my father. I shattered the castle. I purged my own court. So if I had the keys, Wing Leader,” he finished as he released her wrist, “I have no doubt that I would do the same once more—across this continent.”

“Why?” she breathed, her blood chilling.

She was indeed a bit terrified of the icy rage rippling from him as Dorian said, “Because she died. And even before she did, this world saw to it that she suffered, and was afraid, and alone. And even though no one will remember who she was, I do. I will never forget the color of her eyes, or the way she smiled. And I will never forgive them for taking it away.”

Too breakable—he’d said of human women. No wonder he’d come to her.

Manon had no answer, and she knew he wasn’t looking for one, but she said anyway, “Good.”

She ignored the glimmer of relief that flashed across his face as she moved ahead.



Rowan’s calculations hadn’t been wrong: they reached the Lock by midday.

Aelin supposed that even if Rowan hadn’t scouted ahead, it would have been obvious from the moment they beheld the waterlogged, labyrinthine complex of

wrecked pillars that the Lock likely lay in the half-crumbling stone dome in its center. Mostly because everything—every choking weed and drop of water—seemed to be leaning *away* from it. Like the complex was the dark, rippling heartbeat of the marshes.

Rowan shifted as he landed before where they had all gathered on a grassy, dry bit of land on the outskirts of the sprawling complex, not even missing a step as he walked to her side. She tried not to look too relieved as he safely returned.

She really tortured them, she realized, by shoving her way into danger whenever she felt like it. Perhaps she'd try to be better about it, if this dread was at all like what they felt.

"This whole place is too quiet," Rowan said. "I probed the area, but ... nothing."

Aedion drew the Sword of Orynth from across his back. "We'll circle the perimeter, making smaller passes until we get up to the building itself. No surprises."

Lysandra stepped back from them, bracing for the shift. "I'll take the water—if you hear two roars, get to higher ground. One quick roar, and it's clear."

Aelin nodded in confirmation and order to go ahead. By the time Aedion had strode for the outer wall of the complex, Lysandra had slipped into the water, all scales and talons.

Rowan jerked his chin to Gavriel and Fenrys. Both males silently shifted and then trotted ahead, the latter joining Aedion, the former in the opposite direction.

Rowan kept to Aelin's side, Dorian and the witch at her back, as they waited for the all clear.

When Lysandra's solitary, swift roar cleaved the air, Aelin murmured to Rowan, "What's the catch? *Where* is the catch? It's too easy." Indeed, there was nothing and no one here. No threat beyond what might be rotting away in the pits and sinkholes.

"Believe me, I've been considering it."

She could almost feel him sliding into that frozen, raging place—where born instinct and centuries of training had him seeing the world as a killing field, and willing to do anything to eradicate any threats to her. Not just his Fae nature—but *Rowan's* nature. To protect, to shield, to fight for what and who he loved.

Aelin stepped close and kissed him on the neck. Those pine-green eyes warmed slightly as they shifted from the ruin to scan her face.

"When we get back to civilization," he said, his voice deepening as he kissed her cheek, her ear, her brow, "I'm going to find you the nicest inn on the whole

gods-damned continent.”

“Oh?” He kissed her mouth. Once, twice.

“With good food, a disgustingly comfortable bed, and a big bathtub.”

Even in the marshes, it was easy to become drunk on him, on the taste and smell and sound and feel of him. “How big?” she murmured, not caring what the others thought as they returned.

“Big enough for two,” he said onto her lips.

Her blood turned sparkling at the promise. She kissed him once—briefly but deeply. “I have no defenses against such offers. Especially those made by such a pretty male.”

He scowled at *pretty*, nipping at her ear with his canines. “I keep a tally, you know, Princess. To remind myself to repay you the next time we’re alone for all the truly wonderful things you say.”

Her toes curled in her soggy boots. But she patted him on the shoulder, looking him over with absolute irreverence, saying as she walked ahead, “I certainly hope you make me beg for it.”

His answering growl from behind made heat bloom in her core.

The feeling lasted for about a minute, however. Within a few turns into the maze of crumbling walls and pillars, leaving Dorian to guard the entrance and Rowan slipping ahead, Aelin found herself beside the witch—who looked more bored than anything. Fair enough. She’d been dragged here, after all.

Wading as quietly as they could into the towering archways and pillars of stone, Rowan signaled from a crossroads ahead. They were getting close.

Aelin unsheathed Goldryn, Manon drawing her own sword in answer.

Aelin lifted her brows as she glanced between their two blades. “What’s your sword called?”

“Wind-Cleaver.”

Aelin clicked her tongue. “Good name.”

“Yours?”

“Goldryn.”

A slash of iron teeth as they were bared in a half smile. “Not as good a name.”

“Blame my ancestor.” She certainly did. For many, many things.

They reached a crossroads—one leading left, one right. Neither offering a hint of the direct path to the center of the ruin.

Rowan said to Manon, “You go left. Whistle if you find anything.”

Manon stalked off among the stones and water and reeds, shoulders tight

enough to suggest she hadn't appreciated the order, but she wasn't dumb enough to tangle with him.

Aelin smiled a bit at the thought as she and Rowan continued on. Running her free palm over the carved walls they passed, she said casually, "That sunrise Mala appeared to you—what, exactly, did she say?"

He slashed a glance in her direction. "Why?"

Her heart turned thunderous, and maybe it made her a coward to say it now

Rowan gripped her elbow as he read her body, scented her fear and pain. "Aelin."

She braced herself, nothing but stone and water and bramble around them, and turned a corner.

And there it was.

Even Rowan forgot to demand an answer to what she'd been about to tell him as they surveyed the open space flanked by crumbling walls and punctuated by fallen pillars. And at its northern end ... "Big surprise," Aelin muttered. "There's an altar."

"It's a chest," Rowan corrected with a half smile. "It's got a lid."

"Even better," she said, nudging him with an elbow. Yes—yes, she'd tell him later.

The water separating them from the chest was still and silver bright—too murky to see if there was a bottom at all beyond the steps up to the dais. Aelin reached for her water magic, hoping it'd whisper of what lay beneath that surface, but her flames were burning too loudly.

Splashing issued across the way, and Manon appeared around an opposite wall. Her focus went to the enormous stone chest at the rear of the space, the stone cracked and overflowing with weeds and vines. She began easing across the water, one step at a time.

Aelin said, "Don't touch the chest."

Manon just gave her a long look and kept heading for the dais.

Trying not to slip on the slick floor, Aelin crossed the space, sloshing water over the dais steps as she mounted them, Rowan close behind.

Manon leaned over the chest to study the lid but did not open it. Studying, Aelin realized, the countless Wyrdmarks carved into the stone.

Nehemia had known how to use the marks. Had been taught them and was fluent enough in them to have wielded their power. Aelin had never asked how or why or when.

But here were Wyrddmarks, deep within Eyllwe.

Aelin stepped up to Manon, examining the lid more closely. “Do you know what those are?”

Manon brushed back her long white hair. “I’ve never seen such markings.”

Aelin examined a few, her memory straining for the translation. “Some of these aren’t symbols I’ve encountered before. Some are.” She scratched her head. “Should we throw a rock at it—see what it does?” she asked, twisting to where Rowan peered over her shoulder.

But a hollow throb of air pulsed around them, silencing the incessant buzz of the marshes’ inhabitants. And it was that utter silence, the bark of surprise from Fenrys, that had Aelin and Manon shifting into flanking, defensive positions. As if they’d done this a hundred times before.

But Rowan had gone still as he scanned the gray skies, the ruins, the water.

“What is it?” Aelin breathed.

Before her prince could answer, Aelin felt it again. A pulsing, dark wind *demanding* their attention. Not the Valg. No, this darkness was born of something else.

“Lorcan,” Rowan breathed, a hand on his sword—but not drawing it.

“Is that his magic?” Aelin shuddered as that death-kissed wind shoved at her. She batted it away as if it were a gnat. It snapped at her in answer.

“It’s his warning signal,” Rowan murmured.

“For what?” Manon asked sharply.

Rowan was instantly moving, scaling the high walls with ease, even as stone crumbled away. He balanced on its top, surveying the land on the other side of the wall.

Then he smoothly climbed back down, his splash as he landed echoing off the stones.

Lysandra slithered around a cluster of weeds and halted with a swift thrust of her scaled tail as Rowan said too calmly, “There is an aerial legion approaching.”

Manon breathed, “Ironteeth?”

“No,” Rowan said, meeting Aelin’s gaze with an icy steadiness that had seen him through centuries of battle. “Ilken.”

“How many?” Aelin’s voice turned distant—hollow.

Rowan’s throat bobbed, and she knew he’d been taking in the horizon and surrounding lands not for any chance of winning the battle that was sure to come, but for any shot at getting her out. Even if the rest of them had to buy her time with their own lives.

“Five hundred.”

Lorcan's breath singed his throat with every inhalation, but he kept running through the marshes, Elide laboring beside him, never complaining, only scanning the skies with wide, dark eyes.

Lorcan sent out another flickering blast of his power. Not toward the winged army that raced not too far ahead, but farther—toward wherever Whitethorn and his bitch-queen might be in this festering place. If those ilken reached them long before Lorcan could arrive, that Wyrdkey the bitch carried would be as good as lost. And Elide ... He shut out the thoughts.

The ilken flew hard and fast, heading toward what had to be the heart of the marshes. What the hell had brought the queen out here?

Elide flagged, and Lorcan gripped her under an elbow to keep her upright as she stumbled over a bit of pockmarked stone. Faster. If the ilken caught them unawares, if they stole his revenge and that key ...

Lorcan sent out burst after burst of his power in every direction.

Keys aside, he didn't want to see the look on Elide's face if the ilken got there first. And they found whatever was left of the fire-breather and her court.



There was nowhere to go.

In the heart of this festering plain, there was nowhere to run, or hide.

Erawan had tracked them here. Had sent five hundred ilken to retrieve them. If the ilken had found them on the sea and in this endless wasteland, they'd no doubt be able to find them if they tried hiding among the ruins.

They were all silent as they gathered on a grassy hill at the edge of the ruins, watching that black mass take form. Deep in the ruins behind them, the chest still waited. Untouched.

Aelin knew the Lock couldn't help—other than to waste their time by opening its container. Brannon could get in line to complain.

And Lorcan ... somewhere out there. She'd think on that later. At least

Fenrys and Gavriel had remained, rather than charging off to fulfill Maeve's kill order.

Rowan said, eyes pinned on those swift, leathery wings far on the horizon, "We'll use the ruin to our advantage. Force them to bottleneck in key areas." Like a cloud of locusts, the ilken blocked out the clouds, the light, the sky. A dull, glazed sort of calm swept over Aelin.

Eight against five hundred.

Fenrys quickly tied back his golden hair. "We divide it up, take them out. Before they can get close enough. While they're still in the air." He tapped his foot on the ground, rolling his shoulders—as if shaking off the grip of that blood oath roaring at him to hunt down Lorcan.

Aelin rasped, "There's another way."

"No," was Rowan's response.

She swallowed hard and lifted her chin. "There is nothing and no one out here. The risk of using that key would be minimal—"

Rowan's teeth flashed as he snarled, "No, and that's final."

Aelin said too quietly, "You don't give me orders."

She saw as much as she felt Rowan's temper rise with dizzying speed. "You will have to pry that key out of my cold, dead hands."

He meant it, too—he'd make her kill him before he let her use the key in any capacity beyond wielding the Lock.

Aedion let out a low, bitter laugh. "You wanted to send a message to our enemies about your power, Aelin." Closer and closer that army came, and Rowan's ice and wind licked at her as he tunneled down into his magic. Aedion jerked his chin toward the army approaching. "It seems Erawan sent his answer."

Aelin hissed, "You blame me for this?"

Aedion's eyes darkened. "We should have stayed in the North."

"I had no choice, I'll have you remember."

"You did," Aedion breathed, none of the others, not even Rowan, stepping in. "You've had a choice all along, and you opted to flash your magic around."

Aelin knew very well that her eyes were now flickering with flames as she took a step toward him. "So I guess the 'you're perfect' stage is over, then."

Aedion's lip curled off his teeth. "This isn't a game. This is *war*, and you pushed and pushed Erawan to show his hand. You refused to run your schemes by us first, to let us weigh in, when we have fought wars—"

"Don't you *dare* pin this on me." Aelin peered inside herself—to the power there. Down and down it went, to that pit of eternal fire.

“This isn’t the time,” Gavriel offered.

Aedion threw out a hand in his direction, a silent, vicious order for the Lion to shut his mouth. “Where are our allies, Aelin? Where are our armies? All we have to show for our efforts is a Pirate Lord who might very well change his mind if he hears about this from the wrong lips.”

She held in the words. *Time*. She had needed *time*—

“If we’re going to stand a chance,” Rowan said, “we need to get into position.”

Embers sparked at her fingertips. “We do it together.” She tried not to look offended at their raised brows, their slightly gaping mouths. “Magic might not last against them. But steel will.” She jerked her chin at Rowan, at Aedion. “Plan it.”

So they did. Rowan stepped to her side, a hand on her lower back. The only comfort he’d show—when he knew, they both knew, it hadn’t been his argument to win. He said to the Fae males, “How many arrows?”

“Ten quivers, fully stocked,” Gavriel said, eyeing Aedion as he removed the Sword of Orynth from his back and rebuckled it at his side.

Returned to her human form, Lysandra had drifted to the edge of the bank, back stiff as the ilken gathered on the horizon.

Aelin left the males to sort out their positions and slipped up beside her friend. “You don’t have to fight. You can stay with Manon—guard the other direction.”

Indeed, Manon was already scaling one of the ruin walls, a quiver with unnervingly few arrows slung over her back beside Wind-Cleaver. Aedion had ordered her to scout the other direction for any nasty surprises. The witch had looked ready to debate—until she seemed to realize that, on this battlefield at least, she was not the apex predator.

Lysandra loosely braided her black hair, her golden skin sallow. “I don’t know how they have done this so many times. For *centuries*.”

“Honestly, I don’t know, either,” Aelin said, glancing over a shoulder at the Fae males now analyzing the layout of the marshes, the flow of the wind, whatever else to use to their advantage.

Lysandra rubbed at her face, then squared her shoulders. “The marsh beasts are easily enraged. Like someone I know.” Aelin jabbed the shifter with an elbow, and Lysandra snorted, even with the army ahead. “I can rile them up—threaten their nests. So that if the ilken land ...”

“They won’t just have us to deal with.” Aelin gave her a grim smile.

But Lysandra's skin was still pale, her breathing a bit shallow. Aelin threaded her fingers through the shifter's and squeezed tightly.

Lysandra squeezed back once before letting go to shift, murmuring, "I'll signal when I'm done."

Aelin just nodded, lingering on the bank for a moment to watch the long-legged white bird flap across the marsh—toward that building darkness.

She turned back to the others in time to see Rowan jerk his chin to Aedion, Gavriel, and Fenrys. "You three herd them—to us."

"And you lot?" Aedion said, sizing up her, Rowan, and Dorian.

"I get the first shot," Aelin said, flames dancing in her eyes.

Rowan inclined his head. "My lady wants the first shot. She gets the first shot. And when they're scattering in a blind panic, we come in."

Aedion gave her a long look. "Don't miss this time."

"Asshole," she snapped.

Aedion's smile didn't reach his eyes as he strode to fetch extra weapons from their packs, grabbing a quiver of arrows in either hand, slinging one of the longbows across his broad back along with his shield. Manon had already stationed herself atop the wall behind them, grunting as she strung Aedion's other bow.

Rowan was saying to Dorian, "Short bursts. Find your targets—the center of groups—and use only what magic is necessary. Don't waste it all at once. Aim for the heads, if you can."

"What about once they start landing?" Dorian asked, sizing up the terrain.

"Shield yourself, attack when you can. Keep the wall to your back at all times."

"I won't be his prisoner again."

Aelin tried to shut out what he'd meant by it.

But Manon said from the wall above them, an arrow now nocked loosely in her bow, "If it comes to that, princeling, I'll kill you before they can."

Aelin hissed, "You will do no such thing."

Both of them ignored her as Dorian said, "Thank you."

"None of you are being taken prisoner," Aelin growled, and walked away.

And there would be no second or third shots.

Only the first shot. Only her shot.

Perhaps it was time to see how deep that new well of power went. What lived inside it.

Perhaps it was time for Morath to learn to scream.

Aelin stepped up to the water's edge, then leaped onto the next island of grass and stone. Rowan silently came up beside her, meeting her pace for pace. It wasn't until they reached the next hill that he angled his face toward her, his golden skin stretched taut, his eyes as cold as her own.

Only that anger was directed at her—perhaps more livid than she'd seen him since Mistward. She bared her teeth in a feral, grim smile. "I know, I know. Just add suggesting to use the Wyrdkey to that tally of all the horrible things I do and say."

Leathery, massive wings beat the air, and shrieking cries at last began to trickle toward them. Her knees quaked, but she clamped down on the fear, knowing he could scent it, knowing the others could, too.

So she willed herself to take another step onto the sodden, reed-laden plain—toward that ilken army. They'd be upon them in minutes—less, maybe.

And horrible, miserable Lorcan had bought them that extra time. Wherever the bastard was.

Rowan didn't object as she took another step, then another. She had to put distance between them all—had to make sure that every last ember was capable of reaching that army and that she didn't waste her strength by traveling far to do so.

Which meant striding out into the marshes alone. To wait for those things to be close enough to see their teeth. They had to know who now marched through the reeds toward them. What she'd do to them.

But still the ilken charged.

In the distance, far to the right, marsh creatures began to roar—no doubt in Lysandra's wake. She prayed the beasts were hungry. And that they didn't mind Morath-bred meat.

"Aelin." Rowan's voice cut across water and plant and wind. She paused, looking over a shoulder at where he now stood on the sandbank, as if it'd been impossible *not* to follow her.

The strong, unyielding bones of his face were set with that warrior's brutality. But his pine-green eyes were bright—almost soft—as he said, "Remember who you are. Every step of the way down, and every step of the way back. Remember who you are. And that you're mine."

She thought of the new, delicate scars on his back—marks from her own nails, that he'd refused to heal with his magic, and instead had set with seawater, the salt locking the scars into place before the immortal body could smooth it over. Her claiming marks, he'd breathed into her mouth the last time he'd been

inside her. So he and anyone who saw them would know that he belonged to her. That he was hers, just as she was his.

And because he was hers, because they were *all* hers ...

Aelin turned away from him and sprinted across the plain.

With every step toward the army whose wings she could just make out, she watched for those beasts Lysandra riled, even as she began a swift, deadly descent into the core of her magic.

She had been hovering around the middle ledge of her power for days now, one eye on the churning, molten abyss far below. Rowan knew. Fenrys and Gavriel, definitely. Shielding them, drying their clothes, killing the insects that plagued them ... all little ways to relieve the strain, to keep herself steady, to grow accustomed to its depth and pressure.

For the deeper she went into her power, the more her body, her mind, squeezed under the pressure of it. That was the burnout—when that pressure won, when the magic was drained too fast or too greedily, when it was spent and still the bearer tried to claw deeper than it should.

Aelin slammed to a stop in the heart of the plain. The ilken had spied her sprinting and now flapped toward her.

Unaware of the three males who crept far out, bows at the ready to push Erawan's soldiers onto her flames.

If she could burn through their defenses. She'd have to drag up every bit of her power to incinerate them all. The true might of Aelin Fire-Bringer. Not an ember less.

So Aelin abandoned every trapping of civilization, of conscience and rules and humanity, and plummeted into her fire.

She flew for that flaming abyss, only distantly aware of the humidity lying thick on her skin, of the pressure building in her head.

She'd shoot straight down—and push off the bottom, bringing all that power with her to the surface. The drag would be enormous. And it would be the test, the true test, of control and strength. Easy—so easy to spear into the heart of fire and ash. The hard part was bringing it up; that was when the cracking would occur.

Deeper and deeper, Aelin shot into her power. Through distant, mortal eyes, she noted the ilken sweeping closer. A mercy—if they had once been human, perhaps obliterating them would be a mercy.

Aelin knew she'd reached the former edge of her power thanks to warning bells in her blood that pealed in her wake. That pealed as she launched herself

into the burning depths of hell.

The Queen of Flame and Shadow, the Heir of Fire, Aelin of the Wildfire, Fireheart ...

She burned through each title, even as she became them, became what those foreign ambassadors had hissed when they reported on a child-queen's growing, unstable power in Terrasen. A promise that had been whispered into the blackness.

The pressure began to build in her head, in her veins.

Far behind, safely out of her range, she felt the flickers of Rowan's and Dorian's magic as they rallied the blasts that would answer her own.

Aelin soared into the uncharted core of her power.

The inferno went on and on.

Lorcan knew they were still too slow, warning signal or not.

Elide was gasping for breath, weaving on her feet as Lorcan halted on the outskirts of a massive, flooded plain. She pushed back a stray strand of hair from her face, Athril's ring glinting on her finger. She hadn't questioned where it had come from or what it did when he'd slipped it onto her finger this morning. He'd only warned her to never take it off, that it might be the one thing to keep her safe from the ilken, from Morath.

The force had swept northward and away from where Lorcan and Elide had hauled ass, no doubt to secure some better approach. And at the far end of the plain, too distant for Elide's human eyes to clearly make out, Whitethorn's silver hair glinted, the King of Adarlan at his side. Magic, bright and cold, swirling around them. And farther out—

Gods above. Gavriel and Fenrys were in the reeds, bows drawn. And Gavriel's son. Aimed at the army approaching. Waiting for—

Lorcan tracked where they were all facing.

Not the army closing in on them.

But the queen standing alone in the heart of the flooded plain.

Lorcan realized a moment too late that he and Elide were on the wrong side of the demarcation line—too far north of where Aelin's companions stood safely behind her.

Realized it the exact heartbeat that Elide's eyes fell on the golden-haired woman facing that army.

Her arms slackened at her sides. Her face drained of color.

Elide staggered one step—one step toward Aelin, a small noise coming out of her.

That's when he felt it.

Lorcan had sensed it once before, that day at Mistward. When the Queen of Terrasen had laid waste to the Valg princes, when her power had been a behemoth surging from the deep, setting the world trembling.

That was nothing—*nothing*—compared to the power that now roared into the

world.

Elide stumbled, gaping at the spongy earth as the marsh water rippled.

Five hundred ilken closed in around them. They had taken his warning—and set a trap.

And that power ... that power Aelin was now dragging up from whatever hellhole was inside her, from whatever fiery pit she'd been damned to endure ... Its wake would wash over them.

“What is ... ,” Elide breathed, but Lorcan lunged for her, hurling them to the ground, covering her body with his. He threw a shield over them, plummeting hard and fast into his magic, the drop nearly uncontrolled. He didn't have time to do anything but pour every ounce of power into his shield, into the one barrier that would keep them from being melted into nothing.

He shouldn't have wasted the effort warning them. Not when it was now likely to get him and Elide killed.

Whitethorn knew—even at Mistward—that the queen hadn't yet stepped into her birthright. Knew that this sort of power came around once in an eon, and to serve it, to serve *her* ...

A court that wouldn't just change the world. It would start the world over.

A court that could conquer this world—and any other it wished.

If it wished. If that woman on the plain desired to. And that was the question, wasn't it?

“Lorcan,” Elide whispered, her voice breaking in longing for the queen, or terror of her, he didn't know.

Didn't have time to guess, as a feral roar went up from the reeds. A command.

And then a hail of arrows, precisely and brutally aimed, flew from the marshes to strike at the outer flanks of the ilken. He marked Fenrys's shots by the black-tipped arrows that easily found their marks. Gavriel's son didn't miss, either. Ilken tumbled from the sky, and the others panicked, flapping into one another, careening inward.

Right to where the Queen of Terrasen unleashed the full force of her magic upon them.



The moment Lysandra roared to signal that the marsh beasts were riled and she was safely behind their lines again, the moment the ilken got so close Aedion

could shoot them out of the sky like geese, his queen erupted.

Even with Aelin's aim away from them, even with Rowan's shield, the heat of that fire *burned*. "Holy gods," Aedion found himself saying as he stumbled back through the reeds, falling farther behind her line of attack. "Holy rutting gods."

The heart of the legion didn't have the chance to scream as they were washed away in a sea of flame.

Aelin was no savior to rally behind, but a cataclysm to be weathered.

The fire grew hotter, his bones groaning as sweat beaded on his brow. But Aedion took up a new spot, glancing to ensure his father and Fenrys had done the same across the drowned plain, and aimed for the ilken veering out of the flame's path. He made his arrows count.

Ashes fell to the earth in a slow, steady snow.

Not fast enough. As if sensing Aelin's dragging pace, ice and wind erupted overhead.

Where gold-and-red flame did not melt Erawan's legion, Dorian and Rowan ripped them apart.

The ilken still held out, as if they were a stain of darkness, harder to wash away.

Still Aelin kept burning. Aedion couldn't even see her in the heart of that power.

There was a cost—there had to be a cost to such power.

She had been born knowing the weight of her crown, her magic. Had felt its isolation long before she'd reached adolescence. And that seemed like punishment enough, but ... there had to be a price.

Nameless is my price. That was what the witch had said.

Understanding glimmered at the edge of Aedion's mind, just out of grasp. He fired his second-to-last arrow, straight between the eyes of a frantic ilken.

One by one, their own foul-bred resistance to magic yielded to those bursts of ice, and wind, and flame.

And then Whitethorn began walking into the firestorm fifty feet ahead. Toward Aelin.



Lorcan pinned Elide to the earth, throwing every last shadow and pocket of darkness into that shield. The flames were so hot that sweat dripped down his

brow, right into her silken hair, spread on the green moss. The marsh water around them boiled.

Boiled. Fish floated belly-up. The grasses dried out and caught fire. The entire world was a hell-realm, with no end and no beginning.

Lorcan's shredded, dark soul tipped its head back and roared in unison to her power's burning song.

Elide was cringing, fists balled in his shirt, face buried against his neck as he gritted his teeth and weathered the firestorm. Not just fire, he realized. But wind and ice. Two other, mighty magics had joined her—shredding the ilken. And his own shield.

Wave after wave, the magic battered his power. A lesser gift might have been broken against it—a lesser magic might have tried to fight back, and not just let the power wash over them.

If Erawan got a collar around Aelin Galathynius's neck ... it would be over.

To leash that woman, that power ... Would a collar even be able to contain *that*?

There was movement through the flames.

Whitethorn was prowling across the boiling marshes, his steps unhurried.

The flame swirled around the dome of Rowan's shield, eddying with his icy wind.

Only a male who'd lost his damn mind would wander into that storm.

The ilken died and died and died, slowly and not at all cleanly, as their dark magic failed them. Those that tried to flee the flame or ice or wind were felled by arrows. Those that managed to land were shredded apart by ambushes of claws and fangs and snapping, scaled tails.

They'd made every minute of his warning count. Had easily set a trap for the ilken. That they'd fallen for it so swiftly—

But Rowan reached the queen in the heart of the marshes as her flames winked out. As his own wind died out, and plumes of unforgiving ice shattered the few ilken flapping in the skies.

Ash and glittering ice rained down, thick and swirling as snow, embers dancing between the clumps that had once been the ilken. There were no survivors. Not one.

Lorcan didn't dare lift his shield.

Not as the prince stepped onto the small island where the queen was standing. Not as Aelin turned toward Rowan, and the only flame that remained was a crown of fire atop her head.

Lorcan watched in silence as Rowan slid a hand over her waist, the other cupping the side of her face, and kissed his queen.

Embers stirred her unbound hair as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed close. A golden crown of flame flickered to life atop Rowan's head—the twin to the one Lorcan had seen burning that day at Mistward.

He knew Whitethorn. He knew the prince wasn't ambitious—not in the way that immortals could be. He likely would have loved the woman if she'd been ordinary. But this power ...

In his wasteland of a soul, Lorcan felt that tug. Hated it.

It was why Whitethorn had strode to her—why Fenrys was now halfway across the plain, dazed, attention wholly fixed on where they stood, tangled in each other.

Elide stirred beneath him. “Is—is it over?”

Given the heat with which the queen was kissing her prince, he wasn't entirely sure what to tell Elide. But he let her squirm out from beneath him, twisting to her feet to spy the two figures on the horizon. He rose, watching with her.

“They killed them all,” she breathed.

An entire legion—gone. Not easily, but—they'd done it.

Ash continued to fall, clumping on Elide's silky night-dark hair. He gently picked out a bit, then put a shield over her to keep it from landing on her again.

He hadn't touched her since last night. There hadn't been time, and he hadn't wanted to think about what her kiss had done to him. How it had utterly wrecked him and still twisted up his guts in ways he wasn't sure he could live with.

Elide said, “What do we do now?”

It took him a moment to realize what she'd meant. Aelin and Rowan at last pulled apart, though the prince leaned in to nuzzle her neck.

Power called to power among the Fae. Perhaps Aelin Galathynius was unlucky the cadre had been drawn to Maeve's power long before she was born, had chained themselves to her instead.

Perhaps they were the unlucky ones, for not holding out for something better.

Lorcan shook his head to clear the useless, traitorous thoughts.

That was Aelin Galathynius standing there. Drained of her power.

He felt it now—the utter lack of sound or feeling or heat where there had been such a riotous storm moments before. A creeping cold.

She'd emptied her entire cache. They all had. Maybe Whitethorn had gone to her, put his arms around her, not because he wanted to mount her in the middle

of the marshes, but to keep her upright once that power was gone. Once she was left vulnerable.

Open to attack.

What do we do now? Elide had asked.

Lorcan smiled slightly. "We go say hello."

She balked at the shift in his tone. "You're not on friendly terms."

Certainly not, and he wasn't about to be, not when the queen was within his sights. Not when she had that Wyrdkey ... the sibling to the one Elide carried.

"They won't attack me," he said, and began heading for them. The marsh water was near-scalding, and he grimaced at the fish floating, milky eyes open wide to the sky. Frogs and other beasts bobbed among them, wobbling in his ripples.

Elide hissed at entering the hot water but followed after him.

Slowly, Lorcan closed in on his prey, too focused on the fire-breathing bitch to notice that Fenrys and Gavriel had vanished from their positions in the reeds.

43

Without the brace, Chaol was given a black mare, Farasha, whose name was about as ill-fitting as they came. It meant *butterfly*, Yrene told him as they gathered in the palace courtyard three days later.

Farasha was anything but.

Yanking at the bit, stomping her hooves and tossing her head, Farasha savored testing his limits long before the desert-bound company finished gathering. Servants had gone ahead the day before to prepare the camp.

He'd known the royals would give him their fiercest horse. Not a stallion, but one close enough to match it in fury. Farasha had been born furious, he was willing to bet.

And he'd be damned if he let those royals make him ask for another horse. One that would not strain his back and legs so much.

Yrene was frowning at Farasha, at him, as she stroked a hand down her chestnut mare's night-black mane.

Both beautiful horses, though neither compared to the stunning Asterion stallion Dorian had gifted Chaol for his birthday last winter.

Another birthday celebration. Another time—another life.

He wondered what had happened to that beautiful horse, whom he had never named. As if he'd known, deep down, how fleeting those few happy weeks were. He wondered if it was still in the royal stables. Or if the witches had pillaged him—or let their horrible mounts use him to fill their bellies.

Perhaps that was why Farasha resented his very presence. Perhaps she sensed that he had forgotten that noble-hearted stallion in the north. And wanted to make him pay for it.

The breed was an offshoot of the Asterions, Hasar had tittered as she'd trotted past on her white stallion, circling him twice. The refined, wedge-shaped head and high tails were twin markers of their Fae ancestry. But these horses, the Muniqi, had been bred for the desert climes of this land. For the sands they were to cross today, and the steppes that had once been the khagan's homeland. The princess had even pointed to a slight bulge between the horses' eyes—the *jibbah*—the marker of the larger sinus capacity that allowed the Muniqi to thrive in the dry, unyielding deserts of this continent.

And then there was the Muniqi's speed. Not as fast, Hasar admitted, as an Asterion. But close.

Yrene had watched the princess's little *lesson*, face carefully neutral, using the time to adjust where she'd strapped Chaol's cane behind her saddle, then fiddle with the clothes she wore.

While Chaol was in his usual teal jacket and brown pants, Yrene had forgone a dress.

They'd swathed her in white and gold against the sun, her long tunic flowing to her knees to reveal loose, gauzy pants tucked into high brown boots. A belt cinched her slim waist, and a glinting bandolier of gold and silver beading sliced between her breasts. Her hair, she'd left in her usual half-up fashion, but someone had woven bits of gold thread through it.

Beautiful. As lovely as a sunrise.

There were perhaps thirty of them in total, none people Yrene really knew, as Hasar had not bothered to invite any of the healers from the Torre. Swift-legged hounds paced in the courtyard, weaving under the hooves of the dozen guards' horses. Definitely not Muniqi, those horses. Fine indeed for guards—his men had received beasts nowhere near their quality—but without that *awareness* the

Muniqi possessed, as if they listened to every word spoken.

Hasar signaled to Shen, standing proud at the gate, who blew a horn—
And then they were off.

For a woman who commanded ships, Hasar seemed far more interested in the equine heritage of her family's people. And seemed more than eager to unleash her skills as a Darghan rider. The princess cursed and scowled as the city streets slowed them. Even with word given well in advance to clear the path out of Antica, the narrow and steep streets checked their speed considerably.

And then there was the brutal heat. Already sweating, Chaol rode beside Yrene, keeping a tight leash on Farasha, who tried to take a bite out of not one but two vendors gawking from the sidewalks. *Butterfly* indeed.

He kept one eye upon the mare and the other upon the city passing by. And as they rode for the eastern gates into the arid, scrub-covered hills beyond, Yrene pointed out landmarks and tidbits of information.

Water ran through aqueducts wending between the buildings, feeding the houses and public fountains and countless gardens and parks scattered throughout. A conqueror might have taken this city three centuries ago, but that same conqueror had loved it well. Treated it well and nourished it.

They cleared the eastern gate, then passed down a long, dusty road that cut through the sprawl beyond the city proper. Hasar didn't bother to wait, and launched her stallion into a gallop that left them waving away her dust.

Kashin, claiming he didn't want to eat her dust the entire way to the oasis, followed suit after giving a small smile toward Yrene and a whistled command to his horse. Then most of the nobles and viziers, apparently having already taken bets, launched into various races at breakneck speed through towns cleared well in advance. As if this kingdom were their playground.

Birthday party indeed. The princess had likely been bored and didn't want to look too irresponsible to her father. Though he was surprised to find that Arghun had joined them. Surely with most of his siblings away, he would have seized the

chance to hatch some plot. But there was Arghun, galloping close to Kashin as they blended into the horizon.

Some of the nobility remained back with Chaol and Yrene, letting the others put some miles between them. They cleared the last of the outlying towns, their horses sweat-soaked and panting as they ascended a large, rocky hill. The dunes began just on its other side, Yrene had told him. They would water the horses here—then make the last leg of the trek across the sands.

She was smiling faintly at him as they ascended the crag, taking a deer path through the scrub. Horses had trampled through here; bushes were broken and shattered under careless riders. A few bushes even bore speckles of blood, already dried in the brutal sun.

Someone should flay the rider who'd been so reckless with their mount.

Others had reached the top of the crag, watered their horses, and moved on. All he saw of them were bodies and horseflesh disappearing into the sky—as if they simply walked off the edge of the cliff and into thin air.

Farasha stomped and surged her way up the hill, and his back and thighs strained to keep seated without the brace to steady him. He didn't dare let her get a whiff of discomfort.

Yrene reached the summit first, her white clothes like a beacon in the cloudless blue day around them, her hair shining bright as dark gold. She waited for him, the chestnut mare beneath her panting heavily, its rich coat gleaming with hues of deepest ruby.

She dismounted as he urged Farasha up the last of the hill, and then—

It knocked the breath from him.

The desert.

It was a barren, hissing sea of golden sand. Hills and waves and ravines, rippling on forever, empty and yet humming. Not a tree or bush or gleam of water to be seen.

The unforgiving hand of a god had shaped this place. Still blew his breath

across it, shifting the dunes grain by grain.

He had never seen such a sight. Such a wonder. It was a new world entirely.

Perhaps it was an unexpected boon that the information they sought dwelled out here.

Chaol dragged his attention to Yrene, who was reading his face. His reaction.

“Its beauty is not for everyone,” she said. “But it sings to me, somehow.”

This sea where no ships would ever sail, some men would look upon it and see only burning death. He saw only quiet—and clean. And slow, creeping life. Untamed, savage beauty.

“I know what you mean,” he said, carefully dismounting from Farasha. Yrene monitored, yet did nothing but hold out the cane, letting him find the best way to swing his leg over, back groaning and wobbling, and then slide down to the sandy rock. The cane was instantly in his hand, though Yrene made no move to steady him while he finally released the saddle and reached for Farasha’s reins.

The horse tensed, as if considering lunging for him, but he gave her a no-nonsense glare, the cane groaning as he dug it into the rock beneath him.

Farasha’s dark eyes glowed as if she’d been forged in Hellas’s burning realm, but Chaol stood tall—as tall as he could. Didn’t break her stare.

Finally, the horse huffed, and deigned to let him haul her toward the sand-crusted trough that was half crumbling with age. The trough perhaps had been here for as long as the desert had existed, had watered the horses of a hundred conquerors.

Farasha seemed to grasp that they were to enter that ocean of sand and drank heartily. Yrene led her horse over, keeping the chestnut a healthy distance away from Farasha, and said, “How are you feeling?”

“Solid,” he said, and meant it. “I’ll be aching by the time we get there, but the strain isn’t so bad.” Without the cane, he didn’t dare try to walk more than a few steps. Could barely manage it.

She still put a hand on his lower spine, then his thighs, letting her magic

assess. Even with the clothes and the heat, the press of her hands left him aware of every inch of space between them.

But others gathered around the ancient, enormous trough, and so he pulled out of Yrene's assessing touch, leading Farasha a safe distance away. Mounting the mare again, though ...

"Take your time," Yrene murmured, but remained a few steps away.

He'd had a block at the palace. Here, short of climbing onto the precarious lip of the trough ... The distance between his foot and the stirrup had never seemed so long. Balancing on one foot while he lifted it, pushing down with the other to propel him up, swinging his leg around the saddle ... Chaol went through the steps, feeling the motions he'd done a thousand times before. He'd learned to ride before he was six—had been on a horse nearly his entire life.

Of course he'd been given a devil of a horse to do this with.

But Farasha held still, staring toward the sifting sea of sand, to the path that had been trampled down the hill—their entry into the desert. Even with the shifting winds hauling the sands into new shapes and valleys, the tracks the others had left were clear enough. He could even spy some of them cresting hills and then flying down them, little more than specks of black and white.

And yet he remained here. Staring at the stirrups and saddle.

Yrene offered casually, "I can find a block or bucket—"

Chaol moved. Perhaps not as graceful as he'd like, perhaps more struggling than he'd intended, but he managed, the cane groaning as he used it to push upward, then clattering to the rock as he let go to grab the pommel of the saddle, right as his foot slid—barely—into the stirrup. Farasha shifted at his weight while he hauled himself higher into the saddle, his back and thighs barking as he swung his leg over, but he was up.

Yrene strode to the fallen cane and dusted it off. "Not bad, Lord Westfall." She strapped the cane behind her saddle and mounted her mare. "Not bad at all."

He hid his smile, his face still over-warm, and nudged Farasha down the

sandy hill at last.

They followed the tracks the others had left slowly, the heat rippling off the sands.

Up, and down, the only sounds the muffled thumping of their horses and the sighing sands. Their party meandered in a long, snaking line. Guards had been posted throughout, standing with towering poles topped with the khagan's flag and insignia of a dark running horse. Markers of the general direction toward the oasis. He pitied the poor men ordered to stand in the heat for a princess's whim, but said nothing.

The dunes evened out after a time, the horizon shifting to reveal a flat, sandy plain. And in the distance, waving and bobbing in the heat ...

"There we make our camp," Yrene said, pointing toward a dense cluster of green. No sign of the ancient, buried city of the dead that Hasar claimed the oasis had grown over. Not that they expected to see much of anything from their vantage point.

From the distance, it might very well be another thirty minutes. Certainly at their pace.

Despite the sweat soaking through her white clothes, Yrene was smiling. Perhaps she, too, had needed a day away. To breathe the open air.

She noticed his attention and turned. The sun had brought out her freckles, darkening her skin to a glowing brown, and tendrils of hair curled about her smiling face.

Farasha tugged on the reins, her body quivering with impatience.

"I own an Asterion horse," he said, and her mouth curved in an impressed frown. Chaol shrugged. "I'd like to see how a Muniqi measures up."

Her brows narrowed. "You mean ..." She noted the flat, smooth spread of land between them and the oasis. Perfect for running. "Oh, I can't—a gallop?"

He waited for the words about his spine, his legs. None came.

"Are you afraid?" he asked, arching a brow.

“Of these things? *Yes.*” She cringed at her mount, restless beneath her.

“She’s as sweet as a dairy cow,” he said of Yrene’s chestnut mare.

Chaol leaned down to pat “Butterfly’s” neck.

She tried to bite him. He yanked on the reins enough to tell her he was fully aware of her bullshit.

“I’ll race you,” he said.

Yrene’s eyes sparkled. And to his shock she breathed, “The prize?”

He could not remember the last time. The last time he had felt so aware of every bit of breath and blood, simmering and thrumming, in his body.

“A kiss. When and where of my choosing.”

“What do you mean *where.*”

Chaol only grinned. And let Farasha run free.

Yrene cursed, more viciously than he’d ever heard her, but he didn’t dare look back—not as Farasha became a black storm upon the sand.

He’d never gotten to test out the Asterion. But if it was faster than *this*—

Flying over the sand, Farasha was a bolt of dark lightning spearing across the golden desert. It was all he could do to keep up, to grit his teeth against his barking muscles.

He forgot about them anyway at the blur of reddish brown and black that emerged in the corner of his eye—and the white rider atop it.

Yrene’s hair rose and fell behind her in a golden-brown tangle of curls, lifting with each thunderous pound of her mare’s legs on the hard sand. White clothes streaming in the wind, the gold and silver sparkled like stars, and her face—

Chaol couldn’t breathe as he beheld the wild joy on Yrene’s face, the unchecked exhilaration.

Farasha marked the mare gaining on them, meeting them beat for beat, and made to charge ahead. To leave them in the dust.

He checked her with the reins and his feet, marveling that he could even do so. That the woman now closing in, now riding beside him, now beaming at him

as if he were the only thing in this barren, burning sea ... She had done this.
Given him this.

Yrene was smiling, and then she was laughing, as if she could not contain it
inside her.

Chaol thought it was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

And that this moment, flying together over the sands, devouring the desert
wind, her hair a golden-brown banner behind her ...

Chaol felt, perhaps for the first time, as if he was awake.

And he was grateful, right down to his very bones, for it.

Every step toward Aelin was an eternity—and every step was somehow too swift.

Elide had never been more aware of her limp. Of her dirty clothes; of her long, unshaped hair; of her small body and lack of any discernible gifts.

She had imagined Aelin’s power, dreamed of how it had shattered the glass castle.

She hadn’t considered that the reality of seeing it unleashed would make her bones quail in terror. Or that the others would possess such harrowing gifts as well—ice and wind twining with fire, until only death rained down. She almost felt bad for the ilken they’d slaughtered. Almost.

Lorcan was silent. Tense.

She was able to read his moods now, the little tells that he believed no one could detect. But there—that faint twitch on the left side of his mouth. That was his attempt to suppress whatever rage was now riding him. And there, that slight angle of his head to the right ... that was his assessing and reassessing every surrounding, every weapon and obstacle within sight. Whatever this meeting was, Lorcan didn’t think it would go well.

He expected to fight.

But Aelin—*Aelin*—had now turned toward them from where she stood on that mound of grass. Her silver-haired prince pivoted with her. Took a casual step in front of her. Aelin sidestepped around him. He tried to block her again. She nudged him with an elbow and held her ground at his side. The Prince of Doranelle—her queen’s lover. How much sway would his opinion hold over Aelin? If he hated Lorcan, would his contempt and mistrust for her as well be immediate?

She should have thought of it—how it’d look to be with Lorcan. Approach with Lorcan.

“Regretting your choice in allies?” Lorcan said with cutting calm. Like he’d been able to read her tells, too.

“It sends a message, doesn’t it?”

She could have sworn something like hurt flashed in his eyes. But it was typical Lorcan—even when she'd ripped into him atop that barge, he'd barely flinched.

He said coolly, "It would seem our bargain with each other is about to end anyway. I'll be sure to explain the terms, don't worry. I'd hate for them to think you were slumming it with me."

"That's not what I meant."

He snorted. "I don't care."

Elide halted, wanting to call him a liar, half because she knew he *was* lying and half because her own chest tightened at the words. But she kept silent, letting him walk ahead, that distance between them yawning wider with his every storming step.

But what would she even say to Aelin? *Hello? How do you do? Please don't burn me? Sorry I'm so filthy and lamed?*

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. *Pay attention. Look around.*

Elide glanced up from where she'd been wincing at her dirty clothes. Lorcan was perhaps twenty feet ahead, the others mere figures near the horizon.

The invisible hand on her shoulder squeezed. *Observe. See.*

See what? Ash and ice rained to the right, ruins rose up on the left, nothing but open marshes spreading ahead. But Elide halted, scanning the world around her.

Something was wrong. Something made any creatures that had survived the maelstrom of magic go silent again. The burnt grasses rustled and sighed.

Lorcan kept walking, his back stiff, though he hadn't reached for his weapons.

See see see.

See *what?* She turned in place but found nothing. She opened her mouth to call to Lorcan.

Golden eyes flickered in the brush not thirty paces ahead.

Enormous golden eyes, fixed on Lorcan as he strode mere feet away. A mountain lion, ready to pounce, to shred flesh and sever bone—

No—

The beast exploded from the burnt grasses.

Elide screamed Lorcan's name.

He whirled, but not to the lion. Toward her, that furious face shooting toward *her—*

But she was running, leg shrieking in pain, as Lorcan finally sensed the

attack about to swoop down on him.

The mountain lion reached him, those thick claws going low while its teeth went right for his throat.

Lorcan drew his hunting knife, so fast it was only the glint of gray light on steel.

Beast and Fae male went down, right into the muddy water.

Elide hurtled for him, a wordless scream breaking from her. Not a normal mountain lion. Not even close. Not with the way it knew Lorcan's every move as they rolled through the water, as they dodged and swiped and lunged, blood spurting, magic clashing, shield against shield—

Then the wolf attacked.

A massive white wolf, sprinting out of nowhere, wild with rage and all of it focused on Lorcan.

Lorcan broke from the lion, blood streaming down his arm, his leg, panting. But the wolf had vanished into *nothing*. Where was it, where was it—

It appeared out of thin air, as if it had stepped through an invisible bridge, ten feet from Lorcan.

Not an attack. An execution.

Elide cleared a gap between two mounds of land, icy grass slicing into her palms, something crunching in her leg—

The wolf leaped for Lorcan's vulnerable back, eyes glazed with bloodlust, teeth shining.

Elide surged up the little hill, time spinning out beneath her.

No no no no no.

Vicious white fangs neared Lorcan's spine.

Lorcan heard her then, heard the shuddering sob as she threw herself into him.

His dark eyes flared in what looked like terror as she slammed into his unprotected back.

As he noticed the death blow not coming from the lion at his front, but the wolf whose jaws closed around her arm instead of Lorcan's neck.

She could have sworn the wolf's eyes flared in horror as it tried to pull back the physical blow, as a dark, hard shield slammed into her, stealing her breath with its unflinching solidity—

Blood and pain and bone and grass and bellowing fury.

The world tilted as she and Lorcan went down, her body thrown over his, the wolf's jaws wrenching out of her arm.

She curled over Lorcan, waiting for the wolf and mountain lion to end it, to take her neck in their jaws and crunch down.

No attack came. Silence cleaved the world.

Lorcan flipped her over, his breathing ragged, his face bloody and pale as he took in her face, her arm. “*ElideElideElide—*”

She couldn’t draw breath, couldn’t see around the sensation that her arm was mere shredded flesh and splintered bone—

Lorcan grabbed her face before she could look and snapped, “Why did you do that? *Why?*” He didn’t wait for an answer. He lifted his head, his snarl so vicious it echoed in her bones, made the pain in her arm surge violently enough that she whimpered.

He growled to the lion and the wolf, his shield a swirling, obsidian wind around them, “You’re dead. You’re both *dead—*”

Elide shifted her head enough to see the white wolf staring at them. At Lorcan. See the wolf change in a flash of light into the most beautiful man she’d ever beheld. His golden-brown face tightened as he took in her arm. Her arm, her arm—

“Lorcan, we were ordered,” said an unfamiliar, gentle male voice from where the lion, too, had transformed into a Fae male.

“Damn your orders to hell, you stupid bastard—”

The wolf-warrior hissed, chest heaving, “We can’t fight against the command much longer, Lorcan—”

“Put the shield down,” the calmer one said. “I can heal the girl. Let her get away.”

“I’ll kill you both,” Lorcan swore. “I’ll *kill you—*”

Elide looked at her arm.

There was a piece missing. From her forearm. There was blood gushing into the burnt remnants of grass. White bone jutting out—

Maybe she started screaming or sobbing or silently shaking.

“*Don’t look,*” Lorcan snapped, squeezing her face again to draw her eyes to his own. His face was lined with such wrath she barely recognized it, but he made no move against the males.

His power was drained. He’d nearly wiped it out shielding against Aelin’s flame and whoever had borne that other magic on the field. This shield ... this was all Lorcan had left.

And if he lowered it so they could heal her ... they’d kill him. He had warned them of the attack, and they’d still kill him.

Aelin—where was *Aelin*—

The world was blackening at the edges, her body begging to submit rather than endure the pain that reordered everything in her life.

Lorcan tensed as if sensing the oblivion that threatened. “You heal her,” he said to the gentle-eyed male, “and then we continue—”

“No,” she got out. Not for this, not for *her*—

Lorcan’s onyx eyes were unreadable as he scanned her face. And then he said quietly, “I wanted to go to Perranth with you.”

Lorcan dropped the shield.



It was not a hard choice. And it did not frighten him. Not nearly as much as the fatal wound in her arm did.

Fenrys had hit an artery. She’d bleed out in minutes.

Lorcan had been born from and gifted with darkness. Returning to it was not a difficult task.

But letting that glimmering, lovely light before him die out ... In his ancient, bitter bones, he could not accept it.

She had been forgotten—by everyone and everything. And still she had hoped. And still she had been kind to him.

And still she had offered him a glimpse of peace in the time he’d known her.

She had offered him a home.

He knew Fenrys wouldn’t be able to fight Maeve’s kill order. Knew Gavriel would stay true to his word and heal her, but Fenrys couldn’t hold out against the blood oath’s command.

He knew the bastard would regret it. Knew the wolf had been horrified the moment Elide had jumped between them.

Lorcan let go of his shield, praying she wouldn’t watch when the bloodletting started. When he and Fenrys went claw-to-claw and fang-to-fang. He’d last against the warrior. Until Gavriel joined back in.

The shield vanished, and Gavriel was instantly kneeling, reaching with his broad hands for her arm. Pain paralyzed her, but she tried telling Lorcan to run, to put the shield back up—

Lorcan stood, shutting out her pleading.

He faced Fenrys. The warrior was trembling with restraint, his hands clenched at his sides to keep from going for any of his blades.

Elide was still sobbing, still begging him.

Fenrys's taut features were lined with regret.

Lorcan just smiled at the warrior.

It snapped Fenrys's leash.

His sentinel leaped for him, sword out, and Lorcan lifted his own, already knowing the move Fenrys planned to use. He'd trained him how to do it. And he knew the guard Fenrys let drop on his left side, just for a heartbeat, exposing his neck—

Fenrys landed before him, swiping low and dodging right.

Lorcan angled his blade for that vulnerable neck.

They were both blown back by an icy, unbreakable wind. Whatever was left of it after the battle.

Fenrys was up, lost to the blood fury, but the wind slammed into him. Again. Again. Holding him down. Lorcan struggled against it, but the shield Whitethorn had thrown over them, the raw power he now used to keep them pinned, was too strong when his own magic was depleted.

Boots crunched on the burnt grass. Sprawled on the bank of a little hill, Lorcan lifted his head. Whitethorn stood between him and Fenrys, the prince's eyes glazed with wrath.

Rowan surveyed Gavriel and Elide, the latter still weeping, still begging for it to stop. But her arm ...

A scratch marred that moon-white arm, but Gavriel's rough battlefield healing had filled the holes, the missing flesh and broken bones. He must have used all his magic to—

Gavriel swayed ever so slightly.

Whitethorn's voice was like gravel. "This ends now. You two don't touch them. They're under the protection of Aelin Galathynius. If you harm them, it will be considered an act of war."

Specific, ancient words, the only way a blood order could be detained. Not overridden—just delayed for a little while. To buy them all time.

Fenrys panted, but relief flickered in his eyes. Gavriel sagged a bit.

Elide's dark eyes were still glassy with pain, the smattering of freckles on her cheeks stark against the unnatural whiteness of her skin.

Whitethorn said to Fenrys and Gavriel, "Are we clear on what the hell will happen if you step out of line?"

To Lorcan's eternal shock, they lowered their heads and said, "Yes, Prince."

Rowan let the shields drop, and then Lorcan was hurtling to Elide, who

struggled to sit up, gaping at her nearly healed arm. Gavriel, wisely, backed away. Lorcan examined her arm, her face, needing to touch her, smell her—

He didn't notice that the light footsteps in the grass didn't belong to his former companions.

But he knew the female voice that said from behind him, "What the rutting hell is going on?"



Elide had no words to express to Lorcan what she'd felt in that moment he'd let the shield drop. What she'd felt when the silver-haired, tattooed warrior-prince had halted that fatal bloodshed.

But she had no breath in her body when she looked over Lorcan's broad shoulder and beheld the golden-haired woman striding toward them.

Young, and yet her face ... It was an ancient face, wary and cunning and limned with power. Beautiful, with the sun-kissed skin, the vibrant turquoise eyes. Turquoise eyes, with a core of gold around the pupil.

Ashryver eyes.

The same as the golden-haired, handsome man who came up beside her, muscled body tense as he assessed whether he'd need to spill blood, a bow dangling from his hand.

Two sides of the same golden coin.

Aelin. Aedion.

They were both staring at her with those Ashryver eyes.

Aelin blinked. And her golden face crumpled as she said, "Are you Elide?"

It was all Elide could do to nod. Lorcan was taut as a bowstring, his body still half angled over her.

Aelin strode closer, eyes never leaving Elide's face. Young—she felt so young compared to the woman who approached. There were scars all over Aelin's hands, along her neck, around her wrists ... where shackles had been.

Aelin slid to her knees not a foot away, and it occurred to Elide that she should be bowing, head to the dirt—

"You look ... so much like your mother," Aelin said, her voice cracking. Aedion silently knelt, putting a broad hand on Aelin's shoulder.

Her mother, who had gone down swinging, who had died fighting so this woman could live—

"I'm sorry," Aelin said, shoulders curving inward, head dropping low as

tears slid down her flushed cheeks. “I’m so sorry.” How many years had those words been locked up?

Elide’s arm ached, but it didn’t stop her from touching Aelin’s hand, clenched in her lap.

Touching that tanned, scarred hand. Warm, sticky skin met her fingertips.

Real. This was—*Aelin* was—real.

As if Aelin realized the same, her head lifted. She opened her mouth, but her lips wobbled, and the queen clamped them together.

None of the gathered company spoke.

And at last Aelin said to Elide, “She bought me time.”

Elide knew who the queen meant.

Aelin’s hand began shaking. The queen’s voice broke entirely as she said, “I am alive today because of your mother.”

Elide only whispered, “I know.”

“She told me to tell you ...” A shuddering inhale. But Aelin didn’t break her stare, even as tears continued cutting through the dirt on her cheeks. “Your mother told me to tell you that she loves you—very much. Those were her last words to me. ‘Tell my Elide I love her very much.’”

For over ten years, Aelin had been the sole bearer of those final words. Ten years, through death and despair and war, Aelin had carried them across kingdoms.

And here, at the edge of the world, they had found each other again. Here at the edge of the world, just for a heartbeat, Elide felt the warm hand of her mother brush her shoulder.

Tears stung Elide’s eyes as they slipped free. But then the grass crunched behind them.

She saw the white hair first. Then the golden eyes.

And Elide sobbed as Manon Blackbeak emerged, smiling faintly.

As Manon Blackbeak saw her and Aelin, knee-to-knee in the grass, and mouthed one word.

Hope.

Not dead. None of them were dead.

Aedion said hoarsely, “Is your arm—”

Aelin grabbed it—gently. Inspecting the shallow cut, the new pink skin that revealed what had been missing mere moments before. Aelin twisted on her knees, snarling at the wolf-warrior.

The golden-haired male averted his eyes as the queen glared her displeasure.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Elide managed to say.

“The bite,” Aelin said drily, turquoise eyes livid, “would suggest otherwise.”

“I’m sorry,” the male said, either to the queen or Elide, she didn’t know. His eyes lifted to Aelin—something like devastation there.

Aelin ignored the words. The male flinched. And the silver-haired prince seemed to give him a brief pitying glance.

But if the order hadn’t come from Aelin to kill Lorcan ...

Aelin said to the *other* golden-haired male behind Elide, the one who had healed her—the lion, “I assume Rowan told you the deal. You touch them, you die. You so much as breathe wrong in their direction, and you’re dead.”

Elide tried not to cringe at the viciousness. Especially when Manon smiled in wicked delight.

Aelin tensed as the witch came at her exposed back but allowed Manon to settle on her right. To look over Elide with those gold eyes. “Well met, witchling,” Manon said to her. Manon faced Lorcan just as Aelin did.

Aelin snorted. “You look a bit worse for wear.”

“Likewise,” Lorcan snapped at her.

Aelin’s grin was terrifying. “Got my note, did you?”

Aedion’s hand had slid to his sword—

“The Sword of Orynth,” Elide blurted, noticing the bone pommel, the ancient markings. Aelin and Lorcan paused being at each other’s throats. “The sword ... you ...”

Vernon had mocked her about it once. Said it had been taken by the King of Adarlan and melted down. Burned, along with the antler throne.

Aedion’s turquoise eyes softened. “It survived. We survived.”

The three of them, the remnants of their court, their families.

But Aelin was again sizing up Lorcan, bristling, that wicked grin returning. Elide said softly, “I survived, Majesty, because of him.” She pointed with her chin to Manon. “And because of her. I am here because of both of them.”

Manon nodded, focus going to the pocket where she’d seen Elide hide that scrap of stone. The confirmation she’d been looking for. The reminder of the third part of the triangle.

“I’m here,” Elide said as Aelin fixed those unnervingly vivid eyes on her, “because of Kaltain Rompier.” Her throat clogged, but she pushed past it as her trembling fingers fished out the little bit of cloth from her inside pocket. The otherworldly *feel* of it pulsed in her palm.

“She said to give this to you. To Celaena Sardothien, I mean. She didn’t

know they ... you were the same. She said it was payment for ... for a warm cloak offered in a cold dungeon.” She wasn’t ashamed of the tears that fell, not in honor of what that woman had done. Aelin studied the scrap of cloth in Elide’s shaking palm. “I think she kept this as a reminder of kindness,” Elide said hoarsely. “They ... they broke her, and hurt her. And she died alone in Morath. She died alone, so I wouldn’t ... so they couldn’t ...” None of them spoke or moved. She couldn’t tell if it made it worse. If the hand that Lorcan laid on her back made her cry harder.

The words tumbled out of Elide’s shaking mouth. “She said t-to remember your promise to punish them all. And s-said that you can unlock any door, if you only have the k-key.”

Aelin clamped her lips together and closed her eyes.

A beautiful, dark-haired man now approached. He was perhaps a few years older than her, but carried himself so gracefully that she felt small and unmolded before him. His sapphire eyes fixed on Elide, clever and unruffled—and sad. “Kaltain Rompier saved your life? And gave you that?”

He knew her—had known her.

Manon Blackbeak said in a faint, amused voice, “Lady Elide Lochan of Perranth, meet Dorian Havilliard, King of Adarlan.” The king lifted his brows at the witch.

“M-majesty,” she stammered, inclining her head. She should really get up. Really stop lying on the ground like a worm. But the cloth and stone still lay in her hand.

Aelin wiped her damp face on a sleeve, then straightened. “Do you know what it is you carry, Elide?”

“Y-yes, Majesty.”

Turquoise eyes, haunted and weary, lifted to her own. Then slid to Lorcan. “Why didn’t you take it?” The voice was hollow and hard. Elide suspected she’d be lucky if it was never used on her.

Lorcan met her gaze without flinching. “It wasn’t mine to take.”

Aelin now glanced between them, seeing too much. And there was no warmth on the queen’s face, but she said to Lorcan, “Thank you—for bringing her to me.”

The others seemed to be trying not to look too shocked at the words.

But Aelin turned to Manon. “I lay claim to her. Witch-blood in her veins or no, she is Lady of Perranth, and she is *mine*.”

Gold eyes gleamed with the thrill of challenge. “And if I claim her for the

Blackbeaks?”

“Blackbeaks—or the Crochans?” Aelin purred.

Elide blinked. Manon—and the Crochans? What was the Wing Leader doing here? Where was Abraxos? The witch said, “Careful, Majesty. With your power reduced to embers, you’ll have to fight me the old-fashioned way again.”

That dangerous grin returned. “You know, I’ve been hoping for round two.”

“Ladies,” the silver-haired prince said through clenched teeth.

They both turned, giving Rowan Whitethorn horrifyingly innocent smiles. The Fae Prince, to his credit, only winced after they looked away again.

Elide wished she could hide behind Lorcan as both women fixed that near-feral attention on her again. Manon reached forward, tipping Elide’s hand over—to where Aelin’s waited. “There you go, over and done with,” Manon said.

Aelin cringed slightly but pocketed the cloth and the key inside. A shadow instantly lifted from Elide’s heart, a whispering presence now silenced.

Manon ordered, “On your feet. We were in the middle of something.”

She reached to pull Elide up, but Lorcan stepped in and did it himself. He didn’t let go of Elide’s arm, and she tried not to lean into his warmth. Tried not to make it seem like she hadn’t just met her queen, her friend, her court, and ... somehow now found Lorcan to be the safest of them all.

Manon smirked at Lorcan. “Your claim on her, male, is at the very bottom of the list.” Iron teeth slid out, turning that beautiful face petrifying. Lorcan didn’t let go. Manon crooned in that way that usually meant death, “Don’t. Touch. Her.”

“You don’t give me orders, witch,” Lorcan said. “And you have no say in what is between us.”

Elide frowned at him. “You’re making it worse.”

“We like to call it ‘territorial male nonsense,’” Aelin confided. “Or ‘territorial Fae bastard’ works just as nicely.”

The Fae Prince coughed pointedly behind her.

The queen looked over a shoulder, brows raised. “Am I forgetting another term of endearment?”

The warrior-prince’s eyes glowed, even as his face remained set with predatory intent. “I think you covered it.”

Aelin winked at Lorcan. “You hurt her, and I’ll melt your bones,” she merely said, and walked away.

Manon’s iron-clad smile grew, and she gave Lorcan a mocking incline of the head as she followed in the queen’s wake.

Aedion looked Lorcan over and snorted. “Aelin does whatever she wants, but I think she’d let me see how many of your bones I can break before she melts them.” Then he, too, was walking toward the two females. One silver, one gold.

Elide almost screamed as a ghost leopard appeared out of nowhere, twitched its whiskers in Lorcan’s direction, and then trotted after the women, its puffy tail swishing behind it.

Then the king left, then the Fae males. Until only Prince Rowan Whitethorn stood there. He gave Elide a Look.

Elide immediately shrugged out of Lorcan’s grip. Aelin and Aedion had stopped ahead, waiting for her. Smiling faintly—welcomingly.

So Elide headed for them, her court, and did not look back.



Rowan had kept quiet during the past few minutes, observing.

Lorcan had been willing to die for Elide. Had been willing to put aside his quest for Maeve in order for Elide to live. And had then acted territorial enough to make Rowan wonder if he seemed so ridiculous around Aelin all the time.

Now alone, Rowan said to Lorcan, “How did you find us?”

A cutting smile. “The dark god nudged me toward here. The ilken army did the rest.”

The same Lorcan he’d known for centuries, and yet ... not. Some hard edge had been dulled—no, *soothed*.

Lorcan stared toward the source of that soothing, but his jaw clenched as his focus shifted to where Aelin walked beside her. “That power could just as easily destroy her, you know.”

“I know,” Rowan admitted. What she’d done minutes ago, the power she’d summoned and unleashed ... It had been a song that had made his magic erupt in kind.

When the ilken’s resistance had finally yielded beneath flame and ice and wind, Rowan hadn’t been able to stifle the yearning to walk into the burning heart of that power and see her glowing with it.

Halfway across the plain, he’d realized it wasn’t just the allure of it that tugged at him. It was the woman inside it, who might need physical contact with another living being to remind herself that she had a body, and people who loved her, and to pull back from that killing calm that so mercilessly wiped the ilken

from the skies. But then the flames had vanished, their enemies raining down as ash and ice and corpses, and she'd looked at him ... Holy gods, when she'd looked at him, he'd almost fallen to his knees.

Queen, and lover, and friend—and more. He hadn't cared that they had an audience. *He* had needed to touch her, to reassure himself that she was all right, to *feel* the woman who could do such great and terrible things and still look at him with that beckoning, vibrant life in her eyes.

You make me want to live, Rowan.

He wondered if Elide Lochan had somehow made Lorcan want to do the same.

He said to Lorcan, “And what about your mission?”

Any softness vanished from Lorcan's granite-hewn features. “Why don't you tell me why you're in this shithole place, and then we'll discuss *my* plans.”

“Aelin can decide what to tell you.”

“Such a good dog.”

Rowan gave him a lazy smile but refrained from commenting on the delicate, dark-haired young woman who now held Lorcan's own leash.

Kaltain Rompier had just turned the tide in this war.

Dorian had never been more ashamed of himself.

He should have been better. Should have *seen* better. They all should have.

The thoughts swirled and eddied as Dorian kept back in the half-drowned temple complex, silently watching as Aelin studied the chest on the altar as if it were an opponent.

The queen was now flanked by Lady Elide, Manon on the dark-haired girl's other side, Lysandra sprawled in ghost leopard form at the queen's feet.

The power in that cluster alone was staggering. And Elide ... Manon had murmured something to Aelin on their walk back into the ruins about Elide being watched over by Anneith.

Watched over, as the rest of them seemed to be by other gods.

Lorcan stepped into the ruins, Rowan at his side. Fenrys, Gavriel, and Aedion approached them, hands on their swords, bodies still thrumming with tension as they kept Lorcan within sight. Especially Maeve's warriors.

Another ring of power.

Lorcan—Lorcan, blessed by Hellas himself, Rowan had told him on that skiff ride into the Dead Islands. Hellas, god of death. Who had traveled here with Anneith, his consort.

The hair on Dorian's arms rose.

Scions—each of them touched by a different god, each of them subtly, quietly, guided here. It wasn't a coincidence. It couldn't be.

Manon noticed him standing a few feet away, read whatever wariness was on his face, and broke from the circle of quietly talking women to come to his side. "What?"

Dorian clenched his jaw. "I have a bad feeling about this."

He waited for the dismissal, the mockery. Manon only said, "Explain."

He opened his mouth, but Aelin stepped up to the dais.

The Lock—the Lock that would contain the Wyrddkeys, would allow Aelin to put them back in their gate. Thanks to Kaltain, thanks to Elide, they only needed

one more. Wherever Erawan had it. But getting this Lock ...

Rowan was instantly at the queen's side as she peered into the chest.

Slowly, she looked back at them. At Manon.

"Get up here," the queen said in an unnervingly calm voice.

Manon, wisely, did not refuse.

"This isn't the place or time for exploring it," Rowan said to the queen. "We move it back to the ship, then figure it out from there."

Aelin murmured her agreement, her face paling.

Manon asked them, "Was the Lock ever here to begin with?"

"I don't know." Dorian had never heard Aelin utter the words. It was enough to send him splashing up the stairs, dripping water behind him as he peered in.

There was no Lock. Not in the way that they had expected, not in the way the queen had been promised and instructed to find it.

The stone chest held only one thing:

An iron-bound mirror, the surface near-golden with age, speckled, and covered in grime. And along the twining, intricately carved border, tucked into the upper right corner ...

The marking of the Eye of Elena. A witch symbol.

"What the hell is it?" Aedion demanded from the steps below.

It was Manon who answered, glancing sidelong at the grim-faced queen, "It's a witch mirror."

"A what?" Aelin asked. The others edged closer.

Manon tapped a nail on the stone rim of the chest. "When you killed Yellowlegs, did she give any hint about why she was there, what she wanted from you or the former king?" Dorian searched his own memory but found nothing.

"No." Aelin glanced to him in question, but Dorian shook his head as well. She asked the witch, "Do *you* know why she was there?"

A hint of a nod. A breath of hesitation. Dorian braced himself. "Yellowlegs was there to meet with the king—to show him how her magic mirrors worked."

"I smashed most of them," Aelin said, crossing her arms.

"Whatever you destroyed were cheap tricks and replicas. Her true witch mirrors ... You cannot break those. Not easily, at least."

Dorian had a horrible feeling about where this was headed. "What can they do?"

"You can see the future, past, present. You can speak between mirrors, if someone possesses the sister-glass. And then there are the rare silvers—whose

forging demands something vital from the maker.” Manon’s voice dropped low. Dorian wondered if even among the Blackbeaks, these tales had only been whispered at their campfires. “Other mirrors amplify and hold blasts of raw power, to be unleashed if the mirror is aimed at something.”

“A weapon,” Aedion said, eliciting a nod from Manon. The general must have been piecing things together as well because he asked before Dorian could, “Yellowlegs met with him about those weapons, didn’t she?”

Manon went silent for long enough that he knew Aelin was about to push. But Dorian gave her a warning stare to keep quiet. So she did. They all did.

Finally, the witch said, “They’ve been making towers. Enormous, yet capable of being hauled across battlefields, lined with those mirrors. For Erawan to use with his powers—to incinerate your armies in a few blasts.”

Aelin closed her eyes. Rowan laid a hand on her shoulder.

Dorian asked, “Is this ...” He gestured to the chest, the mirror inside. “One of the mirrors they plan to use?”

“No,” Manon said, studying the witch mirror within the chest. “Whatever *this* mirror is ... I’m not sure what it was meant for. What it can even do. But it surely isn’t that Lock you sought.”

Aelin fished the Eye of Elena from her pocket, weighing it in her hand, and loosed a sharp sigh through her nose. “I’m ready for today to be over.”



Mile after mile, the Fae males carried the mirror between them.

Rowan and Aedion pushed Manon for details on those witch towers. Two were already constructed, but she didn’t know how many more were being built. They were stationed in the Ferian Gap, but with others possibly elsewhere. No, she didn’t know the mode of transportation. Or how many witches to a tower.

Aelin let their words settle into some deep, quiet part of her. She’d figure it out tomorrow—after she slept. Figure out this damn witch mirror tomorrow, too.

Her magic was exhausted. For the first time in days, that pit of magic now slumbered.

She could sleep for a week. A month.

Each step across the marshes, back toward where those three ships would be waiting, was an effort. Lysandra frequently offered to shift into a horse and carry her, but Aelin refused. The shifter was drained as well. They all were.

She wanted to talk to Elide, wanted to ask about so many things regarding

those years apart, but ... The exhaustion that nagged at her rendered speech nearly impossible. She knew what kind of sleep beckoned—the deep, restorative slumber that her body demanded after too much magic had been spent, after she'd held on to it for too long.

So Aelin hardly spoke to Elide, leaving the lady to lean on Lorcan as they hurried to the coast. As they hauled the mirror with them.

Too many secrets—there were still too many secrets with Elena and Brannon and their long-ago war. Had the Lock ever existed? Or was the witch mirror the Lock? Too many questions with too few answers. She'd figure it out. Once they were back to safety. Once she had a chance to sleep.

Once ... everything else fell into place, too. So they trudged through the marshes without rest.

It was Lysandra who picked up on it with that leopard's senses, half a mile from the white-sand beach and the calm gray sea beyond, a wall of grassy sand dunes blocking the view ahead.

They all had weapons drawn as they scrambled up the dune, sand slipping from beneath them. Rowan didn't shift—the only proof he'd shown of his utter exhaustion. He made it up the hill first. Drew his sword from across his back.

Aelin's breath burned her throat as she halted beside him, Gavriel and Fenrys gently setting down the mirror on her other side.

Because a hundred gray sails stretched ahead, surrounding their own ships.

They spread toward the western horizon, utterly silent save for the men they could barely make out on board. Ships from the west ... from the Gulf of Oro.

Melisande's fleet.

And on the beach, waiting for them ... a party of twenty warriors, led by a gray-cloaked woman. Lysandra's claws slipped free of their sheaths as she let out a low snarl.

Lorcan shoved Elide behind him. "We retreat into the marshes," he said to Rowan, whose face was set in stone as he sized up the party on the beach, the looming fleet. "We can outrun them."

Aelin slid her hands into her pockets. "They're not going to attack."

Lorcan sneered, "You're guessing this based on your many years of experience in war?"

"Watch it," Rowan snarled.

"This is absurd," Lorcan spat, twisting away, as if he'd grab Elide, pale-faced at his side. "Our reservoirs are drained—"

Lorcan was halted from hauling Elide over a shoulder by a paper-thin wall of

fire. About as much as Aelin could summon.

And by Manon and her iron nails stepping before him as she growled, “You’re not taking Elide anywhere. Not now, and not ever.”

Lorcan rose to his full height. And before they could wreck everything with their brawling, Elide laid a delicate hand on Lorcan’s arm—his own hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword. “I choose this, Manon.”

Manon only glanced at the hand on Lorcan’s arm. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Indeed. Aelin looked Lorcan over and jerked her chin. “Go brood somewhere else.” The cloaked woman on the beach, along with her soldiers, was now striding toward them.

Lorcan growled, “It’s not over, this business between us.”

Aelin smiled a bit. “You think I don’t know that?”

But Lorcan prowled to Rowan, his dark power flickering, rippling away across the waves as if in a silent boom of thunder. Taking up a defensive position.

Aelin looked to her stone-faced prince, then to Aedion, her cousin’s sword and shield angled and at the ready, then the others. “Let’s go say hello.”

Rowan started. “Aelin—”

But she was already striding down the dune, doing her best to keep from sliding on the treacherous sand, to keep her head high. The others trailing behind were taut as bowstrings, but their breathing remained even—primed for anything.

The soldiers were in heavy, worn gray armor, their faces rough and scarred, sizing them up as they hit the sand. Fenrys snarled at one of them, and the man averted his eyes.

But the cloaked woman removed her hood as she approached with feline grace, halting perhaps ten feet away.

Aelin knew every detail about her.

Knew that she was twenty years old now. Knew that the medium-length, wine-red hair was her real hair color. Knew the red-brown eyes were the only she’d seen in any land, on any adventure. Knew the wolf’s head on the pommel of the mighty sword at her side was her family’s crest. She knew the smattering of freckles, the full, laughing mouth, knew the deceptively slim arms that hid rock-hard muscle as she crossed them.

That full mouth slanted into a half grin as Ansel of Briarcliff, Queen of the Wastes, drawled, “Who gave you permission to use my name in pit fights, *Aelin*?”

“I gave myself permission to use your name however I please, *Ansel*, the day I spared your life instead of ending you like the coward you are.”

That cocky smile widened. “Hello, bitch,” Ansel purred.

“Hello, traitor,” Aelin purred right back, surveying the armada spread before them. “Looks like you made it on time after all.”

Aelin felt the utter shock of her companions ripple from them as Ansel bowed dramatically, gesturing to the ships behind them, and said, “As requested: your fleet.”

Aelin snorted. “Your soldiers look like they’ve seen better days.”

“Oh, they always look like that. I’ve tried and tried to get them to focus on *outside* appearances as much as improving their inner beauty, but ... you know how men are.”

Aelin chuckled. Even as she sensed her companions’ shock turning into something red-hot.

Manon stepped forward, the sea breeze whipping strands of her white hair over her face, and said to Aelin, “Melisande’s fleet bows to Morath. You might as well be signing an alliance with Erawan, too, if you’re working with this ... person.”

Ansel’s face drained of color at the iron teeth, the nails. And Aelin remembered the story the assassin-turned-queen had once told her, whispered atop rolling desert sands and beneath a carpet of stars. A childhood friend—eaten alive by an Ironteeth witch.

Then Ansel herself, after the slaughter of her family, had been spared when she’d stumbled into an Ironteeth witch’s camp.

Aelin said to Manon, “She is not from Melisande. The Wastes are allied with Terrasen.”

Aedion started, now sizing up the ships, the woman before them.

Manon Blackbeak said in a voice like death, “Who is she to speak for the Wastes?”

Oh, gods above. Aelin schooled her face into bland irreverence and gestured between the two women. “Manon Blackbeak, Heir to the Blackbeak Witch-Clan and now the last Crochan Queen ... meet Ansel of Briarcliff, assassin and Queen of the Western Wastes.”



Roaring filled Manon's head as they rowed back to their ship, interrupted only by the splashing of the oars through the calm waves.

She was going to kill the red-haired bitch. Slowly.

They remained silent until they reached the towering ship, then climbed its side.

No sign of Abraxos.

Manon scanned the skies, the fleet, the seas. Not a scale to be found.

The rage in her gut twisted into something else, something worse, and she took a step for the ruddy-faced captain to demand answers.

But Aelin casually stepped in her path, giving her an adder's smile as she glanced between Manon and the red-haired young woman who now leaned against the stair post. "You two should have a little chat later."

Manon stormed around her. "Ansel of Briarcliff does not speak for the Wastes."

Where was Abraxos—

"But you do?"

And Manon had to wonder if she'd somehow ... somehow become tangled in whatever plans the queen had woven. Especially as Manon found herself forced to halt again, forced to turn back to the smirking queen and say, "Yes. I do."



Even Rowan blinked at Manon Blackbeak's tone—the voice that was not witch or warrior or predator. Queen.

The last Crochan Queen.

Rowan sized up the potentially explosive fight brewing between Ansel of Briarcliff and Manon Blackbeak.

He remembered all that Aelin had told him of Ansel—the betrayal while the two woman had trained in the desert, the fight to the death that had left Aelin sparing the red-haired woman. A life debt.

Aelin had called in the life debt owed to her.

Ansel, with a swaggering arrogance that completely explained why she and Aelin had become fast friends, drawled to Manon from where she'd perched on the quarterdeck stairs, "Well, last I heard, neither Crochan nor Ironteeth witches bothered to look after the Wastes. I suppose that as someone who has fed and guarded its people these past two years, I do get to speak for them. And decide

who we help and how we do it.” Ansel smirked at Aelin like the witch wasn’t staring at her throat as if she’d rip it out with her iron teeth. “You and I live next door to each other, after all. It’d be un-neighborly of me not to help.”

“Explain,” Aedion said tightly, his heartbeat thundering loud enough for Rowan to hear. The first word the general had uttered since Ansel had pulled back her hood. Since Aelin’s little surprise had been waiting for them on the beach.

Ansel angled her head, the silky red hair catching the light, looking, Rowan realized, like the richest red wine. Exactly as Aelin had once described it. “Well, months ago, I was minding my own business in the Wastes, when I got a message out of the blue. From Aelin. She sent me a message loud and clear from Rifthold. Pit fighting.” She chuckled, shaking her head. “And I knew to get ready. To move my army to the edge of the Anascaul Mountains.”

Aedion’s breathing snagged. Only centuries of training kept Rowan’s from doing the same. His cadre remained stalwart behind them all, positions they’d taken hundreds of times over the centuries. Ready for bloodshed—or to fight their way out of it.

Ansel smiled, a winning grin. “Half of them are on their way there now. Ready to join with Terrasen. The country of my friend Celaena Sardothien, who did not forget it, even when she was in the Red Desert; and who did not stop looking north every night that we could see the stars. There was no greater gift I could offer to repay her than saving the kingdom she did not forget. And that was before I got her letter months ago, telling me who she was and that she’d gut me if I didn’t assist in her cause. I was on my way with my army already, but ... then the next letter arrived. Telling me to go to the Gulf of Oro. To meet her here and follow a specific set of instructions.”

Aedion snapped his head to Aelin, salt water still gleaming on his tan face from the boat over. “The dispatches from Ilium—”

Aelin waved a lazy hand to Ansel. “Let the woman finish.”

Ansel strolled to Aelin and linked her arm through her elbow. She smirked like a fiend. “I’m assuming you lot know how bossy Her Majesty is. But I followed the instructions. I brought the other half of my army when I veered down south, and we hiked through the White Fangs and into Melisande. Its queen assumed we arrived to offer aid. She let us right in the front gates.”

Rowan held his breath.

Ansel let out a sharp whistle, and on the nearest ship, clopping and nickering sounded.

And then an Asterion horse emerged from the stables.

The horse was a storm made flesh.

Rowan couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Aelin beam with pure delight as she breathed, "Kasida."

"Do you know," Ansel went on, "that I rather enjoy pillaging? With Melisande's troops spread so thin for Morath, she really had no choice but to yield. Though she was particularly furious to see me claim the horse—made worse when I took her out of her dungeon to reveal that Terrasen's flag now flies alongside my wolf at her own damn house."

"What," Aedion blurted.

Aelin and Ansel faced them, brows high. Dorian staggered forward a step at Ansel's words, and the Queen of the Wastes gave him a look that said she'd like to pillage *him*.

Ansel gestured to the ships around them with a broad sweep of her arm. "Melisande's fleet is now our fleet. And its capital is now ours, too." She jerked her chin at Aelin. "You're welcome."

Manon Blackbeak burst out laughing.



Aedion didn't know who to be more furious with: Aelin, for not telling him about Ansel of Briarcliff *and* the gods-damned army she'd quietly ordered to sack Melisande and seize its fleet, or himself, for not trusting her. For demanding where their allies were, for implying all that he had in those moments before the ilken attack. She'd just taken it.

As Ansel's words sank in to the company still gathered on the main deck, his cousin said quietly, "Melisande meant to assist Morath in cleaving the North and South. I did not take its city for glory or conquest, but I will not allow anything to come between me and defeating Morath. Melisande will now clearly understand the cost of allying with Erawan."

He tried not to bristle. He was her general-prince. Rowan was her consort—or close enough to it. And yet she had not entrusted them with this. He hadn't even contemplated the Wastes as an ally. Perhaps that was why. He would have told her not to bother.

Aedion said to Ansel, "Melisande has likely already sent word to Morath. Its own armies are no doubt rushing back to the capital city. Get your remaining men across the Fangs again. We can lead the armada from here."

Ansel looked to Aelin, who nodded her agreement. The Queen of the Wastes then asked him, “And then march north to Terrasen and cross at the Anascaul passes?”

Aedion gave a single nod of confirmation, already calculating where he’d place her men, who in the Bane he’d give command over them. Without seeing Ansel’s men fight ... Aedion began heading toward the stairs to the quarterdeck, not bothering to wait for permission.

But Aelin halted him with a cleared throat. “Talk to Ansel before she leaves tomorrow morning about where to bring her army once it’s whole again.”

He merely nodded and continued up the steps, ignoring his father’s concerned look as he went. The others eventually split up, and Aedion didn’t care where they went, only that he had a few minutes to himself.

He leaned against the rail, peering into the sea lapping against the side of the ship, trying not to notice the men on the surrounding ships sizing up him and his companions.

Some of their whispers hit him from across the water. *The Wolf of the North; General Ashryver*. Some began to tell stories—most outright lies, a few close enough to the truth. Aedion let the sound of them bleed into the plunk and hiss of the waves.

Her ever-changing scent hit him, and something in his chest loosened. Loosened a bit further at the sight of her slim golden arms as she braced them on the rail beside his own.

Lysandra glanced over her shoulder to where the witch and Elide—gods above, *Elide*—had gone to sit by the foremast, talking quietly. Probably recounting their own adventures since parting ways.

The armada wouldn’t sail until morning, he’d overheard the captain saying. He doubted it had to do with Aelin waiting to see if the Wing Leader’s missing mount would return.

“We shouldn’t linger,” Aedion said, now scanning the northern horizon. The ilken had come from that direction—and if they had found them so easily, even with an armada now around them ... “We’re carrying two keys and the Lock—or whatever the hell that witch mirror actually is. The tide’s with us. We should go.”

Lysandra shot him a sharp look. “Go take it up with Aelin.”

Aedion studied her from head to toe. “What’s chewing on you?”

She’d been distant for the past few days. But now he could practically see that courtesan’s mask snap into place as she seemed to will her eyes to brighten,

her frowning mouth to soften. “Nothing. I’m just tired.” Something about the way she glanced toward the sea rubbed at him.

Aedion said carefully, “We’ve been battling our way across the continent. Even after ten years of this, it still drains me. Not just physically, but—in my heart.”

Lysandra ran a finger down the smooth wood of the railing. “I thought ... It all seemed a grand adventure. Even when the danger was so horrible, it was still new, and I was no longer caged in dresses and bedrooms. But that day in Skull’s Bay, it stopped being any of that. It started being ... survival. And some of us might not make it.” Her mouth wobbled a bit. “I never had friends—not as I do now. And today on that beach, when I saw that fleet and thought it belonged to our enemy ... For a moment, I wished I’d never met any of you. Because the thought of any of you ...” She sucked in a breath. “How do you do it? How have you learned to enter a battlefield with your Bane and not fall apart with the terror that not all of you might walk off it?”

Aedion listened to every word, assessed every shaking breath. And he said plainly, “You have no choice but to learn to face it.” He wished she didn’t need to think of such things, have such weight on her. “The fear of loss ... it can destroy you as much as the loss itself.”

Lysandra at last met his gaze. Those green eyes—the sadness in them hit him like a blow to the gut. It was an effort not to reach for her. But she said, “I think we will both need to remind ourselves of that in the times ahead.”

He nodded, sighing through his nose. “And remember to enjoy what time we do have.” She’d likely learned that as many times as he had.

Her slender, lovely throat bobbed, and she glanced sidelong at him beneath lowered lashes. “I do enjoy it, you know. This—whatever this is.”

His heart ratcheted to a thunderous beat. Aedion debated whether or not to go for subtlety and gave himself the span of three breaths to decide. In the end, he went for his usual method, which had served him well both on and off battlefields: a precise sort of blunt attack, edged with enough outright arrogance to throw his opponents off their guard. “Whatever this is,” he said with a half smile, “between *us*?”

Lysandra indeed went on the defensive and showed her hand. “I know my history is ... unappealing.”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” Aedion said, daring a step closer. “And I’m going to tell you that there is nothing unappealing about you. *Nothing*. I’ve been with just as many people. Women, men ... I’ve seen and tried it all.”

Her brows had risen. Aedion shrugged. “I find pleasure in both, depending on my mood and the person.” One of his former lovers still remained one of his closest friends—and most skilled commanders in his Bane. “Attraction is attraction.” He steeled his nerve. “And I know enough about it to understand what you and I ...” Something shuttered in her eyes, and the words slipped from him. Too soon. Too soon for this sort of talk. “We can figure it out. Make no demands of each other beyond honesty.” That was really the only thing he cared to request. It was nothing more than he’d ask of a friend.

A small smile played about her lips. “Yes,” she breathed. “Let’s start there.”

He dared another step closer, not caring who watched on the deck or in the rigging or in the armada around them. Color bloomed high on those beautiful cheekbones, and it was an effort not to stroke a finger across them, then his mouth. To taste her skin.

But he’d take his time. Enjoy every moment, as he had told her to do.

Because this would be his last hunt. He had no intention of wasting each glorious moment in one go. Of wasting any of the moments that fate had granted him, and all he wanted to show her.

Every stream and forest and sea in Terrasen. To see Lysandra laugh her way through the autumnal circle dances; to weave ribbons around the maypoles in the spring; and listen, wide-eyed, to ancient tales of war and ghosts before the roaring winter fires in the mountain halls. All of it. He’d show her all of it. And walk onto those battlefields again and again to ensure he could.

So Aedion smiled at Lysandra and brushed her hand with his own. “I’m glad we’re in agreement, for once.”

Yrene was soaked in sweat, though it dried so quickly that she only *felt* its essence clinging.

Thankfully, the oasis was shaded and cool, a large, shallow pool in its center. Horses were led into the heaviest shade to be watered and brushed down, and servants and guards claimed a hidden spot for their own washing and enjoyment.

No sign of any sort of cave that Nousha had mentioned, or the city of the dead that Hasar claimed lurked in the jungle beyond. But the site was sprawling, and in the large pool ... The royals were already soaking in the cool waters.

Renia, Yrene saw immediately, was only wearing a thin silk shift—that did little to hide her considerable assets as she emerged from the water, laughing at something Hasar said.

“Well, then,” Chaol said, coughing beside Yrene.

“I told you about the parties,” she muttered, heading to the tents spread through the towering palms and brush. They were white and gilded, each marked with the prince or princess’s banner. But with Sartaq and Duva not with them, Chaol and Yrene had been assigned them, respectively.

Mercifully, the two were near each other, but Yrene took in the open tent flaps, the entire space as large as the cottage she’d shared with her mother, then turned toward Chaol’s retreating back. His limp, even with the cane, was deeper than it’d been that morning. And she’d seen how stiffly he’d gotten off that infernal horse.

“I know you want to wash up,” Yrene said. “But I need to take a look at you. At your back and legs, I mean. After all that riding.”

Perhaps she shouldn't have raced him. She hadn't even remembered who'd reached the oasis border anyway. She'd been too busy laughing, feeling as if she were coming out of her body and would likely never feel that way again. Too busy looking at his face, filled with such light.

Chaol paused at his tent flaps, cane wobbling, as if he'd put far more weight on it than he let on. But it was the relief in his face as he asked, “Your tent or mine?” that made her worry—just a tad.

“Mine,” she said, aware of the servants and nobility who likely had no idea she was even the cause of this excursion, but who would happily report her comings and goings. He nodded, and she monitored each rise and placement of his legs, the shifting of his torso, the way he leaned on that cane.

As Chaol edged past her and into the tent, he murmured in her ear, “I won, by the way.”

Yrene glanced toward the sun now making its descent and felt her core tighten in answer.



He was sore but could thankfully still walk by the time Yrene finished her thorough examination. And set of soothing stretches for his legs and back. And massage.

Chaol had the distinct feeling she was toying with him, even as her hands remained chaste. Uninterested.

She even had the nerve to call for a servant to ask for a jug of water.

The tent was fit for the princess who usually occupied it. A large bed lay in the center upon a raised platform, the floors covered with ornate rugs. Sitting areas were scattered throughout, along with a curtained-off washing-up and privy, and there was gold *everywhere*.

Either the servants had brought it with them yesterday, or the people of this land so feared the wrath of the khaganate that they didn't dare rob this place. Or were so well-cared for they didn't need to.

The others were all in the oasis pool by the time he shrugged on his now-dry clothes and they emerged to seek out their quarry.

They'd whispered in the tent—neither of them had spotted anything of interest upon arrival. And in the oasis pool, definitely no indication of a cave or ruins near the bathing royals and their friends. Comfortable, relaxed. Free, in ways that Adarlan had never been, to its detriment. He wasn't naive enough to think that no scheming or intrigue was now playing out in the cool waters, but he'd never heard of Adarlanian nobles going to a swimming hole and enjoying themselves.

Though he certainly wondered what the hell Hasar was thinking in throwing such a party for Yrene, manipulated into it or no, considering the princess was well aware Yrene barely knew most of those gathered.

Yrene hesitated at the edge of the clearing and glanced at him beneath lowered lashes—a look anyone might interpret as shy. A woman perhaps hesitant to strip down to the light clothes they wore in the waters. Letting any onlookers forget that she was a healer and wholly used to far more skin showing. “I find I'm not up to bathing,” Yrene murmured over the laughter and splashing of those within the oasis waters. “Care for a walk?”

Pleasant, polite words as she inclined her head through the few acres of untamed jungle sprawling to the left. She didn't think herself a courtier, but she could certainly lie well enough. He supposed that as a healer, it was a skill that proved useful.

“It would be my pleasure,” Chaol said, offering his arm.

Yrene hesitated again, the portrait of modesty—peering over her shoulder at those in the pool. The royals watching. Kashin included.

He would let her choose when and how to make it clear to the prince—*again*

—that she was not interested. Though he couldn't avoid a faint tinge of guilt as she looped her arm through his and they stepped into the murkiness of the oasis jungle.

Kashin was a good man. Chaol doubted his words about being willing to go to war were lies. And to risk antagonizing the prince by perhaps flaunting what he had with Yrene ... Chaol glanced sidelong at her, his cane digging into the roots and soft soil. She offered him a faint smile, cheeks still flushed with the sun.

To hell with worrying over antagonizing Kashin.

The oasis spring's gurgling blended with the sighing palms overhead as they headed deeper between the fauna, picking their own way—no direction in mind. “In Anielle,” he said, “there are dozens of hot springs along the valley floor, near the Silver Lake. Kept warm by the vents in the earth. When I was a boy, we'd often soak in them after a day of training.”

She asked carefully, as if realizing that he'd indeed offered up this piece of him, “Was it that training that inspired you to join the guard?”

His voice was thick as he finally said, “Part of it. I was just ... good at it. Fighting and fencing and archery and all of it. I received the training that was befitting for the heir of a lord to a mountain people who had long fended off wild men from the Fangs. But my real training began when I arrived in Rifthold and joined the royal guard.”

She slowed while he navigated around a tricky nest of roots, letting him focus on where to place his feet and the cane.

“I suppose being stubborn and bullheaded made you a good pupil for the discipline aspect.”

Chaol chuckled, nudging her with his elbow. “It did. I was the first one on the training pitch and the last one off. Even though I was walloped every single day.” His chest tightened as he remembered their faces, those men who had trained him, who had pushed and pushed him, left him limping and bleeding, and

then made sure he got patched up in the barracks that night. Usually with a hearty meal and a clap on the back.

And it was in honor of those men, his brothers, that he said hoarsely, “They weren’t all bad men, Yrene. The ones I ... I grew up with, whom I commanded ... They were good men.”

He saw Ressa’s laughing face, the blush the young guard could never hide around Aelin. His eyes burned.

Yrene stopped, the oasis humming around them, and his back and legs were more than grateful for the reprieve as she removed her arm from his. Touched his cheek. “If they are partially responsible for you being ... you,” she said, rising up to brush her mouth against his, “then I believe that they are.”

“Were,” he breathed.

And there it was. That one word, swallowed by the loam and shade of the oasis, that he could barely stand. *Were*.

He could still retreat—retreat from this invisible precipice now before them. Yrene remained standing close, a hand resting over his heart, waiting for him to decide whether to speak.

And maybe it was only because she held her hand over his heart that he whispered, “They were tortured for weeks this spring. Then butchered and left to hang from the castle gates.”

Grief and horror guttered in her eyes. He could hardly stomach it as he managed to go on, “Not one of them broke. When the king and—others ...” He could not bring himself to finish. Not yet. Perhaps not ever, to face that suspicion and likely truth. “When they questioned the guards about me. Not a single one of them broke.”

He didn’t have the words for it—that courage, that sacrifice.

Yrene’s throat bobbed, and she cupped his cheek.

And Chaol finally breathed, “It was my fault. The king—he did it to punish me. For running, for helping the rebels in Rifthold. He ... it was all because of

me.”

“You can’t blame yourself.” Simple, honest words.

And utterly untrue.

They snapped him back into himself, more effectively than a thrown bucket of cold water.

Chaol pushed out of her touch.

He shouldn’t have told her, shouldn’t have brought it up. On her birthday, gods above. While they were supposed to focus on finding any sort of scrap of information that might help them.

He’d brought his sword and dagger, and as he limped into the palms and ferns, leaving Yrene to follow, he checked to ensure they were both still buckled at his waist. Checked them because he had to do *something* with his shaking hands, his raw insides.

He folded the words, the memories back into himself. Deeper. Sealed them away as he counted his weapons, one after another.

Yrene only trailed him, saying nothing while they picked their way deeper into the jungle. The entire site was larger than many villages, and yet little of the green had been tamed—certainly no path to be found, or indication of a city of the dead beneath them.

Until fallen pale pillars began to appear between the roots and bushes. A good sign, he supposed. If there were a cave, it might be nearby—perhaps as some ancient dwelling.

But the level of architecture they climbed over and walked around, forcing him to select his steps carefully ...“These weren’t some cave-dwelling people who buried their dead in holes,” he observed, cane scraping over the ancient stone.

“Hasar said it was a *city* of the dead.” Yrene frowned at the ornate columns and slabs of carved stone, crusted with forest life. “A sprawling necropolis, right beneath our feet.”

He studied the jungle floor. “But I thought the khagan’s people left their dead under the open sky in the heart of their home territory.”

“They do.” Yrene ran her hands over a pillar carved with animals and strange creatures. “But ... this site predates the khaganate. The Torre and Antica, too. To whoever was here before.” A set of crumbling steps led to a platform where the trees had grown through the stone itself, knocking over carved columns in their wake. “Hasar claimed the tunnels are all clever traps. Either designed to keep looters out—or keep the dead inside.”

Despite the heat, the hair on his arms rose. “You’re telling me this now?”

“I assumed Nousha meant something different. That it would be a *cave*, and if it was connected to these ruins, she’d have mentioned it.” Yrene stepped onto the platform, and his legs protested as he followed her up. “But I don’t see any sort of rock formations here—none large enough for a cave. The only stone ... it’s from this.” The sprawling gateway into the necropolis beneath, Hasar had claimed.

They surveyed the mangled complex, the enormous pillars now broken or covered in roots and vines. Silence lay as heavy as the shaded heat. As if none of the singing birds or humming insects from the oasis dared venture here.

“It’s unsettling,” she murmured.

They had twenty guards within shouting distance, and yet he found his free hand drifting toward his sword. If a city of the dead slumbered beneath their feet, perhaps Hasar was right. They should be left to sleep.

Yrene turned in place, surveying the pillars, the carvings. No caves—none at all. “Nousha knew the location, though,” she mused. “It must have been important—the site. To the Torre.”

“But its importance was forgotten over time, or warped. So that only the name, the sense of its importance remained.”

“Healers were always drawn to this realm, you know,” Yrene said distantly, running a hand over a column. “The land just ... blessed them with the magic.

More than any other kind. As if this were some breeding ground for healing.”

“Why?”

She traced a carving on a column longer than most ships. “Why does anything thrive? Plants grow best in certain conditions—those most advantageous to them.”

“And the southern continent is a place for healers to thrive?”

Something had snagged her interest, making her words mumbled as she said, “Maybe it was a sanctuary.”

He approached, wincing at the slicing pain down his spine. It was forgotten as he examined the carving beneath her palm.

Two opposing forces had been etched into the column’s broad face. On the left: tall, broad-shouldered warriors, armed with swords and shields, with rippling flame and bursting water, animals of all kinds in the air or at their knees. Pointed ears—those were pointed ears on the figures’ heads.

And facing them ...

“You said nothing is coincidence.” Yrene pointed to the army facing the Fae one.

Smaller than the Fae, their bodies bulkier. Claws and fangs and wicked-looking blades.

She mouthed a word.

Valg.

Holy gods.

Yrene rushed to the other pillars, ripping away vines and dirt. More Fae faces. Figures.

Some were depicted in one-on-one battles against Valg commanders. Some felled by them. Some triumphing.

Chaol moved with her as much as he could manage. Looking, looking—

There, tucked into the dense shadows of squatting, thick palms. A square, crumbling structure. A mausoleum.

“A cave,” Yrene whispered. Or what might have been interpreted as one, as knowledge turned muddled.

Chaol ripped away the vines for her with his free hand, his back protesting.

Ripped and tore them down to survey what had been carved into the gates of the necropolis.

“Nousha said legend claimed some of those scrolls came from here,” Chaol said. “From a place full of Wyrdblocks, of carvings of the Fae and Valg. But this was no living city. So they had to have been removed from tombs or archives below our feet.” From the doorway just beyond them.

“They did not bury humans here,” Yrene whispered.

For the markings on the sealed, stone gates ... “The Old Language.”

He’d seen it inked on Rowan’s face and arm.

This was a Fae burial site. *Fae*—not human.

Chaol said, “I thought only one group of Fae ever left Doranelle—to establish Terrasen with Brannon.”

“Maybe another settled here during whatever this war was.”

The first war. The first demon war, before Elena and Gavin were born, before Terrasen.

Chaol studied Yrene. Her bloodless face. “Or maybe they wanted to hide something.”

Yrene frowned at the ground as if she could see to the tombs beneath. “A treasure?”

“Of a different sort.”

She met his eyes at his tone—his stillness. And fear, cool and sharp, slid into his heart.

Yrene said softly, “I don’t understand.”

“Fae magic is passed down through their bloodlines. It doesn’t appear at random. Perhaps these people came here. And then were forgotten by the world, forces good and evil. Perhaps they knew this place was far away enough to

remain untouched. That wars would be waged elsewhere. By them.” He jerked his chin to a carving of a Valg soldier. “While the southern continent remained mostly mortal-held. While the seeds planted here by the Fae were bred into the human bloodlines and grew into a people gifted and prone to healing magic.”

“An interesting theory,” she said hoarsely, “but you don’t know if it could stand to reason.”

“If you wanted to hide something precious, wouldn’t you conceal it in plain sight? In a place where you were willing to bet a powerful force would spring up to defend it? Like an empire. Several of them. Whose walls had not been breached by outside conquerors for the entirety of its history. Who would see the value of its healers and think their gift was for one thing, but never know that it might be a treasure waiting to be used at another time. A weapon.”

“We do not kill.”

“No,” Chaol said, his blood going cold. “But you and all the healers here ... There is only one other such place in the world. Guarded as heavily, protected by a power just as mighty.”

“Doranelle—the Fae healers in Doranelle.”

Guarded by Maeve. Fiercely.

Who had fought in that first war. Who had fought against the Valg.

“What does it mean?” she breathed.

Chaol had the sense of the ground slipping from beneath him. “I was sent here to retrieve an army. But I wonder ... I wonder if some other force brought me to retrieve something else.”

She slid her hand into his, a silent promise. One he’d think of later.

“Perhaps that is why whoever it is that’s been stalking the Torre, was hunting me,” Yrene whispered. “If they are indeed sent from Morath ... They don’t want us realizing any of this. Through healing you.”

He squeezed her fingers. “And those scrolls in the library ... either they were taken or brought from here, forgotten save for legend about where they came

from. Where the healers of this land might have originated from.”

Not the necropolis—but the Fae people who had built it.

“The scrolls,” she blurted. “If we return and find someone to—to translate them ...”

“They might explain this. What the healers could do against the Valg.”

She swallowed. “Hafiza. I wonder if she knows what those scrolls are, somehow. The Healer on High is not just a position of power, but of learning. She’s a walking library herself, taught things by her predecessor that no one else at the Torre knows.” She twisted a curl around a finger. “It’s worth showing her some of the texts. To see if she might know what they are.”

A gamble to share the information with anyone else, but one worth taking. Chaol nodded.

Someone’s laughter pierced through even the heavy silence of the oasis.

Yrene released his hand. “We’ll need to smile, enjoy ourselves amongst them. And then leave at first light.”

“I’ll send word to Nesryn to return. As soon as we’re back. I’m not sure we can afford any longer to wait for the khagan’s aid.”

“We’ll try to convince him again anyway,” she promised. He angled his head. “You will still have to win this war, Chaol,” she said quietly. “Regardless of what role we might play.”

He brushed a thumb over her cheek. “I have no intention of losing it.”



It was no easy task to pretend they had not stumbled across something enormous. That something had not rattled them down to their bones.

Hasar grew bored of bathing and called for music and dancing and lunch. Which turned into hours of lounging in the shade, listening to the musicians, eating an array of delicacies that Yrene had no idea how they’d managed to bring all the way out here.

But as the sun set, they all dispersed into their tents to change for dinner. After what she'd learned with Chaol, even being alone for a moment had her jumpy, but Yrene washed and changed into the purple gauzy gown Hasar had provided.

Chaol was waiting outside the tent.

Hasar had brought him clothes, too. Beautiful deep blue that brought out the gold in his brown eyes, the summer-kissed tan of his skin.

Yrene blushed as his gaze slid along her neckline, to the swaths of skin the flowing folds of the dress revealed along her waist. Her thighs. Silver and clear beads had been sewn onto the entire thing, making the gown shimmer like the stars now flickering to life in the night sky above them.

Torches and lanterns had been lit around the oasis pool, tables and couches and cushions brought out. Music was playing, people were already loosing themselves upon the feast laid across the various tables, with Hasar holding court, regal as any queen from her spot at the centermost table alongside the fire-gilded pool.

She spotted Yrene and signaled her over. Chaol, too.

Two seats had been left open to the princess's right. Yrene could have sworn Chaol sized them up with each step, as if scanning the chairs, those around them, the oasis itself for any pitfalls or threats. His hand brushed the sliver of skin exposed down the column of her spine—as if in confirmation that all was clear.

“You did not think I forgot my honored guest, did you?” Hasar said, kissing her cheeks. Chaol bowed to the princess as much as he could manage, and claimed his seat on Yrene's other side, leaning his cane against the table.

“Today has been wonderful,” Yrene said, and wasn't lying. “Thank you.”

Hasar was quiet for a beat, looking Yrene over with unusual softness. “I know I am not an easy person to care for, or an easy friend to have,” she said, her dark eyes meeting Yrene's at last. “But you have never once made me feel that way.”

Yrene's throat tightened at the bald words. Hasar inclined her head, waving to the party around them. "This is the least I can do to honor my friend." Renia gently patted Hasar's arm, as if in approval and understanding.

So Yrene bowed her head and said to the princess, "I have no interest in easy friends—easy people. I think I trust them less than the difficult ones, and find them far less compelling, too."

That brought a grin to Hasar's face. She leaned down the table to survey Chaol and drawl, "You look quite handsome, Lord Westfall."

"And you are looking beautiful, Princess."

Hasar, while well dressed, would never be called such. But she accepted the compliment with that cat's smile that somehow reminded Yrene of that stranger in Innish—that knowledge that beauty was fleeting, yet power ... power was a far more valuable currency.

The feast unfolded, and Yrene suffered through a not-so-unguarded toast from Hasar to her *dear, loyal, clever friend*. But she drank with them. Chaol, too. Wine and honey ale, their glasses refilled before Yrene could even notice the near-silent reach of the servants pouring.

It took all of thirty minutes before talk of the war started.

Arghun began it first. A mocking toast, to safety and serenity in such tumultuous times.

Yrene drank but tried to hide her surprise as she found Chaol doing so as well, a vague smile plastered on his face.

Then Hasar began musing on whether the Western Wastes, with everyone so focused upon the eastern half of the continent, was fair game to interested parties.

Chaol only shrugged. As if he'd reached some conclusion this afternoon. Some realization about this war, and the role of these royals in it.

Hasar seemed to notice, too. And for all that this was meant to be a birthday party, the princess pondered aloud to no one in particular, "Perhaps Aelin

Galathynius should drag her esteemed self down here and select one of my brothers to marry. Perhaps then we would consider assisting her. If such influence remained in the family.”

Meaning all that flame, all that brute power ... tied to this continent, bred into the bloodline, never to be a threat.

“My brothers would have to stomach being with someone like that, of course,” Hasar went on, “but they are not such weak-blooded men as you might believe.” A glance at Kashin, who seemed to pretend not to hear, even as Arghun snorted. Yrene wondered if the others knew how adept Kashin was at drowning out their taunting—that he never fell for their baiting simply because he couldn’t be bothered to care.

Chaol answered Hasar with equal mildness, “As interesting as it would be to see Aelin Galathynius deal with all of you ...” A secret, knowing smile, as if Chaol might very well enjoy seeing that sight. As if Aelin might very well make blood sport out of them all. “Marriage is not an option for her.”

Hasar’s brows lifted. “To a man?”

Renia gave her a sharp look that Hasar ignored.

Chaol chuckled. “To anyone. Beyond her beloved.”

“King Dorian,” Arghun said, swirling his wine. “I’m surprised she can stomach *him*.”

Chaol stiffened, but shook his head. “No. Another prince—foreign-born and powerful.”

All the royals stilled. Even Kashin looked their way.

“Who, pray tell, is that?” Hasar sipped her wine, those keen eyes darkening.

“Prince Rowan Whitethorn, of Doranelle. Former commander to Queen Maeve, and a member of her royal household.”

Yrene could have sworn the blood drained wholly from Arghun’s face. “Aelin Galathynius is to wed Rowan Whitethorn?”

From the way the prince said the name ... he’d indeed heard of this Rowan.

Chaol had mentioned Rowan more than once in passing—Rowan, who had managed to heal much of the damage in his spine. A Fae Prince. And Aelin’s beloved.

Chaol shrugged. “They are *carranam*, and he swore the blood oath to her.”

“He swore that oath to Maeve,” Arghun countered.

Chaol leaned back in his seat. “He did. And Aelin got Maeve to free him from it so he could swear it to her. Right in Maeve’s face.”

Arghun and Hasar swapped glances. “How,” the former demanded.

Chaol’s mouth turned up at the corner. “Through the same way Aelin achieves all her ends.” He flicked his brows up. “She encircled Maeve’s city in fire. And when Maeve told her that Doranelle was made of stone, Aelin simply replied that her people were not.”

A chill snaked down Yrene’s spine.

“So she is a brute and a madwoman,” Hasar sniffed.

“Is she? Who else has taken on Maeve and walked away, let alone gotten what they want out of it?”

“She would have destroyed an entire city for one man,” Hasar snapped.

“The most powerful pure-blooded Fae male in the world,” Chaol said simply. “A worthy asset for any court. Especially when they had fallen in love with each other.”

Though his eyes danced as he spoke, a tremor of tension ran beneath the last words.

But Arghun seized on the words. “If it is a love match, then they risk knowing their enemies will go after him to punish her.” Arghun smiled as if to say he was already thinking of doing so.

Chaol snorted, and the prince straightened. “Good luck to anyone who tries to go after Rowan Whitethorn.”

“Because Aelin will burn them to ash?” Hasar asked with poisoned sweetness.

But it was Kashin who answered softly, “Because Rowan Whitethorn will always be the person who walks away from that encounter. Not the assailant.”

A pause of silence.

Then Hasar said, “Well, if Aelin cannot represent her continent, perhaps we shall look elsewhere.” She smirked at Kashin. “Perhaps Yrene Towers might be offered in the queen’s stead.”

“I am not noble-born,” Yrene blurted. “Or royal.” Hasar had lost her mind.

Hasar shrugged. “I’m sure Lord Westfall, as Hand, can find you a title. Make you a countess or duchess or whatever terms you call them. Of course, we’d know you were little more than a milkmaid dressed in jewels, but if it stayed amongst us ... I’m sure there are some here who would not mind your humble beginnings.” She’d done as much with Renia—for Renia.

The amusement faded from Chaol’s face. “You sound as if you now want to be a part of this war, Princess.”

Hasar waved a hand. “I am merely musing on the possibilities.” She surveyed Yrene and Kashin, and the food in Yrene’s stomach turned leaden. “I’ve always said you would make such beautiful children.”

“If they were allowed to live by your future khagan.”

“A small consideration—to be later dealt with.”

Kashin leaned forward, his jaw tight. “The wine goes to your head, sister.”

Hasar rolled her eyes. “Why not? Yrene is the unspoken heir of the Torre. It is a position of power—and if Lord Westfall were to bestow upon her a royal title ... say, spin a little story that her royal lineage was newly discovered, she might very well wed you, Ka—”

“She will not.”

Chaol’s words were flat. Hard.

Color stained Kashin’s face as he asked softly, “And why is that, Lord Westfall?”

Chaol held the man’s gaze. “She will not marry you.”

Hasar smiled. "I think the lady may speak for herself."

Yrene wanted to flip her chair back into the pool and sink to the bottom. And live there, under the surface, forever. Rather than face the prince waiting for an answer, the princess who was smirking like a demon, and the lord whose face was hard with rage.

But if it was a serious offer, if doing something like that could lead to the full might of the southern continent's armies coming to help them, save them ...

"Don't you even consider it," Chaol said too quietly. "She's full of shit."

People gasped. Hasar barked a laugh.

Arghun snapped, "You will speak with respect to my sister, or you will find yourself with legs that don't work again."

Chaol ignored them. Yrene's hands shook badly enough that she slid them beneath the table.

Had the princess brought her out here to corner her into agreeing to this preposterous idea, or had it merely been a whim, an idle thought to taunt and gnaw at Lord Westfall?

Chaol seemed to be on the verge of opening his mouth to say more, to push this ridiculous idea out of her head, but he hesitated.

Not because he agreed, Yrene realized, but because he wanted to give her the space to choose for herself. A man used to giving orders, to being obeyed. And yet Yrene had the sense that this, too, was new to him. The patience; the trust.

And she trusted him. To do what he had to. To find a way to survive this war, whether with this army or another one. If it did not happen here, with these people, he'd sail elsewhere.

Yrene looked to Hasar, to Kashin and the others, some smirking, some swapping disgusted glances. Arghun most of all. Revolted at the thought of sullyng his family's bloodline.

She trusted Chaol.

She did not trust these royals.

Yrene smiled at Hasar, then Kashin. “This is very grave talk for my birthday. Why should I choose one man tonight when I have so many handsome ones in my company right now?”

She could have sworn a shudder of relief went through Chaol.

“Indeed,” Hasar crooned, her smile sharpening. Yrene tried not to balk at the invisible fangs revealed in that smile. “Betrothals are rather odious things. Look at poor Duva, stuck with that brooding, sad-eyed princeling.”

And so the conversation moved on. Yrene did not glance to Kashin or the others. She looked only at her constantly refilled goblet—and drank it. Or at Chaol, who appeared half inclined to lean across Yrene and flip Hasar’s chair right back into the pool.

But the meal passed, and Yrene kept drinking—enough so that when she stood after dessert, she had not realized precisely how much she’d imbibed. The world tipped and swayed, and Chaol steadied her with a hand on her elbow, even as he was none too steady on his feet.

“Seems like they can’t hold their liquor up north,” Arghun said with a snort.

Chaol chuckled. “I’d advise never to say that to someone from Terrasen.”

“I suppose there’s nothing else to do while living amongst all the snow and sheep beyond drink,” Arghun drawled, lounging in his chair.

“That may be,” Chaol said, putting an arm on Yrene’s back to guide her to the trees and tents, “but it won’t stop Aelin Galathynius or Aedion Ashryver from drinking you under the table.”

“Or under a chair?” Hasar crooned to Chaol.

Maybe it was the wine. Maybe it was the heat, or the hand on her back, or the fact that this man beside her had fought and fought and never once complained about it.

Yrene lunged for the princess.

And though Chaol might have decided against pushing Hasar into the pool behind her, Yrene had no such qualms about doing it herself. One heartbeat,

Hasar was smirking up at her.

The next, her legs and skirts and jewels went sky-up, her shriek piercing across the dunes as Yrene shoved the princess, chair and all, into the water.

45

Yrene knew she was a dead woman.

Knew it the moment Hasar hit the dark water and everyone leaped to their feet, shouting and drawing blades.

Chaol had Yrene behind him in an instant, a sword half out—a blade she hadn't even seen him reach for before it was in his hand.

The pool was not deep, and Hasar swiftly stood, soaked and seething, teeth bared and hair utterly limp as she pointed at Yrene.

No one spoke.

She pointed and pointed, and Yrene braced for the death order.

They'd kill her, and then kill Chaol for trying to save her.

She felt him sizing up all the guards, the princes, the viziers. Every person who would get in the way to the horses, every person who might put up a fight.

But a low, fizzing sounded behind Yrene.

She looked to see Renia clutching her stomach, another hand over her mouth, as she looked at her lover and *howled*.

Hasar whirled on Renia, who just stuck out a finger, pointing and roaring with laughter. Tears leaked from the woman's eyes.

Then Kashin tipped his head back and bellowed with amusement.

Yrene and Chaol did not dare move.

Not until Hasar shoved away a servant who'd flung himself into the pool to help her, crawled back onto the paved lip, and looked Yrene dead in the eye with

the full wrath of all the mighty khagans before her.

Silence again.

But then the princess snorted. “I was wondering when you’d grow a backbone.”

She walked away, trailing water behind her, Renia howling again.

Yrene caught Chaol’s stare—watched him slowly release the hand on his sword. Watched his pupils shrink again. Watched him realize ...

They were not going to die.

“With that,” Yrene said quietly, “I think it’s time for bed.”

Renia paused her laughing long enough to say, “I’d be gone before she returns.”

Yrene nodded, and led Chaol by the wrist back toward the trees and dark and torches.

She couldn’t help but wonder if Renia and Kashin’s laughter had in part been true amusement, but also a gift. A birthday gift, to keep them from the gallows. From the two people who understood best just how deadly Hasar’s moods could be.

Keeping her head, Yrene decided, was a very good birthday gift indeed.



It would have been easy for Chaol to roar at Yrene. To demand how she could even *think* to risk her life like that. Months ago, he would have. Hell, he was still debating it.

Even as they slipped into her spacious tent, he continued soothing the instincts that had come bellowing to the surface the moment those guards had pressed in and reached for their swords.

Some small part of him was profoundly, knee-wobblingly grateful none of those guards were ones he’d trained with these weeks—that he hadn’t been forced to make that choice, cross that line between them.

But he'd seen the terror in Yrene's eyes. The moment she'd realized what was about to happen, what would have happened if the princess's lover and Kashin had not stepped in to defuse the situation.

Chaol knew Yrene had done it for him.

For the mocking, hateful insult.

And from the way she paced inside the tent, wending between the couches and tables and cushions ... Chaol also knew she was well aware of the rest.

He took up a seat on the rolled arm of a chair, leaning the cane beside it, and waited.

Yrene whirled toward him, stunning in that purple gown, which had nearly knocked his knees from beneath him when she'd first emerged from the tent. Not just for how well it suited her, but the swaths of supple skin. The curves. The light and color of her.

"Before you begin shouting," Yrene declared, "I should say that what just happened is proof that I should *not* be marrying a prince."

Chaol crossed his arms. "Having lived with a prince for most of my life, I'd say quite the opposite."

She waved a hand, pacing more. "I know it was stupid."

"Incredibly."

Yrene hissed—not at him. The memory. The temper. "I don't regret doing it."

A smile tugged on his mouth. "It's an image I'll likely remember for the rest of my life."

He would. The way Hasar's feet had gone over her head, her shrieking face right before she hit the water—

"How can you be so amused?"

"Oh, I'm not." His lips indeed curved. "But it's certainly entertaining to see that temper of yours turned on someone other than me."

"I don't have a temper."

He raised a brow. "I have known a fair number of people with tempers, and

yours, Yrene Towers, ranks among the finest of them.”

“Like Aelin Galathynius.”

A shadow passed over him. “She would have greatly enjoyed the sight of Hasar flipping into the pool.”

“Is she really marrying that Fae Prince?”

“Maybe. Likely.”

“Are you—upset about it?”

And though she asked it casually, that healer’s mask a portrait of calm curiosity, he selected his words carefully.

“Aelin was very important to me. She still is—though in a different way. And for a while ... it was not easy, to change the dreams I’d planned for my future. Especially the dreams with her.”

Yrene angled her head, the lantern light dancing in her soft curls. “Why?”

“Because when I met Aelin, when I fell in love with her, she was not ... She went by another name. Another title and identity. And things between us fell apart before I knew the truth, but ... I think I knew. When I learned she was truly Aelin. I knew that between her and Dorian, I ...”

“You would never leave Adarlan. Or him.”

He fiddled with the cane beside him, running his hands over the smooth wood. “She knew it, too, I think. Long before I did. But she still ... She left, at one point. It’s a long story, but she went off to Wendlyn alone. And that was where she met Prince Rowan. And out of respect to me, because we had not truly ended it, she waited. For him. They both did. And when she came back to Rifthold, it ended. Between us, I mean. Officially. Badly. I handled it badly, and she did, too, and it just ... We made our peace, before we parted ways months ago. And they left together. As it should be. They are ... If you ever meet them, you’ll get it. Like Hasar, she isn’t an easy person to be with, to understand. Aelin frightens *everyone*.” He snorted. “But not him. I think that’s why she fell in love with him, against her best intentions. Rowan beheld all Aelin was and is, and he

was not afraid.”

Yrene was quiet for a moment. “But you were?”

“It was a ... rough period for me. Everything I knew was trampled. Everything. And she ... I think I placed the blame for a great deal of it upon her. Began to see her as a monster.”

“Is she?”

“It depends on who’s telling the story, I suppose.” Chaol studied the intricate pattern of the red-and-green rug beneath his boots. “But I don’t think so. There is no one else that I would trust to handle this war. No one else I would trust to take on all of Morath but Aelin. Even Dorian. If there’s some way to win, she’ll find it. The costs might be high, but she’ll do it.” He shook his head. “And it’s your birthday. We should probably talk of nicer things.”

Yrene didn’t smile. “You waited for her while she was gone. Didn’t you? Even knowing what—who—she really was.”

He hadn’t admitted it, even to himself.

His throat tightened. “Yes.”

She now studied that woven carpet beneath them. “But you—you don’t still love her?”

“No,” he said, and had never meant anything more. He added softly, “Or Nesryn.”

Her brows rose at that, but he wrapped a hand around the cane, groaning softly as he pushed to his feet and made his way toward her. She tracked each movement, unable to set aside the healing, her eyes darting over his legs, his middle, the way he gripped the cane.

Chaol halted a step away, pulling a small bundle out of his pocket. Silently, he extended it to her, the black velvet like the rippling dunes beyond them.

“What’s that?”

He only held out the folded piece of fabric. “They didn’t have a box I liked, so I just used the cloth—”

Yrene took it from his hand, her fingers shaking slightly as she folded back the edges of the bundle that he'd been carrying all day.

In the lantern light, the silver locket shimmered and danced as she lifted it up between her fingers, eyes wide. "I can't take this."

"You'd better," he said as she lowered the oval locket into her palm to examine it. "I had your initials carved onto it."

Indeed, she was already tracing the swirling letters he'd asked the jeweler in Antica to engrave on the front. She turned it over to the back—

Yrene put a hand to her throat, right over that scar.

"Mountains. And seas," she whispered.

"So you never forget that you climbed them and crossed them. That you—only you—got yourself here."

She let out a small, soft laugh—a sound of pure joy. He couldn't let himself identify the other sound within it.

"I bought it," Chaol clarified instead, "so you could keep whatever it is you always carry in your pocket inside. So you don't have to keep moving it from dress to dress. Whatever it is."

Surprise lighted her eyes. "You know?"

"I don't know *what* it is, but I see you holding something in there all the time."

He'd calculated that it was small, and based the locket's size upon it. He'd never seen an indentation or weight in her pockets to suggest its bulk, and had studied other objects she'd placed within there while working on him—papers, vials—against the utter flatness of it. Perhaps it was a lock of hair, some small stone—

"It's nothing as fine as a party in the desert—"

"No one has given me a gift since I was eleven."

Since her mother.

"A birthday gift, I mean," she clarified. "I ..."

She slid the locket's fine silver chain over her head, the links catching in the stray, luscious curls. He watched her lift the mass of her hair over the chain, setting it dangling down to the edge of her breasts. Against the honey-brown of her skin, the locket was like quicksilver. She traced her slim fingers over the engraved surface.

Chaol's chest tightened as she lifted her head, and he found silver lining her eyes.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He shrugged, unable to come up with a response.

Yrene only walked over, and he braced himself, readied himself, as her hands cupped his face. As she stared into his eyes.

"I am glad," she whispered, "that you do not love that queen. Or Nesryn."

His heart thundered through every inch of him.

Yrene rose onto her toes and pressed a kiss, light as a caress, to his mouth. Never breaking his stare.

He read the unspoken words there. He wondered if she read the ones not voiced by him, either.

"I will cherish it always," Yrene said, and he knew she wasn't talking about the locket. Not as she lowered a hand from his face to his chest. Atop his raging heart. "No matter what may befall the world." Another featherlight kiss. "No matter the oceans, or mountains, or forests in the way."

Any leash on himself snapped. Letting his cane thump to the floor, Chaol drifted a hand around her waist, his thumb stroking along the sliver of bare skin the dress revealed. The other he plunged into that luxurious, heavy hair, cupping the back of her head as he tilted her face upward. As he studied those brown-gold eyes, the emotion simmering in them.

"I am glad that I do not love them, either, Yrene Towers," he whispered onto her lips.

Then his mouth was on hers, and she opened for him, the heat and silk of her

driving a groan from deep in his throat.

Her hands speared into his hair, onto his shoulders, across his chest and up his neck. As if she could not touch enough of him.

Chaol reveled in the fingers she dug into his clothes, as if they were claws seeking purchase. He slid his tongue against hers, and her moan as she pushed herself against him—

Chaol backed them toward the bed, its white sheets near-glowing in the lantern light, not caring that his steps were uneven, staggering. Not with that dress little more than cobwebs and mist, not when he never took his mouth from hers, remained *unable* to take his mouth from hers.

Yrene's knees hit the mattress behind them, and she drew her lips away enough to protest, "Your back—"

"I'll manage." He slanted his mouth over hers again, her kiss searing him to his very soul.

His. She was his, and he had never had anything he could call such. Wanted to call such.

Chaol couldn't bring himself to rip his mouth away from Yrene's long enough to ask if she considered him hers. To explain that he already knew his own answer. Had perhaps known from the moment she'd walked into that sitting room and did not look at him with an ounce of pity or sadness.

He nudged her with a press of his hips, and she let him lay her upon the bed gently—reverently.

Her reach for him, hauling him atop her, was anything but.

Chaol huffed a laugh against her warm neck, the skin softer than silk, as she scrabbled with his buttons, his buckles. She writhed against him, and as he settled his weight over her, every hard part of him lining up with so many soft parts of her ...

He was going to fly out of his skin.

Yrene's breath was sharp and ragged against his ear, her hands tugging

desperately at his shirt, trying to slide to his back beneath.

“I’d think you were sick of touching my back.”

She shut him up with a plundering kiss that made him forget language for a while.

Forget about his name and his title and everything but her.

Yrene.

Yrene.

Yrene.

She moaned when he slid a hand up her thigh, baring her skin beneath the folds of that gown. When he did it to the other leg. When he nipped at her mouth and traced idle circles with his fingers over those beautiful thighs, starting along their outer edge and arcing over—

Yrene did not appreciate being toyed with.

Not as she wrapped a hand around him, and his entire body bowed into the touch, the sensation of it. Not just a hand stroking over him, but *Yrene* doing it—

He couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but taste and touch and yield.

And yet—

He found words. Found language again. Long enough to ask, “Have you ever —”

“Yes.” The word was a rough pant. “Once.”

Chaol shoved against the ripple of darkness, the line on that throat. He only kissed it instead. Licked it. Then asked against her skin, his mouth skirting up her jaw, “Do you want to—”

“*Keep going.*”

But he made himself pause. Made himself rise to look at her face, his hands on her sleek thighs and her hand still gripping him, stroking him. “Yes, then?”

Yrene’s eyes were gold flame. “Yes,” she breathed. She leaned up, kissed him gently. Not lightly, but sweetly. Openly. “Yes.”

A shudder wracked through him at the words, and he gripped her thigh right

where it met her hip. Yrene released him to lift her hips, dragging herself over him. Feeling him, with only the thin gossamer panel of her gown between them. Nothing beneath.

Chaol slid it to the side, bunching the material at her waist. He dipped his head, eager to look his fill, then to touch and taste and learn what made Yrene Towers lose control entirely—

“Later,” Yrene begged hoarsely. “Later.”

He couldn’t bring himself to deny her anything. This woman who held everything he was, all he had left, in her beautiful hands.

So Chaol removed his shirt, his pants following with a few, trickier maneuvers. Then he removed that dress of hers, leaving it in scraps on the floor beside the bed.

Until Yrene only wore that locket. Until Chaol surveyed every inch of her and found himself unable to breathe.

“I will cherish it always,” Chaol whispered as he slid into her, slow and deep. Pleasure rippled down his spine. “No matter what may befall the world.” Yrene kissed his neck, his shoulder, his jaw. “No matter the oceans, or mountains, or forests in the way.”

Chaol held Yrene’s stare as he stilled, letting her adjust. Letting *himself* adjust to the sensation that the entire axis of the world had shifted. Looking into those eyes of hers, swimming with brightness, he wondered if she felt it, too.

But Yrene kissed him again, in answer and silent demand. And as Chaol began to move in her, he realized that here, amongst the dunes and stars ... Here, in the heart of a foreign land ... Here, with her, he was home.

46

It broke her, and unmade her, and rebirthed her.

Sprawled over Chaol's chest hours later, listening to the thump of his heartbeat, Yrene still did not have words for what had passed between them. Not the physical joining, not the repeated bouts of it, but simply the sense of *him*. Of belonging.

She'd never known it could *be* like that. Her quick, unimpressive, and only brush with sex had been just last autumn, and had left her in no hurry to seek it out again. But this ...

He'd made sure she found her pleasure. Repeatedly. Before he ever found his own.

And beyond that, the *things* he made her feel—

Not just as a result of his body, but who he was ...

Yrene pressed an idle kiss to the sculpted muscle of his chest, savoring the fingers he still trained down her spine, over and over.

It was safety, and joy, and comfort, and knowing that no matter what befell them ... He would not balk. He would not break. Yrene nuzzled her face against him.

It was dangerous, she knew, to feel such things. She'd known what lay in her eyes when he'd looked at her. The heart she'd offered up without saying as much. But seeing that locket that he'd somehow found and had been so thoughtful about ... Her initials were beautifully done, but the mountains and

waves ... It was stunning work, done by a master jeweler in Antica.

“I didn’t do it on my own,” Yrene murmured against his skin.

“Hmm?”

She ran her fingers over the grooves of Chaol’s stomach before rising onto an elbow to study his face in the dimness. The lanterns had long since burned out, and silence had settled over the camp, replaced by the buzz and hum of beetles in the palm trees. “Getting here. The mountains yes, but the seas ... Someone helped me.”

Alertness filled those sated eyes. “Oh?”

Yrene plucked up the locket. Between bouts of lovemaking, when she’d gone to move his cane within easy reach of the bed, she’d slid the small note inside. The fit had been perfect.

“I was stuck in Innish, with no way of leaving. And one night, this stranger appeared at the inn. She was ... everything I was not. Everything I’d forgotten. She was waiting for a boat, and during the three nights she was there, I think she *wanted* the lowlifes to try to rob her—she was spoiling for a fight. But she kept her distance. I was left with cleaning up alone that night ...”

Chaol’s hand tensed on her back, but he said nothing.

“And mercenaries who had given me a hard time earlier that evening found me in the alley.”

He went utterly still.

“I think—I *know* they wanted to ...” She shook off the icy grip of horror, even all these years later. “The woman, girl, whatever she was, she interrupted before they could so much as try. She ... dealt with them. And when she finished, she taught me how to defend myself.”

His hand began stroking again. “So that’s how you learned.”

She ran a hand over the scar on her neck. “But other mercenaries, friends of the earlier ones, returned. One held a knife to my throat to get her to drop her weapons. She refused to do so. So I used what she’d taught me to disarm and

disable the man.”

He blew out an impressed breath that ruffled her hair.

“To her, it was a test. She’d been aware of the second group circling, and told me she wanted me to have some *controlled* experience. I’d never heard of anything more ridiculous.” The woman had been either brilliant or insane. Likely both. “But she told me ... told me it was better to be suffering in the streets of Antica than in Innish. And that if I wanted to come here, I should go. That if I wanted something, I should *take* it. She told me to fight for my miserable life.”

Yrene brushed the sweat-damp hair from his eyes. “I patched her up and she went on her way. And when I got back to my room ... She had left me a bag of gold. And a golden brooch with a ruby the size of a robin’s egg. To pay for my passage here, and any tuition at the Torre.”

He blinked in surprise. Yrene whispered, voice breaking, “I think she was a god. I—I don’t know who would *do* that. I have a little gold left, but the brooch ... I never sold it. I still have it.”

He frowned at the necklace, as if he’d misjudged its size.

Yrene added, “That’s not what I keep in my pocket.” His brows rose. “I left Innish that morning. I took the gold and the brooch and got on a ship here. So I crossed mountains alone, yes—but the Narrow Sea ...” Yrene traced the waves on the locket. “I crossed because of her. I teach the women at the Torre because she told me to share the knowledge with any women who would listen. I teach it because it makes me feel like I’m paying her back, in some small way.”

Yrene ran her thumb over the initials on the front. “I never learned her name. She only left a note with two lines. *For wherever you need to go—and then some. The world needs more healers.* That’s what I keep in my pocket—that little scrap of paper. What’s now in here.” Yrene tapped the locket. “I know it’s silly, but it gave me courage. When things were hard, it gave me courage. It still does.”

Chaol swept the hair from her brow and kissed it. “There is nothing silly about it. And whoever she is ... I will be forever grateful.”

“Me too,” Yrene whispered as he slid his mouth over her jaw and her toes curled. “Me too.”

The pass between the twin peaks of Dagul was larger than it looked.

It went on and on, a maze of jagged, towering rock.

Nesryn and Sartaq did not dare stop.

Webs sometimes blocked their way, or hovered above, but still they charged onward, seeking any sort of path upward. To where Kadara might pluck them into the sky.

For down here, with the cramped, narrow walls of the pass, the ruk could not reach them. If they were to stand a chance of being rescued, they'd have to find a way up.

Nesryn didn't dare let Falkan out—not yet. Not when so many things could still go so wrong, and letting the spiders know what sort of card they had up their sleeve ... No, not yet would she risk using him.

But the temptation gnawed on her. The walls were smooth, ill-fitted for climbing, and as they hurried through the pass, hour after hour, Sartaq's wet, labored breaths echoed off the rock.

He was in no state to climb. He was barely able to stay upright, or grip his sword.

Nesryn kept an arrow nocked, ready to fly as they rounded corner after corner, glancing up every now and then.

The pass was so tight in spots that they had to squeeze through, the sky a watery trickle high above. They did not speak, did not dare do more than breathe

as they kept their steps light.

It made no difference. Nesryn knew it made little difference.

A trap had been laid for them, and they had fallen into it. The *kharankui* knew where they were. Were likely following at their leisure, herding them along.

It had been hours since they'd last heard the boom of Kadara's wings.

And the light ... it was beginning to fade.

Once darkness fell, once the way became too dark to manage ... Nesryn pressed a hand to Falkan, still in her pocket. When the night settled upon the pass, she decided, then she'd use him.

They pushed through a particularly tight passage between two near-kissing boulders, Sartaq grunting behind her. "We have to be nearing the end," he breathed.

She didn't tell him that she doubted the spiders were stupid enough to allow them to walk right out of the other side of the pass and into Kadara's awaiting talons. If the injured ruk could even manage their weight.

Nesryn just pushed onward, the pass becoming a fraction wider, counting her breaths. They were likely some of her last—

Thinking that way helped no one and nothing. She'd stared down death this summer, when that wave of glass had come crashing toward her. Had stared it down, and been saved.

Perhaps she would be lucky again, too.

Sartaq stumbled out behind her, breathing hard. Water. They desperately needed water—and bandages for his wounds. If the spiders did not find them, then the lack of water in the arid pass might very well kill them first. Long before any help arrived from the Eridun rukhin.

Nesryn forced one step in front of another, the path narrowing again, the rock as tight as a vise. She twisted sideways, edging through, her swords scraping.

Sartaq grunted, then let out a pained curse. "I'm stuck."

She found him indeed wedged behind her, the bulk of his broad chest and shoulders pinned. He shoved himself forward, blood leaking from his wounds as he pushed and pulled.

“Stop,” she ordered. “Stop—wriggle back out if you can.” There was no other way through and nothing to climb over, but if they removed his weapons—
His dark eyes met hers. She saw the words forming.

You keep going.

“Sartaq,” she breathed.

They heard it then.

Claws clicking on stone. Skittering along.

Many of them. Too many. Coming from behind, closing in.

Nesryn grabbed the prince’s hand, tugging. “Push,” she panted. “*Push.*”

He grunted in pain, the veins in his neck bulging as he tried to squeeze through, his boots scraping on the loose rock—

Nesryn dug her own feet in, gritting her teeth as she hauled him forward.

Click, click, click—

“Harder,” she gasped.

Sartaq angled his head, shoving against the rock that held him.

“What a fine morsel, our guest,” hissed a soft female voice. “So large he cannot even fit through the passage. How we shall feast.”

Nesryn heaved and heaved, her grip treacherously slippery with sweat and blood from both of them, but she clamped onto his wrist hard enough that she felt bones shift beneath—

“Go,” he whispered, straining to push through. “You run.”

Falkan was shifting in her pocket, trying to emerge. But with the rock pressing on her chest, the passage was too tight for even him to poke out his head—

“A pretty pair,” that female continued. “How her hair shines like a moonless night. We shall take you both back to our home, our honored guests.”

A sob clawed its way up Nesryn's throat. "Please," she begged, scanning the rock high above them, the lip into the upper reaches of the narrow pass, the curving horns of the peaks, tugging and tugging on Sartaq's arm. "*Please*," she begged them, begged *anyone*.

But Sartaq's face went calm. So calm.

He stopped pushing, stopped trying to haul himself forward.

Nesryn shook her head, *pulling* on his arm.

He did not move. Not an inch.

His dark eyes met hers. There was no fear in them.

Sartaq said to her, clear and steady, "I heard the spies' stories of you. The fearless Balruhni woman in Adarlan's empire. Neith's Arrow. And I knew ..."

Nesryn sobbed, tugging and tugging.

Sartaq smiled at her—gently. Sweetly. In a way she had not yet seen.

"I loved you before I ever set eyes on you," he said.

"Please," Nesryn wept.

Sartaq's hand tightened on hers. "I wish we'd had time."

A hiss behind him, a rising bulk of shining black—

Then the prince was gone. Ripped from her hands.

As if he had never been.



Nesryn could barely see through her tears as she edged and squeezed along the pass. As she hurtled over rocks, arms straining, feet unfaltering.

Keep going. The words were a song in her blood, her bones as she plunged onward.

Keep going and get out; find *help*—

But the passage at last opened into a wider chamber. Nesryn staggered from the vise that had held her, panting, Sartaq's blood still coating her palms, his face still swimming before her—

The path curved ahead, and she stumbled for it, hand flying to where Falkan now poked his head out. She sobbed at the sight of him, sobbed as the clicking and hissing again began to sound behind her, closing in once more.

It was over. It was done, and she had as good as killed him. She should have never left, should have never done *any* of it—

She sprinted toward the curve in the pass, chips of shale scattering from beneath her boots.

Take you both back to our home ...

Alive. The spider had talked as if they would be taken *alive* to their lair. For a brief window before the *feasting* began. And if she had spoken true ...

Nesryn slapped a hand over a wriggling Falkan, earning a squeak of outrage.

But she said, soft as the wind through the grass, “Not yet. Not yet, my friend.”

And as Nesryn slowed her steps, as she stopped entirely, she whispered her plan to him.



The *kharankui* did not try to hide their arrival.

Hissing and laughing, they skittered around the corner of the pass.

And halted when they beheld Nesryn panting on her knees, blood from slices in her arms, her collarbone, filling the tight air with her scent. She saw them note the sprayed shale around her, flecks of her blood on it.

As if she had taken a bad fall. As if she could no longer go on.

Clicking, chattering to one another, they surrounded her. A wall of ancient, reeking limbs and fangs and swollen, bulbous abdomens. And eyes. More eyes than she could count, her reflection in all of them.

Her trembling was not faked.

“Pity it did not give much sport,” one pouted.

“We shall have it later,” another replied.

Nesryn shook harder.

One sighed. “How fresh her blood smells. How clean.”

“P-please,” she begged.

The *kharankui* just laughed.

Then the one behind her pounced.

Pinning her to the shale, rock slicing her face, her hands, Nesryn screamed against the claws that dug into her back. Screamed as she managed to look over her shoulder to see those spinnerets hovering above her legs.

To see the silk that shot from them, ready to be woven. To wrap her tightly.

Nesryn awoke to sharp biting.

She jerked upright, a scream on her lips—

It died when she felt the little teeth biting at her neck, her ear. Nipping her awake.

Falkan. She winced, her head throbbing. Bile surged up her throat.

Not biting at her head. But the silk that bound her body, the thick strands reeking. And the cave she was in ...

No, not cave. But a covered section of the pass. Dimly illuminated by the moon.

She scanned the dark to either side, the arch of stone above them no more than thirty feet wide, keeping her breathing steady—

There. Sprawled on the ground nearby, covered foot to neck with silk. His face crusted with blood, eyes closed—

Sartaq's chest rose and fell.

Nesryn shuddered with the force of keeping her sob contained as Falkan slithered down her body, chewing at the strands with his vicious teeth.

She didn't need to tell the shifter to hurry. She scanned the empty passage, scanned the dim stars beyond.

Wherever they were ... It was different here.

The rock smooth. Polished. And carved. Countless carvings had been etched in the space, ancient and primitive.

Falkan chewed and chewed, the silk snapping strand by strand.

“Sartaq,” Nesryn dared to whisper. “Sartaq.” The prince did not stir.

Clicking sounded from beyond the archway. “Stop,” she murmured to Falkan. “*Stop.*”

The shifter halted his path down her back. Clung to her leathers as a shadow darker than the night emerged from around the corner behind them. Or ahead—she had no idea where true north lay. If they were still within the pass itself, or atop another peak.

The spider was slightly larger than the others. Her blackness deeper. As if the starlight itself was loath to touch her.

The *kharankui* halted as she noted Nesryn staring at her.

Nesryn controlled her breathing, rallying her mind to come up with *something* to buy them time, buy Sartaq and Falkan time ...

“You are the ones who have been poking about in forgotten places,” the spider said in Halha, her voice beautiful, lyrical.

Nesryn swallowed once, twice, trying and failing to moisten her paper-dry tongue. She managed to rasp, “Yes.”

“What is it that you seek?”

Falkan pinched her back in warning—and order. Keep her distracted. While he chewed.

Nesryn blurted, “We were paid by a merchant, who traded with your sisters to the north, the stygian spiders—”

“Sisters!” The spider hissed. “Our blood kin they may be, but no true sisters of the soul. Gentlehearted fools, trading with mortals—*trading*, when we were born to *devour* you.”

Nesryn’s hands shook behind her back. “T-that is why he sent us. He was unimpressed by them. S-said they did not live up to the legend ...” She had no idea what was spewing from her mouth. “So he wished to see you, see if you might t-t-trade.”

Falkan brushed against her arm in quiet comfort.

“Trade? We have nothing to trade, beyond the bones of your kin.”

“There is no Spidersilk here?”

“No. Though we delight in tasting your dreams, your years. Before we finish with you.”

Had they already done so for Sartaq? Was that why he did not stir? Nesryn forced herself to ask as the threads behind her snapped free so slowly, “Then—then what is it you do here?”

The spider took a step forward, and Nesryn braced herself. But the spider lifted a thin, clawed leg and pointed to one of the polished, carved walls. “We wait.”

And as her eyes at last adjusted to the dimness, Nesryn saw what the spider pointed to.

A carving of an archway—a gate.

And a cloaked figure standing within it.

She squinted, straining to make out who stood there. “W-who do you wait for?”

Houlun had said the Valg had once passed through here—

The spider brushed aside the dirt crusted over the figure. Revealing long, flowing hair etched there. And what she’d thought to be a cloak ... It was a dress.

“Our queen,” the spider said. “We wait for Her Dark Majesty to return at last.”

“Not—not Erawan?” Servants to a dark crown, Houlun had said ...

The spider spat, the venom landing near Sartaq’s covered feet. “Not him. Never *him*.”

“Then who—”

“We wait for the Queen of the Valg,” the spider purred, rubbing against the carving. “Who in this world calls herself Maeve.”

Aelin and Ansel clinked bottles of wine over the long, scarred table in the galley and drank deeply.

They were to sail at first light tomorrow. North—back north. To Terrasen.

Aelin braced her forearms on the slick table. “Here’s to dramatic entrances.”

Lysandra, curled on the bench in ghost leopard form with her head on Aelin’s lap, let out a little feline laugh. Ansel blinked in wonder. “So what now?”

“It’d be nice,” Aedion grumbled from down the table, where he and Rowan glared at them, “to be included in just *one* of these schemes, Aelin.”

“But your faces are so wonderful when I get to reveal them,” Aelin crooned.

He and Rowan growled. Oh, she knew they were pissed. So pissed that she hadn’t told them about Ansel. But the thought of disappointing them, of failing ... She’d wanted to do this on her own.

Rowan, apparently, mastered his annoyance enough to ask Ansel, “Were the ilken or Valg not in Melisande?”

“Are you implying my forces weren’t good enough to take the city if they had been?” Ansel swigged from her wine, laughter dancing in her eyes. Dorian sat at the table between Fenrys and Gavriel, the three of them wisely keeping quiet. Lorcan and Elide were on the deck—somewhere. “No, Prince,” Ansel went on. “I asked the Queen of Melisande about the lack of Morath-bred horrors, and, after some coaxing, she informed me that through whatever wiles and scheming, she managed to keep Erawan’s claws from her. And her soldiers.”

Aelin straightened a bit, wishing she’d had more wine than the third of a bottle she’d already consumed as Ansel added, “When this war is over, Melisande will not have the excuse of being in thrall to Erawan or the Valg. Everything she and her armies have done, their choice in allying with him, was a human choice.” A pointed glance to the darkest part of the galley, where Manon Blackbeak sat alone. “At least Melisande will have the Ironteeth to commiserate with.”

Manon’s iron teeth flashed in the dim light. Her wyvern hadn’t been spotted or heard from since he’d left, apparently. And she and Elide had talked for over

an hour on the deck this afternoon.

Aelin decided to do them all a favor and cut in, “I need more men, Ansel. And I do not have the ability to be in so many places at once.” They were all watching now.

Ansel set down the bottle. “You want me to raise *another* army for you?”

“I want you to find me the lost Crochan witches.”

Manon jerked upright. “What.”

Aelin scratched at a mark on the table. “They are in hiding, but they’re still out there, if the Iron-teeth hunt them. They might have significant numbers. Promise to share the Wastes with them. You control Briarcliff and half the coast. Give them inland and the South.”

Manon was prowling over, death in her eyes. “You do not have the right to promise such things.” Rowan’s and Aedion’s hands shot to their swords. But Lysandra opened a sleepy eye, stretched out a paw on the bench, and revealed the needle-sharp claws that now stood between Manon’s shins and Aelin.

Aelin said to Manon, “You cannot hold the land, not with the curse. Ansel won it, through blood and loss and her own wits.”

“It is *my* home, my people’s home—”

“That was the asking price, wasn’t it? The Iron-teeth get their homeland returned, and Erawan probably promised to break the curse.” At Manon’s wide eyes, Aelin snorted. “Oh—the Ancients didn’t tell you that, did they? Too bad. That’s what Ansel’s spies picked up.” She looked the Wing Leader over. “If you and your people prove to be better than your Matrons, there will be a place for you in that land, too.”

Manon just stalked back to her seat and glared at the galley’s small brazier as if she could freeze it over.

Ansel murmured, “So touchy, these witches.”

Aelin clamped her lips together, but Lysandra let out another breathy cat laugh. Manon’s nails clicked against each other from across the room. Lysandra merely answered with her own.

Aelin said to Ansel, “Find the Crochans.”

“They’re all gone,” Manon cut in again. “We’ve hunted them to near-extinction.”

Aelin slowly looked over a shoulder. “What if their queen summoned them?”

“I am no more their queen than you are.”

They’d see about that. Aelin laid a hand flat on the table. “Send anything and anyone you find north,” she said to Ansel. “Sacking Melisande’s capital on the

sly will at least piss off Erawan, but we don't want to be stuck down here when Terrasen is attacked."

"I think Erawan was probably born pissed." Only Ansel, who had once laughed at death as she'd leaped a ravine and convinced Aelin to nearly die doing the same, would mock a Valg king. But Ansel added, "I'll do it. I don't know how effective it'll be, but I have to go north anyway. Though I think Hisli will be heartbroken to say farewell to Kasida once again."

It was no surprise at all that Ansel had managed to hold on to Hisli, the Asterion mare she'd stolen for herself. But Kasida—oh, Kasida was just as beautiful as Aelin remembered, even more so once she'd been led over a gangway onto the ship. Aelin had brushed the mare down when she'd led her into the cramped, wet stables, and bribed the horse to forgive her with an apple.

Ansel slugged from the bottle. "I heard, you know. When you went to Endovier. I was still fighting my way onto the throne, battling Lord Loch's horde with the lords I'd banded together, but ... even out in the Wastes, we heard when you were sent there."

Aelin picked at the table some more, well aware the others were listening. "It wasn't fun."

Ansel nodded. "Once I'd killed Loch, I had to stay to defend my throne, to make it right again for my people. But I knew if anyone could survive Endovier, it'd be you. I set out last summer. I'd reached the Ruhnn Mountains when I got word you were gone. Taken to the capital by ..." She glanced at Dorian, stone-faced across the table. "Him. But I couldn't go to Rifthold. It was too far, and I had been gone too long. So I turned around. Went home."

Aelin's words were strangled. "You tried to get me out?"

The fire cast Ansel's hair in ruby and gold. "There was not one hour that I did not think about what I did in the desert. How you fired that arrow after twenty-one minutes. You told me twenty, that you'd shoot even if I wasn't out of range. I was counting; I knew how many it had been. You gave me an extra minute."

Lysandra stretched out, nuzzling Ansel's hand. She idly scratched the shifter.

Aelin said, "You were my mirror. That extra minute was as much for me as it was for you." Aelin clinked her bottle against Ansel's again. "Thank you."

Ansel just said, "Don't thank me yet."

Aelin straightened. The others halted their eating, utensils discarded in their stew.

"The fires along the coast weren't set by Erawan," Ansel said, those red-

brown eyes flickering in the lantern light. “We interrogated Melisande’s Queen and her lieutenants, but ... it wasn’t an order from Morath.”

Aedion’s low growl told her they all knew the answer before Ansel replied.

“We got a report that Fae soldiers were spied starting them. Firing from ships.”

“Maeve,” Gavriel murmured. “But burning isn’t her style.”

“It’s mine,” Aelin said. They all looked at her. She let out a humorless laugh.

Ansel just nodded. “She’s been setting them, blaming you for it.”

“To what end?” Dorian asked, dragging a hand through his blue-black hair.

“To undermine Aelin,” Rowan said. “To make her look like a tyrant, not a savior. Like a threat worth banding against, rather than allying with.”

Aelin sucked on a tooth. “Maeve plays the game well, I’ll give her that.”

“So she’s reached these shores, then,” Aedion said. “But where the hell is she?”

A stone of fear plunked into Aelin’s stomach. She couldn’t bring herself to say north. To suggest that perhaps Maeve now sailed for undefended Terrasen. A glance at Fenrys and Gavriel revealed them already shaking their heads in silent answer to Rowan’s pointed look.

Aelin said, “We leave at first light.”



In the dim light of their private cabin an hour later, Rowan drew a line across the map spread in the center of the floor, then a second line beside it, then a third beside that. Three lines, roughly spaced apart, broad swaths of the continent between. Aelin, standing beside him, studied them.

Rowan drew an inward arrow from the leftmost line toward the one in the center, and said quietly so the others in the adjacent rooms or hall couldn’t hear, “Ansel and her army hammer from the western mountains.” Another arrow in an opposite direction—toward the line on the far right. “Rolfe, the Mycenians, and this armada strike from the eastern coast.” An arrow pointing down into the right section of his little drawing, where the two arrows would meet. “The Bane and the other half of Ansel’s army sweep down the center, from the Staghorns, to the heart of the continent—all converging on Morath.” Those eyes were like green fire. “You’ve been moving armies into position.”

“I need more,” she said. “And I need more time.”

His brows narrowed. “And what army will you be fighting in?” His mouth

twitched up at a corner. “I assume I won’t be able to persuade you to stay behind the lines.”

“You know better than to even try.”

“Where would the fun be, anyway, if I got to win all the glory while you sat on your ass? I’d never let you hear the end of it.”

She snorted, and surveyed the other maps they’d spread across the floor of their cabin. Together, they formed a patchwork of their world—not just the continent, but the lands beyond. She stood, towering over it, as if she could spy those armies, both near and far.

Rowan, still kneeling, looked upon the world spread at her feet.

And she realized it indeed was—if she won this war, won the continent back.

Aelin scanned the sprawl of the world, which had once seemed so vast and now, at her feet, seemed so ... fragile. So small and breakable.

“You could, you know,” Rowan said, his tattoo stark in the lantern light. “Take it for yourself. Take it all. Use Maeve’s bullshit maneuvers against her. Make good on that promise.”

There was no judgment. Only frank calculation and contemplation. “And would you join me if I did? If I turned conqueror?”

“You would unify, not pillage and burn. And yes—to whatever end.”

“That’s the threat, isn’t it?” she mused. “The other kingdoms and territories will spend the rest of their existence wondering if I will one day grow restless in Terrasen. They will do their best to ensure we stay happily within our borders, and find them to be more useful as allies and trade partners than potential conquests. Maeve attacked Eyllwe’s coast, posing as me, perhaps to turn those foreign lands against me—to hammer home the point I made with my power at Skull’s Bay ... and use it against us.”

He nodded. “But if you could ... would you?”

For a heartbeat, she could see it—see her face, carved into statues in kingdoms so far away they did not even know Terrasen existed. A living god—Mala’s heir and conqueror of the known world. She would bring music and books and culture, wipe out the corruption festering in corners of the earth ...

She said softly, “Not now.”

“But later?”

“Perhaps if being queen bores me ... I’ll think about making myself empress. To give my offspring not one kingdom to inherit, but as many as the stars.”

There was no harm in saying it, anyway. In thinking about it, stupid and useless as it was. Even if wondering about the possibilities ... perhaps it made

her no better than Maeve or Erawan.

Rowan jerked his chin toward the nearest map—toward the Wastes. “Why did you forgive Ansel? After what she did to you and the others in the desert?”

Aelin crouched again. “Because she made a bad choice, trying to heal a wound she couldn’t ever mend. Trying to avenge the people she loved.”

“And you really set all this in motion when we were in Rifthold? When you were fighting in those pits?”

She gave him a roguish wink. “I knew if I gave the name Ansel of Briarcliff, it’d somehow make its way to her that a red-haired young woman was using *her* name to slaughter trained soldiers in the Pits. And that she’d know it was me.”

“So the red hair back then—not just for Arobynn.”

“Not even close.” Aelin frowned at the maps, dissatisfied she hadn’t spotted any other armies hiding out around the world.

Rowan dragged a hand through his hair. “Sometimes I wish I knew every thought in that head, each scheme and plot. Then I remember how much it delights me when you reveal it—usually when it’s most likely to make my heart stop dead in my chest.”

“I knew you were a sadist.”

He kissed her mouth once, twice, then the tip of her nose, nipping it with his canines. She hissed and batted him away, and his deep chuckle rumbled against the wooden walls. “That’s for not telling me,” he said. “*Again.*”

But despite his words, despite everything, he looked so ... happy. So perfectly content and happy to be there, kneeling among those maps, the lantern down to its last dregs, the world going to hell.

The joyless, cold male she’d first met, the one who had been waiting for an opponent good enough to bring him death ... He now looked at her with happiness in his face.

She took his hand, gripping it hard. “Rowan.”

The spark died from his eyes.

She squeezed his fingers. “Rowan, I need you to do something for me.”



Manon lay curled on her side in her narrow bed, unable to sleep.

It was not from the piss-poor sleeping conditions—no, she’d slept in far worse, even considering the shoddily patched hole in the side of the wall.

She stared at that gap in the wall, at the moonlight leaking in on the salty

summer breeze.

She would not go find the Crochans. No matter what the Terrasen Queen called her, admitting to her bloodline was different from ... claiming it. She doubted the Crochans would be willing to serve anyway, given that she'd killed their princess. Her own half sister.

And even if the Crochans did choose to serve her, fight for her ... Manon put a hand to the thick scar now across her belly. The Ironteeth would not share the Wastes.

But it was that mentality, she supposed as she twisted onto her back, peeling her hair from her sweat-sticky neck, that had sent them all into exile.

She again peered through the gaps in that hole to the sea beyond. Waiting to spot a shadow in the night sky, to hear the boom of mighty wings.

Abraxos should have been here already. She shut out the coiling dread in her stomach.

But instead of wings, footsteps creaked in the hall outside.

A heartbeat later, the door opened on near-silent hinges, then shut again. Locked.

Manon didn't sit up as she said, "What are you doing here."

The moonlight sifted through the king's blue-black hair. "You don't have chains anymore."

She sat up at that, examining where the irons draped down the wall. "Is it more enticing for you if they're on?"

Sapphire eyes seemed to glow in the dark as he leaned against the shut door. "Sometimes it is."

She snorted, but found herself saying, "You never weighed in."

"On what?" he asked, though he knew what she'd meant.

"What I am. Who I am."

"Does my opinion matter to you, witchling?"

Manon stalked toward him, stopping a few feet away, aware of every inch of night between them. "You do not seem outraged that Aelin sacked Melisande without telling anyone, you do not seem to care that I am a Crochan—"

"Do not mistake my silence for lack of feeling. I have good reason to keep my thoughts to myself."

Ice glittered at his fingertips. Manon tracked it. "Will it be you or the queen against Erawan in the end, I wonder."

"Fire against darkness makes for a better story."

"Yes, but so would ripping a demon king to shreds without using your

hands.”

A half smile. “I can think of better uses for my hands—invisible and flesh.”

An invitation and a question. She held his gaze.

“Then finish what you started,” Manon breathed.

Dorian’s answering smile was soft—edged with that glimmer of cruelty that made her blood heat as if the Fire-Queen herself had breathed flame into it.

She let Dorian back her against the wall. Let him hold her gaze while he tugged the top laces of her white shirt free.

One. By. One.

Let him lean in to brush his mouth against her bare neck, right under her ear.

Manon arched slightly at that caress. At the tongue that flicked against where his lips had been. Then he pulled back. Away.

Even as those phantom hands continued to trail up her hips, over her waist. His mouth parted slightly, body trembling with restraint. Restraint, where most males took and took when she offered it, gorging themselves on her. But Dorian Havilliard said, “The Bloodhound was lying that night. What she said about your Second. I felt her lie—tasted it.”

Some tight part in her chest eased. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

He stepped closer again, and those phantom hands trailed under her breasts. She gritted her teeth. “And what do you want to talk about, Manon?”

She wasn’t sure he’d ever said her name before. And the way he’d said it ...

“I don’t want to talk at all,” she countered. “And neither do you,” she added with a pointed glance.

Again, that dark, edged smile appeared. And when he stepped close once more, his hands replaced those phantom ones.

Tracing her hips, her waist, her breasts. Unhurried, indolent circles that she allowed him to make, simply because no one had ever dared. Each brush of his skin against hers left a wake of fire and ice. She found herself transfixed by it—by each coaxing, luxurious stroke. She did not even consider objecting as Dorian slid off her shirt and surveyed her bare, scar-flecked flesh.

His face turned ravenous as he took in her breasts, the plane of her stomach—the scar slicing across it.

That hunger shifted into something icy and vicious: “You once asked me where I stand on the line between killing to protect and killing for pleasure.” His fingers grazed the seam of the scar across her abdomen. “I’ll stand on the other side of the line when I find your grandmother.”

A chill ran down her body, peaking her breasts. He watched them, then

circled a finger around one. Dorian bent, his mouth following the path where that finger had been. Then his tongue. She bit her lip against the groan rising up her throat, her hands sliding into the silken locks of his hair.

His mouth was still around the tip of her breast as he again met her eyes, sapphire framed with ebony lashes, and said, "I want to taste every inch of you."

Manon let go of all pretense of reason as the king lifted his head and claimed her mouth.

And for all his wanting to taste her, as she opened for him, Manon thought the king tasted like the sea, like a winter morning, something so foreign and yet familiar it at last dragged that moan from deep in her.

His fingers slid to her jaw, tipping her face to thoroughly take her mouth, every movement of his tongue a sensuous promise that had her arching into him. Had her meeting him stroke for stroke as he explored and teased until she could hardly think straight.

She had never contemplated what it would be like—to yield control. And not have it be weakness, but a freedom.

Dorian's hands slid down her thighs, as if savoring the muscle there, then around—cupping her backside, grinding her into every hard inch of him. The small noise in her throat was cut off as he hoisted her from the wall in a smooth movement.

Manon wrapped her legs around his waist while he carried her to the bed, his mouth never leaving hers as he devoured and devoured her. As he spread her beneath him. As he freed her pants button by button, then slid them off.

But Dorian pulled back at last, leaving her panting as he surveyed her, utterly bare before him. He caressed a finger along the inside of her thigh. Higher. "I wanted you from the first moment I saw you in Oakwald," he said, his voice low and rough.

Manon reached up to peel off his shirt, white fabric sliding away to reveal tan skin and sculpted muscle. "Yes," was all she told him. She unbuckled his belt, hands shaking. "Yes," she said again, as Dorian brushed a knuckle over her core. He let out an approving growl at what he found.

His clothes joined hers on the floor. Manon let him raise her arms over her head, his magic gently pinning her wrists to the mattress as he touched her, first with those wicked hands. Then with his wicked mouth. And when Manon had to bite his shoulder to muffle her moaning as he brought her over the edge, Dorian Havilliard buried himself deep inside her.

She did not care who she was, who she had been, and what she had once

promised to be as he moved. She dragged her hands through his thick hair, over the muscles of his back as it flexed and rippled with each thrust that drove her toward that shimmering edge again. Here, she was nothing but flesh and fire and iron; here, there was only this selfish need of her body, his body.

More. She wanted more—wanted *everything*.

She might have whispered it, might have pleaded for it. Because Darkness save her, Dorian gave it to her. To them both.

He remained atop her when he at last stilled, his lips barely a hairsbreadth above hers—hovering after the brutal kiss he'd given her to contain his roar as release found him.

She was trembling with ... whatever he'd done to her, her body. He brushed a strand of hair out of her face, his own fingers shaking.

She had not realized how silent the world was—how loud they might have been, especially with so many Fae ears nearby.

He was still atop her, in her. Those sapphire eyes flicked to her mouth, still panting slightly. “This was supposed to take the edge off.”

She kept her words low as his clothes slid over, hauled by phantom hands. “And did it?”

He traced her lower lip with his thumb and shuddered as she sucked it into her mouth, flicked it with her tongue. “No. Not even close.”

But that was the gray light of dawn creeping into the room, staining the walls silver. He seemed to notice it at the same moment she did. Groaning softly, he pulled himself off her. She tugged on her clothes with trained efficiency, and only when she was lacing up her shirt did Dorian say, “We're not done, you and I.”

And it was the purely male *promise* that made her bare her teeth. “Unless you would like to learn precisely what parts of me are made of iron the next time you touch me, I decide those things.”

Dorian gave another purely male smile, brows flicking up, and sauntered out the door as silently as he'd arrived. He only seemed to pause on the threshold—as if some word had snagged his interest. But he continued out, the door closing with barely a click. Unruffled, utterly calm.

Manon gaped after him, cursing her blood for heating again, for ... what she'd allowed him to do.

She wondered what Dorian would say if she told him she had never allowed a male atop her like that. Not once. Wondered what he'd say if she told him she'd wanted to sink her teeth into his neck and find out what he tasted like. Put

her mouth on other parts and see what he tasted like there.

Manon dragged her hands through her hair and slumped onto the pillow.

Darkness embrace her.

She sent a silent prayer for Abraxos to return soon. Too much time—she had spent too much damn time among these humans and Fae males. She needed to leave. Elide was safe here—the Queen of Terrasen might be many things, but Manon knew she'd protect Elide.

But, with the Thirteen scattered and likely dead, regardless of what Dorian had claimed, Manon wasn't entirely sure where to go once she left. The world had never seemed quite so vast before.

And so empty.



Even utterly exhausted, Elide barely slept during the long night she and Lorcan swayed in hammocks with the other sailors. The smells, the sounds, the rocking of the sea ... All of it nagged, none of it left her settled. A finger seemed to keep prodding her awake, as if telling her to be alert, but ... there was nothing.

Lorcan tossed and turned for hours. As if the same force begged him to wake.

As if he was waiting for something.

His strength had been flagging by the time they'd reached the ship, though he had showed no signs of strain beyond a slight tightening in his mouth. But Elide knew he was near what he'd described as a burnout. Knew, because for hours afterward, the small brace of magic around her ankle kept flickering in and out of place.

After Manon had informed her of the uncertain fates of the Thirteen, Elide had kept mostly out of her companions' way, letting them talk with that red-haired young woman who found them on the beach. So had Lorcan. He'd listened to them debate and plan, his face taut, as if something coiled in him wound itself tighter with every passing moment.

Watching him sleep mere feet away, that harsh face smoothed to softness by slumber, a small part of Elide wondered if she'd somehow brought another danger to the queen. She wondered if the others had noted how often Lorcan's gaze had been fixed on Aelin's back. *Aimed* at her back.

As if sensing her attention, Lorcan opened his eyes. Met her stare without so much as blinking. For a heartbeat, she took in that depthless gaze mere feet

away, made ethereal by the silver light before dawn.

He had been willing to offer up his life for her own.

Something softened in that harsh face as his eyes dipped to where her arm dangled out of her hammock, the skin still a bit sore, but ... miraculously healed. She'd thanked Gavriel twice now, but he'd brushed it aside with a gentle nod and shrug.

A faint smile bloomed on Lorcan's harsh mouth as he reached across the space between them and ran his calloused fingers down her arm. "You choose this?" he murmured so that it was little more than the groaning of the hammock ropes. He brushed a thumb down her palm.

Elide swallowed but let herself take in every line of that face. North—they were going *home* today. "I thought that was obvious," she said with equal quiet, her cheeks heating.

His fingers laced through hers, some emotion she couldn't place flickering like starlight in those black eyes. "We need to talk," he rasped.

It was the shout of the watch that jolted them. The one of pure terror.

Elide nearly flipped out of her hammock, the sailors rushing past. By the time she shoved her hair from her eyes, Lorcan was already gone.

The various decks were packed, and she had to limp onto the stairs to view what had roused them. The other ships were awake and frenzied. With good reason.

Sailing over the western horizon, another armada headed for them.

And Elide knew in her bones it was not one that Aelin had schemed and planned for.

Not as Fenrys breathed, suddenly beside her on the steps. "Maeve."

They had no choice but to meet them. Maeve's armada had the wind and the current, and they would not even reach the shore before they were caught. And outrunning Fae soldiers ... Not an option.

Rowan and Aedion laid out every course for Aelin. All paths arrived at one destination: confrontation. And she was still so drained, so exhausted, that ... She knew how this would go.

Maeve had a third more ships. And immortal warriors. With magic.

It took far too little time for those black sails to fill the sky, for them to glean that their enemy's boats were better-made, their soldiers longer-trained. Rowan and the cadre had overseen much of that training—and the details they provided were not heartening.

Maeve sent one ornately carved rowboat to them, bearing a message.

Surrender—or be sent to the bottom of the ocean. Aelin had until dawn tomorrow to decide.

An entire day. So that the fear would fester and spread among their men.

Aelin met with Rowan and Aedion again. The cadre was not summoned by their queen, though Lorcan paced like a caged beast, Elide watching with a face that impressively revealed nothing.

She had no solution. Dorian remained quiet, though he often glanced between her and Manon. As if some puzzle were laid before him. He never said what.

Aedion pushed for attacking—quietly rallying the boats and attacking. But Maeve would see that maneuver coming. And they could strike faster with magic than it'd take for them to fire arrows and harpoons.

Time. That was all she had to play with.

They debated and theorized and planned. Rowan made a decent attempt at trying to suggest she run. She let him talk, only to let him realize in doing so what a stupid idea it was. After last night, he should be well aware she was not leaving him. Not willingly.

So the sun set. And Maeve's armada waited, poised and watching. A

lounging panther, ready to strike at first light.

Time. Her only tool—and her downfall. And she had run out of it.

Aelin counted those black sails again and again as night blanketed them.

And had no idea what to do.



It was unacceptable, Rowan had decided, during the long hours they'd debated.

Unacceptable that they had done so much, only to be halted not by Erawan, but Maeve.

She hadn't deigned to make an appearance. But that wasn't her style.

She'd do it at dawn. Accept Aelin's surrender in person, with all eyes watching. And then ... Rowan didn't know what she'd do then. What Maeve wanted, other than the keys.

Aelin had been so calm. Shock, he'd realized. Aelin had gone into shock. Rowan had seen her rage and kill and laugh and weep, but he had never seen her ... lost. And he hated himself for it, but he couldn't find a way out. Couldn't find a way for *her* to get out of this.

Aelin was sleeping soundly as Rowan stared at the ceiling above their bed, then slid his gaze over her. He took in the lines of her face, the golden waves of her hair, every moon-white scar and dark swirl of ink. Leaning in, silent as snow in a wood, he kissed her brow.

He would not let it end here, not let this be what broke them.

He knew the house flags that flew beneath Maeve's own crest. Had counted and cataloged them all day, sorting through the catacombs of his memory.

Rowan slid into his clothes and waited until he'd crept into the hall before buckling his sword belt. Still gripping the doorknob, he allowed himself one last look at her.

For a moment, the past snared him—for a moment, he saw her as he'd first spied her on the rooftops of Varese, drunk and battered. He'd been in hawk form, assessing his new charge, and she'd noticed him—broken and reeling, she had still spotted him there. And stuck out her tongue at him.

If someone had told him that the drunken, brawling, bitter woman would become the one thing he could not live without ... Rowan shut the door.

This was all he could offer her.

Rowan reached the main deck and shifted, little more than a gleam of moonlight as he shielded himself and flapped through the briny night—into the

heart of Maeve's fleet.



Rowan's cousin had enough good sense not to try to kill him on sight.

They were close enough in age that Rowan had grown up with him, raised in his uncle's house beside him after his parents had faded. If his uncle ever faded, it would be Enda who took up the mantle as head of their house—a prince of considerable title, property, and arms.

Enda, to his credit, sensed his arrival before Rowan slipped through the flimsy shield on the windows. And Enda remained sitting on the bed, albeit dressed for battle, a hand on his sword.

His cousin looked him over head to toe as Rowan shifted. "Assassin or messenger, Prince?"

"Neither," Rowan said, inclining his head slightly.

Like him, Enda was silver-haired, though his green eyes were speckled with brown that could sometimes swallow the color whole when he was in a rage.

If Rowan had been bred and built for battlefields, Enda was sculpted for intrigue and court machinations. His cousin, while tall and muscled enough, lacked Rowan's breadth of shoulders and solid bulk—though that could also be from the different sorts of training they'd received. Enda knew enough about fighting to warrant being here to lead his father's forces, but their own educations had crossed little after those first decades of youth, when they had run wild together at his family's main estate.

Enda kept his hand on the hilt of his fine sword, utterly calm. "You look ... different," his cousin said, brows twitching toward each other. "Better."

There had been a time when Enda had been his friend—before Lyria. Before ... everything. And Rowan might have been inclined to explain who and what was responsible for this change, but he didn't have time. No, time was not his ally this night.

But Rowan said, "You look different as well, Prince."

Enda gave a half smile. "You can thank my mate for that."

Once, it might have sent a pang of agony through him. That Enda spoke of it reminded him that his cousin might not be a battle-honed warrior, but the courtier was as good as any at marking important details—noting Aelin's scent, now forever entwined with his own. So Rowan nodded, smiling a bit himself. "It was Lord Kerrigan's son, wasn't it?"

Indeed, there was another's scent woven through Enda's, the claiming deep and true. "It was." Enda again smiled—now at a ring on his finger. "We were mated and married earlier this summer."

"You mean to tell me you waited a hundred years for him?"

Enda shrugged, his grip on his sword lightening. "When it comes to the right person, Prince, waiting a hundred years is worth it."

He knew. He understood him so damn well that it made his chest crack to think of it.

"Endymion," he said hoarsely. "Enda, I need you to listen."

There were plenty of people who might have called for the guards, but he knew Enda—or had. He was but one of several cousins who'd shoved their noses into his business for years. Tried, Rowan now wondered, not for gossip but ... to fight to keep some small scrap of him alive. Enda more than any of them.

So Endymion gave him the gift of listening. Rowan tried to keep it concise, tried to keep his hands from trembling. In the end, he supposed his request was simple.

When he finished, Enda studied him, any response hidden behind that court-trained mask of neutrality.

Then Enda said, "I will consider it."

It was the best Rowan could hope for. He said nothing else to his cousin before he shifted again and flapped into the night—toward another banner he had once marched beside.

And ship to ship, Rowan went. The same speech. The same request.

All of them, all his cousins, had the same answer.

I will consider it.

Queen of the Valg.

“Maeve is Queen of the *Fae*,” Nesryn countered carefully.

The spider chuckled, low and wicked. “So she has made them believe.”

Think, think, think. “What—what a mighty and powerful queen she must be,” Nesryn stammered. “To rule both.” Falkan furiously chewed, each strand slowly, so slowly, yielding. “Will you—will you tell me the tale?”

The spider studied her, those depthless eyes like pits of hell. “It will not buy you your life, mortal.”

“I—I know.” She shook further, the words tumbling out. “But stories ... I have always loved stories—of these lands especially. *Wind-seeker*, my mother called me, because I was always drifting where the wind tugged me, always dreaming of those stories. And here ... here the wind has taken me. So I would hear one last tale, if you allow it. Before I meet my end.”

The spider remained quiet for a heartbeat. Another. Then she settled herself beneath the carving of the archway—the Wyrddgate. “Consider it a gift—for your boldness in even asking.”

Nesryn said nothing, heart thundering through every part of her body.

“Long ago,” the spider said softly in that beautiful voice, “in another world, another lifetime, there existed a land of dark, and cold, and wind. Ruled by three kings, masters of shadow and pain. Brothers. The world had not always been that way, had not been born that way. But they waged a mighty war. A war to end all

wars. And those three kings conquered it. Turned it into a wasteland, a paradise for those who had dwelled in darkness. For a thousand years, they ruled, equal in power, their sons and daughters spread throughout the land to ensure their continued dominion. Until a queen appeared—her power a new, dark song in the world. Such wondrous things she could do with her power, such horrible, wondrous things ...”

The spider sighed. “They each desired her, those kings. Pursued her, wooed her. But she only deigned to ally with one, the strongest of them.”

“Erawan,” Nesryn murmured.

“No. Orcus, eldest of the Valg kings. They wed, but Maeve was not content. Restless, our queen spent long hours pondering the riddles of the world—of other worlds. And with her gifts, she found a way to look. To pierce the veil between worlds. To see realms of green, of light and song.” The spider spat, as if such a thing were abhorrent. “And one day, when Orcus was gone to see his brothers, she took a path between realms. Stepped beyond her world, and into the next.”

Nesryn’s blood went cold. “H-how?”

“She had watched. Had learned of such rips between worlds. A door that could open and close at random, or if one knew the right words.” The spider’s dark eyes gleamed. “We came with her—her beloved handmaidens. We stepped with her into this ... place. To this very spot.”

Nesryn glanced at the polished stone. Even Falkan seemed to pause to do the same.

“She bade us stay—to guard the gate. Lest anyone should pursue her. For she had decided she did not wish to go back. To her husband, her world. So she went, and we only heard whisperings through our sisters and smaller kin, carried on the wind.” The spider fell silent.

Nesryn pushed, “What did you hear?”

“That Orcus arrived, his brothers in tow. That Orcus had learned of his wife’s

leaving and discovered how she'd done it. Went beyond what she'd done, and found a way to *control* the gate between worlds. Made keys to do so, shared with his brothers. Three keys, for the three kings.

“They went from world to world, opening gates as they willed it, sweeping in their armies and laying waste to those realms as they hunted for her. Until they reached this world.”

Nesryn could barely draw breath to ask, “And they found her?”

“No,” the spider said, something like a smile in its voice. “For Her Dark Majesty had left these mountains, had found another land, and prepared herself well. She knew that one day she would be found. And planned to hide within plain sight. So she did. She came across a lovely, long-lived people—near-immortals themselves—ruled over by two sister-queens.”

Mab and Mora. Holy gods—

“And using her powers, she ripped into their minds. Made them believe they had a sister, an eldest sister to rule with them. Three queens—for the three kings that might one day come. When they returned to their palace, she tore into the minds of all those who dwelled there, too. And any who came. Planting the thought that a third queen had always existed, always ruled. If they somehow resisted her power, she found ways to end them.” A wicked chuckle.

Nesryn had heard the legends. Of Maeve's dark, unnamed power—a darkness that could devour the stars. That Maeve had never revealed a Fae form, only that deadly darkness. And she had lived far beyond the lifespan of any known Fae. Lived so long that the only comparable lifespan ... Erawan.

A Valg life span. For a Valg queen.

The spider again paused. Falkan had nearly reached her hands—but still not enough to free them.

Nesryn asked, “So the Valg kings arrived, but did not know who faced them in the war?”

“Precisely.” A delighted purr. “Disguised in a Fae body, they did not

recognize her, the fools. But she used it against them. Knew how to defeat them, how their armies worked. And when she realized what they had done to arrive here, the keys they possessed ... she wanted them. To banish them, kill them, and to use the keys as she saw fit within this world. And others.

“So she took them. Snuck in and took them, surrounding herself with Fae warriors so others might not ask just *how* she knew so many things. Oh, the clever queen claimed it was from communing with the spirit world, but ... she knew. She had run those war camps. Knew how the kings worked. So she stole the keys. Managed to send two of those kings back, Orcus one of them. And before she could go after the final king, the youngest one who loved his brothers so very deeply, the keys were taken from her.” A hiss.

“By Brannon,” Nesryn breathed.

“Yes, the fire-king. He saw the darkness in her but did not recognize it. He wondered, suspected, but all he’d known of the Valg, our people, were their *male* soldiers. Their grunts and princes and kings. He did not know that a female ... How different, how extraordinary a female Valg is. Even *he* was tricked by her; she found paths into his mind to keep him from truly realizing it.” Another soft, lovely laugh. “Even now, when all should be clear to his meddlesome spirit ... Even now, he does not know. To his oncoming doom—yes, to his doom, and the other’s.”

Nausea roiled through her. *Aelin*. Aelin’s doom.

“But while he did not guess correctly about our queen’s origins, he still knew that his fire ... She greatly feared his fire. As all true Valg do.” Nesryn tucked away that kernel. “He left, building his kingdom far away, and she built her defenses, too. So many clever defenses, should Erawan rise again and realize that the queen he’d sought for his brother, conquered worlds to find, was here all along. That she had built armies of Fae, and would let them battle each other.”

A spider in a web. That’s what Maeve was.

Falkan reached Nesryn’s hands, chewing through the silk there. Sartaq

remained unconscious, so perilously close to the spider.

“So you have waited these thousands of years—for her to return to these mountains?”

“She ordered us to hold the pass, to guard the rip in the world. So we have. And so we will, until she summons us to her side once more.”

Nesryn’s head spun. Maeve—she’d think on it later. If they lived through this.

She flicked her fingers at Falkan, signaling him.

Silently, keeping to the shadows, the shifter scuttled into the dark.

“And now you know—how the Black Watch came to dwell here.” The spider rose with a mighty heave. “I hope it was a fitting final tale for you, Wind-seeker.”

Nesryn opened her mouth as the spider advanced, rotating her wrists behind her back—

“Sister,” a female voice hissed from the darkness beyond. “Sister, a word.”

The spider halted, pivoting her bulbous body toward the archway entrance. “*What.*”

A beat of fear. “There is a problem, sister. A threat.”

The spider scuttled toward her kin, snapping, “Tell me.”

“Ruks on the northern horizon. Twenty at least—”

The spider hissed. “Guard the mortals. I shall deal with the birds.”

Clicking legs, shale shifting all around her. Nesryn’s heart hammered as she flexed her aching fingers. “Sartaq,” she breathed.

His eyes flicked open across the way. Alert. Calm.

The other spider crawled in, smaller than her leader. Sartaq tensed, shoulders straining as if he’d try to burst from the silk that held him.

But the spider only whispered, “*Hurry.*”

Sartaq sagged at Falkan's voice as it came from the *kharankui*'s hideous mouth.

Nesryn hauled her hands free from the webbing, swallowing her grunt of pain as the fibers tore at her skin. Falkan's mouth and tongue had to be aching—

She glanced at the spider hovering over Sartaq, slicing through the silk binding the prince with slashes of the claws. Indeed, where those pincers waved, blood leaked out.

“Quickly,” the shifter whispered. “Your weapons are in the corner there.”

She could just make out the faint gleam of starlight on the curve of her bow, along the naked silver of her Asterion short-sword.

Falkan cut through Sartaq's bindings, and the prince sprang free, shoving off the webbing. He swayed as he stood, bracing a hand on the stone. Blood, there was so much blood all over him—

But he rushed to her, ripping at the threads still covering her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“Faster,” Falkan said, glancing to the archway entrance behind. “It won't take her long to realize no one's coming.”

Nesryn's feet came free, and Sartaq hauled her up. “Did you hear what she said about Maeve—”

“Oh, I heard,” Sartaq breathed as they rushed to their weapons. He handed her the bow and quiver, the Fae blade. Grabbed his own Asterion daggers as he hissed to Falkan, “Which way?”

The shifter scuttled forward, past the carving of Maeve. “Here—there is a slope upward. We’re just on the other side of the pass. If we can get up high—”

“Have you seen Kadara?”

“No,” the shifter said. “But—”

They didn’t wait to hear the rest as they crept on silent feet from the archway, entering the starlight-filled pass beyond. Sure enough, a rough slope of loose stone rose from the ground, as if it were a path into the stars themselves.

They’d made it halfway up the treacherous slope, Falkan a dark shadow at their backs, when a shriek rose from the mountain beyond. But the skies were empty, no sign of Kadara—

“Fire,” Nesryn breathed as they hurtled toward the apex of the peak. “She said all Valg hate fire. *They* hate fire.” For the spiders, devouring life, devouring souls ... They were as Valg as Erawan. Hailed from the same dark hell. “Get the flint from your pocket,” she ordered the prince.

“And light *what*?” His eyes drifted to the arrows at her back as they halted atop the narrow apex of the peak—the curved horn. “We’re trapped up here.” He scanned the sky. “It might not buy us anything.”

Nesryn withdrew an arrow, shouldering her bow as she tugged a strip of her shirt from beneath the jacket of her flying leathers. She ripped off the bottom, sliced the piece in two, and wrapped one around the shaft of the arrow. “We need kindling,” she said as Sartaq withdrew the flint stone from his breast pocket.

A knife flashed, and then a section of Sartaq’s braid was in his outstretched hand.

She didn’t hesitate. Just wrapped the braid around the fabric, holding the arrow out for him as he struck the flint over and over. Sparks flew, drifting—

One caught. Fire flared. Just as darkness spilled into the pass below. Shoulder to shoulder, the spiders surged for them. Two dozen at least.

Nesryn nocked the arrow, drawing back the string—and aimed up.

Not directly to them. But a shot into the sky, high enough to pierce the frosty

stars.

The spiders paused, watching the arrow reach its zenith and then plunge down, down—

“Another,” Nesryn said, taking that second strip of fabric and wrapping it again around the head of her next arrow. Only three remained in her quiver. Sartaq sliced off a second piece of his braid, looping it over the tip. Flint struck, sparks glowed, and as that first arrow plummeted toward the spiders scattering from its path, she loosed her second arrow.

The spiders were so distracted looking up they did not stare ahead.

The largest of them, the one who had spoken to her for so long, least of all.

And as Nesryn’s burning arrow slammed into her abdomen, sticking deep, the spider’s scream shook the very stones beneath them.

“Another,” Nesryn breathed, fumbling for her next arrow as Sartaq ripped the fabric from his shirt. “Hurry.”

Nowhere to go, no way to keep them at bay.

“Shift,” she told Falkan, who monitored the panicking spiders, who balked at their leader’s screaming orders to put out the fire atop her abdomen. “If you are going to shift into something, do it *now*.”

The shifter turned that hideous spider’s face toward them. Sartaq sliced off another piece of his braid and slid it over the head of her third arrow. “I will hold them,” Falkan said.

Sparks showered, flame kindled on that third flaming arrow.

“A favor, Captain,” the shifter said to her.

Time. They did not have *time*—

“When I was seven, my older brother sired a bastard daughter off a poor woman in Rifthold. Abandoned them both. It has been twenty years since then, and from when I was old enough to go to the city, to begin my trade, I looked for her. Found the mother after some years—on her deathbed. She could barely talk long enough to say she’d kicked the girl out. She did not know where my niece

was. Didn't care. She died before she could give me a name."

Nesryn's hands shook as she aimed the arrow toward the spider trying to edge past her burning sister. Sartaq warned, "Hurry."

Falkan said, "If she survived, if she is grown, she might have the shifter gift, too. But it doesn't matter if she does or does not. What matters ... She is my family. All I have left. And I have looked for her for a very long time."

Nesryn fired the third arrow. A spider screamed as it found its mark. The others fell back.

"Find her," Falkan said, taking a step toward the horrors churning below. "My fortune—all of it is for her. And I may have failed her in this life. But not in my death."

Nesryn opened her mouth, not believing it, the words surging up—

But Falkan sprinted down the path. Leaped right in front of that burning line of spiders.

Sartaq grabbed her elbow, pointing toward the steep slope downward from the tiny peak. "This—"

One moment, she was standing upright. The next, Sartaq had thrown her back, his sword whining.

She stumbled, arms flailing to keep her upright as she realized what had crept up the other side of the peak. The spider now hissing at them, enormous fangs dripping venom to the stone.

It lunged for Sartaq with its front two legs.

He dodged one and swung down, striking true.

Black blood sprayed, the spider shrieking—but not before it slashed that claw deep into the prince's thigh.

Nesryn moved, her fourth arrow flying, right into one of those eyes. The fifth and final arrow flew a moment later, shooting for the spider's open mouth as it screamed.

It bit down on the arrow, slicing it in half.

Nesryn dropped her bow and drew her Fae blade.

The spider hissed at it.

Nesryn stepped between Sartaq and the spider. Down below, the *kharankui* screamed and shrieked. She did not dare to look to see what Falkan was doing. If he still fought.

The blade was a sliver of moonlight between her and the spider.

The *kharankui* advanced a step. Nesryn yielded one, Sartaq struggling to rise beside her.

“I will make you beg for death,” the spider seethed, advancing again.

It recoiled, preparing to spring.

Make it count; make the swing count—

The spider leaped.

And went tumbling off the cliff as a dark ruk slammed into it, roaring her fury.

Not Kadara. But Arcas.

Borte.

51

A whirlwind of fury, Arcas reared up, then dove again, Borte's battle cry ringing off the stones as she and her ruk aimed for the *kharankui* in the pass below. To the spider holding them off, blood—red blood—leaking from him.

Another cry split the night, one she'd learned as well as her own voice.

And there was Kadara, sailing hard for them, two other ruks in her wake.

Sartaq let out what might have been a sob as one of the other ruks broke away, diving to where Borte swept and lunged and shattered through the *kharankui* ranks.

A ruk of darkest brown feathers ... and a young man atop it.

Yeran.

Nesryn did not recognize the other rider who sailed in behind Kadara. Blood stained Kadara's golden feathers, but she flew steady, hovering overhead as the other ruk closed in.

"Hold still, and don't fear the drop," Sartaq breathed, brushing a hand over Nesryn's cheek. In the moonlight, his face was caked in dirt and blood, his eyes full of pain, and yet—

Then there was a wall of wings, and mighty talons spread wide.

They wrapped around her waist and beneath her upper thighs, hauling her sitting upright into the air, Sartaq clutched in the other, and then the great bird shot into the night.

The wind roared, but the ruk lifted them higher. Kadara fell into rank behind

—guarding their rear. Through her whipping hair, Nesryn looked back toward the fire-limned pass.

To where Borte and Yeran now soared upward, a dark form clutched in the claws of Yeran's ruk. Utterly limp.

Borte was not done.

A light sparked atop her ruk. A flaming arrow.

Borte fired it high into the sky.

A signal, Nesryn realized as countless wings filled the air around them. And as Borte's arrow landed atop a web, flame erupting, hundreds of lights kindled in the sky.

Ruk riders. Each bearing a flaming arrow. Each now pointing downward.

Like a rain of shooting stars, the arrows fell upon the darkness of Dagul. Landed on web and tree. And caught fire. One after another after another.

Until the night was lit up, until smoke streamed, mingling with the rising screams from the peaks and wood.

The ruks veered northward, Nesryn shaking as she clung to the talons holding her. Across the way, Sartaq met her gaze, his now-shoulder-length hair rippling in the wind.

With the flames below, it made the wounds to his face, his hands, his neck all the more gruesome. His skin was wan, his lips pale, his eyes heavy with exhaustion and relief. And yet ...

Sartaq smiled, barely a curve of his mouth. The words the prince had confessed drifted on the wind between them.

She could not take her eyes from him. Could not look away.

So Nesryn smiled back.

And below and behind them, long into the night, the Dagul Fells burned.

Manon was awake when Dorian stormed into her room an hour before dawn. He ignored her unlaced shirt, the swell of those lush breasts he'd tasted only yesterday, as he said, "Put your clothes on and follow me."

Mercifully, the witch obeyed. Though he had a feeling it was mostly from curiosity.

When he reached Aelin's chamber, he bothered to knock—just in case the queen and Rowan were utilizing their potentially last few hours together. But the queen was already awake and dressed, the prince nowhere to be found. Aelin took one look at Dorian's face. "What is it?"

He didn't tell either woman anything as he led them down into the cargo hold, the upper levels of the ship already astir with battle preparations.

While they'd debated and readied for the past day, he'd contemplated Manon's warning, after she'd made his very blood sing with pleasure. *Unless you would like to learn precisely what parts of me are made of iron the next time you touch me, I decide those things.*

Over and over, he'd considered the way the words had snagged on a sharp corner of memory. He'd lain awake all night while he descended into his still-depleted well of magic. And as the light had begun to shift ...

Dorian tugged the sheet off the witch mirror carefully held in place against the wall. The Lock—or whatever it was. In the muted reflection, the two queens were frowning at his back.

Manon's iron nails slid out. "I would be careful handling that if I were you."

"The warning is noted and appreciated," he said, meeting those gold eyes in the mirror. She didn't return his smile. Neither did Aelin. He sighed. "I don't think this witch mirror has any power. Or, rather, not a tangible, brute power. I think its power is knowledge."

Aelin's steps were near-silent as she approached. "I was told the Lock would allow me to bind the three keys into the gate. You think this mirror knows how to do that?"

He simply nodded, trying not to be too offended by the skepticism

scrunching her face.

Aelin picked at a loose thread on her jacket. “But what does the Lock-mirror-whatever-it-is have to do with the armada breathing down our necks?”

He tried not to roll his eyes. “It has to do with what Deanna said. What if the Lock wasn’t just for binding them back into the gate, but a tool for safely controlling the keys?”

Aelin frowned at the mirror. “So I’m going to lug that thing onto the deck and use it to blow apart Maeve’s armada with the two keys we have?”

He took a steadying breath, beseeching the gods for patience. “I said I think this mirror’s power is knowledge. I think it will *show* you how to wield the keys safely. So you can come back here and wield them without consequence.”

A slow blink. “What do you mean, *come back here*?”

Manon answered, now stepping close as she studied the mirror. “It’s a traveling mirror.”

Dorian nodded. “Think about Deanna’s words: *‘Flame and iron, together bound, merge into silver to learn what must be found. A mere step is all it shall take.’*” He pointed to the mirror. “Step into the silver—and *learn*.”

Manon clicked her tongue. “And I suppose she and I are flame and iron.”

Aelin crossed her arms.

Dorian cut the Queen of Terrasen a wry glance. “People other than you *can* solve things, you know.”

Aelin glared at him. “We don’t have time for what-ifs. Too many things could go wrong.”

“You have little magic left,” Dorian countered, waving a hand toward the mirror. “You could be in and out of this mirror before dawn. And use what you learn to send Maeve a message in no uncertain terms.”

“I can still fight with steel—without the risks and waste of time.”

“You can stop this battle before the losses are too great on either side.” He added carefully, “We’re out of time already, Aelin.”

Those turquoise eyes were steady—if not still furious he’d beat her to the riddle—but something flickered in them. “I know,” she said. “I was hoping ...” She shook her head, more at herself. “I ran out of time,” she murmured as if it were an answer, and considered the mirror, then Manon. Then blew out a breath. “This wasn’t my plan.”

“I know,” Dorian said with a half smile. “That’s why you don’t like it.”

Manon asked before Aelin could bite off his head, “But where will the mirror lead?”

Aelin clenched her jaw. “Hopefully not Morath.” Dorian tensed. Perhaps this plan—

“That symbol belongs to both of us,” Manon said, studying the Eye of Elena etched onto it. “And if it takes you to Morath, you’re going to need someone who knows the way out.”

Steps thudded down the stairs at the back of the hold. Dorian twisted toward them, but Aelin smirked at Manon and approached the mirror. “Then I’ll see you on the other side, witch.”

Aedion’s golden head appeared between the crates. “What the hell are you —”

Aelin’s shallow nod seemed all that Manon needed. She placed her hand atop Aelin’s.

Golden eyes met Dorian’s for a moment, and he opened his mouth to say something to her, the words surging from some barren field in his chest.

But Aelin and Manon pressed their joined hands to the speckled glass.

Aedion’s shout of warning rang through the hold as they vanished.

Elide watched the ship rally against the armada looming before them—then descend into utter chaos as Aedion began roaring below.

The news came out moments later. Came out as Prince Rowan Whitethorn landed on the main deck, face haggard, eyes full of nothing but fear as Aedion burst out the door, Dorian on his heels, sporting an already-nasty bruise around his eye. Pacing, seething, Aedion told them of Aelin and Manon walking into the mirror—the Lock—and vanishing. How the King of Adarlan had solved Deanna’s riddle and sent them into its silvery realm to buy them a shot at this battle.

They went down into the cargo hold. But no matter how Aedion pushed against the mirror, it did not open to him. No matter how Rowan searched it with his magic, it did not yield where Aelin and Manon had gone. Aedion had spat on the floor, looking inclined to give the king another black eye as Dorian explained there had been little choice. He hadn’t seemed sorry about it—until Rowan refused to meet his gaze.

Only when they were gathered on the deck again, the king and shape-shifter off speaking to the captain about the turn of events, did Elide carefully say to Aedion as he paced, “What is done is done. We can’t wait for Aelin and Manon to find a way to save us.”

Aedion halted, and Elide tried not to cringe at the unrelenting fury as it narrowed on her. “When I want your opinion about how to deal with my missing queen, I’ll ask you.”

Lorcan snarled at him. But Elide lifted her chin, even as the insult hit something in her chest. “I waited as long as you did to find her again, Aedion. You are not the only one who fears to lose her once more.”

Indeed, Rowan Whitethorn now rubbed his face. She suspected it was as much feeling as the Fae Prince would show.

Rowan lowered his hands, the others watching him. Waiting—for his orders. Even Aedion.

Elide started as realization slapped her. As she searched for proof but found

none.

“We continue readying for battle,” Rowan said hoarsely. He looked to Lorcan, then Fenrys and Gavriel, and his entire countenance changed, his shoulders pushing back, his eyes turning hard and calculating. “There’s not a chance in hell Maeve doesn’t know you’re here. She’ll wield the blood oath when it’ll hurt us the most.”

Maeve. Some small part of her wished to see the queen who could command Lorcan’s relentless focus and affection for so many centuries. And perhaps give Maeve a piece of her mind.

Fenrys put a hand on the hilt of his sword and said with more quiet than Elide had witnessed so far, “I don’t know how to play this one.”

Indeed, Gavriel seemed at a loss, scanning his tattooed hands as if the answer lay there.

It was Lorcan who said, “If you’re spotted fighting on this side, it’s over. She’ll either kill you both or make you regret it in other ways.”

“And what about *you*?” Fenrys challenged.

Lorcan’s eyes slid to hers, then back to the males before them. “It was over for me months ago. It’s now a matter of waiting to see what she’ll do about it.”

If she’d kill him. Or drag him back in chains.

Elide’s stomach turned, and she avoided the urge to grab his hand, to beg him to run.

“She’ll see that we’ve worked our way around her order to kill you,” Gavriel at last said. “If fighting on this side of the line doesn’t damn us enough, then that surely will. It likely already has.”

“Dawn’s still half an hour off, if you two want to try again,” Lorcan crooned.

Elide tensed. But it was Fenrys who said, “It’s all a ploy.” Elide held her breath as he surveyed the Fae males—his companions. “To fracture us when Maeve knows that unified, we could present a considerable threat.”

“We’d never turn on her,” Gavriel countered.

“No,” Fenrys agreed. “But we would offer that strength to another.” And he looked at Rowan as he said, “When we got your call for aid this spring—when you asked us to come defend Mistward, we left before Maeve could get wind of it. We ran.”

“That’s enough,” Lorcan growled.

But Fenrys went on, holding Rowan’s steady gaze, “When we returned, Maeve whipped us within an inch of our lives. Tied Lorcan to the posts for two days and let Cairn whip him whenever he wished. Lorcan ordered us not to tell

you—for whatever reason. But I think Maeve saw what we did together in Mistward and realized how dangerous we could be—to *her*.”

Rowan didn't hide the devastation in his eyes as he faced Lorcan—devastation that Elide felt echo in her own heart. Lorcan had endured that ... and still remained loyal to Maeve. Elide brushed her fingers against his. The motion didn't go unnoticed by the others, but they wisely kept quiet about it. Especially as Lorcan dragged his thumb down the back of her hand in answer.

And Elide wondered if Rowan also understood that Lorcan hadn't ordered their silence for strategy, but perhaps to spare the prince from guilt. From wanting to retaliate against Maeve in a way that would surely harm him.

“Did you know,” Rowan said hoarsely to Lorcan, “that she'd punish you before you came to Mistward?”

Lorcan held the prince's stare. “We all knew what the cost would be.”

Rowan's throat bobbed, and he took a long breath, his eyes darting toward the stairs, as if Aelin would come prowling out, salvation in hand. But she didn't, and Elide prayed that wherever the queen now was, she was gleaning what they so desperately needed to learn. Rowan said to his companions, “You know how this battle will likely end. Even if our armada teemed with Fae soldiers, we'd still have the odds stacked against us.”

The sky began to bleed with pink and purple as the sun stirred beneath the distant waves.

Gavriel only said, “We have had the odds stacked against us before.” A glance at Fenrys, who nodded gravely. “We will stay until we are commanded otherwise.”

It was to Aedion that Gavriel looked as he said this last piece. There was something in the general's Ashryver eyes that looked almost like gratitude.

Elide sensed Lorcan's attention and found him still watching her as he said to Rowan, “Elide gets to shore, under a guard of whatever men you can spare. My sword is yours only if you do that.”

Elide started. But Rowan said, “Done.”



Rowan spread them across the fleet, each given command of a few ships. He stationed Fenrys, Lorcan, and Gavriel on ships toward the center and back, farthest away from Maeve's notice. He and Aedion took the front lines, with Dorian and Ansel commanding the line of ships behind his.

Lysandra was already beneath the waves in sea dragon form, ready for his order to do damage to hull and prow and rudder on ships he'd marked for her. He'd bet that while the Fae ships might have shields around them, they wouldn't waste valuable reservoirs of power on shielding below the surface. Lysandra would strike quick and hard—gone before they could realize who and what wrecked them from below.

Dawn broke, clear and bright, staining the sails with gold.

Rowan did not let himself think of Aelin—of wherever she might be.

Minute after minute passed, and still Aelin did not return.

A small oak rowboat slid out from Maeve's fleet and headed for him.

There were only three people on it—none of them Maeve.

He could feel thousands of eyes on either side of that too-narrow band of empty water between their armadas, watching that boat approach. Watching *him*.

A male in Maeve's livery stood with preternatural Fae balance as the oarsmen held the boat steady. "Her Majesty awaits your reply."

Rowan tunneled into his depleted reserve of power, keeping his face bland. "Inform Maeve that Aelin Galathynius is no longer present to give a reply."

A blink from the male was all the shock he'd let show. Maeve's creatures were too well trained, too aware of the punishment for revealing her secrets.

"Princess Aelin Galathynius is ordered to surrender," the male said.

"*Queen* Aelin Galathynius is not on this ship or any other in this fleet. She is, in fact, not on the shore, or in any nearby lands. So Maeve will find she came a long way for nothing. We will leave your armada in peace, if you will grant us the same courtesy."

The male sneered up at him. "Spoken like cowards who know they're outnumbered. Spoken like a traitor."

Rowan gave the male a small smile. "Let's see what Maeve has to say now."

The male spat into the water. But the ship rowed back into the embrace of the armada.

For a moment, Rowan recalled his last words to Dorian before he'd sent the king to shield his own line of ships.

They were beyond apologies. Aelin would either return or—he didn't let himself consider the alternative. But they could buy her as much time as possible. Try to fight their way out—for her, and the future of this armada.

Dorian's face had revealed the same thoughts as he clasped hands with him and said quietly, "It is not such a hard thing, is it—to die for your friends."

Rowan didn't bother insisting they were going to live through this. The king

had been tutored in warfare, even if he hadn't yet practiced it. So Rowan had given him a grim smile and replied, "No, it is not."

The words echoed through him again as that messenger's boat disappeared. And for whatever good it would do, whatever time it would buy them, Rowan reinforced his shields again.

The sun had fully risen over the horizon when Maeve's reply came.

Not a messenger in a longboat.

But a barrage of arrows, so many that they blotted out the light as they arced across the sky.

"*Shield,*" Rowan bellowed, not only at the magic-wielders, but also at the armed men who raised their dented and battered shields above them as arrows rained across the line.

The arrows struck, and his magic buckled under their onslaught. Their tips had been wrapped in magic of their own, and Rowan gritted his teeth against it. On other ships, where the shield was stretched thin, some men screamed.

Maeve's armada began crawling toward them.

Chaol and Yrene galloped back to Antica at dawn.

They left a note for Hasar, claiming that Yrene had a gravely ill patient who needed to be checked on, and raced across the dunes under the rising sun.

Neither of them had slept much, but if what they'd guessed about the healers was true, they did not risk lingering.

Chaol's back ached thanks to yesterday's ride and last night's ... other ride. Multiple rides. And by the time the minarets and white walls of Antica appeared, he was hissing through his teeth.

Yrene frowned at him the entire painful trek through the packed streets to the palace. They hadn't discussed sleeping arrangements, but he didn't care if he had to walk up every single one of the stairs of the Torre. Either her bed or his. The thought of leaving her, even for a heartbeat—

Chaol winced as he climbed off Farasha, the black mare suspiciously well behaved, and accepted the cane the nearest stable hand had retrieved from Yrene's mare.

He managed a few steps toward her, his limp deep and splintering, but Yrene held out a warning hand. "Do *not* think about attempting to lift me off this horse, or carry me, or *anything*."

He gave her a wry look, but obeyed. "*Anything?*"

She turned a beautiful shade of scarlet as she slid off the mare, passing the reins to the waiting stable hand. The man sagged with relief, utterly grateful to

not have the task of handling the impetuous Farasha, who was currently sizing up the poor man attempting to drag her toward the stables as if she'd have him for lunch. Hellas's horse indeed.

"Yes, *anything*," Yrene said, fluffing out her wrinkled clothes. "It's likely because of *anything* that you're limping worse than before."

Chaol let her fall into step beside him, and balanced on his cane long enough to press a kiss to her temple. He didn't care who saw. Who reported on it. They could all go to hell. But behind them, he could have sworn Shen and the other guards were grinning from ear to ear.

Chaol winked at her. "Then you'd better heal me, Yrene Towers, because I plan to do a great deal of *anything* with you tonight."

She flushed even deeper, but angled her chin upward, prim and proper. "Let's focus on these scrolls first, you rogue."

Chaol grinned, broad and unrestrained, and felt it in every inch of his aching body as they strode back inside the palace.



Any joy was short-lived.

Chaol picked up on the humming threads of something amiss the moment they entered their quiet wing. The moment he saw the guards murmuring, the servants scurrying about. Yrene only shared a glance with him, and they hurried along as fast as he could manage. Strands of fire shot along his back, down his thighs, but if something had happened—

The doors to his suite were ajar, with two guards posted outside, who gave him looks full of pity and dread. His stomach turned.

Nesryn. If she had come back, if something had happened with that Valg hunting them—

He stormed into the suite, his protesting body going distant, his head full of roaring silence.

Nesryn's door was open.

But no body lay sprawled on the bed. No blood stained the carpet, or splattered the walls.

His room was the same. But both bedrooms ... Trashed.

Shredded, as if some great wind had shattered the windows and torn through the space.

The sitting room was worse. Their usual gold couch—gutted. The pictures, the art overturned or cracked or slashed.

The desk had been looted, the carpets flipped over—

Kadja was kneeling in the corner, gathering pieces of a broken vase.

“Be careful,” Yrene hissed, striding to the girl as she plucked up pieces with her bare hands. “Get a broom and dustpan rather than use your own hands.”

“Who did this,” Chaol asked quietly.

Fear glimmered in Kadja's eyes as she rose. “It was like this when I came in this morning.”

Yrene demanded, “You didn't hear anything at all?”

The sharp doubt in those words made him tense. Yrene hadn't trusted the servant girl for an instant, making up tasks that would keep her away, but for Kadja to *do* this—

“With you gone, my lord, I ... I took the night to visit my parents.”

He tried not to cringe. A family. She had family here, and he'd never bothered to ask—

“And can your parents swear to the fact that you were with them all night?”

Chaol whirled. “Yrene.”

Yrene didn't so much as glance at him as she studied Kadja. The servant girl withered under that fierce stare. “But I suppose leaving the door unlocked for someone would have been smarter.”

Kadja cringed, shoulders curving inward.

“Yrene—this could have been from anything. Anyone.”

“Yes, anyone. Especially someone who was looking for something.”

The words clicked at the same moment the disarray of the room did.

Chaol faced the servant girl. “Don’t clean any more of the mess. Everything in here might offer some proof of who did this.” He frowned. “How much did you manage to clean already?”

From the state of the room, not much.

“I only just started. I thought you wouldn’t return until tonight, so I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.” At her cringe, he added, “Go to your parents. Take the day off, Kadja. I’m glad you weren’t here when this happened.”

Yrene gave him a frown that said the girl might very well have been the cause of this, but kept her mouth shut. Within a minute, Kadja had left, closing the hall doors with a quiet click.

Yrene ran her hands over her face. “They took everything. *Everything.*”

“Did they?” He limped to the desk, peering into the drawers as he braced a hand on the surface. His back ached and writhed—

Yrene stormed to the gold couch, lifting the ruined cushions. “All those books, the scrolls ...”

“It was common knowledge that we’d be gone.” He leaned fully against the desk, nearly sighing at the weight it took off his back.

Yrene carved a path through the room, inspecting all the places she’d ferreted away those books and scrolls. “They took it all. Even *The Song of Beginning.*”

“What about the bedroom?”

She vanished instantly. Chaol rubbed at his back, hissing softly. More rustling, then, “Ha!”

She emerged again, waving one of his boots in the air. “At least they didn’t find this.”

That first scroll. He rallied a smile to his mouth. “At least there’s that.”

Yrene held his boot to her chest as if it were a babe. “They’re getting desperate. That makes people dangerous. We shouldn’t stay here.”

He surveyed the damage. “You’re right.”

“Then we’ll go directly to the Torre.”

He glanced through the open doors to the foyer. To Nesryn’s bedroom.

She was due back soon. And when she did return, to find him gone, with Yrene ... He’d treated her abominably. He’d let himself forget what he’d promised, what he’d implied, in Rifthold. On the ship here. And Nesryn might not hold him to any promises, but he’d broken too many of them.

“What is it?” Yrene’s question was barely more than a whisper.

Chaol closed his eyes. He was a bastard. He’d dragged Nesryn here, and this was how he’d treated her. While she was off hunting for answers, risking her life, while she sought some shred of hope for raising an army ... He’d send that message—immediately. To return as fast as she could.

“It’s nothing,” Chaol said at last. “Perhaps you should stay at the Torre tonight. There are enough guards there to make anyone think twice.” He added when hurt flickered in her eyes, “I can’t appear to be running away. Especially with the royals now starting to think I might be someone of interest. That Aelin continues to be such a source of worry and intrigue ... perhaps I should use that to my advantage.” He fiddled with the cane, tossing it from one hand to another. “But I should stay here. And you, Yrene, you should go.”

She opened her mouth to object, but paused, straightening. A steely glint entered her eyes. “I’ll take Hafiza the scroll myself, then.”

He hated the edge to her voice as he nodded, the dimming of those eyes. He’d done wrong by her, too. In not first ending things with Nesryn, to make it clear. He’d made a mess of it.

A fool. He’d been a fool to think he could rise above this. Move beyond the person he’d been, the mistakes he’d made.

A fool.

Yrene stormed up the Torre steps, careful not to crush the scroll in her fist.

The trashing of his room had rattled him. Rattled her, too, but ...

It wasn't fear of harm or death. Something else had shaken him.

In her other hand, she clutched the locket, the metal warm against her skin.

Someone knew they were close to discovering whatever it was they wanted to keep secret. Or at the very least *suspected* they might learn something and had destroyed any possible sources. And after what they'd started to piece together in the ruins amid Aksara ...

Yrene checked her temper as she reached the top landing of the Torre, the heat smothering.

Hafiza was in her private workshop, tutting to herself over a tonic that rippled with thick smoke. "Ah, Yrene," she said without looking up while she measured in a drop of some liquid. Vials and basins and bowls covered the desk, scattered between the open books and a set of bronze hourglasses of various time measurements. "How was your party?"

Revelatory. "Lovely."

"I assume the young lord finally handed over his heart."

Yrene coughed.

Hafiza smiled as she lifted her head at last. "Oh, I knew."

"We are not—that is to say, there is nothing official—"

"That locket suggests otherwise."

Yrene clapped a hand over it, cheeks heating. “He is not—he is a *lord*.”

At Hafiza’s raised brows, Yrene’s temper whetted itself. Who else knew? Who else had seen and commented and betted?

“He is a Lord of Adarlan,” she clarified.

“So?”

“*Adarlan*.”

“I thought you had moved past that.”

Perhaps she had. Perhaps she hadn’t. “It is nothing to be concerned about.”

A knowing smile. “Good.”

Yrene took a long breath through her nose.

“But, unfortunately, you are not here to give me all the juicy details.”

“Och.” Yrene grimaced. “No.”

Hafiza measured another few drops into her tonic, the substance within roiling. She plucked up her ten-minute hourglass and turned it over, bone-white sand trickling into the ancient base. A proclamation of a meeting begun even before Hafiza said, “I assume it has something to do with that scroll in your hand?”

Yrene looked to the open hall, then rushed to shut the door. Then the open windows.

By the time she’d finished, Hafiza had set down the tonic, her face unusually grave.

Yrene explained the ransacking of their room. The books and scrolls taken. The ruins at the oasis and their wild theory that perhaps the healers had not just arisen here, but had been *planted* here, in secret. Against the Valg and their kings.

And for the first time since Yrene had known her, the ancient woman’s brown face seemed to go a bit colorless. Her clear dark eyes turned wide.

“You are certain—that these are the forces amassing on your continent?” Hafiza settled herself into the small chair behind the worktable.

“Yes. Lord Westfall has seen them himself. Battled them. It is why he came. Not to raise an army against mere men loyal to Adarlan’s empire, but an army to fight demons who wear the bodies of men, demons who breed monsters. So vast and terrible that even the full might of Aelin Galathynius and Dorian Havilliard is not enough.”

Hafiza shook her head, her nimbus of white hair flowing. “And now you two believe that the healers have some role to play?”

Yrene paced. “Perhaps. We were relentlessly hunted down on our own continent, and I know it doesn’t sound like anything to go on, but if a settlement of healing-inclined Fae did start a civilization here long ago ... *Why?* Why leave Doranelle, why come so far, and leave so few traces, yet ensure that the healing legacy survived?”

“That is why you have come—and brought this scroll.”

Yrene placed the scroll before the Healer on High. “Since Nousha only knew vague legends and didn’t know how to read the language written here, I thought you might actually have the truth. Or tell me what this scroll might be about.”

Hafiza carefully unfurled the scroll, weighing its corners with various vials. Dark, strange letters had been inked there. The Healer on High traced a wrinkled finger over a few of them. “I do not know how to read such a language.” She ran her hand over the parchment again.

Yrene’s shoulders sagged.

“But it reminds me ...” Hafiza scanned the bookshelves in her workshop, some of them sealed behind glass. She rose, hobbling to a locked case in the shadowy corner of the room. The doors there were not glass at all—but metal. Iron.

She withdrew a key from around her neck and opened it. Beckoned Yrene over.

Half stumbling through the room in her haste, Yrene reached Hafiza’s side. On a few of the spines of the tomes, near-rotting with age ... “Wyrdmarks,”

Yrene murmured.

“I was told these were not books for human eyes—that it was knowledge best kept locked away and forgotten, lest it find its way into the world.”

“Why?”

Hafiza shrugged, studying but not touching the ancient texts shelved before them. “That was all my predecessor told me: *They are not meant for human eyes.* Oh, once or twice, I’ve been drunk enough to debate opening up the books, but every time I take out this key ...” She toyed with the long necklace, the key of blackest iron hanging from it. A match to the cabinet. “I reconsider.”

Hafiza weighed the key in her palm. “I do not know how to read these books, nor what this language is, but if those scrolls and books were in the library itself, then the fact that *these* have been locked up here ... Perhaps this is the sort of information worth killing for.”

Ice skittered down her spine. “Chaol—Lord Westfall knows someone who can read these markings.” Aelin Galathynius, he’d told her. “Perhaps we should bring them to her. The scroll, and these few books.”

Hafiza’s mouth tightened as she closed the iron doors to the cabinet and locked it with a heavy click. “I shall have to think on it, Yrene. The risks. Whether these books should leave.”

Yrene nodded. “Yes, of course. But I fear we may not have much time.”

Hafiza slid the iron key back under her robes and returned to the worktable, Yrene trailing her. “I do know a little of the history,” Hafiza admitted. “I thought it myth, but ... my predecessor told me, when I first came. During the Winter Moon festival. She was drunk, because I’d plied her with alcohol to get her to reveal her secrets. But instead, she gave me a rambling history lesson.” Hafiza snorted, shaking her head. “I never forgot it, mostly because I was so disappointed that three bottles of expensive wine—purchased with all the money I had—got me so little.”

Yrene leaned against the ancient worktable as Hafiza sat and interlaced her

fingers in her lap. “She told me that long ago, before man stumbled here, before the horse-lords and the ruks above the steppes, this land indeed belonged to Fae. A small, pretty little kingdom, its capital here. Antica was built atop its ruins. But they erected temples to their gods beyond the city walls—out in the mountains, in the river-lands, in the dunes.”

“Like the necropolis at Aksara.”

“Yes. And she told me that they did not burn their bodies, but entombed them within sarcophagi so thick no hammer or device could open them. Sealed with spells and clever locks. Never to be opened.”

“Why?”

“The drunk goat told me that it was because they lived in fear of someone getting *in*. To take their bodies.”

Yrene was glad she was leaning on the table. “The way the Valg now use humans for possession.”

A nod. “She rambled about how they had left their knowledge of healing for us to find. That they had stolen it from elsewhere, and that their teachings formed the basis of the Torre. That Kamala herself had been trained in their arts, their records discovered in tombs and catacombs long since lost to us. She founded the Torre based off what she and her small order learned. Worshipped Silba because she was their healing god, too.” Hafiza gestured to the owls carved throughout her workroom, the Torre itself, and rubbed at her temple. “So your theory could hold water. I never learned how the Fae came here, where they went and why they faded away. But they were here, and according to my predecessor, they left some sort of knowledge or power behind.” A frown toward that locked bookcase.

“That someone is now trying to erase.” Yrene swallowed. “Nousha will kill me when she hears those books and scrolls were taken.”

“Oh, she might very well. But she’ll likely go on the hunt for whoever did it first.”

“What does any of it *mean*, though? Why go to so much trouble?”

Hafiza strode back to her tonic, the hourglass nearly empty. “Perhaps that is for you to learn.” She added a few more drops of liquid to her tonic, grabbed the one-minute glass, and flipped it over. “I shall consider the books, Yrene.”



Yrene returned to her room, flung open the window to let in the breeze to the stifling chamber, and sat on her bed for all of a minute before she was walking again.

She’d left the scroll with Hafiza, figuring the locked bookcase was safer than anywhere else, but it was not scrolls or ancient books that filled her head as she turned left and headed downstairs.

Progress. They had made progress on Chaol’s injury, significantly so, and returned to find their room trashed.

His room—not theirs. He’d made that clear enough earlier.

Yrene’s steps were unfaltering, even as her legs ached from nearly two days’ worth of riding. There had to be some connection—his progress, these attacks.

She’d never get any thinking done up in her quiet, stuffy room. Or in the library, not when she’d be jumping at every footstep or meow from a curious Baast Cat.

But there was one place, quiet and safe. One place where she might work through the tangled threads that had brought them here.



The Womb was empty.

After Yrene had washed and changed into the pale, thin lavender robe, she’d padded into the steam-filled chamber, unable to help looking toward that tub by the far wall. Toward where that healer had cried mere hours before her death.

Yrene scrubbed her hands over her face, taking a steadying breath.

The tubs on either side beckoned, the bubbling waters inviting, promising to soothe her aching limbs. But Yrene remained in the center of the chamber, amid all those faintly ringing bells, and stared up into the darkness high above.

From a stalactite too far in the gloom to see, a droplet of water fell—landing on her brow. Yrene closed her eyes at the cool, hard splash, but made no move to wipe away the water.

The bells sang and murmured, the voices of their long-dead sisters. She wondered if that healer who had died ... If her voice was now singing here.

Yrene peered up at the nearest string of bells hung across the chamber, various sizes and makes. Her own bell ...

On bare, silent feet, Yrene padded to the little stalagmite jutting from the floor near the wall, to the chain sagging between it and another pillar a few feet away. Seven other bells hung from it, but Yrene needed no reminder of which was hers.

Yrene smiled at the small silver bell, purchased with that stranger's gold. There was her name, etched into the side—maybe by the same jeweler Chaol had found for the amulet hanging from her neck. Even in here, she had not wanted to part with it.

Gently, she brushed her finger over the bell, over her name and the date she'd entered the Torre.

A faint, sweet ringing leaped away in the wake of her touch. It echoed off the rock walls, off the other bells. Setting some of them ringing, as if in answer.

Around and around the sound of her bell danced, and Yrene turned in place, as if she could follow it. And when it faded ...

Yrene flicked her bell again. A louder, clearer sound.

The ringing flitted through the room, and she watched it, tracked it.

It faded once more. But not before her power flickered in answer.

With hands that did not entirely belong to her, Yrene rang her bell a third time.

And as its singing filled the room, Yrene began to walk.

Everywhere its ringing went, Yrene followed.

Her bare feet slapping against the damp stone, she tracked the sound's path through the Womb, as if it were a rabbit racing ahead of her.

Around the stalagmites rising from the floor. Ducking under the stalactites drooping from above. Crossing the room; slithering down the walls; setting the candles guttering. On and on, she tracked that sound.

Past the bells of generations of healers, all singing in its wake.

Yrene streamed her fingers along them, too.

A wave of sound answered.

You must enter where you fear to tread.

Yrene walked on, the bells ringing, ringing, ringing. Still she followed the sound of her own bell, that sweet, clear song beckoning onward. Pulling her.

That darkness still dwelled in him; in his wound. They had beaten it so far back, yet it remained. Yesterday, he'd told her things that broke her heart, but not the entire story.

But if the key to defeating that shred of Valg blackness did not lie in facing the memories alone, if blind blasts of her magic did nothing ...

Yrene followed the silver bell's ringing to where it halted:

An ancient corner of the room, the chains rusted with age, some of the bells green from oxidation.

Here, the sound of her bell went silent.

No, not silent. But waiting. Humming against the corner of stone.

There was a small bell, hanging just by the end of the chain. So oxidized that the writing was nearly impossible to read.

But Yrene read the name there.

Yafa Towers

She did not feel the hard bite of stone as she fell to her knees. As she read that name, the date—the date from two hundred years ago.

A Towers woman. A Towers healer. Here—with her. A Towers woman had been singing in this room during the years Yrene had dwelled here. Even now, even so far from home, she had never once been alone.

Yafa. Yrene mouthed the name, a hand on her heart.

Enter where you fear to tread ...

Yrene peered up into the darkness of the Womb overhead.

Feeding. The Valg's power had been feeding off him ...

Yes, the darkness above seemed to say. Not a drip sounded; not a bell chimed.

Yrene gazed down at her hands, lying limp at her sides. Summoned forth the faint white glow of her power. Let it fill the room, echo off the rock in silent song. Echo off those bells, the voices of thousands of her sisters, the Towers voice before her.

Enter where you fear to tread ...

Not the void lurking within him. But the void within herself.

The one that had started the day those soldiers had gathered around her cottage, had hauled her out by her hair into the bright grasses.

Had Yafa known, here in this chamber so far beneath the earth, what happened that day across the sea? Had she watched the past two months and sent up her ancient, rusted song in silent urging?

They weren't bad men, Yrene.

No, they were not. The men he'd commanded, trained with, who had worn the same uniform, bowed to the same king as the soldiers who had come that day ...

They were not bad men. People existed in Adarlan worth saving—worth fighting for. They were not her enemy, had never been. Perhaps she'd known that long before he'd revealed it in the oasis yesterday. Perhaps she had not wanted to.

But the thing that remained inside him, that shred of the demon who had ordered it all ...

I know what you are, Yrene said silently.

For it was the same thing that had dwelled inside her these years, taking from her, even as it sustained her. A different creature, but still one and the same.

Yrene spooled her magic back inside herself, the glow fading. She smiled up at the sweet darkness above. *I understand now.*

Another drop of water kissed her brow in answer.

Smiling, Yrene reached out a hand to her ancestor's bell. And rang it.

Aelin had a body that was not a body.

She knew only because in this void, this foggy twilight, Manon had a body. A nearly transparent, wraithlike body, but ... a form nonetheless.

Manon's teeth and nails glinted in the dim light as she surveyed the swirling gray mists. "What is this place?" The mirror had transported them to ... wherever this was.

"Your guess is as good as mine, witch."

Had time stopped beyond the mists? Had Maeve held her fire upon learning she was not present—or attacked anyway? Aelin had no doubt Rowan would hold the lines for as long as possible. Had no doubt he and Aedion would lead them. But ...

Whether the witch mirror was the Lock she'd sought, she'd expected it to have *some* immediate reaction to the two Wyrdkeys she'd snuck into her jacket.

Not ... this. Not absolutely *nothing*.

Aelin drew Goldryn. In the mist, the sword's ruby flickered—the only color, only light.

Manon said, "We stick close; we only speak when necessary."

Aelin was inclined to agree. There was solid ground beneath them, but the mist hid her feet—hid any inkling that they stood on dirt beyond a faint, crumbling scraping.

"Any guess which way?" Aelin murmured. But they didn't have to decide.

The eddying fog darkened, and Manon and Aelin stepped close together, back to back. Pure night swept around them—blinding them.

Then—a murky, dim light ahead. No, not ahead. Approaching them. Manon's bony shoulder dug into her own as they pressed tighter together, an impenetrable wall.

But the light rippled and expanded, figures within it appearing. Solidifying.

Aelin knew three things as the light and color enveloped them and became tangible:

They were not seen, or heard, or scented by those before them.

And this was the past. A thousand years ago, to be exact.

And that was Elena Galathynius on her knees in a black barren mountain pass, blood dripping from her nose, tears sliding through the dirt crusting her face to splatter on her armor, an obsidian sarcophagus somehow stationed before her.

All across the sarcophagus, Wyrdmarks simmered with pale blue fire. And in the center of it ... the Eye of Elena, the amulet held within the stone itself, its pale gold unvarnished and gleaming.

Then, as if a phantom breath blew over it, the Eye dimmed, along with the Wyrdmarks.

Elena reached with a trembling hand to twist the Eye, rotating it thrice in the black stone. The Eye clicked and tumbled into Elena's awaiting hand. Sealing the sarcophagus.

Locking it.

"You've had the Lock all along," Manon murmured. "But then the mirror ..."

"I think," Aelin breathed, "we have been deliberately misled about what we must retrieve."

"Why?" Manon said with equal quiet.

"I suppose we're about to find out."

A memory—that's what this was. But what was so vital that they had been sent to retrieve it when the whole damn world was falling apart around them?

Aelin and Manon stood in silence as the scene unfolded. As the truth, at last the truth, now wove together.

Dawn at the Obsidian Passes

The Lock had crafted the sarcophagus from the mountain itself.

It had taken every ember of its power to bind Erawan within the stone, to seal him inside.

She could feel the Dark King sleeping within. Hear the shrieks of his fell army feasting on human flesh in the valley far below. How long would they continue fighting when word spread that Erawan had fallen?

She wasn't foolish enough to hope her companions had survived the slaughter. Not this long.

On her knees in the sharp black rock, Elena gazed at the obsidian sarcophagus, the symbols carved into it. They initially had been glowing, but had now faded and cooled, settled into place. When she had stolen the Lock from her father all those months ago, she had not known—had not understood—the truth depth of its power. Still did not know why he had forged it. Only that once, just once, could the Lock's power be wielded. And that power ... oh, that mighty, shattering power ... it had saved them all.

Gavin, sprawled and bloody behind her, stirred. His face was so mangled she could barely see the handsome, fierce features beneath. His left arm was useless at his side. The price of distracting Erawan while she'd unleashed the Lock's power. But even Gavin had not known what she'd been planning. What she'd stolen and harbored all these months.

She did not regret it. Not when it had spared him from death. Worse.

Gavin took in the sarcophagus, the empty, intricate amulet of the Lock in her palm as it rested on her thigh. He recognized it instantly, having seen it around her father's neck during those initial weeks in Orynth. The blue stone in its center was now drained, dim where it had once flickered with inner fire. Barely a drop of its power left, if that.

“What have you done?” His voice was a broken rasp from screaming during Erawan's ministrations. To buy her time, to save their people—

Elena folded her fingers into a fist around the Lock. “He is sealed. He cannot escape.”

“Your father’s Lock—”

“It is done,” she said, shifting her attention to the dozen ancient, immortal figures now on the other side of the sarcophagus.

Gavin started, hissing at his broken body with the sudden movement.

They had no forms. They were only figments of light and shadow, wind and rain, song and memory. Each individual, and yet a part of one majority, one consciousness.

They were all gazing at the broken Lock in her hands, its stone dull.

Gavin lowered his brow to the blood-soaked rock and averted his eyes.

Elena’s very bones quailed in their presence, but she kept her chin high.

“Our sister’s bloodline has betrayed us,” said one that was of sea and sky and storms.

Elena shook her head, trying to swallow. Failing. “I *saved* us. I stopped Erawan—”

“Fool,” said the one of many shifting voices, both animal and human. “Half-breed *fool*. Did you not consider why your father carried it, why he bided his time all these years, gathering his strength? He was to wield it—to seal the three Wyrdkeys back into the gate, and send us *home* before he shut the gate forever. Us, and the Dark King. The Lock was forged for us—*promised* to us. And you *wasted* it.”

Elena braced a hand on the earth to keep from swaying. “My father bears the Wyrdkeys?” He had never so much as *hinted* ... And the Lock ... she had thought it a mere weapon. A weapon he had *refused* to wield in this bloody war.

They did not answer, their silence confirmation enough.

A small, broken noise came out of her throat. Elena breathed, “I’m sorry.”

Their rage rattled her bones, threatened to stop her heart dead in her chest. The one of flame and light and ashes seemed to withhold, seemed to pause in her wrath.

To remember.

She had not seen or spoken to her mother since she had left her body to forge the Lock. Since Rhiannon Crochan had helped Mala cast her very essence into it, the mass of its power contained within the small witch mirror disguised as a blue stone, to be unleashed only once. They had never told Elena why. Never said it was anything more than a weapon that her father would one day desperately need to wield.

The cost: her mother's mortal body, the life she had wanted for herself with Brannon and their children. It had been ten years since then. Ten years, her father had never stopped waiting for Mala to return, hoping he'd see her again. Just once.

I will not remember you, Mala had said to them all before she had given herself to the Lock's forging. And yet there she was. Pausing. As if she remembered.

"Mother," Elena whispered, a broken plea.

Mala Light-Bringer looked away from her.

The one who saw all with wise, calm eyes said, "Unleash him. So we have been betrayed by these earth beasts, let us return the favor. Unleash the Dark King from his coffin."

"No," Elena pleaded, rising from her knees. "Please—*please*. Tell me what I must do to atone, but *please* do not unleash him. I beg you."

"He will rise again one day," said the one of darkness and death. "He will awaken. You have wasted *our* Lock on a fool's errand, when you could have solved all, had you only the patience and wits to understand."

"Then let him awaken," Elena begged, her voice breaking. "Let someone else inherit this war—someone better prepared."

"Coward," said the one with a voice of steel and shields and arrows. "Coward to shove the burden to another."

"Please," Elena said. "I will give you anything. *Anything*. But not that."

As one, they looked to Gavin.

No—

But it was her mother who said, "We have waited this long to return home. We may wait a little longer. Watch over this ... place a little longer."

Not just gods, but beings of a higher, different existence. For whom time was fluid, and bodies were things to be shifted and molded. Who could exist in multiple places, spread themselves wide like nets being thrown. They were as mighty and vast and eternal as a human was to a mayfly.

They had not been born in this world. Perhaps had become trapped here after wandering through a Wyrddate. And they had struck some bargain with her father, with Mala, to at last send them home, banishing Erawan with them. And she had ruined it.

The one with three faces said, "We will wait. But there must be a price. And a promise."

"Name it," Elena said. If they took Gavin, she'd follow. She was not the heir

to her father's throne. It did not matter if she walked out of this mountain pass. She wasn't entirely certain she could bear to see him again, not after her arrogance and pride and self-righteousness. Brannon had begged her to listen, to wait. She had instead stolen the Lock from him and run with Gavin into the night, desperate to save these lands.

The one with three faces studied her. "Mala's bloodline shall bleed again to forge the Lock anew. And *you* will lead them, a lamb to slaughter, to pay the price of this choice *you* made to waste its power here, for this petty battle. *You* will show this future scion how to forge a new Lock with Mala's gifts, how to then use it to wield the keys and send us home. Our original bargain still holds: we will take the Dark King with us. Tear him apart in our own world, where he will be but dust and memory. When we are gone—you will show this scion how to seal the gate behind us, the Lock holding it intact eternally. By yielding every last drop of their life force. As your father was prepared to do when the time was right."

"Please," Elena breathed.

The three-faced one said, "Tell Brannon of the Wildfire what occurred here; tell him the price his bloodline shall one day pay. Tell him to ready for it."

She let the words, the damnation, sink in. "I will," she whispered.

But they were gone. There was only a lingering warmth, as if a beam of sunlight had brushed her cheek.

Gavin lifted his head. "What have you done?" he asked again. "What have you given them?"

"Did you not—not hear it?"

"Only you," he rasped, his face so horribly pale. "No others."

She stared at the sarcophagus before them, its black stone rooted to the earth of the pass. Immovable. They would have to build something around it, to hide it, protect it.

Elena said, "The price will be paid—later."

"Tell me." His swollen, split lips could barely form the words.

Since she had already damned herself, damned her bloodline, she figured there was nothing left to lose in lying. Not this one time, this last time. "Erawan will awaken again—one day. When the time comes, I will help those who must fight him."

His eyes were wary.

"Can you walk?" she asked, extending a hand to help him rise. The rising sun cast the black mountains in gold and red. She had no doubt the valley behind

was bathed in the latter.

Gavin released his grip, the fingers still broken, from where it had rested on Damaris's hilt. But he did not take her offered hand.

And he did not tell her what he'd detected while he touched the Sword of Truth, what lies he'd sensed and unraveled.

They never spoke of them again.



Moonrise at the Temple of Sandrian, the Stone Marshes

The Princess of Eyllwe had been wandering the Stone Marshes for weeks, searching for answers to riddles posed a thousand years ago. Answers that might save her doomed kingdom.

Keys and gates and locks—portals and pits and prophecies. That was what the princess murmured to herself in the weeks she'd been stalking through the marshes alone, hunting to keep herself alive, fighting the beasts of teeth and venom when necessary, reading the stars for entertainment.

So when the princess at last reached the temple, when she stood before the stone altar and the chest that was the light twin to the dark one beneath Morath, *she* at last appeared.

“You are Nehemia,” she said.

The princess whirled, her hunting leathers stained and damp, the gold tips on her braided hair clinking.

An assessing look with eyes that were too old for barely eighteen; eyes that had stared long into the darkness between the stars and yearned to know its secrets. “And you are Elena.”

Elena nodded. “Why have you come?”

The Princess of Eyllwe jerked her elegant chin toward the stone chest. “Am I not called to open it? To learn how to save us, and to pay the price?”

“No,” Elena said quietly. “Not you. Not in this way.”

A tightening of her lips was the only sign of the princess's displeasure. “Then in what way, Lady, am I required to bleed?”

She had been watching, and waiting, and paying for her choices for so long. Too long.

And now that darkness had fallen ... now a new sun would rise. *Must* rise.

“It is Mala's bloodline that will pay, not your own.”

Her back stiffened. “You have not answered my question.”

Elena wished she could hold back the words, keep them locked up. But this was the price, for her kingdom, her people. The price for these people, this kingdom. And others.

“In the North, two branches flow from Mala. One to the Havilliard House, where its prince with my mate’s eyes possesses my raw magic—and her brute power. The other branch flows through the Galathynius House, where it bred true: flame and embers and ashes.”

“Aelin Galathynius is dead,” Nehemia said.

“Not dead.” No, she’d ensured that, still paying for what she’d done that wintry night. “Just hiding, forgotten by a world grateful to see such a power extinguished before it matured.”

“Where is she? And how does this tie to me, Lady?”

“You are versed in the history, in the players and the stakes. You know the Wyrdblocks and how to wield them. You misread the riddles, thinking it was you who must come here, to this place. This mirror is not the Lock—it is a pool of memory. Forged by myself, my father, and Rhiannon Crochan. Forged so the heir of this burden might understand one day. Know everything before deciding. This encounter, too, shall be held in it. But you were called, so we might meet.”

That wise, young face waited.

“Go north, Princess,” Elena said. “Go into your enemy’s household. Make the contacts, get the invitation, do what you must, but get to your enemy’s house. The two bloodlines will converge there. Already, they are on their way.”

“Aelin Galathynius is headed to Adarlan?”

“Not Aelin. Not with that name, that crown. Know her by her eyes—turquoise with a core of gold. Know her by the mark on her brow—the bastard’s mark, the mark of Brannon. Guide her. Help her. She will need you.”

“And the price?”

Elena hated them, then.

Hated the gods who had demanded this. Hated herself. Hated that this was asked, all these bright lights ...

“You will not see Eyllwe again.”

The princess stared at the stars as if they spoke to her, as if the answer were written there. “Will my people survive?” A small, quiet voice.

“I don’t know.”

“Then I will take the steps for that, too. Unite the rebels while I am in Rifthold, ready the continent for war.”

Nehemia lowered her eyes from the stars. Elena wanted to fall to her knees before the young princess, beg her forgiveness. “One of them must be ready—to do what needs to be done,” Elena said, if only because it was the sole way to explain, to apologize.

Nehemia swallowed. “Then I shall help in whatever way I can. For Erilea. And my people.”

Chaol awoke the next morning and could barely move.

They'd repaired his room, added extra guards, and by the time the royals at last returned from the dunes at sundown, all was in order.

He didn't see Yrene for the rest of that day, and wondered if she and the Healer on High had indeed found something of worth in that scroll. But when dinner came and she still hadn't appeared, he sent Kadja to ask Shen for a report.

Shen himself had returned—blushing a bit, no doubt thanks to the beauty of the servant girl who'd led him here—and revealed that he'd made sure word was received from the Torre that Yrene had returned safely and had not left the tower since.

Still, Chaol had debated calling for Yrene when his back began to ache to the point of being unbearable, when even the cane couldn't help him hobble across the room. But the suite was not safe. And if she began to stay here, and Nesryn returned before he could explain—

He couldn't get the thought out of his mind. What he'd done, the trust he'd broken.

So he'd managed to take a bath, hoping to ease his sore muscles, and had nearly crawled into bed.

Chaol awoke at dawn, tried to reach for his cane beside the bed, and bit down his bark of pain.

Panic crashed into him, wild and sharp. He gritted his teeth, trying to fight

through it.

Toes. He could move his toes. And his ankles. And his knees—

His neck arched at the rippling agony as he shifted his knees, his thighs, his hips.

Oh, gods. He'd pushed it too far, he'd—

The door flung open, and there she was, in that purple gown.

Yrene's eyes widened, then settled—as if she'd been about to tell him something.

Instead, that mask of steady calm slid over her face while she tied her hair back in her usual half-up fashion and approached on unfaltering feet. “Can you move?”

“Yes, but the pain—” He could barely speak.

Dropping her satchel to the carpet, Yrene rolled up her sleeves. “Can you turn over?”

No. He'd tried, and—

She didn't wait for his answer. “Describe exactly what you did yesterday, from the moment I left until now.”

Chaol did. All of it, right until the bath—

Yrene swore viciously. “Ice. *Ice* to help strained muscles, *not* heat.” She blew out a breath. “I need you to roll over. It will hurt like hell, but it's best if you do it in one go—”

He didn't wait. He gritted his teeth and did it.

A scream shattered from his throat, but Yrene was instantly there, hands on his cheek, his hair, mouth against his temple. “Good,” she breathed onto his skin. “Brave man.”

He hadn't bothered with more than undershorts while sleeping, so she had little to do to prepare him as she hovered her hands over his back, tracing the air above his skin.

“It ... it crept back,” she breathed.

“I’m not surprised,” he said through his teeth. Not at all.

She lowered her hands to her sides. “Why?”

He traced a finger over the embroidered coverlet. “Just—do what you have to.”

Yrene paused at his deflection—then riffled through her bag for something. The bit. She held it in her hands, however, instead of sliding it into his mouth. “I’m going in,” she said quietly.

“All right.”

“No—I’m going in, and I’m ending this. Today. Right now.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. All that it’d entail. He dared ask, “And what if I can’t?” *Face it, endure it?*

There was no fear in Yrene’s eyes, no hesitation. “That’s not my question to answer.”

No, it never had been. Chaol watched the sunlight dance on her locket, over those mountains and seas. What she might now witness within him, how badly he’d failed, over and over—

But they had walked this far down the road. Together. She had not turned away. From any of it.

And neither would he.

His throat thick, Chaol managed to say, “You could hurt yourself if you stay too long.”

Again, no ripple of doubt or terror. “I have a theory. I want to test it.” Yrene slid the bit between his lips, and he clamped down lightly. “And you—you’re the only person I can try it on.”

It occurred to Chaol, right as she laid her hands on his bare spine, why he was the only one she could try it on. But there was nothing he could do as pain and blackness slammed into him.

No way to stop Yrene as she plunged into his body, her magic a white swarming light around them, inside them.

The Valg. His body had been tainted by their power, and Yrene—



Yrene did not hesitate.

She soared through him, down the ladder of his spine, down the corridors of his bones and blood.

She was a spear of light, fired straight into the dark, aiming for that hovering shadow that had stretched out once more. That had tried to reclaim him.

Yrene slammed into the darkness and screamed.

It roared back, and they tangled, grappling.

It was foreign and cold and hollow; it was rife with rot and wind and hate.

Yrene threw herself into it. Every last drop.

And above, as if the surface of a night-dark sea separated them, Chaol bellowed with agony.

Today. It ended today.

I know what you are.

So Yrene fought, and so the darkness raged back.

The agony tore through him, unending and depthless.

He blacked out within a minute. Leaving him to free-fall into this place. This pit.

The bottom of the descent.

The hollow hell beneath the roots of a mountain.

Here, where all was locked and buried. Here, where all had come to take root.

The empty foundation, mined and hacked apart, crumbled away into nothing but this pit.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Worthless and nothing.

He saw his father first. His mother and brother and that cold mountain keep. Saw the stairs crusted with the ice and snow, stained with blood. Saw the man he'd gladly sold himself out to, thinking it would get Aelin to safety. *Celaena* to safety.

He'd sent the woman he'd loved to the safety of another assassination. Had sent her to Wendlyn, thinking it better than Adarlan. To *kill* its royal family.

His father emerged from the dark, the mirror of the man he might have become, might one day be. Distaste and disappointment etched his father's features as he beheld him, the son that might have been.

His father's asking price ... he'd thought it a prison sentence.

But perhaps it had been a shot at freedom—at saving his useless, wayward son from the evil he likely suspected was about to be unleashed.

He had broken that promise to his father.

He hated him, and yet his father—that horrible, miserable bastard—had upheld his end of the bargain.

He ... he had not.

Oath-breaker. Traitor.

Everything he had done, Aelin had come to rip it apart. Starting with his honor.

She, with her fluidity, that murky area in which she dwelled ... He'd broken his vows for her. Broken everything he was for her.

He could see her, in the dark.

The gold hair, those turquoise eyes that had been the last clue, the final piece of the puzzle.

Liar. Murderer. Thief.

She basked in the sun atop a chaise longue on the balcony of that suite she'd occupied in the palace, a book in her lap. Tilting her head to the side, she looked him over with that lazy half smile. A cat being stirred from its repose.

He hated her.

He hated that face, the amusement and sharpness. The temper and viciousness that could reduce someone to shreds without so much as a word—only a look. Only a beat of silence.

She *enjoyed* such things. Savored them.

And he had been so bewitched by it, this woman who had been a living flame. He'd been willing to leave it all behind. The honor. The vows he'd made.

For this haughty, swaggering, self-righteous woman, he had shattered parts of himself.

And afterward, she had walked away, as if he were a broken toy.

Right into the arms of that Fae Prince, who emerged from the dark. Who approached that lounge chair on the balcony and sat on its end.

Her half smile turned different. Her eyes sparked.

The lethal, predatory interest honed in on the prince. She seemed to glow brighter. Become more aware. More centered. More ... alive.

Fire and ice. An end and a beginning.

They did not touch each other.

They only sat on that chaise, some unspoken conversation passing between them. As if they had finally found some reflection of themselves in the world.

He hated them.

He *hated* them for that ease, that intensity, that sense of completion.

She had wrecked him, wrecked his life, and had then strolled right to this prince, as if she were going from one room to another.

And when it had all gone to hell, when he'd turned his back on everything he knew, when he had lied to the one who mattered most to keep her secrets, she had not been there to fight. To help.

She had only returned, months later, and thrown it in his face.

His uselessness. His nothingness.

You remind me of how the world ought to be. What the world can be.

Lies. The words of a girl who had been grateful to him for offering her freedom, for pushing and pushing her until she was roaring at the world again.

A girl who had stopped existing the night they'd found that body on the bed.

When she had ripped his face open.

When she had tried to plunge that dagger into his heart.

The predator he'd seen in those eyes ... it had been unleashed.

There were no leashes that could ever keep her restrained. And words like *honor* and *duty* and *trust*, they were gone.

She had gutted that courtesan in the tunnels. She'd let the man's body drop, closed her eyes, and had looked precisely as she had during those throes of

passion. And when she had opened her eyes again ...

Killer. Liar. Thief.

She was still sitting on the chaise, the Fae Prince beside her, both of them watching that scene in the tunnel, as if they were spectators in a sport.

Watching Archer Finn slump to the stones, his blood leaking from him, face taut with shock and pain. Watching Chaol stand there, unable to move or speak, as she breathed in the death before her, the vengeance.

As Celaena Sardothien ended, shattering completely.

He had still tried to protect her. To get her out. To atone.

You will always be my enemy.

She had roared those words with ten years' worth of rage.

And she had meant it. Meant it as any child who had lost and suffered at Adarlan's hand would mean it.

As Yrene meant it.

The garden appeared in another pocket of the darkness. The garden and the cottage and the mother and laughing child.

Yrene.

The thing he had not seen coming. The person he had not expected to find.

Here in the darkness ... here she was.

And yet he had still failed. Hadn't done right by her, or by Nesryn.

He should have waited, should have respected them both enough to end one and begin with another, but he supposed he had failed in that, too.

Aelin and Rowan remained on that chaise in the sunshine.

He saw the Fae Prince gently, reverently, take Aelin's hand, turning it over. Exposing her wrist to the sun. Exposing the faint marks of shackles.

He saw Rowan rub a thumb over those scars. Saw the fire in Aelin's eyes bank.

Over and over, Rowan brushed those scars with his thumb. And Aelin's mask slid off.

There was fire in that face. And rage. And cunning.

But also sorrow. Fear. Despair. Guilt.

Shame.

Pride and hope and love. The weight of a burden she had run from, but now

...

I love you.

I'm sorry.

She had tried to explain. Had said it as clearly as she could. Had given him the truth so he might piece it together when she had left and understand. She meant those words. *I'm sorry.*

Sorry for the lies. For what she had done to him, his life. For swearing that she would pick him, choose him, no matter what. *Always.*

He wanted to hate her for that lie. That false promise, which she had discarded in the misty forests of Wendlyn.

And yet.

There, with that prince, without the mask ... That was the bottom of her pit.

She had come to Rowan, soul limping. She had come to him as she was, as she had never been with anyone. And she had returned whole.

Still she had waited—waited to be with him.

Chaol had been lusting for Yrene, had taken her into his bed without so much as thinking of Nesryn, and yet Aelin ...

She and Rowan looked to him now. Still as an animal in the woods, both of them. But their eyes full of understanding. Knowing.

She had fallen in love with someone else, had wanted someone else—as badly as he wanted Yrene.

And yet it was Aelin, godless and irreverent, who had honored him. More than he'd honored Nesryn.

Aelin's chin dipped as if to say *yes*.

And Rowan ... The prince had let her return to Adarlan. To make right by her

kingdom, but to also decide for herself what she wanted. Who she wanted. And if Aelin had chosen Chaol instead ... He knew, deep down, Rowan would have backed off. If it had made Aelin happy, Rowan would have walked away without ever telling her what he felt.

Shame pressed on him, sickening and oily.

He had called her a monster. For her power, her actions, and yet ...

He did not blame her.

He understood.

That perhaps she had promised things, but ... she had changed. The path had changed.

He understood.

He'd promised Nesryn—or had implied it. And when he had changed, when the path had altered; when Yrene appeared down it ...

He understood.

Aelin smiled softly at him as she and Rowan rippled into a sunbeam and vanished.

Leaving a red marble floor, blood pooling across it.

A head bumping vulgarly over smooth tile.

A prince screaming in agony, in rage and despair.

I love you.

Go.

That—if there had been a cleaving, it was that moment.

When he turned and ran. And he left his friend, his brother, in that chamber.

When he ran from that fight, that death.

Dorian had forgiven him. Did not hold it against him.

Yet he had still run. Still left.

Everything he had planned, worked to save, all came crumbling down.

Dorian stood before him, hands in his pockets, a faint smile on his face.

He did not deserve to serve such a man. Such a king.

The darkness pushed in further. Revealing that bloody council room. Revealing the prince and king he'd served. Revealing what they had done. To his men.

In that chamber beneath the castle.

How Dorian had smiled. Smiled while Ressa had screamed, while Brullo had spat in his face.

His fault—all of it. Every moment of pain, those deaths ...

It showed him Dorian's hands as they wielded those instruments beneath the castle. As blood spurted and bone sundered. Unflinching, clean hands. And that smile.

He knew. He had known, had guessed. Nothing would ever make it right. For his men; for Dorian, left to live with it.

For Dorian, whom he'd abandoned in that castle.

That moment, over and over, the darkness showed him.

As Dorian held his ground. As he revealed his magic, as good as a death sentence, and bought him time to run.

He had been so afraid—so afraid of magic, of loss, of *everything*. And that fear ... it had driven him to it anyway. It had hurried him down this path. He had clung so hard, had fought against it, and it had cost him everything. Too late. He'd been too late to see clearly.

And when the worst had happened; when he saw that collar; when he saw his men swinging from the gates, their broken bodies picked over by crows ...

It had cracked him through to his foundation. To this hollow pit beneath the mountain he'd been.

He had fallen apart. Had let himself lose sight of it.

And he had found some glimmer of peace in Rifthold, even after the injury, and yet ...

It was like applying a patch over a knife wound to the gut.

He had not healed. Unmoored and raging, he had not *wanted* to heal.

Not really. His body, yes, but even that ...

Some part of him had whispered it was deserved.

And the soul-wound ... He had been content to let it fester.

Failure and liar and oath-breaker.

The darkness swarmed, a wind stirring it.

He could stay here forever. In the ageless dark.

Yes, the darkness whispered.

He could remain, and rage and hate and curl into nothing but shadow.

But Dorian remained before him, still smiling faintly. Waiting.

Waiting.

For—him.

He had made one promise. He had not broken it yet.

To save them.

His friend, his kingdom.

He still had that.

Even here at the bottom of this dark hell, he still had that.

And the road that he had traveled so far ... No, he would not look back.

What if we go on, only to more pain and despair?

Aelin had smiled at his question, posed on that rooftop in Rifthold. As if she had understood, long before he did, that he would find this pit. And learn the answer for himself.

Then it is not the end.

This ...

This was not the end. This crack in him, this bottom, was not the end.

He had one promise left.

To that he would still hold.

It is not the end.

He smiled at Dorian, whose sapphire eyes shone with joy—with love.

“I’m coming home,” he whispered to his brother, his king.

Dorian only bowed his head and vanished into the darkness.

Leaving Yrene standing behind him.

She was glowing with white light, bright as a newborn star.

Yrene said quietly, “The darkness belongs to you. To shape as you will. To give it power or render it harmless.”

“Was it ever the Valg’s to begin with?” His words echoed into nothing.

“Yes. But it is yours to keep now. This place, this final kernel of it.”

It would remain in him, a scar and a reminder. “Will it grow again?”

“Only if you let it. Only if you do not fill it with better things. Only if you do not forgive.” He knew she didn’t just mean others. “But if you are kind to yourself, if you—if you love yourself ...” Yrene’s mouth trembled. “If you love yourself as much as I love you ...”

Something began to pound in his chest. A drumbeat that had gone silent down here.

Yrene held a hand toward him, her iridescence rippling into the darkness.

It is not the end.

“Will it hurt?” he asked hoarsely. “The way back—the way out?”

The path back to life, to himself.

“Yes,” Yrene whispered. “But just this one last time. The darkness does not want to lose you.”

“I’m afraid I can’t say the same.”

Yrene’s smile was brighter than the glow rippling off her body. A star. She was a fallen star.

She extended her hand again. A silent promise—of what waited on the other side of the dark.

He still had much to do. Oaths to keep.

And looking at her, at that smile ...

Life. He had *life* to savor, to fight for.

And the breaking that had started and ended here ... Yes, it belonged to him.

He was *allowed* to break, so that this forging might begin.

So that *he* might begin again.

He owed it to his king, his country.

And he owed it to himself.

Yrene nodded as if to say yes.

So Chaol stood.

He surveyed the darkness, this piece of him. He did not balk at it.

And smiling at Yrene, he took her hand.

56

It was agony and despair and fear. It was joy and laughter and rest.

It was life, all of it, and as that darkness lunged for Chaol and Yrene, he did not fear it.

He only looked toward the dark and smiled.

Not broken.

Made anew.

And when the darkness beheld him ...

Chaol slid a hand against its cheek. Kissed its brow.

It loosened its grip and tumbled back into that pit. Curled up on that rocky floor and quietly, carefully, watched him.

He had the sense of rising up, of being sucked through a too-thin door. Yrene grasped him, hauling him along with her.

She did not let go. Did not falter. She speared them upward, a star racing into the night.

White light slammed into them—

No. Daylight.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the brightness.

The first thing he felt was nothing.

No pain. No numbness. No ache or exhaustion.

Gone.

His legs were ... He moved one. It flowed and shifted without a flicker of

pain or tension.

Smooth as butter.

He looked to the right, to where Yrene always sat.

She was simply smiling down at him.

“How,” he rasped.

Joy lit her stunning eyes. “My theory ... I’ll explain later.”

“Is the mark—”

Her mouth tightened. “It is smaller, but ... still there.” She poked a point on his spine. “Though I do not feel anything when I touch it. Nothing at all.”

A reminder. As if some god wanted him to remember this, remember what had occurred.

He sat up, marveling at the ease, the lack of stiffness. “You healed me.”

“I think we both get considerable credit this time.” Her lips were too pale, skin wan.

Chaol brushed her cheek with his knuckles. “Are you feeling well?”

“I’m—tired. But fine. Are *you* feeling well?”

He scooped Yrene into his lap and buried his head in her neck. “Yes,” he breathed. “A thousand times, yes.”

His chest ... there was a lightness to it. To his shoulders.

She batted him away. “You still need to be careful. This newly healed, you could still injure yourself. Give your body time to rest—to let the healing set.”

He lifted a brow. “What, exactly, does resting entail?”

Yrene’s smile turned wicked. “Some things that only special patients get to learn.”

His skin tightened over his bones, but Yrene slid off his lap. “You might want to bathe.”

He blinked, looking at himself. At the bed. And cringed.

That was vomit. On the sheets, on his left arm.

“When—”

“I’m not sure.”

The setting sun was indeed gilding the garden, cramming the room with long shadows.

Hours. All day, they’d been in here.

Chaol moved off the bed, marveling at how he slid through the world like a blade through silk.

He felt her watching him as he strode for the bathing room. “Hot water is safe now?” he called over his shoulder, stripping off his undershorts and stepping into the deliciously warm bath.

“Yes,” she called back. “You’re not full of strained muscles.”

He dunked under the water, scrubbing himself off. Every movement ... holy gods.

When he broke from the surface, wiping the water from his face, she was standing in the arched doorway.

He went still at the smokiness in her eyes.

Slowly, Yrene undid the laces down the front of that pale purple gown. Let it ripple to the floor, along with her undergarments.

His mouth turned dry as she kept her eyes upon him, hips swishing with every step she took to the pool. To the stairs.

Yrene stepped into the water, and his blood roared in his ears.

Chaol was upon her before she’d hit the last step.



They missed dinner. And dessert.

And midnight *kahve*.

Kadja snuck in during the bath to change the sheets. Yrene couldn’t bring herself to be mortified at what the servant had likely heard. They certainly hadn’t been quiet in the water.

And certainly weren’t quiet during the hours following.

Yrene was limp with exhaustion when they peeled apart, sweaty enough that another trip to the bath was imminent. Chaol's chest rose and fell in mighty gulps.

In the desert, he'd been unbelievable. But now, healed—beyond the spine, the legs; healed in that dark, rotting place within his soul ...

He pressed a kiss to her sweat-sticky brow, his lips catching in the stray curls that had appeared thanks to the bath. His other hand drew circles on her lower back.

"You said something—down in that pit," he murmured.

Yrene was too tired to form words beyond a low "Mmm."

"You said that you love me."

Well, that woke her up.

Her stomach clenched. "Don't feel obligated to—"

Chaol silenced her with that steady, unruffled look. "Is it true?"

She traced the scar down his cheek. She had not seen much of the beginning, had only broken into his memories in time to see that beautiful, dark-haired man—*Dorian*—smiling at him. But she had sensed it, known who had given him that recent scar.

"Yes." And though her voice was soft, she meant it with every inch of her soul.

The corners of his mouth tugged upward. "Then it is a good thing, Yrene Towers, that I love you as well."

Her chest tightened; she became too full for her body, for what coursed through her.

"From the moment you walked into the sitting room that first day," Chaol said. "I think I knew, even then."

"I was a stranger."

"You looked at me without an ounce of pity. You saw *me*. Not the chair or the injury. You saw me. It was the first time I'd felt ... seen. Felt *awake*, in a long

time.”

She kissed his chest, right over his heart. “How could I resist these muscles?”

His laugh rumbled into her mouth, her bones. “The consummate professional.”

Yrene smiled onto his skin. “The healers will never let me hear the end of this. Hafiza is already beside herself with glee.”

But she stiffened, considering the road ahead. The choices.

Chaol said after a moment, “When Nesryn returns, I plan to make it clear. Though I think she knew before I did.”

Yrene nodded, trying to fight off the shakiness that crept over her.

“And beyond that ... The choice is yours, Yrene. When you leave. How you leave. If you truly want to leave at all.”

She braced herself.

“But if you’ll have me ... there will be a place for you on my ship. At my side.”

She let out a dainty hum and traced a circle around his nipple. “What sort of place?”

Chaol stretched out like a cat, tucking his arms behind his head as he drawled, “The usual options: scullery maid, cook, dishwasher—”

She poked his ribs, and he laughed. It was a beautiful sound, rich and deep.

But his brown eyes softened as he cupped her face. “What place would you like, Yrene?”

Her heart thundered at the question, the timbre of his voice. But she smirked and said, “Whichever one gives me the right to yell at you if you push yourself too hard.” She drew her hand along his legs, his back. Careful—he’d have to be so, so careful for a while.

A corner of Chaol’s mouth kicked up, and he hauled her over him. “I think I know of just the position.”

Aedion Ashryver had been trained to kill men and hold a line in battle since he was old enough to lift a sword. Crown Prince Rhoe Galathynius had begun his training personally, holding Aedion to standards that some might have deemed unfair, too unyielding for a boy.

But Rhoe had known, Aedion realized as he stood on the prow of the ship, Ansel of Briarcliff’s men armed and ready behind him. Rhoe had known even then that Aedion would serve Aelin, and when foreign armies challenged the might of the Fire-Bringer ... it might not be mere mortals that he faced.

Rhoe—*Evalin*—had gambled that the immortal army now stretching away before him would one day come to these shores. And they had wanted to ensure that Aedion was ready when it did.

“Shields up,” Aedion ordered the men as the second volley of arrows rained from Maeve’s armada. The magical cloak around their ships was holding well enough thanks to Dorian Havilliard, and though he was glad for any bloodshed it spared them, after the bullshit the king had pulled with Aelin and Manon, Aedion gritted his teeth at each ripple of color upon impact.

“These are soldiers, the same as you,” Aedion went on. “Don’t let the pointy ears deceive you. They bleed like the rest of us. And can die from the same wounds, too.”

He didn’t let himself glance behind—to where his father commanded and shielded another line of ships. Gavriel had kept quiet while Fenrys divulged how to keep a quick-healing Fae warrior down: go for slicing through muscles rather than stabbing wounds. Snap a tendon and you’ll halt an immortal long enough to kill.

Easier said than done. The soldiers had gone pale-faced at the thought of it—open combat, blade-to-blade, against Fae warriors. Rightly so.

But Aedion’s duty wasn’t to remind them of the blunt facts. His duty was to make them willing to die, to make this fight seem utterly necessary. Fear could break a line faster than any enemy charge.

Rhoe—his *real* father—had taught him that. And Aedion had learned it

during those years in the North. Learned it fighting knee-deep in mud and gore with the Bane.

He wished they flanked him, not unknown soldiers from the Wastes.

But he would not let his own fear erode his resolve.

Maeve's second volley rose up, up, up, the arrows soaring faster and farther than those from mortal bows. With better aim.

The invisible shield above them rippled with flickers of blue and purple as arrows hissed and slid off it.

Buckling already, because those arrows came tipped with magic.

The soldiers on the deck stirred, shields shifting, their anticipation and rising terror coating Aedion's senses. "Just a bit of rain, boys," he said, grinning widely. "I thought you bastards were used to it out in the Wastes."

Some grumbles—but those metal shields stopped shivering.

Aedion made himself chuckle. Made himself the Wolf of the North, eager to spill blood upon the southern seas. As Rhoe had taught him, as Rhoe had prepared him, long before Terrasen fell to the shadow of Adarlan.

Not again. Never again—and certainly not to Maeve. Certainly not here, with no one to witness it.

Ahead, at the front lines, Rowan's magic flared white in silent signal.

"Arrows at the ready," Aedion ordered.

Bows groaned, arrows pointing skyward.

Another flash.

"*Volley!*" Aedion bellowed.

The world darkened beneath their arrows as they sailed toward Maeve's armada.

A storm of arrows—to distract from the real attack beneath the waves.



The water was dimmer here, the sunlight slim shafts that slid between the fat-bellied boats amassed above the waves.

Other creatures had gathered at the ruckus, flesh-shredders looking for the meals that would surely come when the two armadas at last met.

A flash of light had sent Lysandra diving deep, weaving between the circling scavengers, blending into their masses as best as she could while she launched into a sprint.

She had modified her sea dragon. Given it longer limbs—with prehensile

thumbs.

Given her tail more strength, more control.

Her own little project, during the long days of travel. To take one original form and perfect it. To alter what the gods had made to her own liking.

Lysandra reached the first ship Rowan had marked. A careful, precise map of where and how to strike. A snap of her tail had the rudder in pieces.

Their shouts reached her even under the waves, but Lysandra was already flying, soaring for the next marked boat.

She used her claws this time, grabbing the rudder and ripping it clean off. Then bashing a hole in the keel with her clubbed tail. Clubbed, not spiked—no, the spikes had gotten stuck in Skull's Bay. So she'd made her tail into a battering ram.

Arrows fired with better accuracy than the Valg foot soldiers, shooting like those rays of sunshine into the water. She'd prepared for that, too.

They bounced off scales of Spidersilk. Hours spent studying the material grafted onto Abraxos's wings had taught her about it—how to change her own skin into the impenetrable fiber.

Lysandra tore into another rudder, then another. And another.

Fae soldiers were screaming in advance of her. But the harpoons they fired were too heavy, and she was too fast, dove too deep and too swift. Whips of water magic speared for her, trying to ensnare her. She outswam them, too.

The court that could change the world, she told herself over and over, as exhaustion weighed her down, as she kept disabling rudder after rudder, punching holes in those selected Fae ships.

She had made a promise to that court, that future. To Aedion. And to her queen. She would not fail her.

And if gods-damned Maeve wanted to go head-to-head with them, if Maeve thought to strike them when they were weakest ... Lysandra was going to make the bitch regret it.



Dorian's magic roiled as Maeve's armada went from firing arrows to outright chaos. But he kept his shields intact, patching the spots where arrows had broken through. Already, his power wobbled, too swiftly drained.

Either through some trick of Maeve's or whatever magic coated those arrows.

But Dorian gritted his teeth, leashing his magic to his will, Rowan's bellowed warnings to hold echoing off the water—amplified in the way that Gavriel had used his voice in Skull's Bay.

But even with the chaos of Maeve's armada finding their ships under siege from beneath the water, the lines of it stretched away forever.

Aelin and Manon had not returned.

A Fae male in a raging, lethal panic was a terrifying thing to behold. Two of them were near cataclysmic.

When Aelin and Manon had vanished into that mirror, Dorian suspected it was only Aedion's roaring that had made Rowan snap out of the blood fury he'd descended into. And only the throbbing bruise on Dorian's cheek that made Rowan refrain from giving him a matching one.

Dorian glanced toward the front lines, where the Fae Prince stood at the prow of his ship, his sword and hatchet out, a quiver of arrows and bow strapped across his back, various hunting knives honed razor-sharp. The prince had not snapped out of it at all, he realized.

No, Rowan had already descended to a level of icy wrath that had Dorian's magic trembling, even from the distance now between them.

He could feel it, Rowan's power—feel it as he'd sensed Aelin's surging up.

Rowan had already been deep within his reservoir of power when Aelin and Manon had left. He'd used the last hour, once Aedion had focused that fear and anger on the battle ahead, to plunge even deeper. It now flowed around them like the sea mere feet below.

Dorian had followed suit, falling back on the training the prince had instilled in him. Ice coated his veins, his heart.

Aedion had said only one thing to him before departing for his own section of the armada. The general-prince had looked him over once, his Ashryver eyes lingering on the bruise he'd given him, and said, "Fear is a death sentence. When you're out there, remember that we don't need to survive. Only put enough of a dent in them so that when she comes back ... she'll wipe out the rest."

When. Not if. But when Aelin found their bodies, or whatever was left of them if the sea didn't claim them ... she might very well end the world for rage.

Maybe she should. Maybe this world deserved it.

Maybe Manon Blackbeak would help her do it. Maybe they'd rule over the ruins together.

He wished he'd had more time to talk to the witch. To get to know her beyond what his body had already learned.

Because even with the rudders being disabled ... ships now advanced.

Fae warriors. Born and bred to kill.

Aedion and Rowan sent another volley of arrows aiming for the ships. Shields disintegrated them before they could meet any targets. This would not end well.

His heart thundered, and he swallowed as the ships crept around their foundering brethren, inching toward that demarcation line.

His magic writhed.

He'd have to be careful where to aim. Have to make it count.

He did not trust his power to remain focused if he unleashed it all.

And Rowan had told him not to. Had told him to wait until the armada was truly upon them. Until they crossed that line. Until the Fae Prince gave the order to fire.

For it was fire—and ice—that warred in Dorian now, begging for release.

He kept his chin high as more ships inched toward those disabled at the front, then slipped alongside them.

Dorian knew it would hurt. Knew it would hurt to wreck his magic, and then wreck his body. Knew it would hurt to see his companions go down, one by one.

Still Rowan held the front line, did not let his ships turn to flee.

Closer and closer, those enemy ships speared toward their front lines, hauled by waving limbs of mighty oars. Archers were poised to fire, and sunlight glinted off the burnished armor of the battle-hungry Fae warriors aboard. Ready and rested, primed to slaughter.

There would be no surrender. Maeve would destroy them just to punish Aelin.

He'd failed them—in sending Manon and Aelin away. On that gamble, he'd perhaps failed all of them.

But Rowan Whitethorn had not.

No, as those enemy ships slid into place among their foundering companions, Dorian saw that they each bore the same flag:

A silver banner, with a screaming hawk.

And where Maeve's black flag of a perching owl had once flapped beside it ... now that black flag lowered.

Now the dark queen's flag vanished entirely, as Fae ships bearing the silver banner of the House of Whitethorn opened fire upon their own armada.

Rowan had told Enda about Aelin.

He had told his cousin about the woman he loved, the queen whose heart burned with wildfire. He had told Enda about Erawan, and the threat of the keys, and Maeve's own desire for them.

And then he had gotten on his knees and begged his cousin to help.

To not open fire on Terrasen's armada.

But on Maeve's.

To not squander this one chance at peace. At halting the darkness before it consumed them all, both from Morath and Maeve. To fight not for the queen who had enslaved him, but the one who had saved him.

I will consider it, Endymion had said.

And so Rowan had gotten off his knees and flown to another cousin's ship. Princess Sellene, his youngest, cunning-eyed cousin, had listened. Had let him beg. And with a small smile, she had said the same thing. *I will consider it*.

So he'd gone, ship to ship. To the cousins he knew might listen.

An act of treason—that was what he had begged them for. Treason and betrayal so great they could never go home. Their lands, their titles, would be seized or destroyed.

And as their unharmed ships sailed into place beside those Lysandra had already disabled, as they opened an assault of arrows and magic upon their unsuspecting forces, Rowan roared at his own fleet, "*Now, now, now!*"

Oars splashed into the waves, men grunting as they rowed like hell for the armada in utter chaos.

Every single one of his cousins had attacked.

Every single one. As if they had all met, all decided to risk ruination together.

Rowan had not possessed an army of his own to give to Aelin. To give to Terrasen.

So he had won an army for her. Through the only things Aelin had claimed were all she wanted from him.

His heart. His loyalty. His friendship.

And Rowan wished his Fireheart were there to see it as the House of Whitethorn slammed into Maeve's fleet, and ice and wind exploded across the waves.



Lorcan didn't believe it.

He didn't believe what he was seeing as a third of Maeve's fleet opened fire upon the stunned majority of her ships.

And he knew—he knew without having it confirmed that the banners flying on those ships would be silver.

However he'd convinced them, whenever he'd convinced them ...

Whitethorn had done it. For her.

All of it, for Aelin.

Rowan bellowed the order to press their advantage, to break Maeve's armada between them.

Lorcan, a bit dazed, passed on the order to his own ships.

Maeve wouldn't allow it. She'd wipe the Whitethorn line off the map for this.

But there they were, unleashing their ice and wind upon their own ships, accented with arrows and harpoons that speared through wood and soldiers.

Wind whipped at his hair, and he knew Whitethorn was now pushing his magic to the breaking point to haul their own ships into the fray before his cousins lost the advantage of surprise. Fools, all of them.

Fools, and yet ...

Gavriel's son was bellowing Whitethorn's name. A gods-damned victory cry. Over and over, the men taking up the call.

Then Fenrys's voice lifted. And Gavriel's. And that red-haired queen. The Havilliard king.

Their armada soared for Maeve's, sun and sea and sails all around, blades glinting in the morning brightness. Even the rise and fall of the oars seemed to echo the chant.

On into battle, on into bloodshed, they called the prince's name.

For a heartbeat, Lorcan allowed himself to ponder it—the power of the thing that had compelled Rowan to risk it all. And Lorcan wondered if it would perhaps be the one force that Maeve, that Erawan, would not see coming.

But Maeve—Maeve was in that armada somewhere.

She would retaliate. She would strike back, make them all suffer—

Rowan slammed their armada into Maeve's front lines, unleashing the fury of his ice and wind alongside their arrows.

And where Rowan's power paused, Dorian's magic leaped out.

Not a chance in hell of winning had now become a fool's chance. If Whitethorn and the others could hold their lines, keep themselves steady.

Lorcan found himself scanning for Fenrys and Gavriel across ship and soldier.

And he knew Maeve's answer had come when he spied them, one after the other, go rigid. Spied Fenrys take a running leap and vanish into thin air. The White Wolf of Doranelle instantly appeared at Gavriel's side, men shouting at his appearance out of a pocket of nothing.

But he gripped Gavriel's arm, and then they were both gone again, their faces taut. Only Gavriel managed to look toward Lorcan before they vanished—his eyes wide in warning. Gavriel pointed, then they were nothing but sunlight and spindrift.

Lorcan stared at where Gavriel had managed to point, that bit of defiance that had likely cut deep.

Lorcan's blood went cold.

Maeve was allowing the battle to explode across the water because she had other games afoot. Because she was not on the seas at all.

But on the shore.

Gavriel had pointed to it. Not to the distant beach, but up the shore—westward.

Precisely where he had left Elide hours ago.

And Lorcan did not care about the battle, about what he'd agreed to do for Whitethorn, the promise he'd made the prince.

He had made a promise to her first.

The soldiers weren't stupid enough to try to stop him as Lorcan ordered one of them in charge, and seized a longboat.



Elide couldn't view the battle from where she waited among the sand dunes, the seagrasses hissing around her. But she could hear it, the shouting and the booming.

She tried not to listen to the din of battle, tried to instead beg Anneith to give her friends guidance. To keep Lorcan alive, and Maeve far from him.

But Anneith was sticking close, hovering behind her shoulder.

See, she said, as she always did. *See, see, see.*

There was nothing but sand and grass and water and blue sky. Nothing but the eight guards Lorcan had commanded to stay with her, lounging on the dunes, looking either relieved or put-out to miss the battle raging on the waves around the bend in the coast.

The voice became urgent. *See, see, see.*

Then Anneith vanished entirely. No—*fled.*

Clouds gathered, sweeping from the marshes. Heading toward the sun beginning its ascent.

Elide got to her feet, sliding a bit on the steep dune.

The wind whipped and hissed through the grasses—and warm sand turned gray and muted as those clouds passed over the sun. Blotting it out.

Something was coming.

Something that knew Aelin Galathynius drew strength from sunlight. From Mala.

Elide's mouth dried. If Vernon found her here ... there would be no escaping him now.

The guards on the dunes behind her stirred, noticing the strange wind, the clouds. Sensing that approaching storm was not of natural origin. Would they stand against the ilken long enough for help to come? Or would Vernon bring more of them this time?

But it was not Vernon who appeared on the beach, as if walking out of a passing breeze.

The Eridun aerie was madness when they returned.

Falkan was alive—barely—and had caused such panic upon the ruks' arrival at Altun that Houlun had to leap in front of the limp spider to keep the other ruks from shredding him apart.

Sartaq had managed to stand long enough to embrace Kadara, order a healer to come for her immediately, then wrap his arms around Borte, who was spattered in black blood and grinning from ear to ear. Then Sartaq clasped arms with Yeran, whom Borte pointedly ignored, which Nesryn supposed was an improvement from outright hostility.

“How?” Sartaq asked Borte while Nesryn hovered near the unconscious form of Falkan, still not trusting the ruks to control themselves.

Yeran, his company of Berlad ruks having returned to their own aerie, stepped away from his awaiting mount and answered instead, “Borte came to get me. Said she was going on a stupidly dangerous mission and I could either let her die alone or come along.”

Sartaq rasped a laugh. “You were forbidden,” he told Borte, glancing toward where Houlun knelt at Falkan's side, the hearth-mother indeed looking torn between relief and outright rage.

Borte sniffed. “By my hearth-mother *here*. As I am currently betrothed to a captain of the Berlad”—emphasis on *currently*, to Yeran's chagrin, it seemed—“I also can claim partial loyalty to the hearth-mother *there*. Who had no

qualms about letting me spend some *quality time* with my betrothed.”

“We will have words, she and I,” Houlun seethed as she rose to her feet and strode past, ordering several people to bring Falkan farther into the hall. Wincing at the spider’s weight, they gingerly obeyed.

Borte shrugged, turning to follow Houlun to where the shifter would be patched up as best they could manage in that spider’s body. “At least his hearth-mother’s sense of quality time is in line with my own,” she said, and walked off.

Yet as she left, Nesryn could have sworn Borte gave Yeran a secret, small smile.

Yeran stared after her for a long moment, then turned to them. Gave them a crooked grin. “She promised to set a date. That’s how she got my hearth-mother to approve.” He winked at Sartaq. “Too bad I didn’t tell her that I don’t approve of the date at all.”

And with that, he strode after Borte, jogging a few steps to catch up. She whirled on him, sharp words already snapping from her lips, but allowed him to follow her into the hall.

When Nesryn faced Sartaq, it was in time to see him sway.

She lunged, her aching body protesting as she caught the prince around the middle. Someone shouted for a healer, but Sartaq got his legs beneath him, even as he kept his arms about her.

Nesryn found herself disinclined to remove her own arms from his waist.

Sartaq stared down at her, that soft, sweet smile on his mouth again. “You saved me.”

“It seemed a sorry end for the tales of the Winged Prince,” she replied, frowning at the gash in his leg. “You should be sitting—”

Across the hall, light flashed, people cried out ... and then the spider was gone. Replaced by a man, covered in slashing cuts and blood.

When Nesryn looked back, Sartaq’s gaze was on her face.

Her throat closed up, her mouth pressing into a trembling line as she realized

that they were here. They were here, and alive, and she had never known such true terror and despair as she had in those moments when he had been hauled away.

“Don’t cry,” he murmured, leaning down to brush his mouth over the tears that escaped. He said against her skin, “Whatever would they say about Neith’s Arrow then?”

Nesryn laughed despite herself, despite what had happened, and wrapped her arms around him as tightly as she dared, resting her head against his chest.

Sartaq just wordlessly stroked her hair and held her right back.



The Council of Clans met two days later at dawn.

Hearth-mothers and their captains from every aerie gathered in the hall, so many that the space was filled.

Nesryn had slept the entirety of the day before.

Not in her room, but curled in bed beside the prince now standing with her before the assembled group.

They had both been patched up and bathed, and though Sartaq had not so much as kissed her ... Nesryn had not objected when he led her by the hand and limped into his bedroom.

So they had slept. And when they had awoken, when their wounds had been rebandaged, they’d emerged to find the hall full of riders.

Falkan sat against the far wall, his arm in a sling, but eyes clear. Nesryn had smiled at him as she’d entered, but now was not the time for that reunion. Or the possible truths she bore.

When Houlun had finished welcoming everyone, when silence fell on the hall, Nesryn stood shoulder to shoulder with Sartaq. It was strange to see him with the shorter hair—strange, but not awful. It would grow back, he said when she had frowned that morning.

All eyes shifted between them, some warm and welcoming, some worried, some hard.

Sartaq said to the group gathered, “The *kharankui* have stirred again.” Murmurs and shifting rustled through the hall. “And though the threat was dealt with bravely and fiercely by the Berlad clan, the spiders will likely return again. They have heard a dark call through the world. And they are poised to answer it.”

Nesryn stepped forward. Lifted her chin. And though the words filled her with dread, speaking them here felt as natural as breathing. “We learned many things in the Pass of Dagul,” Nesryn said, voice ringing out across the pillars and stones of the hall. “Things that will change the war in the north. And change this world.”

Every eye was on her now. Houlun nodded from her spot near Borte, who smiled in encouragement. Yeran sat nearby, half watching his betrothed.

Sartaq’s fingers brushed hers. Once—in urging. And promise.

“We do not face an army of men in the northern continent,” Nesryn went on. “But of demons. And if we do not rise to meet this threat, if we do not rise to meet it as one people, of *all* lands ... Then we will find our doom instead.”

So she told them. The full history. Of Erawan. And Maeve.

She did not mention the quest for the keys, but by the time she was done, the hall was astir as clans whispered to one another.

“I leave this choice to you,” Sartaq said, voice unfaltering. “The horrors in the Dagul Fells are only the start. I will pass no judgment, should you choose to remain. But all who fly with me, we soar under the khagan’s banner. We shall leave you to debate amongst yourselves.”

And with that, taking Nesryn by the hand, Sartaq led her from the hall, Falkan falling into step behind them. Borte and Houlun remained, as heads of the Eridun clan. Nesryn knew how they would side, that they would fly north, but the others ...

Whispers had turned into full-on debate by the time they reached one of the private gathering spaces for the family. But Sartaq was only in the small room for a moment before he headed to the kitchens, leaving Nesryn and Falkan with a wink and a promise to bring back food.

Alone with the shifter, Nesryn strode to the fire and warmed her hands. “How are you feeling?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder to where Falkan eased into a low-backed wooden chair.

“Everything hurts.” Falkan grimaced, rubbing at his leg. “Remind me never to do anything heroic again.”

She chuckled over the crackle of the fire. “Thank you—for doing that.”

“I have no one in my life who would miss me anyway.”

Her throat tightened. But she asked, “If we fly north—to Antica, and finally to the northern continent ...” She could no longer bring herself to say the word. *Home*. “Will you come?”

The shifter was silent for a long moment. “Would you want me there? Any of you?”

Nesryn turned from the fire at last, eyes burning. “I have something to tell you.”



Falkan wept.

Put his head in his hands and wept when Nesryn told him what she suspected. She did not know much of Lysandra’s personal history, but the ages, the location matched. Only the description did not. The mother had described a plain, brown-haired girl. Not a black-haired, green-eyed beauty.

But yes—yes, he would come. To war, and to find her. His niece. His last shred of family in the world, for whom he had never stopped looking.

Sartaq returned with food, and thirty minutes later, word came from the hall.

The clans had decided.

Hands shaking, Nesryn strode to the door, to where Sartaq held out a hand.

Their fingers interlaced, and he led her toward the now-silent hall. Falkan rose painfully from his chair, groaning as he brushed away his tears, and limped after them.

They made it a handful of steps before a messenger came barreling down the hall.

Nesryn pulled away from Sartaq to let him deal with the panting, wild-eyed girl. But it was to Nesryn the messenger extended the letter.

Nesryn's hands shook as she recognized the handwriting on it.

She felt Sartaq stiffen as he, too, realized that the writing was Chaol's. He stepped back, eyes shuttered, to let her read it.

She read the message twice. Had to take a steady breath to keep from vomiting.

"He—he requests my presence in Antica. *Needs* it," she said, the note fluttering in her shaking hand. "He begs us to return immediately. As fast as the winds can carry us."

Sartaq took the letter to read for himself. Falkan remained quiet and watchful as the prince read it. Swore.

"Something is wrong," Sartaq said, and Nesryn nodded.

If Chaol, who never asked for help, never *wanted* help, had told them to hurry ... She glanced toward the council, still waiting to announce their decision.

But Nesryn only asked the prince, "How soon can we be airborne?"

It was an agony.

An agony, to see Nehemia, young and strong and wise. Speaking to Elena in the marshes, among those same ruins.

And then there was the other agony.

That Elena and Nehemia had known each other. Worked together.

That Elena had laid these plans a thousand years ago.

That Nehemia had gone to Rifthold knowing she'd die.

Knowing she'd need to break Aelin—use her death to *break her*, so she could walk away from the assassin and ascend her throne.

Aelin and Manon were shown another scene. Of a whispered conversation at midnight, deep beneath the glass castle.

A queen and a princess, meeting in secret. As they had for months.

The queen asking the princess to pay that price she'd offered back in the marshes. To arrange for her own death—to set this all in motion. Nehemia had warned Elena that she—that Aelin—would be broken. Worse, that she would go so far into an abyss of rage and despair that she wouldn't be able to get out. Not as Celaena.

Nehemia had been right.

Aelin was shaking—shaking in her half-invisible body, shaking so badly she thought her skin would ripple off her bones. Manon stepped closer, perhaps the only comfort the witch knew how to offer: solidarity.

They stared into the swirling mist again, where the scenes—the *memories*—had unfolded.

Aelin wasn't sure she could stomach another truth. Another revelation of just how thoroughly Elena had sold her and Dorian to the gods, for the fool's mistake she'd made, not understanding the Lock's true purpose, to seal Erawan in his tomb rather than let Brannon finally end it—and send the gods to wherever they called home, dragging Erawan with them.

Send them home ... using the keys to open the Wyrddgate. And a new Lock to seal it forever.

Nameless is my price.

Using *her* power, drained to the last drop, *her* life to forge that new Lock. To wield the power of the keys only once—just once, to banish them all, and then seal the gate forever.

Memories flickered by.

Elena and Brannon, screaming at each other in a room Aelin had not seen for ten years—the king’s suite in the palace at Orynth. Her suite—or it would have been. A necklace glittered at Elena’s throat: the Eye. The first and now-broken Lock, that Elena, now the Queen of Adarlan, seemed to wear as some sort of reminder of her foolishness, her promise to those furious gods.

Her argument with her father raged and raged—until the princess walked out. And Aelin knew Elena had never returned to that shining palace in the North.

Then the reveal of that witch mirror in some nondescript stone chamber, a black-haired beauty with a crown of stars standing before Elena and Gavin, explaining how the witch mirror worked—how it would contain these memories. Rhiannon Crochan. Manon started at the sight of her, and Aelin glanced between them.

The face ... it was the same. Manon’s face, and Rhiannon Crochan’s. The last Crochan Queens—of two separate eras.

Then an image of Brannon alone—head in his hands, weeping before a shrouded body atop a stone altar. A crone’s bent shape lay beneath.

Elena, her immortal grace yielded in order to live out a human life span with Gavin. Brannon still looked no older than thirty.

Brannon, the heat of a thousand forges shining on his red-gold hair, his teeth bared in a snarl as he pounded a metal disk on an anvil, the muscles of his back rippling beneath golden skin as he struck and struck and struck.

As he forged the Amulet of Orynth.

As he placed a sliver of black stone within either side, then sealed it, defiance written in every line of his body.

Then wrote the message in Wyrddmarks on the back.

One message.

For her.

For his true heir, should Elena’s punishment and promise to the gods hold true. The punishment and promise that had cleaved them. That Brannon could not and would not accept. Not while he had strength left.

Nameless is my price. Written right there—in Wyrddmarks. The one who bore

Brannon's mark, the mark of the bastard-born nameless ... *She* would be the cost to end this.

The message on the back of the Amulet of Orynth was the only warning he could offer, the only apology for what his daughter had done, even as it contained a secret inside so deadly no one must know, no one could ever be told.

But there would be clues. For her. To finish what they'd started.

Brannon built Elena's tomb with his own hands. Carved the messages in there for Aelin, too.

The riddles and the clues. The best he could offer to explain the truth while keeping those keys hidden from the world, from powers who would use them to rule, to destroy.

Then he made Mort, the metal for the door knocker gifted by Rhiannon Crochan, who brushed a hand over the king's cheek before she left the tomb.

Rhiannon was not present when Brannon hid the sliver of black stone beneath the jewel in Elena's crown—the second Wyrdkey.

Or when he set Damaris in its stand, near the second sarcophagus. For the mortal king he hated and had barely tolerated, but he had leashed that loathing for his daughter's sake. Even if Gavin had taken his daughter, the daughter of his soul, away from him.

The final key ... he went to Mala's temple.

It was where he had wanted to end this all along anyway.

The molten fire around the temple was a song in his blood, a beckoning. A welcoming.

Only those with his gifts—*her* gifts—could get there. Even the priestesses could not reach the island in the heart of the molten river. Only his heir would be able to do that. Or whoever held another key.

So he set the remaining key under a flagstone.

And then he walked into that molten river, into the burning heart of his beloved.

And Brannon, King of Terrasen, Lord of Fire, did not emerge again.

Aelin didn't know why it surprised her to be able to cry in this body. That this body had tears to spill.

But Aelin shed them for Brannon. Who knew what Elena had promised the gods—and had raged against it, the passing of this burden onto one of his descendants.

Brannon had done what he could for her. To soften the blow of that promise, if he could not change its course wholly. To give Aelin a fighting chance.

Nameless is my price.

“I don’t understand what this means,” Manon said quietly.

Aelin did not have the words to tell her. She had not been able to tell Rowan.

But then Elena appeared, real as they were real, and stared into the fading golden light of Mala’s temple as the memory vanished. “I’m sorry,” she said to Aelin.

Manon stiffened at Elena’s approach, taking a step from Aelin’s side.

“It was the only way,” Elena offered. That was genuine pain in her eyes. Regret.

“Was it a choice, or just to spare Gavin’s precious bloodline, that I was the one who was selected?” The voice that came from Aelin’s throat was raw, vicious. “Why spill Havilliard blood, after all, when you could fall back on old habits and choose another to bear the burden?”

Elena flinched. “Dorian was not ready. You were. The choice Nehemia and I made was to ensure that things went according to plan.”

“According to plan,” Aelin breathed. “According to all your schemes to make me clean up the mess of what *you started with your gods-damned thieving and cowardice?*”

“They wanted me to suffer,” Elena said. “And I have. Knowing you must do this, bear this burden ... It has been a steady, endless shredding of my soul for a thousand years. It was so easy to say yes, to imagine you would be a stranger, someone who would not need to know the truth, only to be in the right place with the right gift, and yet ... and yet I was wrong. I was so wrong.” Elena lifted her hands before her, palms up. “I thought Erawan would rise, and the world would face him. I did not know ... I did not know darkness would fall. I did not know that your land would suffer. Suffer as I tried to keep mine from suffering. And there were so many voices ... so many voices even before Adarlan conquered. It was those voices that woke me. The voices of those wishing for an answer, for help.” Elena’s eyes slid to Manon, then back to hers. “They were from all kingdoms, all races. Human, witch-kind, Fae ... But they wove a tapestry of dreams, all begging for that one thing ... A better world.

“Then you were born. And you were an answer to the gathering darkness, with that flame. My father’s flame, my mother’s might—reborn at last. And you were strong, Aelin. So strong, and so vulnerable. Not to outside threats, but the threat of your own heart, the isolation of your power. But there were those who knew you for what you were, what you could offer. Your parents, their court, your great-uncle ... and Aedion. Aedion knew you were the Queen Who Was

Promised without knowing what it meant, without knowing anything about you, or me, or what I did to spare my own people.”

The words hit her like stones. “The Queen Who Was Promised,” Aelin said. “But not to the world. To the gods—to the keys.”

To pay the price. To be their sacrifice in order to seal the keys in the gate at last.

Deanna’s appearance hadn’t been only to tell her how to use the mirror, but to remind her that she *belonged* to them. Had a debt owed to them.

Aelin said too quietly, “I didn’t survive that night in the Florine River because of pure luck, did I?”

Elena shook her head. “We did not—”

“No,” Aelin snapped. “*Show me.*”

Elena’s throat bobbed. But then the mists turned dark and colored, and the very air around them became laced with frost.

Breaking branches, ragged breath punctuated with gasping sobs, light footsteps crashing through bramble and brush. A horse’s thunderous gait, closing in—

Aelin made herself stand still when that familiar, frozen wood appeared, exactly as she remembered it. As *she* appeared, so small and young, white nightgown torn and muddy, hair wild, eyes bright with terror and grief so profound it had broken her entirely. Frantic to reach the roaring river beyond, the bridge—

There were the posts, and the forest on the other side. Her sanctuary—

Manon swore softly as Aelin Galathynius flung herself through the bridge posts, realized the bridge had been cut ... and plummeted into the raging, half-frozen river below.

She had forgotten how far that fall was. How violent the black river was, the white rapids illuminated by the icy moon overhead.

The image shifted, and then it was dark, and silent, and they were being tumbled, over and over as the river tossed her in its wrath.

“There was so much death,” Elena whispered as they watched Aelin being thrown and twisted and dragged down by the river. The cold was crushing.

“So much death, and so many lights extinguished,” Elena said, voice breaking. “You were so small. And you fought ... you fought so hard.”

And there she was, clawing at the water, kicking and thrashing, trying to get to the surface, to the air, and she could feel her lungs begin to seize, feel the pressure building—

Then light flickered from the Amulet of Orynth hanging around her neck, greenish symbols fizzing like bubbles around her.

Elena slid to her knees, watching that amulet glow beneath the water. “They wanted me to take you, right then. You had the Amulet of Orynth, everyone thought you were dead, and the enemy was distracted with the slaughter. I could take you, help you track down the other two keys. I was allowed to help you—to do that much. And once we got the other two, I was to force you to forge the Lock anew. To use every last drop of *you* to make that Lock, summon the gate, put the keys back into it, send them home, and end it all. You had enough power, even then. It’d kill you to do it, but you were likely dead anyway. So they let me form a body, to get you.”

Elena took a shuddering breath as a figure plunged into the water. A silver-haired, beautiful woman in an ancient dress. She grabbed Aelin around the waist, hauling her up, up, up.

They hit the surface of the river, and it was dark and loud and wild, and it was all she could do to grab the log Elena shoved her onto, to dig her nails into the soaked wood and cling to it while she was carried downriver, deep into the night.

“I hesitated,” Elena breathed. “You clung to that log with all your strength. Everything had been taken from you—*everything*—and yet you still fought. You did not yield. And they told me to hurry, because even then their power to hold me in that solid body was fading. They said to just take you and go, but ... I hesitated. I waited until you got to that riverbank.”

Mud and reeds and trees looming overhead, snow still patching the steep hill of the bank.

Aelin watched herself crawl up that riverbank, inch by painful inch, and she felt the phantom, icy mud beneath her nails, felt her broken, frozen body as it slumped onto the earth and shuddered, over and over.

As lethal cold gripped her while Elena hauled herself onto the bank beside her.

As Elena lunged for her, screaming her name, cold and shock setting in ...

“I thought the danger would be drowning,” Elena whispered. “I didn’t realize being out in the cold for so long ...”

Her lips had gone blue. Aelin watched her own small chest rise, fall, rise ...

Then stop moving all together.

“You died,” Elena whispered. “Right there, you died. You had fought so hard, and I failed you. And in that moment, I didn’t care that I’d again failed the

gods, or my promise to make it right, or any of it. All I could think ...” Tears ran down Elena’s face. “All I could think was how unfair it was. You had not even lived, you had not even been given a chance ... And all those people, who had wished and waited for a better world ... You would not be there to give it to them.”

Oh gods.

“Elena,” Aelin breathed.

The Queen of Adarlan sobbed into her hands, even as her former self shook Aelin, over and over. Trying to wake her, trying to revive the small body that had given out.

Elena’s voice broke. “I could not allow it. I could not endure it. Not for the gods’ sake, but—but for your own.”

Light flared at Elena’s hand, then down her arm, then along her whole body. Fire. She wrapped herself around Aelin, the heat melting the snow around them, drying her ice-cruled hair.

Lips that were blue turned pink. And a chest that had stopped breathing now lifted.

Darkness faded to the gray light of dawn. “And then I defied them.”

Elena set her down between the reeds and rose, scanning the river, the world.

“I knew who had an estate near this river, so far away from your home that your parents had tolerated its presence, as long as he was not stupid enough to stir up trouble.”

Elena, a mere flicker of light, tugged Arobynn from a deep sleep inside his former residence in Terrasen. As if in a trance, he shoved on his boots, his red hair gleaming in the light of dawn, mounted his horse, and set off into the woods.

So young, her former master. Only a few years older than she was now.

Arobynn’s horse paused as if an invisible hand had yanked its bridle, and the assassin scanned the raging river, the trees, as if looking for something he didn’t even know was there.

But there was Elena, invisible as sunlight, crouching in the reeds when Arobynn’s eyes fell upon the small, dirty figure unconscious on the riverbank. He leaped from his horse with feline grace, slinging off his cloak as he threw himself to his knees in the mud and felt for her breathing.

“I knew what he was, what he’d likely do with you. What training you would receive. But it was better than dead. And if you could survive, if you could grow up strong, if you had the chance to reach adulthood, I thought perhaps you could

give those people who had wished and dreamed of a better world ... at least give them a chance. Help them—before the debt was called in again.”

Arobynn’s hands hesitated as he noticed the Amulet of Orynth.

He eased the amulet from around her neck and placed it in his pocket. Gently, he scooped her into his arms and carried her up the bank to his waiting horse.

“You were so young,” Elena said again. “And more than the dreamers, more than the debt ... I wanted to give you time. To at least know what it was to live.”

Aelin rasped, “What was the price, Elena? What did they do to you for this?”

Elena wrapped her arms around herself as the image faded, Arobynn mounting his horse, Aelin in his arms. Mist swirled again. “When it is done,” Elena managed to say, “I go, too. For the time I bought you, when this game is finished, my soul will be melted back into the darkness. I will not see Gavin, or my children, or my friends ... I will be gone. Forever.”

“Did you know that before you—”

“Yes. They told me, over and over. But ... I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it.”

Aelin slid to her knees before the queen. Took Elena’s tearstained face between her hands.

“Nameless is my price,” Aelin said, her voice breaking.

Elena nodded. “The mirror was just that—a mirror. A ploy to get you here. So that you could understand everything we did.” *Just a bit of metal and glass*, Elena had said when Aelin had summoned her in Skull’s Bay. “But now you are here, and have seen. Now you comprehend the cost. To forge the Lock anew, to put the three keys back in the gate ...”

A mark glowed on Aelin’s brow, heating her skin. The bastard mark of Brannon.

The mark of the nameless.

“Mala’s blood must be spent—your power must be spent. Every drop, of magic, of blood. You are the cost—to make a new Lock, and seal the keys into the gate. To make the Wyrddgate whole.”

Aelin said softly, “I know.” She had known for some time now.

Had been preparing for it as best she could. Preparing things for the others.

Aelin said to the queen, “I have two keys. If I can find the third, steal it from Erawan ... will you come with me? Help me end it once and for all?”

Will you come with me, so I will not be alone?

Elena nodded, but whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Aelin lowered her hands from the queen’s face. Took a deep, shuddering

breath. “Why didn’t you tell me—from the start?”

Behind them, she had the vague sense that Manon was quietly assessing.

“You were barely climbing out of slavery,” Elena said. “Hardly holding yourself together, trying so hard to pretend that you were still strong and whole. There was only so much I could do to guide you, nudge you along. The mirror was forged and hidden to one day show you all of this. In a way I couldn’t tell you—not when I could only manage a few minutes at a time.”

“Why did you tell me to go to Wendlyn? Maeve poses as great a threat as Erawan.”

Glacier-blue eyes met hers at last. “I know. Maeve has long wished to regain possession of the keys. My father believed it was for something other than conquest. Something darker, worse. I don’t know why she only began hunting for them once you arrived. But I sent you to Wendlyn for the healing. And so you would ... find him. The one who had been waiting so long for you.”

Aelin’s heart cracked. “Rowan.”

Elena nodded. “He was a voice in the void, a secret, silent dreamer. And so were his companions. But the Fae Prince, he was ...”

Aelin reined in her sob. “I know. I’ve known for a long time.”

“I wanted you to know that joy, too,” Elena whispered. “However briefly.”

“I did,” Aelin managed to say. “Thank you.”

Elena covered her face at those words, shuddering. But after a moment, she surveyed Aelin, then Manon, still silent and watching. “The witch mirror’s power is fading; it will not hold you here for much longer. Please—let me show you what must be done. How to end it. You won’t be able to see me after, but ... I will be with you. Until the very end, every step of the way, I will be with you.”

Manon only put a hand on her sword as Aelin swallowed and said, “Show me, then.”

So Elena did. And when she was done, Aelin was silent. Manon was pacing, snarling softly.

But Aelin did not fight it as Elena leaned in to kiss her brow, where that damning mark had been her whole life. A bit of chattel, branded for the slaughterhouse.

Brannon’s mark. The mark of the bastard-born ... the Nameless.

Nameless is my price. To buy them a future, she’d pay it.

She’d done as much as she could to set things in motion to ensure that once she was gone, help would still come. It was the only thing she could give them, her last gift to Terrasen. To those she loved with her heart of wildfire.

Elena stroked her cheek. Then the ancient queen and the mists were gone.

Sunlight flooded them, blinding Aelin and Manon so violently that they hissed and slammed into each other. The brine of the sea, crash of nearby waves, and rustle of seagrasses greeted them. And beyond that, distantly: the clamor and bellowing of all-out war.

They were on the outskirts of the marshes, upon the lip of the sea itself, the battle miles and miles out to sea. They must have traveled within the mists, somehow—

A soft female laugh slithered through the grass. Aelin knew that laugh.

And knew that somehow, perhaps they had not traveled through the mists ...

But they had been placed here. By whatever forces were at work, whatever gods watching.

To stand in the sandy field before the turquoise sea, dead guards in Briarcliff armor slaughtered upon the nearby dunes, still bleeding out. To stand before Queen Maeve of the Fae.

Elide Lochan on her knees before her—with a Fae warrior's blade at her throat.

Aedion had faced armies, faced death more times than he could count, but this

...

Even with what Rowan had done ... the enemy ships still outnumbered them.

The battling between ships had become too dangerous, the magic-wielders too aware of Lysandra to allow her to attack beneath the waves.

She was now fighting viciously beside Aedion in ghost leopard form, taking down whatever Fae warriors tried to board their ship. Whatever soldiers made it through the shredding gauntlet of Rowan's and Dorian's magic.

His father had left. Fenrys and Lorcan, too. He'd last seen his father on the quarterdeck of one of the ships that had been under his command, a sword in each hand, the Lion poised for the kill. And as if sensing Aedion's gaze, a wall of golden light had wrapped around him.

Aedion wasn't stupid enough to demand Gavriel take it away, not as the shield shrank and shrank, until it covered Aedion like a second skin.

Minutes later, Gavriel was gone—vanished. But that magic shield remained.

That had been the start of the sharp turn they'd taken, going back on the defensive as sheer numbers and immortal-versus-mortal fighting took its toll on their fleet.

He had no doubt Maeve had something to do with it. But that bitch wasn't his problem.

No, his problem was the armada all around him; his problem was the fact that the enemy soldiers he engaged were highly trained and didn't go down easily. His problem was his sword arm ached, his shield was embedded with arrows and dented, and still more of those ships stretched away into the distance.

He did not let himself think about Aelin, about where she was. His Fae instincts pricked at the rumble of Rowan's and Dorian's magic surging up, then snapping into the enemy flank. Ships broke in the wake of that power; warriors drowned beneath the weight of their armor.

Their own ship rocked back from the one they'd been engaging thanks to the flood of power, and Aedion used the reprieve to whirl to Lysandra. Blood from

his own wounds and ones he'd inflicted covered him, mixing with the sweat running down his skin. He said to the shifter, "I want you to run."

Lysandra turned a fuzzy head toward him, pale green eyes narrowing slightly. Blood and gore dripped from her maw onto the wood planks.

Aedion held that gaze. "You turn into a bird or a moth or a fish—I don't rutting care—and you go. If we're about to fall, you run. That's an order."

She hissed, as if to say, *You don't give me orders.*

"I technically outrank you," he said, slashing his sword down his shield to clear it of two protruding arrows as they again swung in toward another ship crammed full of well-rested Fae warriors. "So you'll run. Or I'll kick your ass in the Afterworld."

Lysandra stalked up to him. A lesser man might have backed away from a predator that big prowling close. Some of his own soldiers did.

But Aedion held his ground as she rose on her back legs, those huge paws settling on his shoulders, and brought her bloodied feline face up to his. Her wet whiskers twitched.

Lysandra leaned in and nuzzled his cheek, his neck.

Then she trotted back to her place, blood splashing beneath her silent paws.

When she deigned to glance his way, spitting blood onto the deck, Aedion said softly, "The next time, do that in your human form."

Her puffy tail just curled a bit in answer.

But their ship rocked back toward their latest attacker. The temperature plummeted, either from Rowan or Dorian or one of the Whitethorn nobles, Aedion couldn't tell. They'd been lucky that Maeve had brought a fleet whose magic-wielders hailed mostly from Rowan's line.

Aedion braced himself, spreading apart his feet as wind and ice tore into the enemy lines. Fae soldiers, perhaps ones Rowan himself had commanded, screamed. But Rowan and Dorian struck relentlessly.

Line after line, Rowan and Dorian blasted their power into Maeve's fleet.

Yet more ships flooded past them, engaging Aedion and the others. Ansel of Briarcliff held the left flank, and ... the lines remained steady. Even if Maeve's armada still outnumbered them.

The first Fae soldier who cleared the railing of their ship headed right for Lysandra.

It was the last mistake the male made.

She leaped, dodging past his guard, and closed her jaws around his neck.

Bone crunched and blood sprayed.

Aedion leaped forward to engage the next soldier over the railing, cutting through the grappling hooks that arced and landed true.

Aedion loosed himself into a killing calm, an eye on the shifter, who took down soldier after soldier, his father's gold shield holding strong around her, too.

Death rained upon him.

Aedion did not let himself think about how many were left. How many Rowan and Dorian felled, the ruins of ships sinking around them, blood and flotsam choking the sea.

So Aedion kept killing.

And killing.

And killing.



Dorian's breath burned his throat, his magic was sluggish, a headache pulsed at his temples, but he kept unleashing his power upon the enemy lines while soldiers fought and died around him.

So many. So many trained warriors, a scant few of whom were blessed with magic—and had been wielding it to get past them.

He didn't dare see how the others were faring. All he heard were roars and snarls of wrath, shrieks of dying people, and the crack of wood and the snap of rope. Clouds had formed and gathered above, blocking out the sun.

His magic sang as it froze the life out of ships, out of soldiers, as it bathed in their death. But it still flagged. He'd lost track of how long it had been.

Still, they kept coming. And still, Manon and Aelin did not return.

Rowan held the front line, weapons angled, ready for any soldiers stupid enough to approach. But too many broke past their magic. Too many now steadily overwhelmed them.

As soon as he thought it, Aedion's bark of pain cut across the waves.

There was a roar of rage that echoed it. Was Aedion—

The coppery tang of blood coated Dorian's mouth—the burnout. Another roar, deep and bellowing, cleaved the world. Dorian braced himself, rallying his magic perhaps for the last time.

That roar sounded again as a mighty shape shot down from the heavy clouds.

A wyvern. A wyvern with shimmering wings.

And behind it, descending upon the Fae fleet with wicked delight, flew twelve others.

Lysandra knew that roar.

And then there was Abraxos, plunging from the heavy clouds, twelve other wyverns with riders behind him.

Iron-teeth witches.

“*Hold your fire!*” Rowan bellowed from half a dozen ships away, at the archers who had trained their few remaining arrows on the golden-haired witch closest to Abraxos, her pale-blue wyvern shrieking a war cry.

The other witches and their wyverns unleashed hell upon the Fae, smashing through the converging lines, snapping grappling ropes, buying them a moment’s reprieve. How they knew who to attack, what side to fight for—

Abraxos and eleven others angled northward in one smooth movement, then plowed into the panicking enemy fleet. The golden-haired rider, however, swept for Lysandra’s ship, her sky-blue wyvern gracefully landing on the prow.

The witch was beautiful, a strip of black braided leather across her brow, and she called to none of them in particular, “Where is Manon Blackbeak?”

“Who are you?” Aedion demanded, his voice a rasp. But there was recognition in his eyes, as if remembering that day at Temis’s temple—

The witch grinned, revealing white teeth, but iron glinted at her fingertips. “Asterin Blackbeak, at your service.” She scanned the embattled ships. “Where is Manon? Abraxos led—”

“It’s a long story, but she’s here,” Aedion shouted over the din. Lysandra crept closer, sizing up the witch, the coven that was now wreaking havoc upon the Fae lines. “You and your Thirteen save our asses, witch,” Aedion said, “and I’ll tell you anything you damn want.”

A wicked grin and an incline of her head. “Then we shall clear the field for you.”

Then Asterin and the wyvern soared up, and blasted between the waves, spearing for where the others were fighting.

At Asterin’s approach, the wyverns and riders reeled back, rising high into the air, falling into formation. A hammer about to strike.

The Fae knew it. They began throwing up feeble shields, shooting wildly for them, their panic making their aim sloppy. But the wyverns were covered in armor—efficient, beautiful armor.

The Thirteen laughed at their enemy as they slammed into its southern flank.

Lysandra wished she had strength left to shift—one last time. To join them in that glorious destruction.

The Thirteen herded the panicking ships between them, smashed them apart, wielding every weapon in their arsenal—wyverns, blades, iron teeth. What got past them received the brutal mercy of Rowan’s and Dorian’s magic. And what got past that magic ...

Lysandra found Aedion’s blood-splattered stare. The general-prince smirked in that insolent way of his, sending a thrill wilder than bloodlust through her. “We don’t want the witches to make us look bad, do we?”

Lysandra returned his smirk and lunged back into the fray.



Not many more.

Rowan’s magic was strained to the breaking point, his panic a dull roaring in the back of his mind, but he kept attacking, kept swinging his blades at any that got past his wind and ice, or Dorian’s own blasts of raw, unchecked power. Fenrys, Lorcan, and Gavriel had bolted an hour or lifetimes ago, vanishing to wherever Maeve had no doubt summoned them, but the armada held fast. Whoever Ansel of Briarcliff’s men were, they weren’t cowed by Fae warriors. And they were no strangers to bloodshed. Neither were Rolfe’s men. None of them ran.

The Thirteen continued to wreak havoc on Maeve’s panicking fleet. Asterin Blackbeak barked commands high above them, the twelve witches breaking the enemy lines with fierce, clever determination. If this was how one coven fought, then an army of them—

Rowan gritted his teeth as the remaining ships decided to be smarter than their dead companions and began to peel away. If Maeve gave the order to retreat—

Too bad. Too damn bad. He’d send her own ship down to the inky black himself.

He gave Asterin a sharp whistle the next time she passed overhead, rallying her Thirteen again. She whistled back in confirmation. The Thirteen launched

after the fleeing armada.

The battle ebbed, red waves laden with debris flowing past on the swift tide.

Rowan gave the order to the captain to hold the lines and deal with any stupidity from Maeve's armada if any ships decided not to turn tail.

His legs trembling, his arms shaking so badly he was afraid that if he let go of his weapons he wouldn't be able to pick them up again, Rowan shifted and soared high.

His cousins had joined the Thirteen in their pursuit of the fleet now trying to run. He avoided the urge to count. But—Rowan flew higher, scanning.

There was one boat missing.

A boat he'd sailed on, worked on, fought on in past wars and journeys.

Maeve's personal battleship, the *Nightingale*, was nowhere to be seen.

Not within the retreating fleet now fending off the Whitethorn royals and the Thirteen.

Not within the sinking hulks of ships now bleeding out in the water.

Rowan's blood chilled. But he dove fast and hard for Aedion and Lysandra's ship, where gore covered the deck so thickly it rippled as he shifted and set down in it.

Aedion was covered in blood, both his own and others'; Lysandra was purging a stomach full of it. Rowan managed to will his legs into maneuvering around fallen Fae. He did not look too closely at their faces.

"Is she back?" Aedion instantly demanded, wincing as he put weight on his thigh. Rowan surveyed his brother's wound. He'd have to heal him soon—as soon as his magic replenished. In a place like this, even Aedion's Fae blood couldn't keep the infection away long.

"I don't know," Rowan said.

"*Find her*," Aedion growled. He broke Rowan's stare only to watch Lysandra shift into her human form—and ran an eye over the injuries that peppered her skin.

Rowan's skin tightened over his bones. He had the feeling that the ground was about to slip from under his feet as Dorian appeared at the rail of the main deck, gaunt-faced and haggard, no doubt having used the last of his magic to propel a longboat over, and panted, "The coast. Aelin is out by the coast where we sent Elide—they all are."

That was miles away. How the hell had they gotten there?

"How do you know?" Lysandra demanded, tying back her hair with bloody fingers.

“Because I can feel something out there,” Dorian said. “Flame and shadow and death. Like Lorcan and Aelin and someone else. Someone ancient. Powerful.” Rowan braced himself for it, but he still wasn’t ready for the pure terror when Dorian added, “And female.”

Maeve had found them.

The battle had not been for any sort of victory or conquest.

But a distraction. While Maeve slipped away to get the real prize.

They’d never arrive fast enough. If he flew on his own, his magic already drained to the breaking point, he would be of little help. They stood a better chance, *Aelin* stood a better chance, if they were all there.

Rowan whirled to the horizon behind them—to the wyverns destroying the remnants of the fleet. Rowing would take too long; his magic was gutted. But a wyvern ... That might do.

The Queen of the Fae was exactly as Aelin remembered. Swirling dark robes, a beautiful pale face beneath onyx hair, red lips set in a faint smile ... No crown adorned her head, for all who breathed, even the dead who slumbered, would know her for what she was.

Dreams and nightmares given form; the dark face of the moon.

And kneeling before Maeve, a stone-faced sentry holding a blade to her bare throat, Elide trembled. Her guards, all men in Ansel's armor, had likely been killed before they could shout a warning. From the weapons that were only half out of their sheaths, they hadn't even had the chance to fight.

Manon had gone still as death at the sight of Elide, her iron nails sliding free.

Aelin forced a half smile to her mouth, shoved her raw, bleeding heart into a box deep inside her chest. "Not as impressive as Doranelle, if you ask me, but at least a swamp really reflects your true nature, you know? It'll be a wonderful new home for you. Definitely worth the cost of coming all this way to conquer it."

At the edge of the hill that flowed down to the beach a small party of Fae warriors monitored them. Male and female, all armed, all strangers. A massive, elegant ship idled in the calm bay beyond.

Maeve smiled slightly. "What a joy, to learn that your usual good spirits remain undimmed in such dark days."

"How could they not, when so many of your pretty males are in my company?"

Maeve cocked her head, her heavy curtain of dark hair sliding off a shoulder. And as if in answer, Lorcan appeared at the edge of the dunes, panting, wild-eyed, sword out. His focus—and horror, Aelin realized—on Elide. On the sentry holding the blade against her white neck. Maeve gave a little smile to the warrior, but looked to Manon.

With her attention elsewhere, Lorcan took up a place at Aelin's side—as if they were somehow allies in this, would fight back-to-back. Aelin didn't bother to say anything to him. Not as Maeve said to the witch, "I know your face."

That face remained cold and impassive. “Let the girl go.”

A small, breathy laugh. “Ah.” Aelin’s stomach clenched as that ancient focus shifted to Elide. “Claimed by queen, and witch, and ... my Second, it seems.”

Aelin tensed. She didn’t think Lorcan was breathing beside her.

Maeve toyed with a strand of Elide’s limp hair. The Lady of Perranth shook. “The girl who Lorcan Salvaterre summoned me to save.”

That ripple of Lorcan’s power the day Ansel’s fleet had closed in ... She’d known it was a summoning. The same way she’d summoned the Valg to Skull’s Bay. She’d refused to immediately explain Ansel’s presence, wanting to enjoy the surprise of it, and he had summoned Maeve’s armada to take on what he’d believed to be an enemy fleet. To save Elide.

Lorcan just said, “I’m sorry.”

Aelin didn’t know if it was to her or Elide, whose eyes now widened with outrage. But Aelin said, “You think I didn’t know? That I didn’t take precautions?”

Lorcan’s brows furrowed. Aelin shrugged.

But Maeve went on, “Lady Elide Lochan, daughter of Cal and Marion Lochan. No wonder the witch itches to retrieve you, if her bloodline runs in your veins.”

Manon snarled a warning.

Aelin drawled to the Fae Queen, “Well, you didn’t drag your ancient carcass all the way here for nothing. So let’s get on with it. What do you want for the girl?”

That adder’s smile curled Maeve’s lips again.



Elide was trembling; every bone, every pore was trembling in terror at the immortal queen standing above her, at the guard’s blade at her throat. The rest of the queen’s escort remained distant—but it was to the escort that Lorcan kept glancing, his face tight, his own body near-shaking with restrained wrath.

This was the queen to whom he’d given his heart? This cold creature who looked at the world with mirthless eyes? Who had killed those soldiers without a blink of hesitation?

The queen whom Lorcan had summoned for *her*. He’d brought Maeve to save *her*—

Elide’s breath turned sharp in her throat. He’d betrayed them. Betrayed *Aelin*

for her—

“What should I demand as payment for the girl?” Maeve mused, taking a few steps toward them, graceful as a moonbeam. “Why doesn’t my Second tell me? So busy, Lorcan. You’ve been so, so busy these months.”

His voice was hoarse as he lowered his head. “I did it for you, Majesty.”

“Then where is my ring? Where are my keys?”

A ring. Elide was willing to bet it was the golden one on her own finger, hidden beneath her other hand as she clenched them before her.

But Lorcan pointed his chin toward Aelin. “She has them. Two keys.”

Cold clanged through Elide. “Lorcan.” The guard’s blade twitched at her throat.

Aelin only leveled a cool stare at Lorcan.

He didn’t look at either Elide or Aelin. Didn’t so much as acknowledge their existence as he went on, “Aelin has two, and probably has a good inkling where Erawan hides the third.”

“Lorcan,” Elide pleaded. No—no, he wasn’t about to do this, about to betray them again—

“*Be quiet,*” he growled at her.

Maeve’s gaze again drifted down to Elide. The ancient, eternal darkness in it was smothering. “What familiarity you use when you speak his name, Lady of Perranth. What intimacy.”

Aelin’s little snort was her only warning sign. “Don’t you have better things to do than terrorize humans? Release the girl and let’s settle this the fun way.”

Flame danced at Aelin’s fingertips.

No. Her magic had been emptied, still hovered near burnout.

But Aelin stepped forward, nudging Manon with the side of her body as she passed—forcing the witch to back away. Aelin grinned. “Want to dance, Maeve?”

But Aelin shot a cutting glance over her shoulder at Manon as if to say, *Run. Grab Elide the moment Maeve’s guard is down and run.*

Maeve returned Aelin’s smile. “I don’t think you’d be a suitable dance partner right now. Not when your magic is nearly depleted. Did you think my arrival was merely dependent upon Lorcan’s summoning? Who do you think even whispered to Morath you were indeed down here? Of course, the fools didn’t realize that when you had drained yourself on their armies, I’d be waiting. You were already exhausted after putting out the fires I had my armada ignite to tire you on Eyllwe’s coast. It was a convenience that Lorcan gave your precise

location and saved me the energy of tracking you down myself.”

A trap. An enormous, wicked trap. To drain Aelin’s power over days—weeks. But Aelin lifted a brow. “You brought an entire armada just to start a few fires?”

“I brought an armada to see if you’d rise to the occasion. Which, apparently, Prince Rowan has done.”

Hope soared in Elide’s chest. But then Maeve said, “The armada was a precaution. Just in case the ilken didn’t arrive for you to wholly drain yourself ... I figured a few hundred ships would make for good kindling until I was ready.”

To sacrifice her own fleet—or part of it—to gain one prize ... This was madness. The queen was utterly insane. “Do something,” Elide hissed at Lorcan, at Manon. “*Do something.*”

Neither of them responded.

The flame around Aelin’s fingers grew to encompass her hand—then her arm as she said to the ancient queen, “All I hear is a lot of chitchat.”

Maeve glanced at her escort, and they stepped away. Hauled Elide with them, the blade still at her throat.

Aelin said sharply to Manon, “*Get out of range.*”

The witch fell back, but her eyes were on the guard holding Elide, gobbling down every detail she could.

“You can’t possibly hope to win,” Maeve said, as if they were about to play cards.

“At least we’ll enjoy ourselves until the end,” Aelin crooned back, flame now encasing her entirely.

“Oh, I have no interest in killing you,” Maeve purred.

Then they exploded.

Flame slammed outward, red and golden—just as a wall of darkness lashed for Aelin.

The impact shook the world.

Even Manon was thrown on her ass.

But Lorcan was already moving.

The guard holding Elide showered her hair with blood as Lorcan slit his throat.

The other two guards behind him died with a hatchet to the face, one after another. Elide surged up, her leg barking in pain, running for Manon on pure, blind instinct, but Lorcan gripped her by the collar of her tunic. “*Stupid fool,*” he snapped, and she clawed at him—

“Lorcan, hold the girl,” Maeve said quietly, not even looking toward them. “Don’t get any stupid ideas about fleeing with her.” He went utterly still, his hold tightening.

Maeve and Aelin struck again.

Light and darkness.

Sand shuddered down the dunes, the waves rippled.

Only now—Maeve had only dared attack Aelin now.

Because Aelin at her full strength ...

Aelin could beat her.

But Aelin, nearly depleted of her power ...

“Please,” Elide begged Lorcan. But he held her firm, slave to the order Maeve had given, one eye on the battling queens, the other on the escorts who weren’t foolish enough to approach after witnessing what he’d done to their companions.

“Run,” Lorcan said in her ear. “If you wish to live, *run*, Elide. Shove me off—work around her command. Push me, and *run*.”

She would not. She’d sooner die than flee like a coward, not when Aelin was going to the mat for all of them, when—

Darkness devoured flame.

And even Manon flinched as Aelin was slammed back.

A paper-thin wall of flame kept that darkness from hitting home. A wall that wavered—

Help. They needed help—

Maeve lashed to the left, and Aelin threw up a hand, fire deflecting.

Aelin didn’t see the blow to the right. Elide screamed in warning, but too late.

A whip of black sliced into Aelin.

She went down.

And Elide thought the impact of Aelin Galathynius’s knees hitting the sand might have been the most horrible sound she’d ever heard.

Maeve did not waste her advantage.

Darkness poured down, pounding again and again. Aelin deflected, but it got past her.

There was nothing Elide could do as Aelin screamed.

As that dark, ancient power struck her like a hammer over an anvil.

Elide begged Manon, now mere feet away, “Do something.”

Manon ignored her, eyes fixed on the battle before them.

Aelin crawled backward, blood sliding from her right nostril. Dripping on her white shirt.

Maeve advanced, the darkness swirling around her like a fell wind.

Aelin tried to rise.

Tried, but her legs had given out. The Queen of Terrasen panted, fire flickering like dying embers around her.

Maeve pointed with a finger.

A black whip, faster than Aelin's fire, lashed out. Wrapped around her throat. Aelin gripped it, thrashing, her teeth bared, flame flaring over and over.

"Why don't you use the keys, Aelin?" Maeve purred. "Surely you'd win that way."

Use them, Elide begged her. Use them.

But Aelin did not.

The coil of darkness tightened around Aelin's throat.

Flames sparked and died out.

Then the darkness expanded, encompassing Aelin again and squeezing tight, squeezing until she was screaming, screaming in a way that Elide knew meant unfathomable agony—

A low, vicious snarl rippled from nearby, the only warning as a massive wolf leaped through the seagrasses and shifted. Fenrys.

A heartbeat later, a mountain lion charged over a dune, beheld the scene, and shifted as well. Gavriel.

"Let her go," Fenrys growled at the dark queen, advancing a step. "Let her go *now*."

Maeve turned her head, that darkness still lashing Aelin. "Look who finally arrived. Another set of traitors." She smoothed a wrinkle in her flowing gown. "What a valiant effort you made, Fenrys, delaying your arrival on this beach for as long as you could withstand my summons." She clicked her tongue. "Did you enjoy playing loyal subject while panting after the young Queen of Fire?"

As if in answer, the darkness squeezed in tight—and Aelin screamed again.

"*Stop it,*" Fenrys snapped.

"Maeve, please," Gavriel said, exposing his palms to her.

"Maeve?" the queen crooned. "Not Majesty? Has the Lion gone a bit feral? Perhaps too much time with his unchecked, half-breed bastard?"

"Leave him out of this," Gavriel said too softly.

But Maeve let the darkness around Aelin part.

She was curled on her side, bleeding from both nostrils now, more blood

dribbling from her panting mouth.

Fenrys lunged for her. A wall of black slammed up between them.

“I don’t think so,” Maeve crooned.

Aelin gasped for air, eyes glassy with pain. Eyes that slid to Elide’s. Aelin’s bloody, chapped mouth formed the word again. *Run.*

She would not. Could not.

Aelin’s arms shook as she tried to raise herself. And Elide knew there was no magic left.

No fire left in the queen. Not one ember.

And the only way Aelin could face this, accept this, was to go down swinging. Like Marion had.

Aelin’s wet, rasping breaths were the only sound above the crashing waves behind them. Even the battle had gone quiet in the distance. Over—or perhaps they were all dead.

Manon still stood there. Still did not move. Elide begged her, “Please. *Please.*”

Maeve smiled at the witch. “I have no quarrel with you, Blackbeak. Stay out of this and you are free to go where you wish.”

“*Please,*” Elide pleaded.

Manon’s gold eyes were hard. Cold. She nodded to Maeve. “Agreed.”

Something in Elide’s chest cleaved open.

But Gavriel said from across their little circle, “Majesty—please. Leave Aelin Galathynius to her own war here. Let us return home.”

“Home?” Maeve asked. The black wall between Fenrys and Aelin lowered—but the warrior did not try to cross. He just stared at Aelin, stared at her in that way Elide herself must be looking. He didn’t break that stare until Maeve said to Gavriel, “Is Doranelle still your home?”

“Yes, Majesty,” Gavriel said calmly. “It is an honor to call it such.”

“Honor ... ,” Maeve mused. “Yes, you and honor go hand in hand, don’t they? But what of the honor of your vow, Gavriel?”

“I have kept my vow to you.”

“Did I or did I not tell you to execute Lorcan on sight?”

“There were ... circumstances that prevented it from happening. We tried.”

“Yet you failed. Am I not supposed to discipline my blood-bonded who fail me?”

Gavriel lowered his head. “Of course—we will accept it. And I will also take on the punishment you intended for Aelin Galathynius.”

Aelin lifted her head slightly, glazed eyes going wide. She tried to speak, but the words had been broken from her, her voice blown out from screaming. Elide knew the word the queen mouthed. *No*.

Not for her. Elide wondered if Gavriel's sacrifice was not only for Aelin's sake. But for Aedion's. So the son would not have to bear the pain of his queen being hurt—

"Aelin Galathynius," Maeve mused. "So much talk about Aelin Galathynius. The Queen Who Was Promised. Well, Gavriel"—a vicious smile—"if you're so invested in her court, why don't you join it?"

Fenrys tensed, preparing to lunge in front of the dark power for his friend.

But Maeve said, "I sever the blood oath with you, Gavriel. Without honor, without good faith. You are dismissed from my service and stripped of your title."

"You *bitch*," Fenrys snapped as Gavriel's breathing turned shallow.

"Majesty, please—" Gavriel hissed, clapping a hand over his arm as invisible claws raked two lines down his skin, drawing blood that spilled into the grass. A similar mark appeared on Maeve's arm, her blood spilling.

"It is done," she said simply. "Let the world know you, a male of honor, have none. That you betrayed your queen for another, for a bastard get of yours."

Gavriel stumbled back—then collapsed in the sand, a hand shoved against his chest. Fenrys snarled, his face more lupine than Fae, but Maeve laughed softly. "Oh, you'd like for me to do the same, wouldn't you, Fenrys? But what greater punishment for the one who is a traitor to me in his very soul than to serve me forever?"

Fenrys hissed, his breath coming in ragged gulps, and Elide wondered if he'd leap upon the queen and try to kill her.

But Maeve turned to Aelin and said, "Get up."

Aelin tried. Her body failed her.

Maeve clicked her tongue, and an invisible hand hauled Aelin to her feet. Pain-fogged eyes cleared, then filled with cold rage as Aelin took in the approaching queen.

An assassin, Elide reminded herself. Aelin was an *assassin*, and if Maeve got close enough ...

But Maeve didn't. And those invisible hands cut the tethers on Aelin's sword belts. Goldryn thunked to the ground. Then daggers slid from their sheaths.

"So many weapons," Maeve contemplated as the invisible hands disarmed Aelin with brutal efficiency. Even blades hidden beneath clothes found their way

out—slicing as they went. Blood bloomed beneath Aelin’s shirt and pants. Why did she stand there—

Gathering her strength. For one last strike. One last stand.

Let the queen believe her broken. “Why?” Aelin rasped. Buying herself time.

Maeve toed a fallen dagger, the blade edged with Aelin’s blood. “Why bother with you at all? Because I can’t very well let you sacrifice yourself to forge a new Lock, can I? Not when you already have what I want. And I have known for a very, very long time that you would give me what I seek, Aelin Galathynius, and have taken the steps toward ensuring that.”

Aelin breathed, “What?”

Maeve said, “Haven’t you figured it out? Why I wanted your mother to bring you to me, why I demanded such things of you this spring?”

None of them dared move.

Maeve snorted, a delicate, feminine sound of triumph. “Brannon stole the keys from me, after I took them from the Valg. They were mine, and he snatched them. And then he mated with that goddess of yours, breeding the fire into the bloodline, ensuring I would think hard before touching his land, his heirs. But all bloodlines fade. And I knew a time would come when Brannon’s flames would dim to a flicker, and I’d be poised to strike.”

Aelin sagged against the hands that held her up.

“But in my dark power, I saw a glimmer of the future. I saw that Mala’s power would surge again. And that you would lead me to the keys. Only you—the one Brannon left clues for, the one who could find all three. And I saw who you were, what you were. I saw who you loved. I saw your mate.”

The sea breeze hissing through the grasses was the only sound.

“What a powerhouse you two would be—you and Prince Rowan. And any offspring of that union ...” A vicious smirk. “You and Rowan could rule this continent if you wished. But your children ... your children would be powerful enough to rule an empire that could sweep the world.”

Aelin closed her eyes. The Fae males were shaking their heads slowly—not believing it.

“I didn’t know when *you* would be born, but when Prince Rowan Whitethorn came into this world, when he came of age and was the strongest purebred Fae male in my realm ... you were still not there. And I knew what I would have to do. To leash you. To break you to my will, to hand over those keys without thought once you were strong and trained enough to acquire them.”

Aelin’s shoulders shook. Tears slid out past her closed eyes.

“It was so easy to tug on the right psychic thread that day Rowan saw Lyria at the market. To shove him down that other path, to trick those instincts. A slight altering of fate.”

“Oh, gods,” Fenrys breathed.

Maeve said, “So your mate was given to another. And I let him fall in love, let him get her with child. And then I broke him. No one ever asked how those enemy forces came to pass by his mountain home.”

Aelin’s knees gave out completely. Only the invisible hands kept her upright as she wept.

“He took the blood oath without question. And I knew that whenever you were born, whenever you’d come of age ... I’d ensure that your paths crossed, and you’d take one look at each other and I’d have you by the throat. Anything I asked for, you’d give to me. Even the keys. For your mate, you could do no less. You almost did that day in Doranelle.”

Slowly, Aelin slid her feet under herself again, the movement so pained that Elide cringed. But Aelin lifted her head, lip curling back from her teeth.

“I will *kill you*,” Aelin snarled at the Fae Queen.

“That’s what you said to Rowan after you met him, wasn’t it?” Maeve’s faint smile lingered. “I’d pushed and pushed your mother to bring you to me, so you could meet him, so I could have you at last when Rowan felt the bond, but she refused. And we know how well that turned out for her. And during those ten years afterward, I knew you were alive. Somewhere. But when *you* came to *me* ... when you and your mate looked at each other with only hate in your eyes ... I’ll admit I did not anticipate it. That I had broken Rowan Whitethorn so thoroughly that he did not recognize his own mate—that you were so broken by your own pain you didn’t notice, either. And when the signs appeared, the *carranam* bond washed away any suspicion on his part that you might be his. But not you. How long has it been, Aelin, since you realized he was your mate?”

Aelin said nothing, her eyes churning with rage and grief and despair.

Elide whispered, “Leave her alone.” Lorcan’s grip on her tightened in warning.

Maeve ignored her. “Well? When did you know?”

“At Temis’s temple,” Aelin admitted, glancing to Manon. “The moment the arrow went through his shoulder. Months ago.”

“And you’ve hidden it from him, no doubt to save him from any guilt regarding Lyria, any sort of emotional distress ...” Maeve clicked her tongue. “What a noble little liar you are.”

Aelin stared at nothing, her eyes going blank.

“I had planned for him to be here,” Maeve said, frowning at the horizon. “Since letting you two go that day in Doranelle was so that you could lead me to the keys again. I even let you think you’d gotten away with it, by freeing him. You had no idea that I *unleashed* you. But if he’s not here ... I’ll have to make do.”

Aelin stiffened. Fenrys snarled in warning.

Maeve shrugged. “If it’s any consolation, Aelin, you would have had a thousand years with Prince Rowan. Longer.”

The world slowed, and Elide could hear her own blood roaring in her ears as Maeve said, “My sister Mab’s line ran true. The full powers, shifting abilities, and the immortality of the Fae. You’re likely about five years away from Settling.”

Aelin’s face crumpled. This was not a draining of magic and physical strength, but of spirit.

“Perhaps we’ll celebrate your Settling together,” Maeve mused, “since I certainly have no plans to waste you on that Lock. To waste the keys, when they are meant to be *wielded*, Aelin.”

“Maeve, please,” Fenrys breathed.

Maeve examined her immaculate nails. “What I find to be truly amusing is that it seems I didn’t even need you to be Rowan’s mate. Or really need to break him at all. A fascinating experiment in my own powers, if anything. But since I doubt you’ll still go willingly, not at least without trying to die on me first, I’ll let you have a choice.”

Aelin seemed to be bracing herself as Maeve lifted a hand and said, “Cairn.”

The males went rigid. Lorcan turned near-feral behind Elide, subtly trying to drag her back, to work around the order he’d been given.

A handsome, brown-haired warrior walked toward them from the cluster of escorts. Handsome, if it weren’t for the sadistic cruelty singing in his blue eyes. If it wasn’t for the blades at his sides, the whip curled along one hip, the sneering smile. She’d seen that smile before—on Vernon’s face. On so many faces at Morath.

“Allow me to introduce the newest member of my cadre, as you like to call them. Cairn, meet Aelin Galathynius.”

Cairn stepped up to his queen’s side. And the look the male gave Elide’s queen made her stomach turn over. *Sadist*—yes, that was the word for him, without him even saying one himself.

“Cairn,” Maeve said, “is trained in abilities that you have in common. Of course, you only had a few years to learn the art of torment, but ... perhaps Cairn can teach you some of the things he’s learned in his centuries of practicing.”

Fenrys was pale with rage. “Maeve, *I beg you—*”

Darkness slammed into Fenrys, shoving him to his knees, forcing his head to the dirt. “*That is enough,*” Maeve hissed.

Maeve was smiling again when she turned back to Aelin. “I said you have a choice. And you do. Either you come willingly with me and get acquainted with Cairn, or ...”

Those eyes slid to Lorcan. To Elide.

And Elide’s heart stopped as Maeve said, “Or I still take you—and bring Elide Lochan with us. I’m certain she and Cairn will get along wonderfully.”

Aelin's body hurt.

Everything hurt. Her blood, her breath, her bones.

There was no magic left. Nothing left to save her.

"No," Lorcan said softly.

Just turning her head sparked agony down her spine. But Aelin looked at Elide, at Lorcan forced to hold her, his face white with pure terror as he glanced between Cairn and Maeve and Elide. Manon was doing the same—sizing up the odds, how fast she'd have to be to clear the area.

Good. Good—Manon would get Elide out. The witch had been waiting for Aelin to make a move, not realizing that ... she had nothing left. There was no power left for a final strike.

And that dark power was still coiled around her bones, so tightly that one move of aggression ... one move, and her bones would snap.

Maeve said to Lorcan, "No to what, Lorcan? Elide Lochan being taken with us if Aelin decides to put up a fight, or my generous offer to leave Elide be if Her Majesty comes willingly?"

One look at the brown-haired Fae warrior—Cairn—standing at Maeve's side, and Aelin had known what he was. She'd killed enough of them over the years. She'd spent time with Rourke Farran. What he'd do to Elide ... Lorcan also knew what a male like Cairn would do to a young woman. And if he was sanctioned by Maeve herself ...

Lorcan said, "She is innocent. Take the queen, and let us go."

Manon even snapped at Maeve, "She belongs to the Ironteeth. If you have no quarrel with me, then you have no quarrel with her. Leave Elide Lochan out of it."

Maeve ignored Manon and drawled to Lorcan, "I command you to stand down. I command you to watch and do nothing. I command you to not move or speak until I say so. The order applies to you as well, Fenrys."

And Lorcan obeyed. So did Fenrys. Their bodies simply stiffened—and then nothing.

Elide twisted to beg Lorcan, “You can stop this, you can fight it—”

Lorcan didn’t even look at her.

Aelin knew Elide would fight. Would not understand that Maeve had been playing this game for centuries, and had waited until this moment, until the trap was perfect, to seize her.

Aelin found Maeve smiling at her. She had played, and gambled, and lost.

Maeve nodded as if to say yes.

The unspoken question danced in Aelin’s eyes as Elide screamed at Lorcan, at Manon, to help. But the witch knew her orders. Her task.

Maeve read the question in Aelin’s face and said, “I will bear the keys in one hand, and Aelin Fire-Bringer in the other.”

She’d have to break her first. Kill her or break ...

Cairn grinned.

The escorts were now hauling something up the beach, from the longboat they’d rowed over from their awaiting ship. Already, the dark sails were unfurling.

Elide faced Maeve, who did not deign to glance her way. “Please, please—”

Aelin simply nodded at the Fae Queen. Her acceptance and surrender.

Maeve bowed her head, triumph dancing on her red lips. “Lorcan, release her.”

The warrior’s hands slackened at his sides.

And because she had won, Maeve even loosened her power’s grip on Aelin’s bones. Allowed Aelin to turn to Elide and say, “Go with Manon. She will take care of you.”

Elide began crying, shoving away from Lorcan. “I’ll go with you, I’ll come with you—”

The girl would. The girl would face Cairn, and Maeve ... But Terrasen would need that sort of courage. If it was to survive, if it was to heal, Terrasen would need Elide Lochan.

“Tell the others,” Aelin breathed, trying to find the right words. “Tell the others that I am sorry. Tell Lysandra to remember her promise, and that I will never stop being grateful. Tell Aedion ... Tell him it is not his fault, and that ...” Her voice cracked. “I wish he’d been able to take the oath, but Terrasen will look to him now, and the lines must not break.”

Elide nodded, tears sliding down her blood-splattered face.

“And tell Rowan ...”

Aelin’s soul splintered as she saw the iron box the escorts now carried

between them. An ancient, iron coffin. Big enough for one person. Crafted for her.

“And tell Rowan,” Aelin said, fighting her own sob, “that I’m sorry I lied. But tell him it was all borrowed time anyway. Even before today, I knew it was all just borrowed time, but I still wish we’d had more of it.” She fought past her trembling mouth. “Tell him he has to fight. He *must* save Terrasen, and remember the vows he made to me. And tell him ... tell him thank you—for walking that dark path with me back to the light.”

They opened the lid of the box, pulling out long, heavy chains within.

One of the escorts handed Maeve an ornate iron mask. She examined it in her hands.

The mask, the chains, the box ... they had been crafted long before now. Centuries ago. Forged to contain and break Mala’s scion.

Aelin glanced at Lorcan, whose dark eyes were fixed on her own.

And gratitude shone there. For sparing the young woman he’d given his heart to, whether he knew it or not.

Elide begged Maeve one last time, “Don’t do this.”

Aelin knew it would do her no good. So she said to Elide, “I’m glad we met. I’m proud to know you. And I think your mother would have been proud of you, too, Elide.”

Maeve lowered the mask and drawled to Aelin, “Rumor claims you will bow to no one, Heir of Fire.” That serpentine smile. “Well, now you will bow to me.”

She pointed to the sand.

Aelin obeyed.

Her knees barked as she dropped to the ground.

“Lower.”

Aelin slid her body until her brow was in the sand. She did not let herself feel it, let her soul feel it.

“Good.”

Elide was sobbing, wordlessly begging.

“Take off your shirt.”

Aelin hesitated—realizing where this was going.

Why Cairn’s belt carried a whip.

“Take off your shirt.”

Aelin tugged her shirt out of her pants and slung it over her head, tossing it in the sand beside her. Then she removed the flexible cloth around her breasts.

“Varik, Heiron.” Two Fae males came forward.

Aelin didn't fight as they each gripped her by an arm and hauled her up. Spread her arms wide. The sea air kissed her breasts, her navel.

"Ten lashes, Cairn. Let Her Majesty have a taste of what to expect when we reach our destination, if she does not cooperate."

"It would be my pleasure, Lady."

Aelin held Cairn's vicious gaze, willing ice into her veins as he thumbed free his whip. As he raked his eyes over her body and smiled. A canvas for him to paint with blood and pain.

Maeve said, the mask dangling from her fingers, "Why don't you count for us, Aelin?"

Aelin kept her mouth shut.

"Count, or we'll begin again with each stroke you miss. You decide how long this goes on for. Unless you'd rather Elide Lochan receive these strokes."

No. Never.

Never anyone else but her. *Never.*

But as Cairn walked slowly, savoring each step, as he let that whip drag along the ground, her body betrayed her. Began shaking.

She knew the pain. Knew what it'd feel like, what it'd sound like.

Her dreams were still full of it.

No doubt why Maeve had picked a whipping, why she'd done it to Rowan in Doranelle.

Cairn halted. She felt him studying the tattoo on her back. Rowan's loving words, written there in the Old Language.

Cairn snorted. Then she felt him revel in how he'd destroy that tattoo.

"Begin," Maeve said.

Cairn's breath sucked in.

And even bracing herself, even clamping down hard, there was nothing to prepare for the crack, the sting, the pain. She did not let herself cry out, only hissed through her teeth.

A whip wielded by an overseer at Endovier was one thing.

One wielded by a full-blooded Fae male ...

Blood slid down the back of her pants, her split skin screaming.

But she knew how to pace herself. How to yield to the pain. How to take it.

"What number was that, Aelin?"

She would not. She would *never* count for that rutting *bitch*—

"Start over, Cairn," Maeve said.

A breathy laugh. Then the crack and the pain and Aelin arched, the tendons

in her neck near snapping as she panted through clenched teeth. The males holding her gripped her firm enough to bruise.

Maeve and Cairn waited.

Aelin refused to say the word. To start the count. She'd die before she did it.

"Oh gods, oh gods," Elide sobbed.

"Start over," Maeve merely ordered over the girl.

So Cairn did.

Again.

Again.

Again.

They started over nine times before Aelin finally screamed. The blow had been right atop another one, tearing skin down to the bone.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Cairn was panting. Aelin refused to speak.

"Start over," Maeve repeated.

"Majesty," murmured one of the males holding her. "It might be prudent to postpone until later."

"There's still plenty of skin," Cairn snapped.

But the male said, "Others are approaching—still far off, but approaching."

Rowan.

Aelin whimpered then. Time—she had needed *time*—

Maeve made a small noise of distaste. "We'll continue later. Get her ready."

Aelin could barely lift her head as the males heaved her up. The movement set her body roaring in such pain that darkness swarmed in. But she fought it, gritted her teeth and silently roared back at that agony, that darkness.

A few feet away, Elide slid to her knees as if she'd beg until her body gave out, but Manon caught her. "We're going now," Manon said, tugging her away—inland.

"No," Elide spat, thrashing.

Lorcan's eyes widened, but with Maeve's command, he couldn't move, couldn't do anything as Manon slammed the hilt of Wind-Cleaver into the side of Elide's head.

The girl dropped like a stone. That was all Manon needed to haul her over a shoulder and say to Maeve, "Good luck." Her eyes slid to Aelin's once—only

once. Then she looked away.

Maeve ignored the witch as Manon prowled toward the heart of the marshes. Lorcan's body strained.

Strained—like he was fighting that blood oath with everything in him.

Aelin didn't care.

The males half dragged her toward Maeve.

Toward the iron box. And the chains. And the iron mask.

Whorls of fire, little suns, and embers had been shaped into its dark surface. A mockery of the power it was to contain—the power Maeve had needed to ensure was fully drained before she locked her up. The only way she could ever lock her up.

Every inch her feet dragged through the sand was a lifetime; every inch was a heartbeat. Blood soaked her pants. She likely wouldn't be able to heal her wounds within all that iron. Not until Maeve decided to heal them herself.

But Maeve wouldn't let her die. Not with the Wyrdkeys in the balance. Not yet.

Time—she was grateful Elena had given her that stolen time.

Grateful she had met them all, that she had seen some small part of the world, had heard such lovely music, had danced and laughed and known true friendship. Grateful that she had found Rowan.

She was grateful.

So Aelin Galathynius dried her tears.

And did not fight when Maeve strapped that beautiful iron mask over her face.

Manon kept walking.

She didn't dare look back. Didn't dare give that ancient, cold-eyed queen one hint that Aelin did not possess the Wyrdkeys. That Aelin had slipped them both into Manon's pocket when she'd nudged her. Elide would hate her for it—already did hate her for it.

Let that be the cost.

One look from Aelin and she'd known what she had to do.

Get the keys away from Maeve. Get Elide away.

They had forged an iron box to contain the Queen of Terrasen.

Elide stirred, at last coming to, just as they were nearly out of hearing range. She began thrashing, and Manon dumped her behind a dune, gripping the back of her neck so tightly Elide stilled at the iron nails piercing her skin.

"Silence," Manon hissed, and Elide obeyed.

Keeping low, they peered through the grasses. Only a moment—she could spare only a moment to watch, to glean where Maeve was taking the Queen of Terrasen.

Lorcan remained frozen as Maeve had commanded. Gavriel was barely conscious, panting in the grass, as if ripping that blood oath from him had been as grave as any physical wound.

Fenrys—Fenrys's eyes were alive with hatred as he watched Maeve and Cairn. Blood coated Cairn's whip, still dangling at his side as Maeve's soldiers finished strapping that mask over Aelin's face.

Then they clamped irons around her wrists.

Ankles.

Neck.

No one healed her ravaged back, barely more than a bloody slab of meat, as they guided her into the iron box. Made her lie upon her wounds.

And then slid the lid into place. Locked it.

Elide vomited in the grass.

Manon put a hand on the girl's back as the males began carrying the box

down the dunes, to the boat, and the ship beyond.

“Fenrys, go,” Maeve ordered, pointing to the ship.

Breathing raggedly but unable to refuse the order, Fenrys followed. He glanced once at the white shirt discarded in the sand. It was splattered with blood—spray from the whipping.

Then he was gone, stepping through air and wind and into nothing.

Alone with Lorcan, Maeve said to the warrior, “You have done all this—for me?”

He did not move. Maeve said, “Speak.”

Lorcan loosed a shuddering breath and said, “Yes. Yes—it was all for you. All of it.”

Elide gripped the seagrass in fistfuls, and Manon half wondered if she’d grow iron nails and shred it apart at the fury in her face. The hate.

Maeve stepped over Aelin’s blood-splattered shirt, and brushed her hand over Lorcan’s cheek. “I have no use,” she crooned, “for self-righteous males who think they know best.”

He stiffened. “Majesty—”

“I strip you of the blood oath. I strip you of your assets and your titles and your properties. You, like Gavriel, are released with dishonor and shame. You are exiled from Doranelle for your disobedience, your treachery. Should you step foot inside my borders, you will die.”

“Majesty, I beg you—”

“Go beg someone else. I have no use for a warrior I cannot trust. I rescind my kill order. Letting you live with the shame will be far worse for you, I think.”

Blood welled at his wrist, then hers. Spilling on the ground.

Lorcan fell to his knees.

“I do not suffer fools gladly,” Maeve said, leaving him in the sand, and walked away.

As if she’d dealt him a blow, the twin to Gavriel’s, Lorcan couldn’t seem to move, to think or breathe. He tried crawling, though. Toward Maeve. The bastard tried crawling.

“We need to go,” Manon murmured. The moment Maeve checked to see where those keys were ... They had to go.

A roar grumbled on the horizon.

Abraxos.

Her heart thundered in her chest, joy sparking, but—

Elide remained in the grass. Watching Lorcan crawl toward the queen now

striding across the beach, black gown flowing behind her.

Watching the boat row to the awaiting ship, that iron coffin in its center, Maeve sitting beside it, one hand on the lid. For her sanity, Manon prayed that Aelin wouldn't be awake the entire time she was inside.

And for the sake of their world, Manon prayed the Queen of Terrasen could survive it.

If only so Aelin could then die for them all.

There was so much blood.

It had spread to where Lorcan was kneeling, gleaming bright as it soaked into the sand.

It covered her shirt, discarded and forgotten beside him. It even speckled the scabbards of her swords and knives, littered around him like bones.

What Maeve had done ...

What Aelin had done ...

There was a hole in his chest.

And there was so much blood.

Wings and roaring and he still couldn't look up. Couldn't bring himself to care.

Elide's voice cut across the world, saying to someone, "The ship—the ship just *vanished*; she left without realizing we have the—"

Whoops of joy—female cries of happiness.

Thunderous, swift steps.

Then a hand gripping his hair, yanking back his head as a dagger settled along his throat. As Rowan's face, calm with lethal wrath, appeared in his vision.

"Where is Aelin."

There was pure panic, too—pure panic as Whitethorn saw the blood, the scattered blades, and the shirt.

"*Where is Aelin.*"

What had he done, what had he done—

Pain sliced Lorcan's neck, warm blood dribbled down his throat, his chest.

Rowan hissed, "*Where is my wife?*"

Lorcan swayed where he knelt.

Wife.

Wife.

"Oh, gods," Elide sobbed as she overheard, the words carrying the sound of Lorcan's own fractured heart. "Oh, gods ..."

And for the first time in centuries, Lorcan wept.

Rowan dug the dagger deeper into Lorcan's neck, even as tears slid down Lorcan's face.

What that woman had done ...

Aelin had known. That Lorcan had betrayed her and summoned Maeve here. That she had been living on borrowed time.

And she had married Whitethorn ... so Terrasen could have a king. Perhaps had been spurred into action because she knew Lorcan had already betrayed her, that Maeve was coming ...

And Lorcan had not helped her.

Whitethorn's wife.

His mate.

Aelin had let them whip and chain her, had gone willingly with Maeve, so Elide didn't enter Cairn's clutches. And it had been just as much a sacrifice for Elide as it had been a gift to him.

She had bowed to Maeve.

For Elide.

"Please," Rowan begged, his voice breaking as that calm fury fractured.

"Maeve took her," Manon said, approaching.

Gavriel rasped from where he knelt nearby, reeling from the severing of his blood oath, "She used the oath to keep us down—keep us from helping. Even Lorcan."

Rowan still didn't remove the knife from Lorcan's throat.

Lorcan had been wrong. He had been so wrong.

And he could not entirely regret it, not if Elide was safe, but ...

Aelin had refused to count. Cairn had unleashed his full strength on her with that whip, and she had refused to give them the satisfaction of counting.

"Where is the ship," Aedion demanded, then swore at the bloody shirt nearby. He grabbed Goldryn, frantically wiping the blood specks off the scabbard with his jacket.

"It vanished," Elide said again. "It just ... *vanished*."

Whitethorn stared down at him, agony and despair in those eyes. And Lorcan whispered, "I'm sorry."

Rowan dropped the knife, released the fist gripping Lorcan's hair. Staggered back a step. In the grass nearby, Dorian knelt beside Gavriel, a faint light glowing around them. Healing the wounds in his arms. There was nothing to be done for the soul-wound Maeve had dealt him, dealt Lorcan as well, in severing that oath with such dishonor.

Manon came closer, her witches now flanking her. They all sniffed at the blood. A golden-haired one swore softly.

Manon told them about the Lock.

About Elena. About the cost the gods demanded of her. Demanded of Aelin.

But it was Elide who then took up the thread, leaning against Lysandra, who was staring at that blood and that shirt as if it were a corpse, telling them what had happened on these dunes. What Aelin had sacrificed.

She told Rowan that he was Aelin's mate. Told him about Lyria.

She told them about the whipping, and the mask, and the box.

When Elide finished, they were silent. And Lorcan only watched as Aedion turned to Lysandra and snarled, "*You knew.*"

Lysandra did not flinch. "She asked me—that day on the boat. To help her. She told me the suspected price to banish Erawan and restore the keys. What I needed to do."

Aedion snarled, "What could *you* possibly ..."

Lysandra lifted her chin.

Rowan breathed, "Aelin would die to forge the new Lock to seal the keys into the gate—to banish Erawan. But no one would know. No one but us. Not while you wore her skin for the rest of your life."

Aedion dragged a hand through his blood-caked hair. "But any offspring with Rowan wouldn't look anything like—"

Lysandra's face was pleading. "You would fix that, Aedion. With me."

With the golden hair, the Ashryver eyes ... If that line bred true, the shifter's offspring could pass as royal. Aelin wanted Rowan on the throne—but it would be Aedion secretly siring the heirs.

Aedion flinched as if he'd been struck. "And when were you going to reveal this? Before or after I thought I was taking my gods-damned cousin to bed for whatever reason you concocted?"

Lysandra said softly, "I will not apologize to you. I serve her. And I am willing to spend the rest of my life pretending to be her so that her *sacrifice* isn't in vain—"

"You can go to hell," Aedion snapped. "You can *go to hell, you lying bitch!*"

Lysandra's answering snarl wasn't human.

Rowan just took Goldryn from the general and walked toward the sea, the wind tossing his silver hair.

Lorcan rose to his feet, swaying again. But Elide was there.

And there was nothing of the young woman he'd come to know in her pale,

taut face. Nothing of her in the raw voice as Elide said to Lorcan, “I hope you spend the rest of your miserable, immortal life suffering. I hope you spend it alone. I hope you live with regret and guilt in your heart and never find a way to endure it.”

Then she was heading for the Thirteen. The golden-haired one held up an arm, and Elide slipped beneath it, entering a sanctuary of wings and claws and teeth.

Lysandra stormed to tend to Gavriel, who had the good sense not to flinch at her still-snarling face, and Lorcan looked to Aedion to find the young general already watching him.

Hatred shone in Aedion’s eyes. Pure hatred. “Even before you got the order to stand down, you did nothing to help her. You summoned Maeve here. I will never forget that.”

Then he was striding for the beach—to where Rowan knelt in the sand.



Asterin was alive.

The Thirteen were alive. And it was joy in Manon’s heart—joy, she realized, as she beheld those smiling faces and smiled back.

She said to Asterin, all of them standing among their wyverns on a dune overlooking the sea, “How?”

Asterin brushed a hand over Elide’s hair as the girl wept into her shoulder. “Your grandmother’s bitches gave us one hell of a chase, but we managed to gut them. We’ve spent the past month looking for you. But Abraxos found us and seemed to know where you were, so we followed him.” She scratched at some dried blood on her cheek. “And saved your ass, apparently.”

Not soon enough, Manon thought, seeing Elide’s silent tears, the way the humans and Fae were either standing or arguing or just doing nothing.

Not soon enough to stop this. To save Aelin Galathynius.

“What do we do now?” Sorrel asked from where she leaned against her bull’s flank, wrapping up a slice in her forearm.

The Thirteen all looked to Manon, all waited.

She dared to ask, “Did you hear what my grandmother said before ... everything?”

“The Shadows told us,” Asterin said, eyes dancing.

“And?”

“And what?” Sorrel grunted. “So you’re half Crochan.”

“Crochan *Queen*.” And heir to Rhiannon Crochan’s likeness. Had the Ancients noted it?

Asterin shrugged. “Five centuries of pure-blooded Ironteeth couldn’t bring us home. Maybe you can.”

A child not of war ... but of peace.

“And will you follow me?” Manon asked them quietly. “To do what needs to be done before we can return to the Wastes?”

Aelin Galathynius had not beseeched Elena for another fate. She had only asked for one thing, one request of the ancient queen:

Will you come with me? For the same reason Manon had now asked them.

As one, the Thirteen lifted their fingers to their brows. As one, they lowered them.

Manon looked toward the sea, her throat tight.

“Aelin Galathynius willingly handed over her freedom so an Ironteeth witch could walk free,” Manon said. Elide straightened, pulling from Asterin’s arms. But Manon continued, “We owe her a life debt. And more than that ... It is time that we became better than our foremothers. We are all children of this land.”

“What are you going to do?” Asterin breathed, her eyes so bright.

Manon looked behind them. To the north.

“I am going to find the Crochans. And I am going to raise an army with them. For Aelin Galathynius. And her people. And for ours.”

“They’ll never trust us,” Sorrel said.

Asterin drawled, “Then we’ll have to just be our charming selves.”

Some of them smirked; some of them shifted on their feet.

Manon said again to her Thirteen, “Will you follow me?”

And when they all touched their fingers to their brows again, Manon returned the gesture.



Rowan and Aedion were sitting silently on the beach. Gavriel had recovered enough from the shock of the oath’s severing that he and Lorcan were now standing atop the bluff, talking quietly; Lysandra was sitting alone, in ghost leopard form, amongst the waving seagrasses; and Dorian was just ... watching them from the apex of a dune.

What Aelin had done ... what she’d lied about ...

Some of the blood on the ground had dried.

If Aelin was gone, if her life would indeed be the cost if she ever got free ...

“Maeve doesn’t have the two keys,” Manon said from Dorian’s side, having crept up silently. Her coven lingered behind her, Elide ensconced within their ranks. “In case you were concerned.”

Lorcan and Gavriel turned toward them. Then Lysandra.

Dorian dared to ask, “Then where are they?”

“I have them,” Manon said simply. “Aelin slid them into my pocket.”

Oh, Aelin. Aelin. She’d worked Maeve into such a frenzy, made the queen so focused on capturing *her* that she hadn’t thought to confirm if Aelin held the keys before she vanished.

She’d been dealt such a wicked, impossible hand—and yet Aelin had made it count. One last time, she’d made it count.

“It’s why I couldn’t do anything about it,” Manon said. “To help her. I had to look uninvolved. Neutral.” From where he sat on the beach below, Aedion had twisted toward them, his keen Fae hearing feeding him every word. Manon said to all of them, “I am sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t help.”

She reached into the pocket of her riding leathers and extended the Amulet of Orynth and a sliver of black stone to Dorian. He balked.

“Elena said Mala’s bloodline can stop this. It runs in both your houses.”

The golden eyes were weary—heavy. He realized what Manon was asking.

Aelin had never planned to see Terrasen again.

She had married Rowan knowing she would have months at best, days at the worst, with him. But she would give Terrasen a legal king. To hold her territory together.

She had made plans for all of them—and none for herself.

“The quest does not end here,” Dorian said softly.

Manon shook her head. And he knew she meant more than the keys, than the war, as she said, “No, it does not.”

He took the keys from her. They throbbed and flickered, warming his palm. A foreign, horrible presence, and yet ... all that stood between them and destruction.

No, the quest did not end here. Not even close. Dorian slid the keys into his pocket.

And the road that now sprawled away before him, curving into unknown, awaiting shadow ... it did not frighten him.

Rowan had married Aelin before dawn barely two days ago.

Aedion and Lysandra had been the only witnesses as they'd awoken the bleary-eyed captain, who married them quickly and quietly and signed a vow of secrecy.

They'd had fifteen minutes in their cabin to consummate that marriage.

Aedion still carried the formal documents; the captain bearing the duplicates.

Rowan had been kneeling on that spit of beach for half an hour now. Silent, wandering the paths of his churning thoughts. Aedion had kept him company, staring blankly at the sea.

Rowan had known.

Part of him had known that Aelin was his mate. And had turned away from that knowledge, again and again, out of respect for Lyria, out of terror for what it'd mean. He'd leapt in front of her at Skull's Bay knowing it, deep down. Knowing mates aware of the bond could not bear to harm each other, and that it might be the only force to compel her to regain control from Deanna. And even when she had proved him right ... He had turned from that proof, still unready, pushing it from his mind even as he claimed her in every other way.

Aelin had known, though. That he was her mate. And she had not pushed it, or demanded he face it, because she loved him, and he knew she'd rather carve out her own heart than cause him pain or distress.

His Fireheart.

His equal, his friend, his lover. His wife.

His mate.

That gods-damned bitch had put her in an iron box.

She'd whipped his mate so brutally that he'd rarely seen such blood spilled as a result. Then chained her. Then put Aelin in a veritable iron coffin, still bleeding, still hurting.

To contain her. To break her. To torture her.

His Fireheart, locked in the dark.

She'd tried to tell him. Right before the ilken converged.

Tried to tell him she'd vomited her guts up on the ship that day not because she was pregnant but because she'd realized she was going to die. That the cost of sealing the gate, forging a new Lock to do so, was her life. Her immortal life.

Goldryn lying beside him, its ruby dull in the bright sun, Rowan gathered up two fistfuls of sand and let the grains slide out, let the wind carry them toward the sea.

It was all borrowed time anyway.

Aelin did not expect them to come for her.

She, who had come for them, who had found them all. She had arranged for everything to fall into place when she yielded her life. When she gave up a thousand years to save them.

And Rowan knew she believed they'd make the right choice, the wise choice, and remain here. Lead their armies to victory—the armies she'd secured for them, guessing that she wouldn't be there to see it through.

She did not think she'd ever see him again.

He did not accept that.

He would not accept that.

And he would not accept that he had found her, and she had found him, and they had survived such sorrow and pain and despair together, only to be cleaved apart. He would not accept the fate that had been dealt to her, would not accept that her life was the asking price for saving this world. Her life, or Dorian's.

He would not accept it for one heartbeat.

Footsteps thudded on the sand, and he scented Lorcan before he bothered to look. For half a breath, he debated killing the male where he stood.

Rowan knew that today—today he'd win. Something had fractured in Lorcan, and if Rowan attacked now, the other male would die. Lorcan might not even put up much of a fight.

Lorcan's granite-hewn face was hard, but his eyes ... That was agony in them. And regret.

The others flowed down the dunes, the witch's coven remaining behind, and Aedion rose to his feet.

They all stared at Rowan as he remained kneeling.

The sea rolled away, undulating under the clearing blue sky.

He speared that bond into the world, casting it wide as a net. Flinging it out with his magic, his soul, his cracked heart. Searching for her.

Fight it, he willed her, sending the words down the bond—the mating bond, which perhaps had settled into place that first moment they'd become *carranam*,

hidden beneath flame and ice and hope for a better future. *Fight her. I am coming for you. Even if it takes me a thousand years. I will find you, I will find you, I will find you.*

Only salt and wind and water answered him.

Rowan rose to his feet. And slowly turned to face them.

But their attention snagged on the ships now sailing out of the west—from the battle site. His cousins' ships, with what remained of the fleet Ansel of Briarcliff had won for them, and Rolfe's three ships.

But it was not those boats that made him pause.

It was the one that rounded the eastern tip of the land—a longboat. It swept closer on a phantom wind, too fast to be natural.

Rowan braced himself. The boat's shape didn't belong to any of the fleets assembled. But its style nagged at his memory.

From their own fleet, Ansel of Briarcliff and Enda were soaring over the waves in a longboat, aiming for this beach.

But Rowan and the others watched in silence as the foreign boat crested through the surf and slid onto the sand.

Watched the olive-skinned sailors haul it up the beach. A broad-shouldered young man nimbly leaped out, his slightly curling dark hair tossed in the sea breeze.

He did not emit a whiff of fear as he stalked for them—didn't even go for the comforting touch of the fine sword at his side.

"Where is Aelin Galathynius?" the stranger asked a bit breathlessly as he scanned them.

And his accent ...

"Who are you," Rowan ground out.

But the young man was now close enough that Rowan could see the color of his eyes. Turquoise—with a core of gold.

Aedion breathed as if in a trance, "Galan."

Galan Ashryver, Crown Prince of Wendlyn.

The young man's eyes widened as he took in the warrior-prince. "*Aedion*," he said hoarsely, something like awe and grief in his face. But he blinked it away, self-assured and steady, and again asked, "Where is she?"

None of them answered. Aedion demanded, "What are you doing here?"

Galan's dark brows flicked toward each other. "I thought she would have informed you."

"Informed us of *what*?" Rowan said too quietly.

Galan reached into the pocket of his worn blue tunic, pulling out a crinkled letter that looked like it had been read a hundred times. He silently handed it to Rowan.

Her scent still clung to it as he unfolded the paper, Aedion reading over his shoulder.

Aelin's letter to the Prince of Wendlyn had been short. Brutal. The large letters were sprawled across the page as if her temper had gotten the better of her:

*TERRASEN REMEMBERS EVALIN ASHRYVER.
DO YOU?
I FOUGHT AT MISTWARD FOR YOUR PEOPLE.
RETURN THE GODS-DAMNED FAVOR.*

And then coordinates—for this spot.

“It only went to me,” Galan said softly. “Not to my father. Only to me.”

To the armada that Galan controlled—as a blockade runner against Adarlan.

“Rowan,” Lysandra murmured in warning. He followed her stare.

Not to where Ansel and Enda now arrived at the edge of their group, giving the Thirteen a wide berth as they lifted their brows at Galan.

But to the small company of white-clad people that appeared on the cresting dunes behind them, splattered in mud and looking like they had trekked across the marshes themselves.

And Rowan knew.

He knew who they were before they even reached the beach.

Ansel of Briarcliff had gone pale at the sight of their layered, flowing clothes. And as the tall male in their center peeled off his hood to reveal a brown-skinned, green-eyed face still handsome with youth, the Queen of the Wastes whispered, “Ilias.”

Ilias, son of the Mute Master of the Silent Assassins, gaped at Ansel, his back stiffening. But Rowan stepped toward the man, drawing his attention. Ilias's eyes narrowed in assessment. And he, like Galan, scanned them all, searching for a golden-haired woman who was not there. His eyes returned to Rowan as if he'd marked him as the axis of this group.

In a voice hoarse from disuse, Ilias asked him, “We have come to fulfill our life debt to Celaena Sardothien—to Aelin Galathynius. Where is she?”

“You are the *sessiz suikast*,” Dorian said, shaking his head. “The Silent

Assassins of the Red Desert.”

Ilias nodded. And glanced at Ansel, who still seemed near vomiting, before saying to Rowan, “It seems my friend has called in many debts in addition to ours.”

As if the words themselves were a signal, more white-clad figures filled the dunes behind them.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Rowan wondered if every single assassin from that desert Keep had come to honor their debt to the young woman. A lethal legion in themselves.

And Galan ...

Rowan turned to the Crown Prince of Wendlyn. “How many,” he asked. “How many did you bring?”

Galan only smiled a bit and pointed to the eastern horizon.

Where white sails now broke over its rim. Ship after ship after ship, each bearing the cobalt flag of Wendlyn.

“Tell Aelin Galathynius that Wendlyn has never forgotten Evalin Ashryver,” Galan said to him, to Aedion. “Or Terrasen.”

Aedion fell to his knees in the sand as Wendlyn’s armada spread before them.

I promise you that no matter how far I go, no matter the cost, when you call for my aid, I will come, Aelin had told him she’d sworn to Darrow. I’m going to call in old debts and promises. To raise an army of assassins and thieves and exiles and commoners.

And she had. She had meant and accomplished every word of it.

Rowan counted the ships that slid over the horizon. Counted the ships in their own armada. Added Rolfe’s—and the Mycenians he was rallying in the North.

“Holy gods,” Dorian breathed as Wendlyn’s armada kept spreading wider and wider.

Tears slid down Aedion’s face as he silently sobbed. *Where are our allies, Aelin? Where are our armies?* She had taken the criticism—taken it, because he knew she hadn’t wanted to disappoint them if she failed. Rowan put a hand on Aedion’s shoulder.

All of it for Terrasen, she had said that day she’d revealed she’d schemed her way into getting Arobynn’s fortune. And Rowan knew that every step she had taken, every plan and calculation, every secret and desperate gamble ...

For Terrasen. For them. For a better world.

Aelin Galathynius had raised an army not just to challenge Morath ... but to rattle the stars.

She'd known that she would not get to lead it. But she would still hold true to her promise to Darrow: *I promise you on my blood, on my family's name, that I will not turn my back on Terrasen as you have turned your back on me.*

And the last piece of it ... if Chaol Westfall and Nesryn Faliq could rally forces from the southern continent ...

Aedion at last looked up at him, eyes wide as he came to the same realization.

A chance. His wife, his mate, had bought them a fool's shot at this war.

And she did not believe that they would come for her.

"Galan?"

Rowan went still as death at the voice that floated over the dunes. At the golden-haired woman who wore the skin of his beloved.

Aedion shot to his feet, about to snarl, when Rowan gripped his arm.

When Lysandra, as Aelin, as she had promised, swept for them, grinning wide.

That smile ... It punched a hole through his heart. Lysandra had taught herself Aelin's smile, that bit of wickedness and delight, honed with that razor edge of cruelty.

Lysandra's acting, honed in the same hellhole Aelin had learned hers, was flawless as she spoke to Galan. As she spoke to Ilias, embracing him like a long-lost friend, and a relieved ally.

Aedion was trembling beside him. But the world could not know.

Their allies, their enemies, could not know that the immortal fire of Mala had been stolen. Leashed.

Galan said to the one whom he believed to be his cousin, "Where now?"

Lysandra looked to him, then to Aedion, not a sign of regret or guilt or doubt on her face. "We go north. To Terrasen."

Rowan's stomach turned leaden. But Lysandra caught his eye, and said steadily and casually, "Prince—I need you to retrieve something for me before you join us in the North."

Find her, find her, find her, the shifter seemed to beg.

Rowan nodded, at a loss for words. Lysandra took his hand, squeezed it once in thanks, a polite, public farewell between a queen and her consort, and stepped away.

"Come," Lysandra said to Galan and Ilias, motioning them toward where a

white-faced Ansel and frowning Enda waited. “We have matters to discuss before we head out.”

Then their little company was alone once more.

Aedion’s hands clenched and unclenched at his sides as he gazed after the shape-shifter wearing Aelin’s skin, leading their allies down the beach. To give them privacy.

An army to take on Morath. To give them a fighting chance ...

Sand whispered behind him as Lorcan stepped up to his side. “I will go with you. I will help you get her back.”

Gavriel rasped, “We’ll find her.” Aedion at last looked away from Lysandra at that. But he said nothing to his father—had said nothing to him at all since they’d landed on the beach.

Elide took a limping step closer, her voice as raw as Gavriel’s. “Together. We’ll go together.”

Lorcan gave the Lady of Perranth an assessing look that she made a point to ignore. His eyes flickered as he said to Rowan, “Fenrys is with her. He’ll know we’re coming for her—try to leave tracks if he can.”

If Maeve didn’t have him on lockdown. But Fenrys had battled the blood oath every day since swearing it. And if he was all that now stood between Cairn and Aelin ... Rowan didn’t let himself think about Cairn. About what Maeve had already had him do, or would do to her before the end. No—Fenrys would fight it. And Aelin would fight it.

Aelin would never stop fighting.

Rowan faced Aedion, and the warrior-prince again peeled his attention away from Lysandra long enough to meet his eyes. Aedion understood the look, and put a hand on the Sword of Orynth’s hilt. “I’ll go north. With—her. To oversee the armies, make sure it’s all in place.”

Rowan clasped Aedion’s forearm. “The lines have to hold. Buy us whatever time you can, brother.”

Aedion gripped his forearm in return, eyes burning bright. Rowan knew how much it killed him. But if the world believed Aelin was returning north, then one of her generals had to be at her side to lead her armies. And since Aedion commanded the loyalty of the Bane ... “Bring her back, Prince,” Aedion said, voice cracking. “Bring her home.”

Rowan held his brother’s stare and nodded. “We will see you again. All of you.”

He did not waste words persuading the warrior-prince to forgive the shifter.

He wasn't entirely sure what to even make of Aelin and Lysandra's plan. What *his* role would have been in it.

Dorian stepped forward, but glanced to Manon, who was staring toward the sea as if she could see wherever Maeve had spirited away her ship. Using that cloaking power she'd wielded to hide Fenrys and Gavriel in Skull's Bay—hide her armada from the eyes of Eyllwe. "The witches fly north," Dorian said. "And I will go with them. To see if I can do what needs to be done."

"Stay with us," Rowan offered. "We'll find a way to deal with the keys and the Lock and the gods—all of it."

Dorian shook his head. "If you go after Maeve, the keys should be kept far away. If I can help by doing this, by finding the third ... I will serve you better that way."

"You'll likely die," Aedion cut in sharply. "We go north to bloodshed and killing fields—you head into dangers far worse than that. Morath will be waiting." Rowan cut him a glare. But his brother was beyond caring. No, Aedion was riding a vicious, vulnerable edge right now—and it wouldn't take much for that edge to turn lethal. Especially when Dorian had played his part in separating Aelin from their group.

Dorian again looked to Manon, who now smiled faintly at him. It was a smile that softened her face, made it come alive. "He won't die if I can help it," the witch said, then surveyed them all. "We journey to find the Crochans—to rally what forces they might have."

A witch army to counter the Ironteeth legions.

Hope—precious, fragile hope—stirred Rowan's blood.

Manon merely jerked her chin in farewell and prowled up the bluff to her coven.

So Rowan nodded to Dorian. But the man bowed his head—not the gesture of a friend to a friend. But of one king to another.

Consort, he wanted to say. He was just her consort.

Even if she'd married him so he could have the legal right to save Terrasen and rebuild it. To command the armies she'd given everything to gather for them.

"When we are done, I will join you in Terrasen, Aedion," the King of Adarlan promised. "So that when you get back, Rowan—when *both* of you get back—there will be something left to fight for."

Aedion seemed to consider. To weigh the man's words and expression. And then the general-prince stepped forward and embraced the king. It was quick,

and hard, and Dorian flinched, but that edge in Aedion's grief-dull eyes had been eased a bit. Silently, Aedion glanced at Damaris, sheathed at Dorian's side. The blade of Adarlan's first and greatest king. Aedion seemed to weigh its presence, who bore it. At last, the general-prince nodded, more to himself than anyone. But Dorian still bowed his head in thanks.

When Aedion had stalked toward the longboats, deliberately stepping around Lysandra-Aelin when she tried to speak to him, Rowan said to the king, "You trust the witches?"

A nod. "They're leaving two wyverns to guard your ship to the edge of the continent. From there, they'll join us again—and you'll set off wherever ... wherever you need to go."

Maeve could have taken her anywhere, vanished that ship halfway across the world.

Rowan said to Dorian, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." A half smile. "Thank Manon."

If they all lived through this, if he got Aelin back, he would.

He embraced Dorian, wished the king well, and watched the man climb up the sandbank to the white-haired witch who waited for him.

Lysandra was already giving orders to Galan and Ilias regarding transporting the two hundred Silent Assassins onto Wendlyn's ships, Aedion monitoring with crossed arms. Ansel was deep in conversation with Endymion, who didn't seem to quite know what to do with the red-haired queen with a wolf's smile. Ansel, however, seemed already inclined to raise hell and have a damn good time doing it. Rowan wished he had more than a moment to spare to thank them both—to thank Enda and each one of his cousins.

All was set, all was ready for that desperate push north. As Aelin had planned.

There would be no rest, no waiting. They did not have the time to spare.

The wyverns stirred, flapping their wings. Dorian climbed into the saddle behind Manon and wrapped his arms around her waist. The witch said something that made him smile. Truly smile.

Dorian lifted his hand in farewell, wincing as Abraxos soared into the skies.

Ten other wyverns took to the air behind them.

The grinning, golden-haired witch—Asterin—and a slender, black-haired, green-eyed one named Briar waited atop their mounts for Gavriel, Lorcan, and Elide. To carry them to the ship that would take them hunting across the sea.

Lorcan made to step toward Elide as she approached Asterin's wyvern, but

she ignored him. Didn't even look at the male as she took Asterin's hand and was hauled up into the saddle. And though Lorcan hid it well, Rowan caught the glimmer of devastation on those centuries-hardened features.

Gavriel's barked curse as he gripped the golden-haired witch's waist was the only sound of his unease as they flapped into the sky. Only when they were all airborne did Rowan slowly walk up the sandy hill, tying Goldryn's ancient scabbard to his knife belt as he went.

Her blood-splattered shirt was still lying there, just to the side of the pool of her blood soaking the sand. He had no doubt Cairn had purposely left it.

Rowan bent, picking up the shirt, running his thumbs over the soft fabric.

The coven faded into the horizon; his companions reached their ship, and the others were readying to move the army his mate had summoned for them, pushing the longboats into the surf.

Rowan brought the shirt to his face and breathed in her scent. Felt something stir in him—felt the bond flicker.

He let the shirt drop, let the wind carry it far out to sea, far away from this blood-drenched place that reeked of pain.

I will find you.

Rowan shifted and soared high on a fast, wicked wind of his own making, the glimmering sea sprawling to his right, the marshes a green-and-gray tangle to his left. Chaining the wind to him, swiftly catching up with his companions now flying down the coast, he committed her scent to memory, committed that flicker in the bond to memory.

That flicker he could have sworn he felt in answer, like the fluttering heart of an ember.

Unleashing a cry that set the world trembling, Prince Rowan Whitethorn Galathynius, Consort of the Queen of Terrasen, began the hunt to find his wife.

Morning came and went, and Yrene was in no rush to rise from bed. Neither was Chaol. They ate a leisurely lunch in the sitting room, not bothering with proper clothes.

Hafiza would decide in her own time whether to give them those books. So they'd just have to wait. And then wait to encounter Aelin Galathynius again, or anyone else who might be able to decipher them. Chaol said as much, after Yrene told him what Hafiza had confirmed.

"There must be considerable information inside those books," Chaol mused as he chewed on pomegranate seeds, the fruit like small rubies he popped into his mouth.

"If they date back as far as we think," Yrene said, "if many of those texts came from the necropolis or similar sites, it could be a trove. About the Valg. Our connection to them."

"Aelin lucked out in Rifthold, when she stumbled across those few books."

He'd told her last night—of the assassin named Celaena, who had turned out to be a queen named Aelin. The entire history of it, laid bare. A long one, and a sad one. His voice had grown hoarse when he'd talked of Dorian. Of the collar and the Valg prince. Of those they had lost. Of his own role, the sacrifices he'd made, the promises he'd broken. All of it.

And if Yrene had not loved him already, she would have loved him then, learning that truth. Seeing the man he was becoming, turning into, after all of it.

“The king somehow missed them during his initial research and purging.”

“Or perhaps some god made sure he did,” Yrene mused. She lifted a brow. “I don’t suppose there are any Baast Cats at that library.”

Chaol shook his head and set down the looted corpse of the pomegranate. “Aelin has always had a god or two perched on her shoulder. Nothing would surprise me at this point.”

Yrene considered. “Whatever did happen with the king? If he had that Valg demon.”

Chaol’s face darkened as he leaned back on the not-nearly-as-comfortable replacement for the shredded gold sofa. “Aelin healed him.”

Yrene sat up straighter. “How?”

“She burned it out of him. Well, she and Dorian did.”

“And the man—the true king—survived it?”

“No. Initially, yes. But neither Aelin nor Dorian wanted to talk much about what happened on that bridge. He survived long enough to explain what had been done, but I think he was fading fast. Then Aelin destroyed the castle. And him with it.”

“But fire rid the Valg demon within him?”

“Yes. And I think it helped save Dorian, too. Or at least bought him enough freedom to fight back on his own.” He angled his head. “Why do you ask?”

“Because that theory I had ...” Yrene’s knee bounced. She scanned the room, the doors. No one nearby. “I think ...” She leaned closer, gripping his knee. “I think the Valg are parasites. Infections.”

He opened his mouth, but Yrene plowed ahead. “Hafiza and I pulled a tapeworm from Hasar when I first came here. They feed off their host, much in the same way the Valg do. Take over basic needs—like hunger. And eventually kill their hosts, when all those resources have been used up.”

Chaol went utterly still. “But these are no mindless grubs.”

“Yes, and that was what I wanted to see with you yesterday. How much

awareness that darkness had. The extent of their power. If it had left some sort of parasite in your bloodstream. It didn't, but ... There was the other parasite—feeding off you, giving it control.”

He was silent.

Yrene cleared her throat, caressing her thumb over his wrist. “I realized the night before. That I had one of my own. My hatred, my anger and fear and pain.” She brushed away a stray curl. “They were all parasites, feeding on me these years. Sustaining me, but also feeding on me.”

And once she had understood that—that the place she most feared to tread was *inside* herself, where she might have to acknowledge what, exactly, dwelled within *her* ...

“When I realized what *I* was doing, I understood that’s what the Valg truly is, deep down. What your own shadows are. *Parasites*. And enduring it these weeks was not the same as *facing* it. So I attacked it as I would any other parasite; swarmed around it. Made it come to you—attack *you* as hard as it could to get away from *me*. So that *you* might face it, defeat it. So you might go where you feared most to tread, and decide whether, at last, you were ready to fight back.”

His eyes were clear, bright. “That’s a big realization.”

“It certainly was.” She considered what he’d related—about Aelin and the demon inside the dead king. “Fire is cleansing. Purifying. But amongst the healing arts, it’s not often used. Too unwieldy. Water is better-tuned to the healing. But then there are raw healing gifts. Like mine.”

“Light,” Chaol said. “It looked like swarming lights, against their darkness.”

She nodded. “Aelin managed to get Dorian and his father free. Roughly, crudely, and one did not survive. But what if a *healer* with my sort of gifts was to treat someone possessed—*infected* by the Valg? The ring, the collar, they’re implantation devices. Like a bad bit of water, or tainted food. Merely a carrier for something small, the kernel of those demons, who then grow within their hosts. Removing it is the first step, but you said the demon can remain even

afterward.”

His chest began to heave in an uneven rhythm as he nodded.

Yrene whispered, “I think I can heal them. I think the Valg ... I think they are parasites, and I can *treat* the people they infect.”

“Then everyone Erawan has captured, held with those rings and collars—”

“We could potentially free them.”

He squeezed her hand. “But you’d have to get close to them. And their power, Yrene—”

“I would assume that is where Aelin and Dorian would come in. To hold them down.”

“There’s no way to test this, though. Without considerable risk.” His jaw tightened. “It has to be why Erawan’s agent is hunting you. To erase the knowledge of that. To keep you from realizing it by healing me. And relaying it to other healers.”

“If that is the case, though ... Why now? Why wait this long?”

“Perhaps Erawan did not even consider it. Until Aelin purged the Valg from Dorian and the king.” He rubbed at his chest. “But there is a ring. It belonged to Athril, friend to King Brannon and Maeve. It granted Athril immunity from the Valg. It was lost to history—the only one of its kind. Aelin found it. And Maeve wanted it badly enough that she traded Rowan for it. Legend said Mala herself forged it for Athril, but ... Mala loved Brannon, not Athril.”

Chaol shot up from the couch, and Yrene watched him pace. “There was a tapestry. In Aelin’s old room. A tapestry that showed a stag, and hid the entrance that led down to the tomb where the Wyrdkey had been hidden by Brannon. It was Aelin’s first clue that set her down this path.”

“And?” The word was a push of air.

“And there was an owl on it amongst the forest animals. It was Athril’s form. Not Brannon’s. All of that was coded—the tapestry, the tomb. Symbols upon symbols. But the owl ... We never thought. Never considered.”

“Considered what?”

Chaol halted in the middle of the room. “That the owl might not just be Athril’s animal form, but his sigil because of his loyalty to someone else.”

And despite the warm day, Yrene’s blood chilled as she said, “Silba.”

Chaol nodded slowly. “Goddess of Healing.”

Yrene whispered, “Mala did not make that ring of immunity.”

“No. She didn’t.”

Silba did.

“We need to go to Hafiza,” Yrene said softly. “Even if she won’t let us take the books, we should ask her to look at them—see for ourselves what might have survived all this time. What those Fae healers might have learned in that war.”

He motioned her to rise. “We’ll go now.”

But the suite doors opened, and Hasar breezed in, her gold-and-green dress flowing.

“Well,” she said, smirking at their lack of clothes, their disheveled hair. “At least you two are comfortable.”

Yrene had the sense the world was about to be knocked from beneath her as the princess smiled at Chaol. “We’ve had some news. From your lands.”

“What is it.” The words were ground out.

Hasar picked at her nails. “Oh, just that Queen Maeve’s armada managed to find the host Aelin Galathynius has been so sneakily patching together. There was *quite* the battle.”

Chaol debated strangling the smirking princess. But he managed to keep his hands at his sides, managed to keep his chin high despite the fact that he was only wearing his pants, and said, “What. Happened.”

A naval battle. Aelin against *Maeve*. He waited for the dangling sword to drop. If he had been too late—

Hasar looked up from her nails. “It was a spectacle, apparently. A Fae armada versus a cobbled-together human force—”

“Hasar, please,” Yrene murmured.

The princess sighed at the ceiling. “Fine. *Maeve* was trounced.”

Chaol sank onto the sofa.

Aelin—thank the gods Aelin had managed to find a way—

“Though there were some interesting details.” Then the princess rattled off the facts. The numbers. A third of *Maeve*’s armada, bearing Whitethorn flags, had turned on their own and joined Terrasen’s fleet. Dorian had fought—held the front lines with Rowan. Then a pack of wyverns had soared in from nowhere—to fight for Aelin.

Manon Blackbeak. Chaol would be willing to bet his life that somehow, either through Aelin or Dorian, that witch had done them a favor, and possibly altered the course of this war.

“The magic, they say, was impressive,” Hasar went on. “Ice and wind and water.” Dorian and Rowan. “Even rumor of a shape-shifter.” Lysandra. “But no

darkness. Or whatever Maeve fights with. And no flame.”

Chaol braced his forearms on his knees.

“Though some reports claim they spotted flame and shadow on shore—far away. Flickers of both. There and gone. And no one spotted Aelin or the Dark Queen in the fleet.”

It would have been like Aelin, to shift the battle between her and Maeve to the shore. To minimize casualties, so she could unleash her full power without hesitation.

“As I said,” Hasar continued, fluffing the skirts of her dress, “They were victorious. Aelin was spotted returning to her armada hours later. They’ve set sail—north, apparently.”

He muttered a prayer of thanks to Mala. And a prayer of thanks to whatever god watched over Dorian, too. “Any major casualties?”

“To their men, yes, but not to any of the interesting players,” Hasar said, and Chaol hated her. “But Maeve ... there and gone, not a whisper of her left.” She frowned at the windows. “Maybe she’ll sail here to lick her wounds.”

Chaol prayed that wouldn’t be the case. Yet if Maeve’s armada still sat in the Narrow Sea when they took the crossing ... “But the others sail north now—to where?” *Where can I find my king, my brother?*

“I’d assume Terrasen, now that Aelin has her armada. Oh, and another one.”

Hasar smiled at him. Waiting for the question—the plea.

“What other armada,” Chaol forced himself to ask.

Hasar shrugged, walking from the room. “Turns out, Aelin called in a debt. To the Silent Assassins of the Red Desert.”

Chaol’s eyes burned.

“And to Wendlyn.”

His hands began shaking.

“How many ships,” he breathed.

“All of them,” Hasar said, hand on the door. “All of Wendlyn’s armada came,

commanded by Crown Prince Galan himself.”

Aelin ... Chaol’s blood sparked, and he looked to Yrene. Her eyes were wide, bright. Bright with hope—burning, precious hope.

“Turns out,” Hasar mused, as if it were a passing thought, “there are quite a few people who think highly of her. And who believe in what she’s selling.”

“Which is what?” Yrene whispered.

Hasar shrugged. “I assume it’s what she tried to sell to me, when she wrote me a message weeks ago, asking for my aid. From one princess to another.”

Chaol took a shuddering breath. “What did Aelin promise you?”

Hasar smiled to herself. “A better world.”

Chaol was bristling beside Yrene as they hurried through Antica's narrow streets, crammed with people going home for the night. Not with rage, she realized, but purpose.

Aelin had mustered an army, and if they could join with them, bring some force from the khaganate ... Yrene beheld the hope in his eyes. The focus.

A fool's shot at this war. But only if they could convince the royals.

One last push, he declared to her as they entered the cool interior of the Torre and hurried up the stairs. He didn't care if he had to crawl in front of the khagan. He would make one last attempt at convincing him.

But first: Hafiza. And the books that might contain a far more valuable weapon than swords or arrows: knowledge.

His steps did not falter as they wound up the endless interior of the Torre. Even with all that weighed on them, Chaol still murmured in her ear, "No wonder those legs of yours are so pretty."

Yrene batted him off, her face heating. "Cad."

At this hour, most of the acolytes were already heading down to dinner. Several beamed at Chaol as they passed him on the stairs, some younger ones giggling. He gave them all warm, indulgent smiles that sent them into further fits.

Hers. He was hers, Yrene wanted to crow at them. This beautiful, brave, selfless man—he was hers.

And she was going home with him.

It was that thought that sobered her slightly. The sense that these endless hikes up the interior of the Torre might now be limited. That she might not smell the lavender and baked bread for a long time. Not hear those giggles.

Chaol's hand brushed hers as if to say he understood. Yrene only gripped his fingers tightly. Yes, she would leave a part of herself here. But what she took with her upon leaving ... Yrene was smiling when they at last reached the top of the Torre.

Chaol panted, bracing a hand on the wall of the landing. Hafiza's office door was cracked open, letting in the last of the sunset. "Whoever built this thing was a sadist."

Yrene laughed, knocking on Hafiza's office door and pushing it open. "That would be Kamala. And rumor says she—" Yrene halted, finding the Healer on High's office empty.

She edged around him on the landing, striding for the workroom—the door ajar. "Hafiza?"

No answer, but she pushed open the door anyway.

Empty. That bookcase, mercifully, still locked.

Likely making rounds, or at dinner, then. Though they'd seen everyone coming down after the dinner bell's summons, and Hafiza hadn't been among them.

"Wait here," Yrene said, and bounded down the stairs to the next landing, a level above Yrene's own room.

"Eretia," she said, stepping into the small room.

The healer grunted in answer. "Saw a nice backside walk past here a moment ago."

Chaol's cough sounded from above.

Yrene snorted, but said, "Do you know where Hafiza is?"

"In her workroom." The woman didn't so much as turn. "She's been in there

all day.”

“You’re ... certain?”

“Yes. Saw her go in, shut the door, and she hasn’t come out.”

“The door was open just now.”

“Then she likely slipped past me.”

Without saying a word? That wasn’t Hafiza’s nature.

Yrene scratched her head, scanning the landing behind her. The few doors on it. She didn’t bother saying good-bye to Eretia before knocking on them. One was empty; the other healer told her the same: Hafiza was in her workroom.

Chaol was waiting atop the stairs when Yrene climbed back up. “No luck?”

Yrene tapped her foot on the ground. Perhaps she was paranoid, but ...

“Let’s check the mess hall,” was all she said.

She caught the gleam in Chaol’s eyes. The worry—and warning.

They went down two levels until Yrene halted on her own landing.

Her door was shut—but there was something wedged beneath it. As if a passing foot had kicked it under. “What is that?”

Chaol drew his sword so fast she didn’t even see him move, every movement of his body, his blade, a dance. She bent and pulled the object out. Metal scraped on stone.

And there, dangling from its chain ... Hafiza’s iron key.

Chaol studied the door, the stairs, as Yrene pulled the necklace over her head with shaking fingers. “She didn’t slide it there by accident,” he said.

And if she had thought to hide the key here ... “She knew something was coming for her.”

“There was no sign of forced entry or attack upstairs,” he countered.

“She could have just been spooked, but ... Hafiza does nothing without thought.”

Chaol put a hand on the small of her back, ushering her toward the stairs. “We need to notify the guard—start a search party.”

She was going to be ill. She was going to vomit right down the steps.

If she had brought this upon Hafiza—

Panic helped no one. Nothing.

She forced herself to take a breath. Another one. “We need to be quick. Can your back—”

“I can manage. It feels fine.”

Yrene assessed his stance, his balance. “Then hurry.”



Around and around, they flew down the steps of the Torre. Asking anyone who passed if they’d seen Hafiza. *In her workroom*, they all said.

As if she had simply vanished into nothing. Into shadow.

Chaol had seen enough, endured enough, to listen to his gut.

And his gut told him that something either had happened or was unfurling.

Yrene’s face was bone white with dread, that iron key bouncing against her chest with each of their steps. They reached the bottom of the Torre, and Yrene had the guard on alert in a matter of words, calmly explaining that the Healer on High was missing.

But search parties took too long to organize. Anything could happen in the span of minutes. Seconds.

In the busy hallway of the Torre’s main level, Yrene called out to a few healers about Hafiza’s location. No, she was not in the mess hall. No, she was not in the herb gardens. They had just been that way and had not seen her.

It was an enormous complex. “We’d cover more ground if we split up,” Yrene panted, scanning the hall.

“No. They might be expecting that. We stick together.”

Yrene scrubbed her hands over her face. “Widespread hysteria might make the—person act quicker. Rasher. We keep it quiet.” She lowered her hands. “Where do we start? She could be in the city, she could be *d*—”

“How many exits lead from the Torre into the streets?”

“Just the main gate, and a small side one for the deliveries. Both heavily guarded.”

They visited both within a span of minutes. Nothing. The guards were well trained and had kept a record of everyone who went in and out. Hafiza had not been seen. And no wagons had come in or left since early morning. Before Eretia had last seen her.

“She has to be somewhere on the premises,” Chaol said, surveying the tower looming above, the physicians’ complex. “Unless you can think of another way in or out. Perhaps something that might have been forgotten.”

Yrene went wholly still, her eyes bright as flame in the sinking twilight.

“The library,” she breathed, and launched into a sprint.

Swift—she was swift, and it was all he could do to keep up with her. To *run*. Holy gods, he was *running*, and—

“There are rumors of tunnels in the library,” Yrene panted, leading him down a familiar hallway. “Deep below. That connect outside. To where, we don’t know. Rumor claims they were sealed up, but—”

His heart thundered. “It would explain how they were able to come and go unnoticed.”

And if the old woman had been brought down there ...

“How did they even get her to go? Without anyone noticing?”

He didn’t want to answer. The Valg could summon shadows if they wished. And hide within them. And those shadows could turn deadly in an instant.

Yrene slid to a stop in front of the main library desk, Nousha’s head snapping up. The marble was so smooth Yrene had to grapple at the edges of the desk to keep from falling.

“Have you seen Hafiza?” she blurted.

Nousha looked between them. Noted the sword he still had out.

“What is wrong.”

“Where are the tunnels?” Yrene demanded. “The ones they boarded up—where *are* they?”

Behind her, a storm-gray Baast Cat leaped up from its vigil by the hearth and sprinted into the library proper.

Nousha gazed at an ancient bell the size of a melon atop the desk. A hammer lay beside it.

Yrene slapped her hand on the hammer. “Don’t. It will alert them that—that we know.”

The woman’s brown skin seemed to go wan. “Head down to the bottom level. Walk straight to the wall. Cut left. Take that to the farthest wall—the very end. Where the stone is rough and unpolished. Cut right. You’ll see them.”

Yrene’s chest heaved, but she nodded, muttering the directions to herself. Chaol memorized them, planted them in his mind.

Nousha rose to her feet. “Shall I summon the guard?”

“Yes,” Chaol said. “But quietly. Send them after us. As fast as you can.”

Nousha’s hands shook as she folded them in front of her middle. “Those tunnels have been left untouched for a very long time. Be on your guard. Even we do not know what lies down there.”

Chaol debated mentioning the usefulness of cryptic warnings before plunging into battle, but simply entwined his fingers through Yrene’s and launched them down the hall.

61

Yrene counted every step. Not that it helped, but her brain just produced the numbers in an endless tally.

One, two, three ... Forty.

Three hundred.

Four twenty-four.

Seven hundred twenty-one.

Down and down they went, scanning every shadow and aisle, every alcove and reading room and nook. Nothing.

Only acolytes quietly working, many packing up for the night. No Baast Cats—not one.

Eight hundred thirty.

One thousand three.

They hit the bottom of the library, the lights dimmer. Sleepier.

The shadows more alert. Yrene saw faces in all of them.

Chaol plunged ahead, sword like quicksilver as they followed Nousha's directions.

The temperature dropped. The lights became fewer and farther between.

Leather books were replaced with crumbling scrolls. Scrolls replaced by carved tablets. Wooden shelves gave way to stone alcoves. The marble floor turned uncut. So did the walls.

“Here,” Chaol breathed, and drew her into a stop, his sword lifting.

The hall before them was lit by a sole candle. Left to burn on the ground.
And down it: four doors.

Three sealed with heavy stone, but the fourth ... Open. The stone rolled
aside. Another lone candle before it, illumining the darkness beyond.

A tunnel. Deeper than the Womb—deeper than any level of the Torre.

Chaol pointed to the rough dirt of the passage ahead. “Tracks. Two sets, side
by side.”

Sure enough, the ground had been disturbed.

He whirled to her. “You stay here, I’ll—”

“No.” He weighed the word, her stance, as she added, “Together. We do this
together.”

Chaol took another moment to consider, then nodded. Carefully, he led her
along, showing her where to step to avoid any loud noises on loose bits of stone.

The candle beckoned by the open tunnel doorway. A beacon. An invitation.

The light danced along his blade as he angled it before the tunnel entrance.

Nothing but fallen blocks of stone and an endless dark passage greeted them.

Yrene breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth. Hafiza. Hafiza
was in there. Either hurt or worse, and—

Chaol linked his hand with hers and led her into the dark.

They inched along in silence for untold minutes. Until the light from the sole
candle faded behind them—and another appeared. Faintly, far off. As if around a
distant corner.

As if someone was waiting.



Chaol knew it was a trap.

Knew the Healer on High had not been the target, but the bait. But if they
arrived too late ...

He would not let that happen.

They inched toward that second candle, the light as good as ringing the dinner bell.

But he moved forward nonetheless, Yrene keeping pace beside him.

The sole candle grew brighter.

Not a candle. A golden light from the passage beyond. Gilding the stone wall behind it.

Yrene tried to hurry, but he kept their pace slow. Quiet as death.

Though he had no doubt whoever it was already knew they were coming.

They reached the turn in the tunnel, and he studied the light on the far wall, trying to read for any shadows or disruptions. Only light.

He peered around the corner. Yrene did so, too.

Her breath snagged. He had seen some sights in the past year, but this ...

It was a chamber, as enormous as the entire throne room in Rifthold's palace, perhaps larger. The ceiling held aloft on carved pillars receding into the gloom, a set of stairs leading down from the tunnel onto the main floor. He knew why the light had been golden upon the walls.

For illuminated by the torches that burned throughout ... *Gold.*

The wealth of an ancient empire filled the chamber. Chests and statues and trinkets of pure gold. Suits of armor. Swords.

And scattered amongst it all were sarcophagi. Built not from gold, but impenetrable stone.

A tomb—and a trove. And at the very back, rising up on a towering dais ...

Yrene let out a small sound at the sight of the gagged and bound Healer on High seated on a golden throne. But it was the woman standing beside the healer, a knife resting on her round belly, that made Chaol's blood go cold.

Duva. The khagan's now-youngest daughter.

She smiled at them as they approached—and the expression was not human.

It was Valg.

“Well,” said the thing inside the princess, “it certainly took you long enough.”

The words echoed down the massive chamber, bouncing off stone and gold.

Chaol assessed every shadow, every object they passed. All possible weapons. All possible escape routes.

Hafiza did not move as they neared, walking down the broad avenue between the endless, glittering gold and sarcophagi. A necropolis.

Perhaps one enormous, subterranean city, stretching from the desert to here.

When they’d visited Aksara, Duva had remained behind. Claiming that her pregnancy—

Yrene’s hiss told him she realized the same.

Duva was pregnant—and the Valg had a hold on her.

Chaol sized up the odds. A Valg-infested princess, armed with a knife and whatever dark magic, the Healer on High tied to the throne ...

And Yrene.

“Because I see you calculating, Lord Westfall, I’ll spare you the trouble and lay out your options for you.” Duva traced gentle, idle lines over her full womb with that knife, barely disturbing the fabric of her gown. “See, you’ll have to pick. Me, the Healer on High, or Yrene Towers.” The princess smiled and whispered again, “*Yrene.*”

And that voice ...

Yrene shook beside him. The voice from that night.

But Yrene lifted her chin as they halted at the base of those steep dais steps, and said to the princess, unfaltering as any queen, “What is it that you want?”

Duva angled her head, her eyes wholly black. The ebony of the Valg. “Don’t you want to know *how*?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell us, anyway,” Chaol said.

Duva’s eyes narrowed with annoyance, but she let out a small laugh. “These tunnels run right between the palace and the Torre. Those immortal Fae brats buried their royals here. Renegades of Mora’s noble line.” She swept an arm to encompass the room. “I’m sure the khagan would be beside himself to learn of how much gold sits beneath his feet. Another hand to play when the time calls for it.”

Yrene stared and stared at Hafiza, who was watching them calmly.

A woman ready for her end. Who now only wanted to make sure Yrene did not think her frightened.

“I was waiting for you to figure out it was me,” Duva said. “When I destroyed all those precious books and scrolls, I thought you’d certainly realize I was the only one who hadn’t gone to the party. But then I realized—how *could* you suspect me?” She laid a hand on her full womb. “It was why he chose her to begin with. Lovely, gentle Duva. Too kind to ever be a contender for the throne.” A snake’s smile. “Do you know Hasar tried to take the ring first? She spied it in the wedding trove sent by *Perrington* and wanted it. But Duva snatched it before she could.” She held up her finger, revealing the broad silver band. Not a glimmer of Wyrdstone.

“It’s beneath,” she whispered. “A clever little trick to hide it. And the moment she spoke her vows to that sweet, lovesick human prince, this went on her hand.” Duva smirked. “And no one even noticed.” A flash of her white teeth. “Except for keen-eyed little sister.” She clicked her tongue. “Tumelun suspected something was wrong. Caught me poking about in forgotten places. So I caught her, too.” Duva chuckled. “Or didn’t, I suppose. Since I shoved her right off that

balcony.”

Yrene sucked in a breath.

“Such a wild, impetuous princess,” Duva drawled. “Prone to such *moods*. I couldn’t very well have her going to her beloved parents and whining about me, could I?”

“You *bitch*,” Yrene snapped.

“That’s what she called me,” Duva replied. “Said I didn’t seem *right*.” She rubbed a hand over her belly, then tapped a finger to the side of her head. “You should have heard how she screamed. Duva—how Duva *screamed* when I pushed the brat off the balcony. But I shut her up fast enough, didn’t I?” She again brought that knife up to her belly and scraped over the silk fabric.

“Why are you *here*,” Yrene breathed. “What do you *want*?”

“You.”

Chaol’s heart stumbled at the word.

Duva straightened. “The Dark King heard whispers. Whispers that a healer blessed with Silba’s gifts had entered the Torre. And it made him so very, very wary.”

“Because I can wipe you all out like the parasites you are?”

Chaol shot Yrene a warning glance.

But Duva plucked the dagger off her womb and studied the blade. “Why do you think Maeve has hoarded her healers, never allowing them to leave her patrolled borders? She knew we would return. She wanted to be ready—to protect herself. Her prized favorites, those Doranelle healers. Her secret army.” Duva hummed, motioning with the dagger to the necropolis. “How clever those Fae were, who escaped her clutches after the last war. They ran all the way here—the healers who knew their queen would keep them penned up like animals. And then they bred the magic into the land, into its people. Encouraged the right powers to rise up, to ensure this land would always be strong, defended. And then they vanished, taking their treasures and histories beneath the earth.

Ensuring they were forgotten below, while their little *garden* was planted above.”

“Why,” was all Chaol said.

“To give those Maeve did not consider important a fighting chance should Erawan return.” Duva clicked her tongue. “So noble, those renegade Fae. And thus the Torre grew—and His Dark Majesty indeed rose again, and then fell, and then slept. And even he forgot what someone with the right gifts might do. But then he awoke once more. And he remembered the healers. So he made sure to purge the gifted ones from the northern lands.” A smile at Yrene, hateful and cold. “But it seems a little healer slipped the butcher’s block. And made it all the way to this city, with an empire to guard her.”

Yrene’s breathing was ragged. He saw the guilt and dread settle in. That in coming here, she had brought this upon them. Tumelun, Duva, the Torre, the khaganate.

But what Yrene did not realize, Chaol instead saw it for her. Saw it with the weight of a continent, a world, upon him. Saw what had terrified Erawan enough to dispatch one of his agents.

Because Yrene, ripe with power and facing down that preening Valg demon ... Hope.

It was hope that stood beside him, hidden and protected these years in this city, and in the years before it, spirited across the earth by the gods themselves, concealed from the forces poised to destroy her.

A kernel of hope.

The most dangerous of all weapons against Erawan, against the Valg’s ancient darkness.

What he had been brought here to retrieve for his homeland, his people. What he had been brought here to *protect*. More precious than soldiers, than any weapon. Their only shot at salvation.

Hope.

“Why not kill me, then,” Yrene demanded. “Why not just kill me?”

Chaol hadn’t dared ask or think the question.

Duva rested her dagger upon her belly again. “Because you are so much more useful to Erawan alive, Yrene Towers.”



Yrene was shaking. In her bones, she was trembling.

“I am no one,” Yrene breathed.

That blade—that blade sat atop that womb. And Hafiza remained still and watchful, ever calm, beside Duva.

“Are you?” the princess crooned. “Two years is an *unnaturally* swift pace to climb so high in the Torre. Is it not, Healer?”

Yrene wanted to vomit as the demon inside Duva looked upon Hafiza.

Hafiza met her stare unflinchingly.

Duva laughed quietly. “She knew. She said as much to me when I spirited her out of her room earlier. That I was coming for you. Silba’s Heir.”

Yrene’s hand slid to her locket. The note within.

The world needs more healers.

Had it been Silba herself who had come that night in Innish, who had sent her here, with a message she would later understand?

The world needed more healers—to fight Erawan.

“That was why Erawan sent me,” Duva drawled. “To be his spy. To see if a healer with those gifts—the gifts—might indeed emerge from the Torre. And to keep you from learning too much.” A little shrug. “Of course, killing that brat-princess and the other healer were ... mistakes, but I’m sure His Dark Majesty will forgive me for it when I return with you in tow.”

Roaring filled her head, so loud Yrene could barely hear herself as she snapped, “If you mean to bring me to him, why kill the healer you mistook for me? And why not kill every healer in this city and spare yourselves the trouble?”

Duva snorted, waving that dagger. “Because *that* would raise too many questions. *Why* was Erawan targeting your kind? Certain key players might have started pondering. So the Torre was to be left alone—in ignorance. Dwelling here, removed from the north, never leaving these shores. Until it’s time for my liege to deal with *this* empire.” A smile that made Yrene’s blood ice over. “As for that healer ... It had nothing to do with how she resembled you. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Well, the right time for *me*, since I was frightfully hungry and I couldn’t exactly feed without being noticed. But to drum up some fear in you, to make you realize the danger and stop working on that Adarlanian fool, stop prying too far into such ancient matters. But you did not listen, did you?”

Yrene’s hands curled into claws at her sides.

Duva went on, “Too bad, Yrene Towers. Too bad. For every day you worked on him, healed him, it became clear that you, indeed, were the one. The one my Dark King covets. And after Duva’s own palace spies told her that you had healed him fully, once he was walking again and you proved beyond doubt that you were the one I’d been sent to find ...” She sneered at Hafiza, and Yrene wanted to rip that expression right off her face. “I knew outright attack would be complicated. But luring you down here ... Too easy. I’m rather disappointed. So,” she declared, flipping the knife in her hand, “you will be coming with me, Yrene Towers. To Morath.”

Chaol stepped in front of Yrene. “You are forgetting one thing.”

Duva lifted a groomed eyebrow. “Oh?”

“You have not won yet.”

Go, Yrene wanted to tell him. *Go*.

For that was dark power starting to curl around Duva’s fingers, around the hilt of her dagger.

“What’s amusing, Lord Westfall,” Duva said, peering down at them from atop the dais, “is that you think you can buy yourself time until the guards come.

But by then, you will be dead, and no one would *dare* question my word when I tell them you tried to kill us down here. To take this gold back to your poor little kingdom after you wasted your own upon ordering those weapons from my father's vizier. Why, you could buy yourself a thousand armies with this."

Yrene hissed, "You still have *us* to contend with."

"I suppose." Duva pulled something from her pocket. Another ring, crafted from stone so dark it swallowed the light. No doubt sent directly from Morath. "But once you put this on ... you'll do whatever I say."

"And why should I *ever*—"

Duva rested the knife against Hafiza's throat. "That's why."

Yrene looked to Chaol, but he was sizing up the room, the stairs and exits.

The dark power twining around Duva's fingers.

"So," Duva said, taking one step down the dais. "Let's begin."

She made it a second step before it happened.

Chaol did not move. But Hafiza did.

She hurled her body, chair and all, the entire weight of that golden throne, down the stairs.

Right atop Duva.

Yrene screamed, running for them, Chaol launching into motion.

Hafiza and the baby, the baby and Hafiza—

Crone and princess tumbled down those steep stairs, wood snapping. Wood, not metal. The throne had been painted, and now it shattered as they rolled, Duva shrieking and Hafiza so silent, even as her gag came free—

They hit the stone floor with a crack that Yrene felt in her heart.

Chaol was instantly there, not going for Duva, sprawled on the ground, but for Hafiza, limp and unmoving. He hauled her back, splinters and ropes clinging to her, her mouth gaping—

Eyes cracking open—

Yrene sobbed, grabbing Hafiza by the other arm and helping him heave her

out of the way, toward a towering statue of a Fae soldier.

Just as Duva rose up on her elbows, hair loose around her face, and seethed, “You rotting pile of *shit*—”

Chaol shot upright, sword angled before them while Yrene fumbled for her magic to heal the ancient, frail body.

The old woman managed to raise her arm long enough to grip Yrene’s wrist. *Go*, she seemed to say.

Duva climbed to her feet, long splinters embedded in her neck, blood dripping from her mouth. Black blood.

Chaol gave Yrene all of one look over his shoulder. *Run.*

And take Hafiza with her.

Yrene opened her mouth to tell him *no*, but he had already faced ahead again. Toward the princess who advanced one step.

Her dress was torn, revealing the firm, round belly beneath. A fall like that with a baby—

A baby.

Yrene gripped Hafiza under her thin shoulders, hauling her slight weight across the floor.

Chaol wouldn’t kill her. Duva.

Yrene sobbed through her clenched teeth as she dragged Hafiza back and back through that gold-lined avenue, the statues looking on unfeelingly.

He wouldn’t so much as harm Duva, not with that baby in her womb.

Yrene’s chest caved in at the low hum of power that filled the room.

He would not fight back. He would buy Yrene time.

To get Hafiza out and to run.

Duva purred, “This will likely hurt a great deal.”

Yrene whirled back just as shadows lashed from the princess, aimed right at Chaol.

He rolled to the side, the blast going wide and striking the statue he ducked

behind.

“Such theatrics,” Duva tutted, and Yrene hurried, sliding Hafiza toward those distant stairs. Leaving him—leaving him behind.

But movement caught her eye, and then—

A statue crashed into the princess’s path.

Duva blasted it aside with her power. Gold showered the room in chunks that thundered atop the sarcophagi, the cracking echoing through the chamber.

“You will make this boring,” Duva tsked, and hurled a handful of darkness toward where he’d been. Yrene stumbled as the room shuddered, but she kept upright.

Another blow.

Another.

Duva hissed, rounding the sarcophagus where she’d guessed Chaol was hiding. She fired her power blindly.

Chaol appeared, shield in hand.

Not a shield—an ancient mirror.

The power bounced off the metal, shattering glass, even as it rebounded into the princess.

Yrene saw the blood first. On both of them.

Then saw the dread in his face as Duva was blasted back, slamming into a stone sarcophagus so hard her bones cracked.

Duva hit the ground and did not move.

Yrene waited one breath. Two.

She lowered Hafiza to the floor and ran. Ran right for Chaol, where he panted, gaping at the woman’s fallen body.

“What have I done,” he breathed, refusing to take his eyes off the too-still princess. Blood slid down his face from the shards of that mirror, but nothing major—nothing lethal.

Duva, however ...

Yrene shoved past him, past his sword, to the princess on the ground. If she was down, she could potentially get the Valg demon out, potentially try to fix her body—

She turned Duva over.

And found the princess smiling at her.

It happened so fast. Too fast.

Duva lunged for her face, her throat, black bands of power leaping from her palms.

Then Yrene was not there. Then she was on the stones, thrown to the side as Chaol hurled himself between her and the princess.

No shield, no weapon.

Only his back, utterly exposed, as he shoved Yrene away and took the full brunt of the Valg attack.

63

Agony roared through his spine. Down his legs. His arms. Into his very fingertips.

Worse than it had been in the glass castle.

Worse than in those healing sessions.

But all he could see, all he'd seen, was Yrene, that power spearing for her heart—

Chaol hit the ground, and Yrene's scream shattered through the pain.

Get up get up get up

“Such a pity all that hard work amounted to nothing,” Duva trilled, and pointed a finger at his spine. “Your poor, poor back.”

That dark power slammed into his spine again.

Something cracked.

Again. Again.

The feeling in his legs vanished first.

“*Stop*,” Yrene sobbed, on her knees. “*Stop!*”

“Run,” he breathed, forcing his palms flat onto the stones, forcing his arms to push, to lift him—

Duva only reached into her pocket and pulled out that black ring. “You know how this stops.”

“*No*,” he snarled, and his back bellowed as he tried and tried to get his legs beneath him—

Yrene crawled away a step. Another. Eyes darting between them.

Not again. He would not endure seeing this, endure *living* this one more time.

But then he beheld what Yrene grabbed in her right hand.

What she had been crawling toward.

His sword.

Duva snickered, stepping over his sprawled, unmoving legs as she advanced on Yrene. As Yrene rose to her feet and lifted his sword between them.

The blade trembled, and Yrene's shoulders shook as she sobbed through her teeth.

“What do you think that could possibly do,” Duva crooned, “against this?”

Whips of dark power unfurled from the princess's palms.

No. He groaned the word, screamed it at his body, at the wounds pushing in, the agony dragging him under. Duva lifted her arm to strike—

And Yrene threw the sword. A straight throw, unskilled and wild.

But Duva ducked—

Yrene ran.

Swift as a doe, she turned and ran, sprinting into the labyrinth of corpses and treasure.

And like a hound on a scent, Duva snarled and gave chase.



She had no plan. She had nothing.

No options. Nothing whatsoever.

Chaol's spine—

Gone. All that work ... shattered.

Yrene ran through the piles of gold, searching, searching—

Duva's shadows blasted around her, sending shards of gold flying into the air. Gilding every breath Yrene took.

She snatched a short-sword off a chest overflowing with treasure as she ran,

the blade whirring through the air.

If she could trap her, get Duva down for long enough—

A lash of power shattered the stone sarcophagus before her. Chunks of rock soared.

Yrene heard the thud before she felt the impact.

Then her head bleated with pain, and the world tilted.

She fought to stay upright with every heartbeat, every bit of focus she'd ever mastered.

Yrene did not let her feet falter. She kept moving, buying them any sort of time. Rounding a statue, she—

Duva stood before her.

Yrene careened into her, that short-sword so close to the princess's gut, to that womb—

She splayed her hands, dropping the weapon. Duva held firm, arms snatching around Yrene's neck and middle. Pinning her.

The princess hissed, hauling her back toward that avenue, "This body does not like so much running."

Yrene thrashed, but Duva held firm. Too strong—for someone her size, she was too strong.

"I want you to see this. Want you both to see this," Duva jeered in her ear.

Chaol had crawled halfway across the path. Crawled, trailing blood, his legs unresponsive. To help her.

He stilled, blood sliding from his mouth as Duva stepped onto the walkway, pressing Yrene against her.

"Shall I make you watch me kill him, or make him watch me put that ring on you?"

And even with that arm shoved against her throat, Yrene snarled, "*Don't you touch him.*"

Blood on his gritted teeth, Chaol's arms strained and buckled as he tried to

rise.

“It’s too bad I don’t have two rings,” Duva mused to Chaol. “I’m sure your friends would pay handsomely for you.” A grunt. “But I suppose your death will be equally devastating.”

Duva loosened her arm from Yrene’s middle to point at him—

Yrene moved.

She stomped down on the princess’s foot. Right on the instep.

And as the princess lurched, Yrene slammed her palm into the woman’s elbow, freeing the arm across her throat.

So Yrene could whirl and drive her elbow straight into Duva’s face.

Duva dropped like a stone, blood spurting.

Yrene lunged for the dagger at Chaol’s side. The blade whined as she whipped it free of its sheath and threw herself atop the stunned princess, straddling her.

Aimed that blade high, to plunge into the woman’s neck, to sever that head. Bit by bit.

“*Don’t*,” Chaol rasped, the word full of blood.

Duva had destroyed it—destroyed *everything*.

From the blood coming out of his mouth, up his throat ...

Yrene wept, the dagger poised over the princess’s neck.

He was dying. Duva had ripped open something within him.

Duva’s brows began to twitch and furrow as she stirred.

Now.

She had to do it now. Drive this blade in. End it.

End it, and perhaps she could save him. Stop that lethal internal bleeding. But his spine, his *spine*—

A life. She had sworn an oath never to take a life.

And with this woman before her, the second life in her womb ...

The dagger lowered. She’d do it. She’d *do* it, and—

“Yrene,” Chaol breathed, and the word was so full of pain, so quiet ...

It was too late.

Her magic could feel it, his death. She had never told him of that terrible gift—that healers *knew* when death sat near. Silba, lady of gentle deaths.

The death she would give Duva and her child would not be that sort of death.

Chaol’s death would not be that sort of death.

But she ...

But she ...

The princess looked so young, even as she stirred. And the life in her womb

...

The life before her ...

Yrene dropped the knife to the floor.

Its clattering echoed over gold and stone and bones.

Chaol closed his eyes in what she could have sworn was relief.

A light hand touched her shoulder.

She knew that touch. Hafiza.

But as Yrene looked, as she turned and sobbed—

Two others stood behind the Healer on High, holding her upright. Letting Hafiza lean down beside Duva and blow a breath onto the princess’s face, sending her into undisturbed slumber.

Nesryn. Her hair was windblown, her cheeks rosy and chapped—

And Sartaq, his own hair far shorter. The prince’s face was taut, his eyes wide as he beheld his unconscious, bloody sister. As Nesryn breathed, “We were too late—”

Yrene lunged across the stones to Chaol. Her knees tore on the rock, but she barely felt it, barely felt the blood sliding down her temple as she took his head in her lap and closed her eyes, rallying her power.

White flared, but there was red and black everywhere.

Too much. Too many broken and torn and ravaged things—

His chest was barely rising. He did not open his eyes.

“*Wake up,*” she ordered him, her voice breaking. She plunged into her power, but the damage ... It was like trying to patch up holes in a sinking ship.

Too much. Too much and—

Shouting and steps all around them.

His life began to thin and turn to mist around her magic. Death circled, an eagle with an eye upon them.

“*Fight it,*” Yrene sobbed, shaking him. “You stubborn bastard, *fight it.*”

What was the point of it, the point of any of it, if now, when it mattered—

“Please,” she whispered.

Chaol’s chest rose, a high note before the last plunge—

She could not endure it. Would not endure it—

A light flickered. Inside that failing mass of red and black.

A candle ignited. A bloom of white.

Then another.

Another.

Blooming lights, along that broken interior. And where they shone ...

Flesh knitted. Bone smoothed.

Light after light after light.

His chest continued to rise and fall. Rise and fall.

But in the hurt and the dark and the light ...

A woman’s voice that was both familiar and foreign. A voice that was both Hafiza’s and ... another. Someone who was not human, never had been. Speaking through Hafiza herself, their voices blending into the blackness.

The damage is too great. There must be a cost if it is to be repaired.

All those lights seemed to hesitate at that otherworldly voice.

Yrene brushed herself along them, waded through them like a field of white flowers, the lights bobbing and swaying in this quiet place of pain.

Not lights ... but healers.

She knew their lights, their essences. Eretia—that was Eretia closest to her. The voice that was both Hafiza and Other said again, *There must be a cost.* For what the princess had done to him ... There was no returning from it. *I will pay it.* Yrene said into the pain and dark and light. *A daughter of Fenharrow will pay the debt of a son of Adarlan?*

Yes.

She could have sworn a gentle, warm hand brushed her face.

And Yrene knew it did not belong to Hafiza or the Other. Did not belong to any healer alive.

But to one who had never left her, even when she had been turned into ash on the wind.

The Other said, *You offer this of your own free will?*

Yes. *With my entire heart.*

It had been his from the start, anyway.

Those loving, phantom hands brushed her cheek again and faded away.

The Other said, *I chose well. You shall pay the debt, Yrene Towers. And I hope you shall see it for what it truly is.*

Yrene tried to speak. But light flared, soft and soothing.

It blinded her, within and without. Left her cringing over Chaol's head, her fingers grappled into his shirt. Feeling his heartbeats thunder into her palms. The scrape of his breath against her ear.

There were hands on her shoulders. Two sets. They tightened, a silent command to lift her head. Yrene did.

Hafiza stood behind her, Eretia at her side. Each with a hand on her shoulder.

Behind them stood two healers each. Hands on their shoulders.

Behind them, two more. And more. And more.

A living chain of power.

All the healers in the Torre, young and old, stood in that room of gold and bone.

All connected. All channeling to Yrene, to the grip she still held on Chaol.

Nesryn and Sartaq stood a few feet away, the former with a hand over her mouth. Because Chaol—

The healers of the Torre lowered their hands, severing that bridge of contact, as Chaol's feet moved. Then his knees.

And then his eyes cracked open, and he was staring up at Yrene, her tears plopping onto his blood-crusts face. He lifted a hand to brush her lips. "Dead?"

"Alive," she breathed, and lowered her face to his. "Very much alive."

Chaol smiled against her mouth, sighing deep as he said, "Good."

Yrene raised her head, and he smiled up at her again, cracked blood sliding away from his face with the motion.

And where that scar had once sliced down his cheek ... only unmarred skin remained.

Chaol's body ached, but it was the ache of newness. Of sore muscles, not broken ones.

And the air in his lungs ... it did not burn to breathe.

Yrene helped him sit up, his head spinning.

He blinked, finding Nesryn and Sartaq before them as the healers began to file away, their faces grim. The prince's long braid had been cut in favor of loose, shoulder-length hair, and Nesryn ... it was ruk leathers she wore, her dark eyes brighter than he'd ever seen—even with the graveness of her expression.

Chaol rasped, "What—"

"You sent a note to come back," Nesryn said, her face deathly pale. "We flew as fast as we could. We were told you'd come to the Torre earlier this evening. The guards were right behind us, until we outran them. We got a bit lost down here, but then ... cats led the way."

A bemused, puzzled glance over her shoulder, to where half a dozen beryl-eyed cats sat on the tunnel steps, cleaning themselves. They noticed the human attention and scattered, tails high.

Sartaq added, smiling faintly, "We also thought healers might be necessary, and asked some to follow. But apparently, a great number more wanted to come."

Considering the number of women filing out after the vanished cats ... All of them. All of them had come.

Behind Chaol and Yrene, Eretia was tending to Hafiza. Alive, clear-eyed, but ... frail.

Eretia clucked over the elderly woman, chiding her for such heroics. But even as she did, the woman's eyes were bright with tears. Perhaps more, as Hafiza brushed a thumb over Eretia's cheek.

"Is she—" Sartaq began, jerking his chin toward Duva, sprawled on the floor.

"Unconscious," Hafiza rasped. "She will sleep until roused."

"Even with a Valg ring on her?" Nesryn asked as Sartaq made to pick up his sister from the stone floor. She blocked him with an arm across his middle, earning an incredulous look from the prince. There were cuts and scabs on both of them, Chaol realized. And the way the prince had moved—with a limp. Something had happened—

"Even with the ring, she will remain asleep," Hafiza said.

Yrene was just staring at the princess, the dagger on the floor nearby.

Sartaq saw it, too. And said quietly to Yrene, "Thank you—for sparing her."

Yrene just pressed her face against Chaol's chest. He stroked a hand down her hair, finding it wet—

"You're bleeding—"

"I'm fine," she said onto his shirt.

Chaol pulled back, scanning her face. The bloody temple. "That is anything but fine," he said, whipping his head toward Eretia. "She's hurt—"

Eretia rolled her eyes. "Good to see none of this put you out of your usual spirits."

Chaol gave the woman a flat stare.

Hafiza peered over Eretia's shoulder and wryly asked Yrene, "Are you certain this pushy man was worth the cost?"

Before Yrene could answer, Chaol demanded, "What cost?"

A stillness crept over them, and even Yrene looked to Hafiza as the woman extracted herself from Eretia's care. The Healer on High said quietly, "The

damage was too great. Even with all of us ... Death held you by the hand.”

He turned to Yrene, dread curling in his stomach. “What did you do,” he breathed. She didn’t meet his stare.

“She likely made a fool’s bargain, that’s what,” Eretia snapped. “Offered to pay the price without even being told what it was. To save your neck. We all heard.”

Eretia was close to not having a functioning neck herself, but Chaol said as calmly as he could, “Pay the price to *whom*?”

“Not a payment,” Hafiza corrected, setting a hand on Eretia’s shoulder to quiet her, “but a restoration of balance. To the one who likes to see it intact. Who spoke through me as we all gathered within you.”

“What was the cost,” Chaol rasped. If she’d given up anything, he’d find a way to retrieve it. He didn’t care what he had to pay, he’d—

“To keep your life tethered in this world, we had to bind it to another. To hers. Two lives,” Hafiza clarified, “now sharing one thread. But even with that ...” She gestured to his legs, the foot he slid up to brace on the floor. “The demon broke many, many parts of you. Too many. And in order to save most of you, there was a cost, too.”

Yrene went still. “What do you mean?”

Hafiza again looked between them. “There remains some damage to the spine—impacting the lower portions of the legs. That even we could not repair.”

Chaol glanced between the Healer on High and his legs, currently moving. He went so far as to put some weight on them. They held.

Hafiza went on, “With the life-bond between you, Yrene’s power flowing into you ... It will act as a brace. Stabilizing the area, granting you ability to use your legs whenever Yrene’s magic is at its fullest.” He steeled himself for the *but*. Hafiza smiled grimly. “But when Yrene’s power flags, when she is drained or tired, your injury will regain control, and your ability to walk will again be impaired. It will require you to use a cane at the very least—on hard days,

perhaps many days, the chair. But the injury to your spine will remain.”

The words settled in him. Floated through and settled.

Yrene was wholly silent. So still that he faced her.

“Can’t I just heal him again?” She leaned toward him, as if she’d do just that.

Hafiza shook her head. “It is part of the balance—the cost. Do not tempt the compassion of the force that granted this to you.”

But Chaol touched Yrene’s hand. “It is no burden, Yrene,” he said softly. “To be given this. It is no burden at all.”

Yet agony filled her face. “But I—”

“Using the chair is not a punishment. It is not a prison,” he said. “It never was. And I am as much of a man in that chair, or with that cane, as I am standing on my feet.” He brushed away the tear that slipped down her cheek.

“I wanted to heal you,” she breathed.

“You did,” he said, smiling. “Yrene, in every way that truly matters ... You did.”

Chaol wiped away the other tears that fell, brushing a kiss to her hot cheek.

“There is another piece to the life-bond, to this bargain,” Hafiza added gently. They turned to her. “When it is time, whether the death is kind or cruel ... It will claim you both.”

Yrene’s golden eyes were still lined with silver. But there was no fear in her face, no lingering sorrow—none.

“Together,” Chaol said quietly, and interlaced their hands.

Her strength would be his strength. And when Yrene went, he would go. But if he went before her—

Dread curled in his gut.

“The true price of all this,” Hafiza said, reading the panic. “Not fear for your own life, but what losing your life will do to the other.”

“I suggest you not go to war,” Eretia grumbled.

But Yrene shook her head, shoulders straightening as she declared, “We shall

go to war.” Pointing to Duva, she looked at Sartaq. As if she had not just offered up her very *life* to save his—“*That* is what Erawan will do. To all of you. If we do not go.”

“I know,” Sartaq said quietly. The prince turned to Nesryn, and as she held his stare ... Chaol saw it. The glimmer between them. A bond, new and trembling. But there it was, right along with the cuts and wounds they both bore. “I know,” Sartaq said again, his fingers brushing Nesryn’s.

Nesryn met Chaol’s eyes then.

She smiled softly at him, glancing to where Yrene now asked Hafiza about whether she could stand. He’d never seen Nesryn appear so ... settled. So quietly happy.

Chaol swallowed. *I’m sorry*, he said silently.

Nesryn shook her head as Sartaq scooped his sister into his arms with a grunt, the prince balancing his weight on his good leg. *I think I did just fine.*

Chaol smiled. *Then I am happy for you.*

Nesryn’s eyes widened as Chaol at last got to his feet, taking Yrene with him. His movements were as smooth as any maneuver he might have made without the invisible brace of Yrene’s magic flowing between them.

Nesryn wiped away her tears as Chaol closed the distance between them and embraced her tightly. “Thank you,” he said in Nesryn’s ear.

She squeezed him back. “Thank *you*—for bringing me here. To all of this.”

To the prince who now looked at Nesryn with a quiet, burning sort of emotion.

She added, “We have many things to tell you.”

Chaol nodded. “And we you.”

They pulled apart, and Yrene approached—throwing her arms around Nesryn as well.

“What are we going to do with all this gold?” Eretia demanded, leading Hafiza away as the guards formed a living path for them out of the tomb. “Such

tacky junk,” she spat, frowning at a towering statue of a Fae soldier.

Chaol laughed, and Yrene joined him, sliding her arm around his middle as they trailed behind the healers.

Alive, Yrene had said to him. As they walked out of the dark, Chaol at last felt it was true.



Sartaq took Duva to the khagan. Called in his brothers and sister.

Because Yrene insisted they be there. Chaol and Hafiza insisted they be there.

The khagan, in the first hint of emotion Yrene had ever seen from the man, lunged for the unconscious, bloody Duva as Sartaq limped into the hall where they'd been waiting. Viziers pressed in. Hasar let out a gasp of what Yrene could have sworn was true pain.

Sartaq did not let his father touch her. Did not let anyone but Nesryn come close as he laid Duva on a low couch.

Yrene kept a few steps back, silent and watching, Chaol at her side.

This bond between them ... She could feel it, almost. Like a living band of cool, silken light flowing from her—into him.

And he truly did not seem to mind that a piece of his spine, his nerves, would retain permanent damage for as long as they lived.

Yes, he'd now be able to move his legs with limited motion, even when her magic was drained. But standing—never a possibility during those times. She supposed they'd soon learn how and when the level of her power correlated with whether he required cane or chair or neither.

But Chaol was right. Whether he stood or limped or sat ... it did not change him. Who he was. She had fallen in love with him well before he'd ever stood. She would love him no matter how he moved through the world.

What if we fight? Yrene had asked him on the trek over here. *What then?*

Chaol had only kissed her temple. *We fight all the time already. It'll be*

nothing new. He'd added, Do you think I'd want to be with anyone who didn't hand my ass to me on a regular basis?

But she'd frowned. He'd continued, And this bond between us, Yrene ... it changes nothing. With you and me. You'll need your own space; I'll need mine. So if you think for one moment that you're going to get away with flimsy excuses for never leaving my side—

She'd poked him in the ribs. As if I'll want to hang around you all day like some lovesick girl!

Chaol had laughed, tucking her in tighter. But Yrene had only patted his arm and said, *And I think you can take care of yourself just fine.*

He'd just kissed her brow again. And that had been that.

Yrene now brushed her fingers against his, Chaol's hand curling around her own, as Sartaq cleared his throat and held up Duva's limp hand. To display the wedding band there. "Our sister has been enslaved by a demon sent by Perrington in the form of this ring."

Murmurs and shifting about. Arghun spat, "Nonsense."

"Perrington is no man. He is Erawan," Sartaq declared, ignoring his elder brother, and Yrene realized Nesryn must have told him everything. "The Valg king."

Still holding Yrene's hand, Chaol added for all to hear, "Erawan sent this ring as a wedding gift, knowing Duva would put it on—knowing the demon would entrap her. On her wedding day." They'd left the second ring at the Torre, locked within one of the ancient chests, to be disposed of later.

"The babe," the khagan demanded, eyes on that torn-up belly, the scratches marring her neck where Hafiza had already removed the worst of the splinters.

"These are lies," Arghun seethed. "From desperate, scheming people."

"They are not lies," Hafiza cut in, chin high. "And we have witnesses who will tell you otherwise. Guards, healers, and your own brother, Prince, if you will not believe us."

To challenge the word of the Healer on High ... Arghun shut his mouth.

Kashin shoved to the front of the crowd, earning a glare from Hasar as he shouldered past her. “That explains ...” He peered at his sleeping sister. “She has not been the same.”

“She was the same,” Arghun snapped.

Kashin leveled a glare on his eldest brother. “If you ever deigned to spend any time with her, you would have known the differences.” He shook his head. “I thought her morose from the arranged marriage, then the pregnancy.” Grief flooded his eyes as he faced Chaol. “She did it, didn’t she? She killed Tumelun.”

A ripple of shock went through the room as all eyes fixed upon him. But Chaol instead turned to the khagan, whose face was bloodless and devastated in a way that Yrene had not yet known, and could not imagine. To lose a child, to endure this ... “Yes,” Chaol said, bowing his head to the khagan. “The demon confessed to it, but it was not Duva. The demon made it sound as if Duva fought every second—raged against your daughter’s death.”

The khagan closed his eyes for a long moment.

Kashin lifted his palms to Yrene in the heavy silence. “Can you fix her? If she still somehow remains inside?” A broken plea. Not from a prince to a healer, but one friend to another. As they had once been—as she hoped they might again be.

The gathering focused upon Yrene now. She didn’t let an ounce of doubt curve her spine as she said, “I shall try.”

Chaol added, “There are things you should know, Great Khagan. About Erawan. The threat he poses. What you and this land might offer against him. And stand to gain in the process.”

“You think to scheme at a time like this?” Arghun snapped.

“No,” Chaol said clearly, unhesitatingly. “But consider that Morath has already reached these shores. Has already killed and harmed those you care for. And if we do not rise to face this threat ...” His fingers tightened on Yrene’s.

“Princess Duva will only be the first. And Princess Tumelun will not be the last victim of Erawan and the Valg.”

Nesryn stepped forward. “We come with grave tidings from the south, Great Khagan. The *kharankui* are stirring again, called by their dark ... master.” Many stirred at the term she’d used. But some glanced to each other, confusion in their eyes, and Nesryn explained, “Creatures of darkness from the Valg realm. This war has already leaked into these lands.”

Murmuring silence and rustling robes.

But the khagan didn’t tear his eyes away from his unconscious daughter. “Save her,” he said—the words directed to Yrene.

Hafiza nodded subtly to Yrene, motioning her forward.

The message was clear enough: a test. The final one. Not between Yrene and the Healer on High. But something far greater.

Perhaps what had indeed called Yrene to these shores. Guided her across two empires, over mountains and seas.

An infection. A parasite. Yrene had faced them before.

But this demon inside ... Yrene approached the sleeping princess.

And began.

Yrene's hands did not tremble as she held them before her.

White light glowed around her fingers, encasing them, shielding them as she picked up the sleeping princess's hand. It was so slight—so delicate, compared to the horrors she'd done with it.

Yrene's magic rippled and bent as she reached for the false wedding ring. As if it were some sort of lodestone, warping the world around it.

Chaol's hand settled on her back in silent support.

She steeled herself, sucking in a breath as her fingers closed around the ring.

It was worse.

So much worse than what had been within Chaol.

Where his had been a mere shadow, this was an inky pool of blackness. Corruption. The opposite of everything in this world.

Yrene panted through her teeth, her magic flaring around her hand, the light a barrier, a glove between her and that ring, and *pulled*.

The ring slid off.

And Duva began screaming.

Her body arched off the couch, Sartaq and Kashin lunging for her legs and shoulders, respectively.

Teeth gritted, the princes pinned their sister as she thrashed against them, shrieking wordlessly as Hafiza's sleeping spell kept her unconscious.

"*You're hurting her,*" the khagan snapped. Yrene did not bother to look

toward him as she studied Duva. The body the princess slammed up and down, over and over.

“*Hush,*” Hasar hissed at her father. “Let her work. Someone fetch a blacksmith to crack open that damned ring.”

The world beyond them faded into blur and sound. Yrene was distantly aware of a young man—Duva’s husband—sprinting up to them. Covering his mouth with a cry; being held at bay by Nesryn.

Chaol just continued to kneel beside Yrene, removing his hand from her back with a final, soothing rub, while she stared and stared at Duva as she writhed.

“She will hurt *herself,*” Arghun seethed. “Stop this—”

A true parasite. A living shadow within the princess. Filling her blood, planted in her mind.

She could feel the Valg demon within, raging and screeching.

Yrene lifted her hands before her. The white light filled her skin. She *became* that light, held within the now-faint borders of her body.

Someone gasped as Yrene reached her glowing, blinding hands toward the princess’s chest, as if guided by some invisible tug.

The demon began to panic, sensing her approach.

Distantly, she heard Sartaq swear. Heard the crack of wood as Duva drove her foot into the arm of the couch.

There was only the thrashing Valg, scrabbling at power. Only her incandescent hands, reaching for the princess.

Yrene laid her glowing hands on Duva’s chest.

Light flared, bright as a sun. People cried out.

But as quickly as it had appeared, the light vanished, sucked into Yrene—into where her hands met Duva’s chest. Sucked into the princess herself.

Along with Yrene.

It was a dark storm within.

Cold, and raging, and ancient.

Yrene felt it squatting there. Squatting *everywhere*. A tapeworm indeed.

“*You will all die—*” the Valg demon began to hiss.

Yrene unleashed her power.

A torrent of white light flooded every vein and bone and nerve.

Not a river, but a band of light made up of the countless kernels of her power—so many they were legion, all hunting out each dark, festering corner, each screaming crevice of malice.

Far away, beyond, a blacksmith arrived. A hammer struck metal.

Hasar snarled—the sound echoed by Chaol, right at Yrene’s ear.

Half aware, she saw the black, glittering stone held within the metal as they carefully passed it around on a vizier’s kerchief.

The Valg demon roared as her magic smothered it, drowned it. Yrene panted against the onslaught as it pushed back. Shoved at her.

Chaol’s hand again began to rub down her back in soothing lines.

More of the world faded away.

I am not afraid of you, Yrene said into the dark. *And you have nowhere to run.*

Duva thrashed, trying to unseat Yrene’s grip. Yrene pressed down harder on her chest.

Time slowed and bent. She was dimly aware of the ache in her knees, the cramp in her back. Dimly aware of Sartaq and Kashin refusing to offer their position to someone else.

Still Yrene sent her magic flowing into Duva. Filling her with that devouring light.

The demon screamed the entire time.

But bit by bit, she blasted it back, blasted it deeper.

Until she saw it, curled within the core of her.

Its true form ... It was as horrific as she’d imagined.

Smoke swirled and coiled about it, revealing glimpses of gangly limbs and

talons, mostly hairless gray, slick skin, and unnaturally large dark eyes that raged as she looked upon it.

Truly *looked* upon it.

It hissed, revealing pointed, fish-sharp teeth. *Your world shall fall. As the others have done. As all others will.*

The demon dug claws deep into the darkness. Duva screamed.

“Pathetic,” Yrene told it.

Perhaps she spoke the word aloud, for silence fell.

Distantly, that bond flowing away ... it thinned. The hand on her back drifted away.

“Utterly pathetic,” Yrene repeated, her magic rallying behind her in a mighty, cresting white wave. “For a prince to prey on a helpless woman.”

The demon scrambled back against the wave, clawing at the dark as if it would tunnel *through* Duva.

Yrene pushed forward. Let her wave fall.

And as her power slammed into that last remnant of the demon, it laughed. *No prince am I, girl. But a princess. And my sisters shall soon find you.*

Yrene’s light erupted, shredding and cleaving, devouring any last scrap of darkness—

Yrene snapped back into her body, collapsing against the floor. Chaol shouted her name.

But Hasar was there, hauling her upright as Yrene lunged for Duva, hands flaring—

But Duva coughed, choking, trying to twist onto her side.

“Turn her,” Yrene rasped to the princes, who obeyed. Just as Duva heaved, and vomited over the edge of the couch. It splattered Yrene’s knees, reeking to deepest hell. But she scanned the mess. Food—mostly food, and speckles of blood.

Duva retched again, a deep, choking noise.

Only black smoke broke from her lips. She retched again, and again.

Until a tendril dribbled onto the emerald floors.

And as the shadows slithered out of Duva's lips ... Yrene felt it. Even as her magic strained and buckled, she felt the last of that Valg demon vanish into nothing.

A bit of dew dissolved by the sun.

Her body became cold and aching. Empty. Her magic drained to the dregs.

She blinked up at the wall of people standing around the couch.

The khagan's sons now flanked their father, hands on their swords, faces grim.

Lethal—with rage. Not at Yrene, not at Duva, but the man who had sent this to their house. Their family.

Duva's face relaxed on an exhaled breath, color blooming on her cheeks.

Duva's husband tried to surge for her again, but Yrene stopped him with an upheld hand.

Heavy—her hand was so heavy. But she held the young man's panicked stare. Which had not been on his wife's face, but the belly. Yrene nodded to him as if to say, *I will look*.

Then she laid her hands on that round, high womb.

Sent her magic probing, dancing along it—the life within.

Something new and joyous answered back.

Loudly.

Its kick roused Duva with an *ooph*, her eyelids fluttering open.

Duva blinked at them all. Blinked at Yrene, the hand she still laid on her belly. “Is it—” The words were a broken rasp.

Yrene smiled, panting softly, relief a crushing weight in her chest. “Healthy and human.”

Duva just stared at Yrene until tears filled and flowed from those dark eyes.

Her husband sank into a chair and covered his face, shoulders shaking.

There was a flurry of motion, and then the khagan was there.

And the most powerful man on the earth fell to his knees before that couch and reached for his daughter. Crushed her against him.

“Is it true, Duva?” Arghun demanded from the head of the couch, and Yrene resisted the urge to snap at him about giving the woman some space to sort through all she’d endured.

Sartaq had no reservations. He snarled at his elder brother, “*Shut your mouth.*”

But before Arghun could hiss a retort, Duva lifted her head from the khagan’s shoulder.

Tears leaked down her cheeks as she surveyed Sartaq and Arghun. Then Hasar. Then Kashin. And lastly the husband who lifted his head from his hands.

Shadows still lined that lovely face, but—human ones.

“It is true,” Duva whispered, her voice breaking as she looked back to her brothers and sister. “All of it.”

And as everything that confession implied sank in, the khagan gathered her to him again, rocking her gently while she wept.

Hasar lingered by the foot of the couch as her brothers pressed in to embrace their sister, something like longing on her face.

Hasar noticed Yrene’s stare and mouthed the words: *Thank you.*

Yrene only bowed her head and backed toward where Chaol was waiting. Not at her side, but sitting in his chair next to a nearby pillar. He must have asked a servant to bring it from his suite when the tether between them had grown thin as she battled within Duva.

Chaol wheeled over to her, scanning her features. But his own face held no grief, no frustration.

Only awe—awe and such adoration it snatched her breath away. Yrene settled in his lap, and he looped his arms around her as she kissed his cheek.

A door slammed open across the hall, and rushing feet and skirts filled the air.

And sobbing. The Grand Empress was sobbing as she threw herself toward her daughter.

She made it within a foot before Kashin leaped in, grabbing his mother by the waist, her white gown swaying with the force of her halted sprint. She spoke in Halha, too fast for Yrene to understand, her skin ashen against the jet black of her long, straight hair. She did not seem to notice anyone but the daughter before her as Kashin murmured an explanation, his hand stroking down his mother's thin back in soothing lines.

The Grand Empress just fell to her knees and folded Duva into her arms.

An old ache stirred in Yrene at the sight of that mother and daughter, at the sight of both of them, weeping with grief and joy.

Chaol squeezed her shoulder in quiet understanding as Yrene slid off his lap and they turned to leave.

“Anything,” the khagan said over his shoulder to Yrene, the man still kneeling by Duva and his wife as Hasar at last swept in to embrace her sister. Their mother just enfolded both princesses, kissing the sisters on their cheeks and brows and hair as they held together tightly. “Anything you desire,” the khagan said. “Ask it, and it is yours.”

Yrene did not hesitate. The words tumbled from her lips.

“A favor, Great Khagan. I would ask you a favor.”



The palace was in uproar, but Chaol and Yrene still found themselves alone with Nesryn and Sartaq, sitting, of all places, in their suite.

The prince and Nesryn had joined them on the long walk back to the room, Chaol wheeling his chair close to Yrene's side. She'd been swaying on her feet, and was too damned stubborn to mention it. Even went so far as to assess *him* with those sharp healer's eyes, inquiring after his back, his legs. As if *he* was the one who'd drained his power to the dregs.

He'd felt it, the shifting within his body as mighty waves of her power flowed into Duva. The growing strain along parts of his back and legs. Only then had he left her side during the healing, his steps uneven as he'd gone to lean against the wooden arm of a nearby couch and quietly asked the nearest servant to bring his chair. By the time they'd returned, he'd needed it—his legs still capable of some motion, but not standing.

But it did not frustrate him, did not embarrass him. If this was to be his body's natural state for the rest of his life ... it was not a punishment, not at all.

He was still thinking that when they reached his suite, mulling over how they might work out a schedule of him fighting in battle with her healing.

For he would fight. And if her power was drained, he'd fight then, too. Whether on horseback or in the chair itself.

And when Yrene needed to heal, when the magic in her veins summoned her to those killing fields and their bond grew thin ... he'd manage with a cane, or the chair. He would not shrink from it.

If he survived the battle. The war. If *they* survived.

He and Yrene found spots on the sorry replacement for the gold couch—which he was honestly debating bringing back to Adarlan with him, broken bits and all—while Nesryn and the prince sat, carefully, in separate chairs. Chaol tried not to look too aware or amused by it.

“How did you know we were in such trouble?” Yrene asked at last. “Before you linked up with the guards, I mean.”

Sartaq blinked, stumbling out of his thoughts. A corner of his mouth lifted. “Kadja,” he said, jerking his chin toward the servant currently setting a tea service before them. “She was the one who saw Duva leave—down to those tunnels. She's in my ... employ.”

Chaol studied the servant, who made no sign that she'd heard. “Thank you,” he rasped.

But Yrene went one step further, taking the woman's hand and squeezing it.

“We owe you a life debt,” she said. “How can we repay you?”

Kadja only shook her head and backed out of the room. They stared after her for a moment.

“Arghun is no doubt debating whether to punish her for it,” Sartaq mused. “On the one hand, it saved Duva. On the other hand ... she didn’t tell him at all.”

Nesryn frowned. “We need to find a way to shield her, then. If he’s that ungrateful.”

“Oh, he is,” Sartaq said, and Chaol tried not to blink at the casualness between them, or her use of *we*. “But I’ll think on it.”

Chaol refrained from revealing that one word to Shen, and Kadja would have a faithful protector for the rest of her life.

Yrene only asked, “What now?”

Nesryn ran a hand through her dark hair. Different. Yes, there was something wholly different about her. She glanced to Sartaq—not for permission, but ... as if reassuring herself that he was there. Then she said the words that made Chaol glad he was already sitting.

“Maeve is a Valg queen.”

It all came out then. What she and Sartaq had learned these past weeks: stygian spiders, who were really Valg foot soldiers. A shape-shifter who might be Lysandra’s uncle. And a Valg queen who had been masquerading as Fae for thousands of years, hiding from the demon kings she’d drawn to this world in her attempt to escape them.

“That explains why the Fae healers might have fled, too,” Yrene murmured when Nesryn fell silent. “Why Maeve’s own healer compound lies on the border with the mortal world. Perhaps not so they can have access to humans who need care ... but as a border patrol against the Valg, should they ever try to encroach her territory.”

How close the Valg had unwittingly come when Aelin had fought those princes in Wendlyn.

“It also explains why Aelin reported an owl at Maeve’s side when they first met,” Nesryn said, gesturing to Yrene, whose brows bunched.

Then Yrene blurted, “The owl must be the Fae form of a healer. Some healer of hers that she keeps close—as a bodyguard. Has let everyone believe to be some pet ...”

Chaol’s head spun. Sartaq gave him a look as if to say he understood the feeling well.

“What happened before we arrived?” Nesryn asked. “When we found you ...”

Yrene’s hand clenched his. And it was his turn to tell them what they had learned, what they had endured. That regardless of what Maeve might plan to do ... There remained Erawan to face.

Until Yrene murmured, “When I was healing Duva, the demon ...” She rubbed at her chest. He’d never seen anything so remarkable as that healing: the blinding glow of her hands, the near-holy expression on her face. As if she were Silba herself. “The demon told me it was not a Valg prince ... but a princess.”

Silence. Until Nesryn said, “The spider. It claimed the Valg kings had sons *and* daughters. Princes and princesses.”

Chaol swore. No, his legs would not be able to function anytime soon, with or without Yrene’s slowly refilling well of power. “We’re going to need a Fire-Bringer, it seems,” he said. And to translate the books Hafiza said she would gladly hand over to their cause.

Nesryn chewed on her lip. “Aelin now sails north to Terrasen, an armada with her. The witches as well.”

“Or just the Thirteen,” Chaol countered. “The reports were murky. It might not even be Manon Blackbeak’s coven, actually.”

“It is,” Nesryn said. “I’d bet everything on it.” She slid her attention to Sartaq, who nodded—silent permission. Nesryn braced her forearms on her knees. “We did not return alone when we raced back here.”

Chaol glanced between them. "How many?"

Sartaq's face tightened. "The rukhin are vital enough internally that I can only risk bringing half." Chaol waited. "So I brought a thousand."

He was indeed glad he was sitting down. A thousand ruk riders ... Chaol scratched his jaw. "If we can join Aelin's host, along with the Thirteen and any other Ironteeth Manon Blackbeak can sway to our side ..."

"We will have an aerial legion to combat Morath's," Nesryn finished, eyes bright. With hope, yes, but something like dread, too. As if she perhaps realized what combating would ensue. The lives at stake. Yet she turned to Yrene. "And if you can heal those infected by the Valg ..."

"We still need to find a way to get their hosts down," Sartaq said. "Long enough for Yrene and any others to heal them." Yes, there was that to account for, too.

Yrene cut in, "Well, as you said, we have Aelin Fire-Bringer fighting for us, don't we? If she can produce flame, surely she can produce smoke." Her mouth quirked to the side. "I might have some ideas."

Yrene opened her mouth as if she'd say more, but the suite doors blew open and Hasar breezed in.

Hasar seemed to check herself at the sight of Sartaq. "It seems I'm late for the war council."

Sartaq crossed an ankle over a knee. "Who says that's what we're discussing?"

Hasar claimed a seat for herself and adjusted the fall of her hair over a shoulder. "You mean to tell me the ruks shitting up the roofs are just here to make you look important?"

Sartaq huffed a quiet laugh. "Yes, sister?"

The princess only looked to Yrene, then Chaol. "I will come with you."

Chaol didn't dare move. Yrene said, "Alone?"

"Not alone." The mocking amusement was gone from her face. "You saved

Duva's life. And ours, if she had grown more bold." A glance to Sartaq, who watched with mild surprise. "Duva is the best of us. The best of me." Hasar's throat bobbed. "So I will go with you, with whatever ships I can bring, so that my sister will never again look over her shoulder in fear."

Except in fear of one another, Chaol refrained from saying.

But Hasar caught the words in his eyes. "Not her," she said quietly. "All the others," she added with a stark look at Sartaq, who nodded grimly. "But never Duva."

An unspoken promise, Chaol realized, among the other siblings.

"So you will have to suffer my company for a while yet, Lord Westfall," Hasar said, but that edged smile was not as sharp. "Because for my sisters, both living and dead, I will march with my *sulde* to the gates of Morath and make that demon bastard pay." She met Yrene's stare. "And for you, Yrene Towers. For what you did for Duva, I will help you save your land."

Yrene rose, her hands shaking. And none of them spoke a word as Yrene reached Hasar's seat and threw her arms around her neck to hold the princess tightly.

Nesryn was utterly drained. Wanted to sleep for a week. A month.

But she somehow found herself walking the halls, aiming for Kadara's minaret. Alone.

Sartaq had gone to see his father, Hasar joining him. And though it certainly was not awkward with Chaol and Yrene ... Nesryn gave them their privacy. He had been upon Death's threshold after all. She had few illusions about what was likely about to take place in that suite.

And that she'd have to find quarters of her own.

Nesryn supposed she'd have to find quarters for a few people tonight anyway—starting with Borte, who'd marveled at Antica and the sea, even as they'd swept in as fast as the winds could carry them. And Falkan, who'd indeed come with them, riding as a field mouse in Borte's pocket, Yeran none too pleased about it. Or so he'd seemed the last time she'd seen him at the Eridun aerie, Sartaq charging the various hearth-mothers and the captains to rally their rukhin and fly for Antica.

Nesryn reached the stairwell leading up to the minaret when the page found her. The boy was out of breath but managed a graceful bow as he handed her a letter.

It was dated two weeks ago. In her uncle's handwriting.

Her fingers trembled as she broke the seal.

A minute later, she was racing up the minaret stairs.



People cried out in awe and surprise when the reddish-brown ruk sailed over the buildings and homes of Antica.

Nesryn murmured to the bird, guiding him toward the Runni Quarter while they flew on a salt-kissed breeze as fast as his wings could carry them.

She had claimed him upon leaving the Eridun aerie.

Had gone right to the nests, where he had still waited for a rider who would never return, and looked deep into his golden eyes. Had told him that her name was Nesryn Faliq, and she was daughter of Sayed and Cybele Faliq, and that she would be his rider, if he would have her.

She wondered if the ruk, whose late rider had called him Salkhi, had known the burning in her eyes had not been from the roaring wind as he'd bowed his head to her.

Then she'd flown him, Salkhi keeping pace with Kadara at the head of the host as the rukhin sailed northward. Raced to Antica.

And now, as Salkhi landed in the street outside her uncle's home, some vendors abandoning their carts in outright terror, some children dropping their games to gawk, then grin—Nesryn patted her ruk on his broad neck and dismounted.

The front gates to her uncle's house banged open.

And as she saw her father standing there, as her sister shoved past, her children pouring out in a shrieking gaggle ...

Nesryn fell to her knees and wept.



How Sartaq found her two hours later, Nesryn didn't know. Though she supposed a ruk sitting in the street of a fancy quarter of Antica was sure to cause a stir. And be easy to spot.

She had wept and laughed and held her family for untold minutes, right in the

middle of the street, Salkhi looking on.

And when her uncle and aunt had called them in to *at least cry over a good cup of tea*, her family had told her of their adventures. The wild seas they had sailed, the enemies their ship had dodged on their voyage here. But they had made it—and here they would stay while the war raged, her father said, to the nods of her uncle and aunt.

When she emerged from the house gates at last, her father claiming the honor of escorting Nesryn to Salkhi—after he'd shooed off her sister to go *manage that circus of children*—Nesryn had halted so quickly her father had nearly slammed into her.

Because standing beside Salkhi was Sartaq, a half smile on his face. And on the other side of Salkhi ... Kadara patiently waited, the two ruks a proud pair indeed.

Her father's eyes widened, as if recognizing the ruk before the prince.

But then her father bowed. Deeply.

Nesryn had told her family—in moderate detail—what had befallen her amongst the rukhin. Her sister and aunt had glared at her when the various children began to declare that they, too, would be ruk riders. And then took off through the house, shrieking and flapping their arms, leaping off furniture with wild abandon.

She expected Sartaq to wait to be approached, but the prince spotted her father and strode forward. Then reached out and clasped his hand. "I heard Captain Faliq's family had at last arrived safely," Sartaq said by way of greeting. "I thought I'd come to welcome you myself."

Something swelled in her chest to the point of pain as Sartaq inclined his head to her father.

Sayed Faliq looked like he might very well keel over dead, either from the gesture of respect or Kadara's mere presence behind them. Indeed, several small heads now popped behind his legs, scanning the prince, then the ruks, and then

—
“KADARA!”

Her aunt and uncle’s youngest child—no more than four—screamed the ruk’s name loud enough that anyone in the city who didn’t know the bird was on this street was now well aware.

Sartaq laughed as the children shoved past Nesryn’s father, racing for the golden bird.

Her sister was on their heels, warning springing from her lips—

Until Kadara lowered herself to the ground, Salkhi following suit. The children halted, reverence stealing over them as they reached out tentative hands toward the two ruks and stroked them gently.

Nesryn’s sister sighed with relief. Then realized who stood before Nesryn and their father.

Delara went red. She patted her dress, as if it would somehow cover the fresh food stains courtesy of her youngest. Then she slowly backed into the house, bowing as she went.

Sartaq laughed as she vanished—but not before Delara gave Nesryn a sharp look that said, *Oh, you are so smitten it’s not even a laughing matter.*

Nesryn gave her sister a vulgar gesture behind her back that their father chose not to see.

Her father was saying to Sartaq, “I apologize if my grandchildren, nieces, and nephews take some liberties with your ruk, Prince.”

But Sartaq smiled broadly—a brighter grin than any she’d seen him give before. “Kadara pretends to be a noble mount, but she’s more of a mother hen than anything.”

Kadara puffed her feathers, earning squeals of delight from the children.

Nesryn’s father squeezed her shoulder before he said to the prince, “I think I’ll go keep them from trying to fly off on her.”

And then they were alone. In the street. Outside her uncle’s house. All of

Antica now gawking at them.

Sartaq did not seem to notice. Certainly not as he said, "Walk with me?"

Swallowing, with a backward glance toward where her father was now overseeing the gaggle of children attempting to climb onto Salkhi and Kadara, Nesryn nodded.

They headed toward the quiet, clean alley behind her uncle's house, walking in silence for a few steps. Until Sartaq said, "I spoke to my father."

And she wondered, then, if this meeting was not to be a good one. If the army they had brought was to be ordered back to its aeries. Or if the prince, the life she saw for herself in those beautiful mountains ... if perhaps the reality of that, too, had found them.

For he was a prince. And for all that she loved her family, for all that they made her so proud, there was not one noble drop of blood in their lineage. Her father shaking Sartaq's hand was the closest any Faliq had ever come to royalty.

Nesryn managed to say, "Oh?"

"We ... discussed things."

Her chest sank at the careful words. "I see."

Sartaq stopped, the sandy alley humming with the buzzing bees in the jasmine that climbed the walls of the bordering courtyards. The one behind them: the back, private courtyard belonging to her family. She wished she could slither over the wall and hide within. Rather than hear this.

But Nesryn made herself meet the prince's eyes. Saw him scanning her face.

"I told him," Sartaq said at last, "that I planned to lead the rukhin against Erawan, with or without his consent."

Worse. This was getting worse and worse. She wished his face weren't so damn unreadable.

Sartaq took a breath. "He asked me why."

"I hope you told him that the fate of the world might depend upon it."

Sartaq chuckled. "I did. But I also told him that the woman I love now plans

to head into war. And I intend to follow her.”

She didn't let the words sink in. Didn't let herself believe any of it, until he'd finished.

“He told me that you are common-born. That a would-be Heir of the khagan needs to wed a princess, or a lady, or someone with lands and alliances to offer.”

Her throat closed up. She tried to shut out the sound, the words. Didn't want to hear the rest.

But Sartaq took her hand. “I told him if that was what it took to be chosen as Heir, I didn't want it. And I walked out.”

Nesryn sucked in a breath. “Are you *insane*?”

Sartaq smiled faintly. “I certainly hope not, for the sake of this empire.” He tugged her closer, until their bodies were nearly touching. “Because my father appointed me Heir before I could walk out of the room.”

Nesryn left her body. Could only manage to breathe.

And when she tried to bow, Sartaq gripped her shoulders tightly. Stopped her before her head could even lower.

“Never from you,” he said quietly.

Heir—he'd been made *Heir*. To all this. This land she loved, this land she still wished to explore so much it ached.

Sartaq lifted a hand to cup her cheek, his calluses scraping against her skin. “We fly to war. Much is uncertain ahead. Save for this.” He brushed his mouth against hers. “Save for what I feel for you. No demon army, no dark queen or king, will change that.”

Nesryn shook, letting the words sink in. “I—Sartaq, you are *Heir*—”

He pulled back to study her again. “We will go to war, Nesryn Faliq. And when we shatter Erawan and his armies, when the darkness is at last banished from this world ... Then you and I will fly back here. Together.” He kissed her again—a bare caress of his mouth. “And so we shall remain for the rest of our days.”

She heard the offer, the promise.

The world he laid at her feet.

She trembled at it. What he so freely gave. Not the empire and crown, but ... the life. His heart.

Nesryn wondered if he knew her heart had been his from that very first ride atop Kadara.

Sartaq smiled as if to say yes, he had.

So she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

It was tentative, and soft, and full of wonder, that kiss. He tasted like the wind, like a mountain spring. He tasted like home.

Nesryn clasped his face in her hands as she pulled back. "To war, Sartaq," she breathed, memorizing every line of his face. "And then we'll see what comes after."

Sartaq gave her a knowing, cocky grin. As if he'd fully decided what would come after and nothing she could say would ever convince him otherwise.

And from the courtyard just a wall away, her sister shouted, loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear, "*I told you, Father!*"

Two weeks later, it was barely dawn when Yrene found herself on the deck of a fine, massive ship and watched the sun rise over Antica for the last time.

The ship was abuzz with activity, but she stood at the rail, and counted the minarets of the palace. Ran an eye over every shining quarter, the city stirring in the new light.

Autumn winds were already whipping the seas, the ship bobbing and lurching beneath her.

Home. They were to sail home today.

She hadn't made many good-byes, had not needed to. But Kashin had still found her, right as she'd ridden to the docks. Chaol had given the prince a nod before leading her mare onto the ship.

For a long moment, Kashin had stared at the ship—the others gathered in the harbor. Then he'd said quietly, "I wish I had never said a word to you on the steppes that night."

Yrene began to shake her head, unsure of what to even say.

"I have missed having you—as my friend," Kashin went on. "I do not have many of them."

"I know," she managed to get out. And then added, "I missed having you as my friend, too."

For she had. And what he was now willing to do for her, her people ...

She took Kashin's hand. Squeezed it. There was still pain in his eyes, limning

his handsome face, but ... understanding. And a clear, undaunted gleam as he beheld the northern horizon.

The prince squeezed her hand in return. “Thank you again—for Duva.” A small smile toward that northern sky. “We shall meet again, Yrene Towers. I am certain of it.”

She smiled back at him, beyond words. But Kashin winked, pulling his hand from hers. “My *sulde* still blows northward. Who knows what I may find on the road ahead? Especially now that Sartaq has the burden of being Heir, and I’m free to do as I please.”

The city had been in an uproar about it. Celebrating, debating—it still raged on. What the other royal siblings thought, Yrene did not know, but ... there was peace in Kashin’s eyes. And in the eyes of the others, when Yrene had seen them. And part of her indeed wondered if Sartaq had struck some unspoken agreement that went beyond *Never Duva*. To perhaps even *Never Us*.

Yrene had smiled again at the prince—at her friend. “Thank you, for all your kindness.”

Kashin had only bowed to her and strode off into the gray light.

And in the hour since then, Yrene had stood on the deck of this ship, silently watching the awakening city behind it, while the others readied things around and below.

For long minutes, she breathed in the sea and the spices and the sounds of Antica under the rising sun. Took them deep into her lungs, letting them settle. Let her eyes drink their fill of the cream-colored stones of the Torre Cesme rising above it all.

Even in the early morning, the tower was a beacon, a jutting lance of hope and calm.

She wondered if she would ever see it again. For what lay ahead of them ...

Yrene braced her hands on the rail as another gust of wind rocked the ship. A wind from inland, as if all thirty-six gods of Antica blew a collective breath to

send them skittering home.

Across the Narrow Sea—and to war.

The ship began to move at last, the world a riot of action and color and sound, but Yrene remained at the rail. Watching the city grow smaller and smaller.

And even when the coast was little more than a shadow, Yrene could have sworn she still saw the Torre standing above it, glinting white in the sun, as if it were an arm upraised in farewell.

Chaol Westfall took none of his steps for granted. Even the ones that had sent him rushing to a bucket to hurl up the contents of his stomach for the first few days at sea.

But one of the advantages of traveling with a healer was that Yrene easily soothed his stomach. And after two weeks at sea, dodging fierce storms that the captain only called Ship-Wreckers ... his stomach had finally forgiven him.

He found Yrene at the prow railing, gazing toward land. Or where the land would be, if they dared sail close enough. They were keeping far out as they skirted up the coast of their continent, and from his meeting with the captain moments before, they were somewhere near northern Eyllwe. Close to the Fenharrow border.

No sign of Aelin or her armada, but that was to be expected, considering how long they'd been delayed in Antica before leaving.

But Chaol pushed that from his mind as he slid his arms around Yrene's waist and pressed a kiss to the crook of her neck.

She didn't so much as freeze at the touch from behind. As if she'd learned the cadence of his steps. As if she took none of them for granted, either.

Yrene leaned back into him, her body loosening with a sigh as she laid her hands atop where his rested over her stomach.

It had taken a full day after Duva's healing before he'd been able to walk with the cane—albeit stiffly and unevenly. As it had been in those early days of

recovery: his back strained to the point of aching, every step requiring his full attention. But he'd gritted his teeth, Yrene murmuring encouragement when he had to figure out various movements. A day after that, most of the limp had eased, though he'd kept the cane; and a day later, he'd walked with minimal discomfort.

But even now, after these two weeks at sea with little for Yrene to heal beyond queasy stomachs and sunburns, Chaol kept the cane in their stateroom, the chair stored belowdecks, for when they were next needed.

He peered over Yrene's shoulder, down to their interlaced fingers. To the twin rings now gracing both of their hands.

"Watching the horizon won't get us there any faster," he murmured onto her neck.

"Neither will teasing your wife about it."

Chaol smiled against her skin. "How else am I to amuse myself during the long hours than by teasing you, Lady Westfall?"

Yrene snorted, as she always did at the title. But Chaol had never heard anything finer—other than the vows they'd spoken in Silba's temple at the Torre two and a half weeks ago. The ceremony had been small, but Hasar had insisted on a feast afterward that put to shame all the others they'd had in the palace. The princess might have been many things, but she certainly knew how to throw a party.

And how to lead an armada.

Gods help him when Hasar and Aedion met.

"For someone who hates being called Lord Westfall," Yrene mused, "you certainly seem to enjoy using the title for me."

"You're suited to it," he said, kissing her neck again.

"Yes, so suited to it that Eretia won't stop mocking me with her curtsy and bowing."

"Eretia is someone whom I could have gladly left behind in Antica."

Yrene chuckled, but pinched his wrist, stepping out of his embrace. “You’ll be glad for her when we get to land.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Yrene pinched him again, but Chaol caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers.

Wife—his wife. He’d never seen the path ahead so clearly as he had that afternoon three weeks ago, when he’d spied her sitting in the garden and just ... knew. He’d known what he wanted, and so he’d gone to her chair, knelt down before it, and simply asked.

Will you marry me, Yrene? Will you be my wife?

She’d flung her arms around his neck, knocking them both right into the fountain. Where they had remained, to the annoyance of the fish, kissing until a servant had pointedly coughed on their way past.

And looking at her now, the sea air curling tendrils of her hair, bringing out those freckles on her nose and cheeks ... Chaol smiled.

Yrene’s answering smile was brighter than the sun on the sea around them.

He’d brought that damned gold couch with them, shredded cushions and all. It had earned him no shortage of comments from Hasar when it was hauled into the cargo hold, but he didn’t care. If they survived this war, he’d build a house for Yrene around the damn thing. Along with a stable for Farasha, currently terrorizing the poor soldiers tasked with mucking out her stall aboard the ship.

A wedding gift from Hasar, along with Yrene’s own Muniqi horse.

He’d almost told the princess that she could keep Hellas’s Horse, but there was something to be said about the prospect of charging down Morath foot soldiers atop a horse named Butterfly.

Still leaning against him, Yrene wrapped a hand around the locket she never took off, save to bathe. He wondered if he could have it changed to reflect her new initials.

No longer Yrene Towers—but Yrene Westfall.

She smiled down at the locket, the silver near-blinding in the midday sun. “I suppose I don’t need my little note any longer.”

“Why?”

“Because I am not alone,” she said, running her fingers over the metal. “And because I found my courage.”

He kissed her cheek, but said nothing as she opened the locket and carefully removed the browned scrap. The wind tried to rip it from her fingers, but Yrene held tight, unfolding the slender fragment.

She scanned the text she’d read a thousand times. “I wonder if she’ll return for this war. Whoever she was. She spoke of the empire like ...” Yrene shook her head, more to herself, and folded it shut again. “Perhaps she will come home to fight, from wherever she sailed off to.” She offered him the piece of paper and turned away to the sea ahead.

Chaol took the scrap from Yrene, the paper velvet-soft from its countless readings and foldings and how she’d held it in her pocket, clutched it, all these years.

He unfolded the note and read the words he already knew were within:

For wherever you need to go—and then some. The world needs more healers.

The waves quieted. The ship itself seemed to pause.

Chaol glanced to Yrene, smiling serenely at the sea, then to the note.

To the handwriting he knew as well as his own.

Yrene went still at the tears he could not stop from sliding down his face.

“What’s wrong?”

She would have been sixteen, nearly seventeen then. And if she had been in Innish ...

It would have been on her way to the Red Desert, to train with the Silent Assassins. The bruises Yrene had described ... The beating Arobynn Hamel had given her as punishment for freeing Rolfe’s slaves and wrecking Skull’s Bay.

“Chaol?”

For wherever you need to go—and then some. The world needs more healers.
There, in her handwriting ...

Chaol looked up at last, blinking away tears as he scanned his wife's face.
Every beautiful line, those golden eyes.

A gift.

A gift from a queen who had seen another woman in hell and thought to reach back a hand. With no thought of it ever being returned. A moment of kindness, a tug on a thread ...

And even Aelin could not have known that in saving a barmaid from those mercenaries, in teaching her to defend herself, in giving her that gold and this note ...

Even Aelin could not have known or dreamed or guessed how that moment of kindness would be answered.

Not just by a healer blessed by Silba herself, capable of wiping the Valg away.

But by the three hundred healers who had come with her.

The three hundred healers from the Torre, now spread across the one thousand ships of the khagan himself.

A favor, Yrene had asked of the man in return for saving his most beloved daughter.

Anything, the khagan had promised.

Yrene had knelt before the khagan. *Save my people.*

That was all she asked. All she had begged.

Save my people.

So the khagan had answered.

With one thousand ships from Hasar's armada, and his own. Filled with Kashin's foot soldiers and Darghan cavalry.

And above them, spanning the horizon far behind the flagship on which Chaol and Yrene now sailed ... Above them flew one thousand rukhin led by

Sartaq and Nesryn, from every aerie and hearth.

An army to challenge Morath, with more to come, still rallying in Antica under Kashin's command. Two weeks, Chaol had given the khagan and Kashin, but with the autumn storms, he had not wanted to risk waiting longer. So this initial host ... Only half. Only half, and yet the scope of what sailed and flew behind him ...

Chaol folded the note along its well-worn lines and carefully set it back within Yrene's locket.

"Keep it a while longer," he said softly. "I think there's someone who will want to see that."

Yrene's eyes filled with surprise and curiosity, but she asked nothing as Chaol again slid his arms around her and held her tightly.

Every step, all of it, had led here.

From that keep in the snow-blasted mountains where a man with a face as hard as the rock around them had thrown him into the cold; to that salt mine in Endovier, where an assassin with eyes like wildfire had smirked at him, unbroken despite a year in hell.

An assassin who had found his wife, or they had found each other, two gods-blessed women wandering the shadowed ruins of the world. And who now held the fate of it between them.

Every step. Every curve into darkness. Every moment of despair and rage and pain.

It had led him to precisely where he needed to be.

Where he *wanted* to be.

A moment of kindness. From a young woman who ended lives to a young woman who saved them.

That shriveled scrap of darkness within him shrank further. Shrank and fractured into nothing but dust that was swept away by the sea wind. Past the one thousand ships sailing proud and unyielding behind him. Past the healers

scattered amongst the soldiers and horses, Hafiza leading them, who had all come when Yrene had also asked them to save her people. Past the ruks soaring through the clouds, scanning for any threats ahead.

Yrene was watching him warily. He kissed her once—twice.

He did not regret. He did not look back.

Not with Yrene in his arms, at his side. Not with the note she carried, that bit of proof ... that bit of proof that he was exactly where he was meant to be. That he had always been headed there. *Here*.

“Will I ever hear an explanation for this dramatic reaction,” Yrene said at last, clicking her tongue, “or are you just going to kiss me for the rest of the day?”

Chaol rumbled a laugh. “It’s a long story.” He slung an arm around her waist and stared out toward the horizon with her. “And you might want to sit down first.”

“Those are my favorite kinds,” she said, winking.

Chaol laughed again, feeling the sound in every part of him, letting it ring clear and bright as a bell. A final, joyous pealing before the storm of war swept in.

“Come on,” he said to Yrene, nodding to the soldiers working alongside Hasar’s men to keep the ships sailing swiftly for the north—to battle and bloodshed. “I’ll tell you over lunch.”

Yrene rose onto her toes to kiss him before he led them toward their spacious stateroom. “This story of yours had better be worth it,” she said with a wry grin.

Chaol smiled back at his wife, at the light he’d unknowingly walked toward his entire life, even when he had not been able to see it.

“It is,” he said quietly to Yrene. “It is.”

FIREHEART

They had entombed her in darkness and iron.

She slept, for they had forced her to—had wafted curling, sweet smoke through the cleverly hidden airholes in the slab of iron above. Around. Beneath.

A coffin built by an ancient queen to trap the sun inside.

Draped with iron, encased in it, she slept. Dreamed.

Drifted through seas, through darkness, through fire. A princess of nothing. Nameless.

The princess sang to the darkness, to the flame. And they sang back.

There was no beginning or end or middle. Only the song, and the sea, and the iron sarcophagus that had become her bower.

Until they were gone.

Until blinding light flooded the slumbering, warm dark. Until the wind swept in, crisp and scented with rain.

She could not feel it on her face. Not with the death-mask still chained to it.

Her eyes cracked open. The light burned away all shape and color after so long in the dim depths.

But a face appeared before her—above her. Peering over the lid that had been hauled aside.

Dark, flowing hair. Moon-pale skin. Lips as red as blood.

The ancient queen's mouth parted in a smile.

Teeth as white as bone.

“You’re awake. Good.”

Lovely and cold, it was a voice that could devour the stars.

From somewhere, from the blinding light, rough and scar-flecked hands reached into the coffin. Grasped the chains binding her. The queen’s huntsman; the queen’s blade.

He hauled the princess upright, her body a distant, aching thing. She did not want to slide back into this body. Struggled against it, clawing for the flame and the darkness that now ebbed away from her like a morning tide.

But the huntsman yanked her closer to that cruel, beautiful face watching with a spider’s smile.

And he held her still as that ancient queen purred, “Let’s begin.”

EMPIRE
of
STORMS

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TOWER
of
DAWN

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