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SARAH J.
MAAS

**QUEEN OF
SHADOWS**

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

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For Alex Bracken—

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

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

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CRILEA



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Amaroth

RUINS OF MORLA

JUNGLE OF MORLA

THE WESTERN WASTES

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THE DESERTED LAND

Ghe Singing Sands

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PART ONE

Lady of Shadows

1

There was a thing waiting in the darkness.

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

He could not remember his name.

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

Lost, as if the beheading were her fault.

A lovely woman with delicate hands like golden doves. It was not her

fault, even if he could not remember her name. It was the fault of the man on the glass throne, who had ordered that guard's sword to sever flesh and bone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

And what client Arobynn Hamel wanted to see so badly that he was risking a meeting here—especially when brutal, black-uniformed guards were roaming the city like packs of wolves.

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

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

She'd hurried from the docks to the riverside Shadow Market—where anyone could find anything they wanted, rare or contraband or commonplace—and purchased a brick of dye. She'd paid the merchant an extra piece of silver to use the small room in the back of the shop to dye her hair, still short enough to brush just below her collarbones. If those guards had been monitoring the docks and had somehow seen her, they would be looking for

a golden-haired young woman. *Everyone* would be looking for a golden-haired young woman, once word arrived in a few weeks that the King's Champion had failed in her task to assassinate Wendlyn's royal family and steal its naval defense plans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’d mind how much you drink, girl,” sneered a voice beside her.

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

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

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

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

Tern inclined his head over a shoulder, gesturing to the shadowy back of the cavernous space. “Last banquet against the wall. He’s finishing up with a client.”

She flicked her gaze in the direction Tern indicated. Both sides of the Vaults were lined with alcoves teeming with whores, barely curtained off from the crowds. She skipped over the writhing bodies, over the gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed women waiting to earn their keep in this festering shit-hole, over the people who monitored the proceedings from the nearest tables—guards and voyeurs and fleshmongers. But there, tucked into the wall adjacent to the alcoves, were several wooden booths.

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

And in the one farthest from the lights . . . a gleam of polished leather boots stretched out beneath the table. A second pair of boots, worn and

muddy, were braced on the floor across from the first, as if the client were ready to bolt. Or, if he were truly stupid, to fight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not your concern, but nice try.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stranded in her human skin, she'd curled up on her cot and recalled how to breathe, how to think, how to move her damn body without the immortal grace she'd become so dependent on. She was a useless fool for letting those gifts become a crutch, for being caught unguarded when they were again ripped from her. Rowan definitely would have kicked her

ass for *that*—once he'd recovered himself. It was enough to make her glad she'd asked him to stay behind.

So she had breathed in the brine and the wood, and reminded herself that she'd been trained to kill with her bare hands long before she'd ever learned to melt bones with her fire. She did not need the extra strength, speed, and agility of her Fae form to bring down her enemies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She didn't care.

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

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

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

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

3

Chaol was Arobynn's client.

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

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

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

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

Alive—but where had the blood come from?

He must have deemed her nonthreatening, because he merely motioned to his companion to go, and they both strolled toward the bar—no, toward the stairs beyond. He moved at a steady, casual pace, though the woman at his side was too tense to pass for unconcerned. Fortunately

for them all, no one looked his way as he left, and the captain didn't glance in her direction again.

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

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

Seeing Chaol changed nothing—not right now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But no more.

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



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

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

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

Aelin slid onto the bench across from him, too aware of the wood still warm from Chaol. Her own daggers pressed against her with every movement. Goldryn was a heavy weight at her side, the massive ruby in its hilt hidden by her dark cloak—the legendary blade utterly useless in such tight quarters. No doubt why he'd picked the booth for this meeting.

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

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

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

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

“Precautions,” she said, crossing her legs and surveying him just as slowly. No indication that he was wearing the Amulet of Orynth, the royal heirloom he'd stolen from her when he found her half-dead on the

banks of the Florine. He'd allowed her to believe the amulet that secretly contained the third and final Wyrdkey had been lost to the river. For a thousand years, her ancestors had unwittingly worn the amulet, and it had made their kingdom—*her* kingdom—a powerhouse: prosperous and safe, the ideal to which all courts in all lands were held. Still, she'd never seen Arobynn wear any sort of chain around his neck. He probably had it squirreled away somewhere at the Keep. "I wouldn't want to wind up back in Endovier."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A casual reminder of what he was capable of doing, what he could endure. Wesley had been one of the finest warriors she’d ever encountered. If he hadn’t survived the fight with Arobynn, few existed who would. “First Sam,” she said, “then me, then Wesley—what a tyrant you’ve

become. Is there anyone at all left in the Keep besides darling Tern, or have you put down every person who displeased you?" She glanced at Tern, loitering at the bar, and then at the other two assassins seated at separate tables halfway across the room, trying to pretend they weren't monitoring every movement she made. "At least Harding and Mullin are alive, too. But they've always been so good at kissing your ass that I have a hard time imagining you ever bringing yourself to kill them."

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

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

"And how long will your visit be, exactly?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After all that she had endured, after what she had overcome in Wendlyn, to return to this . . . She wished Rowan were beside her, wished she could smell his pine-and-snow scent and know that no matter what news Arobynn bore, no matter how it shattered her, the Fae warrior would be there to help put the pieces back together.

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

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

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

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

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

The world stopped.

Stopped, and started, then stopped again.

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

Aedion. She mastered the swarm of thoughts that clouded her

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“At what cost?”

Arobynn looked her over once more, and something low in her abdomen twisted at the gaze that was anything but that of a brother or father. “A favor—just one favor.” Warning bells pealed in her head. She’d be better off making a bargain with one of the Valg princes. “There are creatures lurking in my city,” he said. “Creatures who wear the bodies of men like clothing. I want to know what they are.”

Too many threads were now poised to tangle.

She said carefully, “What do you mean?”

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

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

He waited.

So did she.

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

“Part of it.”

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

“Two sides of the same coin.”

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

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

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

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

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

“How do you kill them?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

She started. “Absolutely not. And why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course,” he said.

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

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

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

Arobynn continued to pin her with that lover’s gaze. “Nothing is without a price.” He brushed a kiss against her cheekbone, his lips soft and warm. She fought the shudder that trembled through her, and made herself lean into him as he brought his mouth against her ear and whispered, “Tell me what I must do to atone; tell me to crawl over hot coals, to sleep on a bed of nails, to carve up my flesh. Say the word, and it is done. But let me care for you as I once did, before . . . before that madness poisoned my heart. Punish me, torture me, wreck me, but let me help you. Do this small thing for me—and let me lay the world at your feet.”

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

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

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

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

Liar. Trained, cunning liar.

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

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

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

It was only a matter of time before either Arobynn showed his hand or the King of Adarlan’s men found the trail she’d carefully laid from the

docks. Someone would be coming for her—within moments, actually, if the shouts followed by utter silence behind the metal door atop the stairs were any indication. At least that much of her plan remained on course. She'd deal with Chaol later.

With a gloved hand, she plucked up one of the coppers Arobynn had left on the table. She stuck out her tongue at the brutish, unforgiving profile of the king stamped on one side—then at the roaring wyvern gracing the other. Heads, Arobynn had betrayed her again. Tails, the king's men. The iron door at the top of the stairs groaned open, cool night air pouring in.

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

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

4

Aedion Ashryver knew he was going to die—and soon.

He didn't bother trying to bargain with the gods. They'd never answered his pleas, anyway.

In the years he'd been a warrior and a general, he'd always known that he would die some way or another—preferably on a battlefield, in a way that would be worthy of a song or a tale around a fire.

This would not be that sort of death.

He would either be executed at whatever grand event the king had planned to make the most of his demise, or he would die down here in this rotting, damp cell, from the infection that was slowly and surely destroying his body.

It had started off as a small wound in his side, courtesy of the fight he'd put up three weeks ago when that butchering monster had murdered Sorscha. He'd hidden the slice along his ribs from the guards who looked him over, hoping that he'd either bleed out or that it'd fester and kill him before the king could use him against Aelin.

Aelin. His execution was to be a trap for her, a way to lure her into risking an attempt to save him. He'd die before he would allow it.

He just hadn't expected it to hurt so damn much.

He concealed the fever from the sneering guards who fed and watered him twice a day, pretending to slowly fall into sullen silence, feigning that the prowling, cursing animal had broken. The cowards wouldn't get close enough for him to reach, and they hadn't noticed that he'd given up trying to snap the chains that allowed him to stand and walk a few paces, but not much else. They hadn't noticed that he was no longer standing very much at all, except to see to his body's needs. The degradation of that was nothing new.

At least he hadn't been forced into one of those collars, though he'd seen one beside the king's throne that night everything went to shit. He would bet good money that the Wyrdstone collar was for the king's own son—and he prayed that the prince had died before he'd allowed his father to leash him like a dog.

Aedion shifted on his pallet of moldy hay and bit back his bark of agony at the pain exploding along his ribs. Worse—worse by the day. His diluted Fae blood was the only thing that had kept him alive this long, trying desperately to heal him, but soon even the immortal grace in his veins would bow to the infection.

It would be such a relief—such a blessed relief to know he couldn't be used against her, and that he would soon see those he had secretly harbored in his shredded heart all these years.

So he bore down on every spike of fever, every roiling fit of nausea and pain. Soon—soon Death would come to greet him.

Aedion just hoped Death arrived before Aelin did.

5

The night might very well end in *her* blood being shed, Aelin realized as she hurtled down the crooked streets of the slums, sheathing her bloodied fighting knives to keep from dripping a trail behind her.

Thanks to months of running through the Cambrian Mountains with Rowan, her breathing remained steady, her head clear. She supposed that after facing skinwalkers, after escaping ancient creatures the size of small cottages, and after incinerating four demon princes, twenty men in pursuit wasn't all that horrific.

But still a giant, raging pain in her ass. And one that would not likely end pleasantly for her. No sign of Chaol—no whisper of his name on the lips of the men who had surged into the Vaults. She hadn't recognized any of them, but she'd felt the *offness* that marked most of those who had been in contact with Wyrystone, or been corrupted by it. They wore no collars or rings, but something inside these men had rotted nonetheless.

At least Arobynn hadn't betrayed her—though how *convenient* that he'd left only minutes before the king's new guards had finally found the

winding trail she'd left from the docks. Perhaps it was a test, to see whether her abilities remained up to Arobynn's standards, should she accept their little bargain. As she'd hacked her way through body after body, she wondered if he'd even realized that this entire evening had been a test for *him* as well, and that she'd brought those men right to the Vaults. She wondered how furious he would be when he discovered what was left of the pleasure hall that had brought him so much money.

It had also filled the coffers of the people who had slaughtered Sam—and who had enjoyed every moment of it. What a shame that the current owner of the Vaults, a former underling of Rourke Farran and a dealer of flesh and opiates, had accidentally run into her knives. Repeatedly.

She'd left the Vaults in bloody splinters, which she supposed was merciful. If she'd had her magic, she probably would have burned it to ash. But she didn't have magic, and her mortal body, despite months of hard training, was starting to feel heavy and cumbersome as she continued her sprint down the alley. The broad street at its other end was too bright, too open.

She veered toward a stack of broken crates and rubbish heaped against the wall of a brick building, high enough that if she timed it right, she could jump for the windowsill a few feet above.

Behind her, closer now, rushing footsteps and shouts sounded. They had to be fast as hell to have kept up with her all this way.

Well, damn.

She leaped onto the crates, the pile shaking and swaying as she scaled it, each movement concise, swift, balanced. One wrong step and she would go shooting through the rotten wood, or topple the whole thing to the ground. The crates groaned, but she kept moving up and up and up, until she reached the pinnacle and jumped for the overhanging windowsill.

Her fingers barked in pain, digging into the brick so hard that her nails broke inside her gloves. She gritted her teeth and pulled, hauling herself onto the ledge and then through the open window.

She allowed herself two heartbeats to take in the cramped kitchen:

dark and clean, a candle burning from the narrow hall beyond. Palming her knives, the shouting coming closer from the alley below, she raced for the hall.

Someone's home—this was someone's home, and she was leading those men through it. She charged down the hall, the wooden floors shuddering under her boots, scanning. There were two bedrooms, both occupied. Shit. *Shit.*

Three adults were sprawled on dirty mattresses in the first room. And two more adults slept in the other bedroom, one of them shooting upright as she thundered past. “*Stay down,*” she hissed, the only warning she could give before reaching the remaining door in the hall, barricaded with a chair wedged beneath the knob. It was about as much protection as they could find in the slums.

She hurled the chair aside, sending it clattering against the walls of the narrow hallway, where it would slow her pursuers for a few seconds at least. She yanked the apartment door open, the feeble lock splintering with a snap. Half a movement had her hurling a silver coin behind her to pay for the damage—and a better lock.

A communal stairwell lay beyond, the wooden steps stained and rotted. Completely dark.

Male voices echoed too close behind, and banging began at the bottom of the stairwell.

Aelin raced for the ascending stairs. Around and around, her breath now shards of glass in her lungs, until she passed the third level—until the stairs narrowed, and—

Aelin didn't bother being quiet as she slammed into the roof door. The men already knew where she was. Balmy night air smothered her, and she gulped it down as she scanned the roof and the streets below. The alley behind was too wide; the broad street to her left wasn't an option, but—there. Down the alley. That sewer grate.

Perhaps pay a visit to the southeastern section of the tunnels tonight. You might find the person you're looking for.

She knew who he meant. Another little present of his, then—a piece in their game.

With feline ease, she shimmied down the drainpipe anchored to the side of the building. Far above, the shouts grew. They'd reached the roof. She dropped into a puddle of what smelled undoubtedly like piss, and was running before the impact had fully shuddered through her bones.

She hurtled toward the grate, dropping onto her knees and sliding the last few feet until her fingers latched onto the lid, and she hauled it open. Silent, swift, efficient.

The sewers below were mercifully empty. She bit back a gag against the reek already rising up to meet her.

By the time the guards peered over the roof edge, she was gone.



Aelin loathed the sewers.

Not because they were filthy, reeking, and full of vermin. They were actually a convenient way to get around Rifthold unseen and undisturbed, if you knew the way.

She'd hated them ever since she'd been bound up and left to die, courtesy of a bodyguard who hadn't taken so well to her plans to kill his master. The sewers had flooded, and after freeing herself from her bonds, she had swum—actually *swum*—through the festering water. But the exit had been sealed. Sam, by pure luck, had saved her, but not before she'd nearly drowned, swallowing half the sewer along the way.

It had taken her days and countless baths to feel clean. And endless vomiting.

So climbing into that sewer, then sealing the grate above her . . . For the first time that night, her hands shook. But she forced herself past the echo of fear and began creeping through the dim, moonlit tunnels.

Listening.

Heading southeast, she took a large, ancient tunnel, one of the main arteries of the system. It had probably been here from the moment Gavin

Havilliard decided to establish his capital along the Avery. She paused every so often to listen, but there were no signs of her pursuers behind her.

An intersection of four different tunnels loomed ahead, and she slowed her steps, palming her fighting knives. The first two were clear; the third—the one that would take her right into the path of the captain if he was headed to the castle—darker, but wide. And the fourth . . . Southeast.

She didn't need her Fae senses to know that the darkness leaking from the southeastern tunnel wasn't of the usual sort. The moonlight from the grates above didn't pierce it. No noise issued, not even the scampering of rats.

Another trick of Arobynn's—or a gift? The faint sounds she'd been following had come from this direction. But any trail died here.

She paced with feline quiet in front of the line where the murky light faded into impenetrable blackness. Silently, she plucked up a bit of fallen stone and chucked it into the gloom ahead.

There was no answering sound when it should have landed.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Aelin turned toward the cool female voice, casually angling her knives.

The hooded guard from the Vaults was leaning against the tunnel wall not twenty paces behind her.

Well, at least one of them was here. As for Chaol . . .

Aelin held up a knife as she stalked toward the guard, gobbling down every detail. "Sneaking up on strangers in the sewers is also something I'd advise against."

When Aelin got within a few feet, the woman lifted her hands—delicate but scarred, her skin tan even in the pale glow from the streetlights in the avenue above. If she'd managed to sneak up this close, she had to be trained—in combat or stealth or both. Of course she was skilled, if Chaol had her watching his back at the Vaults. But where had he gone now?

"Disreputable pleasure halls and sewers," Aelin said, keeping her knives out. "You certainly live the good life, don't you?"

The young woman pushed off the wall, her curtain of inky hair swaying in the shadows of her hood. “Not all of us are blessed enough to be on the king’s payroll, Champion.”

She recognized her, then. The real question was whether she’d told Chaol—and where he now was. “Dare I ask why I shouldn’t throw stones down that tunnel?”

The guard pointed toward the tunnel closest behind her—bright, open air. “Come with me.”

Aelin chuckled. “You’ll have to do better than that.”

The slender woman stepped nearer, the moonlight illuminating her hooded face. Pretty, if grave, and perhaps two or three years older.

The stranger said a bit flatly, “You’ve got twenty guards on your ass, and they’re cunning enough to start looking down here very soon. I’d suggest you come along.”

Aelin was half tempted to suggest she go to hell, but smiled instead. “How’d you find me?” She didn’t care; she just needed to feel her out a bit more.

“Luck. I’m on scouting duty, and popped onto the street to discover that you’d made new friends. Usually, we have a strike-first, ask-questions-later policy about people wandering the sewers.”

“And who is this ‘we’?” Aelin said sweetly.

The woman just began walking down the bright tunnel, completely unconcerned with the knives Aelin still held. Arrogant and stupid, then. “You can come with me, Champion, and learn some things you probably want to know, or you can stay here and wait to see what answers that rock you threw.”

Aelin weighed the words—and what she’d heard and seen so far that night. Despite the shiver down her spine, she fell into step beside the guard, sheathing her knives at her thighs.

With each block they trudged through the sewer muck, Aelin used the quiet to gather her strength.

The woman strode swiftly but smoothly down another tunnel, and

then another. Aelin marked each turn, each unique feature, each grate, forming a mental map as they moved.

“How did you recognize me?” Aelin said at last.

“I’ve seen you around the city—months ago. The red hair was why I didn’t immediately identify you at the Vaults.”

Aelin watched her from the corner of her eye. The stranger might not know who Chaol really was. He could have used a different name, despite what the woman claimed to know about whatever it was she thought Aelin was seeking.

The woman said in that cool, calm voice, “Are the guards chasing you because they recognized you, or because you picked the fight you were so desperate to have at the Vaults?”

Point for the stranger. “Why don’t you tell me? Do the guards work for Captain Westfall?”

The woman laughed under her breath. “No—those guards don’t answer to him.” Aelin bit back her sigh of relief, even as a thousand more questions rattled in her skull.

Her boots squished something too soft for comfort, and she repressed a shudder as the woman stopped before the entrance to another long tunnel, the first half illuminated by moonlight streaming in through the scattered grates. Unnatural darkness drifted out from the far end. A predatory stillness crept over Aelin as she peered into the gloom. Silence. Utter silence.

“Here,” the stranger said, approaching an elevated stone walkway built into the side of the tunnel. Fool—fool for exposing her back like that. She didn’t even see Aelin slide free a knife.

They’d gone far enough.

The woman stepped onto the small, slick staircase leading to the walkway, her movements long-limbed and graceful. Aelin calculated the distance to the nearest exits, the depth of the little stream of filth running through the tunnel’s center. Deep enough to dump a body, if need be.

Aelin angled her knife and slipped up behind the woman, as close as a lover, and pressed the blade against her throat.

6

“You get one sentence,” Aelin breathed in the woman’s ear as she pressed the dagger harder against her neck. “One sentence to convince me not to spill your throat on the ground.”

The woman stepped off the stairs and, to her credit, wasn’t stupid enough to go for the concealed weapons at her side. With her back against Aelin’s chest, her weapons were beyond reach, anyway. She swallowed, her throat bobbing against the dagger Aelin held along her smooth skin. “I’m taking you to the captain.”

Aelin dug the knife in a bit more. “Not all that compelling to someone with a blade at your throat.”

“Three weeks ago, he abandoned his position at the castle and fled. To join our cause. The *rebel* cause.”

Aelin’s knees threatened to buckle.

She supposed she should have included three parties in her plans: the king, Arobynn, and the rebels—who might very well have a score to settle with her after she’d gutted Archer Finn last winter. Even if Chaol was working with them.

She shut the thought down before its full impact hit her. “And the prince?”

“Alive, but still at the castle,” the rebel hissed. “Is that enough for you to put the knife down?”

Yes. No. If Chaol was now working with the rebels . . . Aelin lowered her knife and stepped back into a pool of moonlight trickling in from an overhead grate.

The rebel whirled and reached for one of her knives. Aelin clicked her tongue. The woman’s fingers paused on the well-polished hilt.

“I decide to spare you, and that’s how you repay me?” Aelin said, tugging back her hood. “I don’t particularly know why I’m surprised.”

The rebel let go of her knife and pulled off her own hood, revealing her pretty, tanned face—solemn and wholly unafraid. Her dark eyes fixed on Aelin, scanning. Ally or enemy?

“Tell me why you came here,” the rebel said quietly. “The captain says you’re on our side. Yet you hid from him at the Vaults tonight.”

Aelin crossed her arms and leaned against the damp stone wall behind her. “Let’s start with you telling me your name.”

“My name is not your concern.”

Aelin lifted a brow. “You demand answers but refuse to give me any in return. No wonder the captain had you sit out the meeting. Hard to play the game when you don’t know the rules.”

“I heard what happened this winter. That you went to the warehouse and killed so many of us. You slaughtered rebels—my friends.” That cool, calm mask didn’t so much as flinch. “And yet I’m now supposed to believe you were on our side all along. Forgive me if I’m not forthright with you.”

“Should I not kill the people who kidnap and beat my friends?” Aelin said softly. “Am I not supposed to react with violence when I receive notes threatening to *kill* my friends? Am I not supposed to gut the self-serving prick who had my beloved friend assassinated?” She pushed off the wall, stalking toward the woman. “Would you like me to apologize? Should I grovel on my knees for any of that?” The rebel’s face showed

nothing—either from training or genuine iciness. Aelin snorted. “I thought so. So why don’t you take me to the captain and save the self-righteous bullshit for later?”

The woman glanced toward the darkness again and shook her head slightly. “If you hadn’t put a blade to my throat, I would have told you that we’d arrived.” She pointed to the tunnel ahead. “You’re welcome.”

Aelin debated slamming the woman into the filthy, wet wall just to remind her who, exactly, the King’s Champion was, but then ragged breathing scraped past her ears, coming from that darkness. Human breathing—and whispers.

Boots sliding and thumping against stone, more whispers—hushed demands from voices she didn’t recognize to *hurry*, and *quiet now*, and—

Aelin’s muscles locked up as one male voice hissed, “We’ve got twenty minutes until that ship leaves. *Move.*”

She knew that voice.

But she still couldn’t brace herself for the full impact of Chaol Westfall staggering out of the darkness at the end of the tunnel, holding a limp, too-thin man between himself and a companion, another armed man guarding their backs.

Even from the distance, the captain’s eyes locked onto Aelin’s.

He didn’t smile.

7

There were two injured people in total, one held between Chaol and his companion, the other sagging between two men she didn't recognize. Three others—two men and another woman—guarded the rear.

The rebel they dismissed with a glance. A friend.

Aelin held each of their gazes as they hurried toward her, their weapons out. Blood was splattered on them all—red blood and black blood that she knew too well. And the two nearly unconscious people . . .

She also knew that emaciated, dried-out look. The hollowness on their faces. She'd been too late with the ones in Wendlyn. But somehow Chaol and his allies had gotten these two out. Her stomach flipped. Scouting—the young woman beside her had been scouting the path ahead, to make sure it was safe for this rescue.

The guards in this city weren't corrupted just by ordinary Valg, as Arobynn had suggested.

No, there was at least one Valg prince here. In these tunnels, if the darkness was any indicator. *Shit*. And Chaol had been—

Chaol paused long enough for a companion to step in to help carry the injured man away. Then he was striding ahead. Twenty feet away now. Fifteen. Ten. Blood leaked from the corner of his mouth, and his bottom lip was split open. They'd *fought* their way out—

“Explain,” she breathed to the woman at her side.

“It's not my place,” was the woman's response.

She didn't bother to push it. Not with Chaol now in front of her, his bronze eyes wide as he took in the blood on Aelin herself.

“Are you hurt?” His voice was hoarse.

Aelin silently shook her head. Gods. *Gods*. Without that hood, now that she could see his features . . . He was exactly as she remembered—that ruggedly handsome, tan face perhaps a bit more gaunt and stubbly, but still Chaol. Still the man she'd come to love, before . . . before everything had changed.

There were so many things she had thought she'd say, or do, or feel.

A slender white scar slashed down his cheek. She'd given him that. The night Nehemia had died, she'd given him that, and tried to kill him.

Would have killed him. If Dorian hadn't stopped her.

Even then, she'd understood that what Chaol had done, whom he had chosen, had forever cleaved what was between them. It was the one thing she could not forget, could not forgive.

Her silent answer seemed enough for the captain. He looked to the woman beside Aelin—to his scout. *His* scout—who reported to him. As though he were leading them all.

“The path ahead is clear. Stick to the eastern tunnels,” she said.

Chaol nodded. “Keep moving,” he said to the others, who had now reached his side. “I'll catch up in a moment.” No hesitation—and no softness, either. As if he'd done this a hundred times.

They wordlessly continued on through the tunnels, casting glances Aelin's way as they swept past. Only the young woman lingered. Watching.

“Nesryn,” Chaol said, the name an order in itself.

Nesryn stared at Aelin—analyzing, calculating.

Aelin gave her a lazy grin.

“*Faliq*,” Chaol growled, and the woman slid her midnight eyes toward him. If Nesryn’s family name didn’t give away her heritage, it was those eyes, slightly uptilted at the corners and lightly lined with kohl, that revealed at least one of her parents was from the Southern Continent. Interesting that the woman didn’t try to hide it, that she chose to wear the kohl even while on a mission, despite Rifthold’s less-than-pleasant policies toward immigrants. Chaol jerked his chin toward their vanishing companions. “Get to the docks.”

“It’s safer to have one of us remain here.” Again that cool voice—steady.

“Help them get to the docks, then get the hell back to the craftsman district. Your garrison commander will notice if you’re late.”

Nesryn looked Aelin up and down, those grave features never shifting. “How do we know she didn’t come here on his orders?”

Aelin knew very well who she meant. She winked at the young woman. “If I’d come here on the king’s orders, Nesryn Faliq, you’d have been dead minutes ago.”

No flicker of amusement, no hint of fear. The woman could give Rowan a run for his money for sheer iciness.

“Sunset tomorrow,” Chaol said sharply to Nesryn. The young woman stared him down, her shoulders tight, before she headed into the tunnel. She moved like water, Aelin thought.

“Go,” Aelin said to Chaol, her voice a thin rasp. “You should go—help them.” Or whatever he was doing.

Chaol’s bloodied mouth formed a thin line. “I will. In a moment.”

No invitation for her to join. Maybe she should have offered.

“You came back,” he said. His hair was longer, shaggier than it’d been months ago. “It—Aedion—it’s a trap—”

“I know about Aedion.” Gods, what could she even *say*?

Chaol nodded distantly, blinking. “You . . . You look different.”

She fingered her red hair. “Obviously.”

“No,” he said, taking one step closer, but only one. “Your face. The way you stand. You . . .” He shook his head, glancing toward the darkness they’d just fled. “Walk with me.”

She did. Well, it was more like walking-as-fast-as-they-could-without-running. Ahead, she could just make out the sounds of his companions hurrying through the tunnels.

All the words she’d wanted to say rushed around in her head, fighting to get out, but she pushed back against them for a moment longer.

I love you—that’s what he’d said to her the day she left. She hadn’t given him an answer other than *I’m sorry*.

“A rescue mission?” she said, glancing behind them. No whisper of pursuit.

Chaol grunted in confirmation. “Former magic-wielders are being hunted and executed again. The king’s new guards bring them into the tunnels to hold until it’s time for the butchering block. They like the darkness—seem to thrive on it.”

“Why not the prisons?” They were plenty dark enough, even for the Valg.

“Too public. At least for what they do to them before they’re executed.”

A chill snaked down her spine. “Do they wear black rings?” A nod. Her heart nearly stopped. “I don’t care how many people they take into the tunnels. Don’t go in again.”

Chaol gave a short laugh. “Not an option. We go in because we’re the only ones who can.”

The sewers began to reek of brine. They had to be nearing the Avery, if she’d correctly counted the turns. “Explain.”

“They don’t notice or really care about the presence of ordinary humans—only people with magic in their bloodline. Even dormant carriers.” He glanced sidelong at her. “It’s why I sent Ren to the North—to get out of the city.”

She almost tripped over a loose stone. “Ren . . . Allsbrook?”

Chaol nodded slowly.

The ground rocked beneath her. Ren Allsbrook. Another child of Terrasen. Still alive. *Alive.*

“Ren’s the reason we learned about it in the first place,” Chaol said. “We went into one of their nests. They looked right at him. Ignored Nesryn and me entirely. We barely got out. I sent him to Terrasen—to rally the rebels there—the day after. He wasn’t too happy about it, believe me.”

Interesting. Interesting, and utterly insane. “Those things are demons. The Valg. And they—”

“Drain the life out of you, feed on you, until they make a show of executing you?”

“It’s not a joke,” she snapped. Her dreams were haunted by the roaming hands of those Valg princes as they fed on her. And every time she would awaken with a scream on her lips, reaching for a Fae warrior who wasn’t there to remind her that they’d made it, they’d survived.

“I know it’s not,” Chaol said. His eyes flicked to where Goldryn peeked over her shoulder. “New sword?”

She nodded. There were perhaps only three feet between them now—three feet and months and months of missing and hating him. Months of crawling out of that abyss he’d shoved her into. But now that she was here . . . Everything was an effort not to say she was sorry. Sorry not for what she’d done to his face, but for the fact that her heart was healed—still fractured in spots, but healed—and he . . . he was not in it. Not as he’d once been.

“You figured out who I am,” she said, mindful of how far ahead his companions were.

“The day you left.”

She monitored the darkness behind them for a moment. All clear.

He didn’t move closer—didn’t seem at all inclined to hold her or kiss her or even touch her. Ahead, the rebels veered into a smaller tunnel, one she knew led directly toward the ramshackle docks in the slums.

“I grabbed Fleetfoot,” he said after a moment of silence.

She tried not to exhale too loudly. “Where is she?”

“Safe. Nesryn’s father owns a few popular bakeries in Rifthold, and has done well enough that he’s got a country house in the foothills outside the city. He said his staff there would care for her in secret. She seemed more than happy to torture the sheep, so—I’m sorry I couldn’t keep her here, but with the barking—”

“I understand,” she breathed. “Thank you.” She cocked her head. “A land-owning man’s daughter is a rebel?”

“Nesryn is in the city guard, despite her father’s wishes. I’ve known her for years.”

That didn’t answer her question. “She can be trusted?”

“As you said, we’d all be dead already if she was here on the king’s orders.”

“Right.” She swallowed hard, sheathing her knives and tugging off her gloves, if only because it gave her something to do with her hands. But then Chaol looked—to the empty finger where his amethyst ring had once been. The skin was soaked with the blood that had seeped in through the fabric, some red, some black and reeking.

Chaol gazed at that empty spot—and when his eyes rose to hers again, it became hard to breathe. He stopped at the entrance to the narrow tunnel. Far enough, she realized. He’d taken her as far as he was willing to allow her to follow.

“I have a lot to tell you,” she said before he could speak. “But I think I’d rather hear your story first. How you got here; what happened to Dorian. And Aedion. All of it.” *Why you were meeting with Arobynn tonight.*

That tentative tenderness in his face hardened into a cold, grim resolve—and her heart cracked a bit at the sight of it. Whatever he had to say wasn’t going to be pleasant.

But he just said, “Meet me in forty minutes,” and named an address in the slums. “I have to deal with this first.”

He didn't wait for a response before jogging down the tunnel after his companions.

Aelin followed anyway.



Aelin watched from a rooftop, monitoring the docks of the slums as Chaol and his companions approached the small boat. The crew didn't dare lay anchor—only tying the boat to the rotted posts long enough for the rebels to pass the sagging victims into the arms of the waiting sailors. Then they were rowing hard, out into the dark curve of the Avery and hopefully to a larger ship at its mouth.

She observed Chaol speak quickly to the rebels, Nesryn lingering when he'd finished. A short, clipped fight about something she couldn't hear, and then the captain was walking alone, Nesryn and the others headed off in the opposite direction without so much as a backward glance.

Chaol made it a block before Aelin silently dropped down beside him. He didn't flinch. "I should have known better."

"You really should have."

Chaol's jaw tightened, but he kept walking farther into the slums.

Aelin examined the night-dark, sleeping streets. A few feral urchins darted past, and she eyed them from beneath her hood, wondering which were on Arobynn's payroll and might report to him that she'd been spotted blocks away from her old home. There was no point in trying to hide her movements—she hadn't wanted to, anyway.

The houses here were ramshackle but not wrecked. Whatever working-class families dwelled within tried their best to keep them in shape. Given their proximity to the river, they were likely occupied by fishermen, dockworkers, and maybe the occasional slave on loan from his or her master. But no sign of trouble, no vagrants or pimps or would-be thieves lurking about.

Almost charming, for the slums.

"The story isn't a pleasant one," the captain began at last.



Aelin let Chaol talk as they strode through the slums, and it broke her heart.

She kept her mouth shut as he told her how he'd met Aedion and worked with him, and then how the king had captured Aedion and interrogated Dorian. It took considerable effort to keep from shaking the captain to demand how he could have been so reckless and stupid and taken so long to act.

Then Chaol got to the part where Sorscha was beheaded, each word quieter and more clipped than the last.

She had never learned the healer's name, not in all the times the woman had patched and sewn her up. For Dorian to lose her . . . Aelin swallowed hard.

It got worse.

So much worse, as Chaol explained what Dorian had done to get him out of the castle. He'd sacrificed himself, revealing his power to the king. She was shaking so badly that she tucked her hands into her pockets and clamped her lips together to lock up the words.

But they danced in her skull anyway, around and around.

You should have gotten Dorian and Sorscha out the day the king butchered those slaves. Did you learn nothing from Nehemia's death? Did you somehow think you could win with your honor intact, without sacrificing something? You shouldn't have left him; how could you let him face the king alone? How could you, how could you, how could you?

The grief in Chaol's eyes kept her from speaking.

She took a breath as he fell silent, mastering the anger and the disappointment and the shock. It took three blocks before she could think straight.

Her wrath and tears would do no good. Her plans would change again—but not by much. Free Aedion, retrieve the Wyrdkey . . . she could still do it. She squared her shoulders. They were mere blocks away from her old apartment.

At least she could have a place to lie low, if Arobynn hadn't sold the property. He probably would have taunted her about it if he had—or perhaps left her to find it had a new owner. He loved surprises like that.

“So now you're working with the rebels,” she said to Chaol. “Or leading them, from the look of it.”

“There are a few of us in charge. My territory covers the slums and docks—there are others responsible for different sections of the city. We meet as often as we dare. Nesryn and some of the city guards have been able to get in contact with a few of my men. Ress and Brullo, mostly. They've been looking for ways to get Dorian out. And Aedion. But that dungeon is impenetrable, and they're watching the secret tunnels. We only went into their nest in the sewer tonight because we'd received word from Ress that there was some big meeting at the palace. Turns out they'd left more sentries behind than we'd anticipated.”

The castle was impossible to get into—unless she accepted Arobynn's help. Another decision. For tomorrow. “What have you heard about Dorian since you fled?”

A flicker of shame shone in his bronze eyes. He *had* fled, though. He'd left Dorian in his father's hands.

She clenched her fingers into fists to keep from slamming his head into the side of a brick building. How could he have served that monster? How could he not have seen it, not have tried to kill the king anytime he got within striking range?

She hoped that whatever Dorian's father had done to him, however he'd been punished, the prince knew he was not the only one grieving. And after she retrieved Dorian, she would let him know, when he was ready to listen, that she understood—and that it would be hard and long and painful, but he might come back from it, the loss. When he did, with that raw magic of his, free when hers was not . . . It could be critical in defeating the Valg.

“The king hasn't publicly punished Dorian,” Chaol said. “Hasn't even locked him up. As far as we can tell, he's still attending events, and will be at this execution—birthday party of his.”

Aedion—oh, Aedion. He knew who she was, what she had become, but Chaol hadn't suggested whether her cousin might spit in her face the moment he laid eyes on her. She wouldn't care about it until Aedion was safe, until he was free.

"So, we've got Ressa and Brullo inside, and eyes on the castle walls," Chaol went on. "They say that Dorian seems to be behaving normally, but his demeanor is off. Colder, more distant—but that's to be expected after Sorscha was—"

"Did they report him wearing a black ring?"

Chaol shuddered. "No—not a ring." There was something about his tone that made her look at him and wish she didn't have to hear his next words. Chaol said, "But one of the spies claimed that Dorian has a torque of black stone around his neck."

A Wyrdstone collar.

For a moment, all Aelin could manage to do was stare at Chaol. The surrounding buildings pressed on her, a giant pit opening beneath the cobblestones she walked upon, threatening to swallow her whole.

"You're pale," Chaol said, but he made no move to touch her.

Good. She wasn't entirely certain she could handle being touched without ripping his face off.

But she took a breath, refusing to let the enormity of what had happened to Dorian hit her—for now at least. "Chaol, I don't know what to say—about Dorian, and Sorscha, and Aedion. About you being *here*." She gestured to the slums around them.

"Just tell me what happened to you all these months."

She told him. She told him what had happened in Terrasen ten years ago, and what had happened to her in Wendlyn. When she got to the Valg princes, she did not tell him about those collars, because—because he already looked sick. And she did not tell him of the third Wyrdkey—only that Arobynn had stolen the Amulet of Orynth, and she wanted it back. "So now you know why I'm here, and what I did, and what I plan to do."

Chaol didn't reply for an entire block. He'd been silent throughout. He had not smiled.

There was so little left of the guard she'd come to care for as he at last met her gaze, his lips a thin line. He said, "So you're here alone."

"I told Rowan it would be safer for him to remain in Wendlyn."

"No," he said a bit sharply, facing the street ahead. "I mean—you came back, but without an army. Without allies. You came back empty-handed."

Empty-handed. "I don't know what you expected. You—you sent me to Wendlyn. If you'd wanted me to bring back an army, you should have been a little more specific."

"I sent you there for your safety, so you could get away from the king. And as soon as I realized who you were, how could I not assume you'd run to your cousins, to Maeve—"

"Have you not been listening to anything I said? About what Maeve is like? The Ashryvers are at her beck and call, and if Maeve does not send aid, *they* will not send aid."

"You didn't even try." He paused on a deserted corner. "If your cousin Galan is a blockade runner—"

"My cousin Galan is none of your concern. Do you even understand what I faced?"

"Do you understand what it was like for us here? While you were off playing with magic, off gallivanting with your faerie prince, do you understand what happened to me—to Dorian? Do you understand what's happening every day in this city? Because your antics in Wendlyn might very well have been the cause of all this."

Each word was like a stone to the head. Yes—yes, maybe, but . . . "My *antics*?"

"If you hadn't been so dramatic about it, hadn't flaunted your defeat of Narrok and practically *shouted* at the king that you were back, he would never have called us to that room—"

"You do not get to blame me for that. For *his* actions." She clenched

her fists as she looked at him—really *looked* at him, at the scar that would forever remind her of what he'd done, what she could not forgive.

“So what *do* I get to blame you for?” he demanded as she started walking again, her steps swift and precise. “Anything?”

He couldn't mean that—couldn't possibly mean it. “Are you *looking* for things to blame me for? How about the fall of the kingdoms? The loss of magic?”

“The second one,” he said through his teeth, “at least I know without a doubt is not your doing.”

She paused again. “What did you say?”

His shoulders tightened. That was all she needed to see to know he'd planned to keep it from her. Not from Celaena, his former friend and lover, but from Aelin—Queen of Terrasen. A threat. Whatever this information about magic was, he hadn't planned to tell her.

“What, exactly, did you learn about magic, Chaol?” she said too quietly.

He didn't reply.

“Tell me.”

He shook his head, a gap in the streetlights shadowing his face. “No. Not a chance. Not with you so unpredictable.”

Unpredictable. It was a mercy, she supposed, that magic was indeed stifled here, or else she might have turned the street to cinders around them, just to show him how very predictable she was.

“You found a way to free it, didn't you. You know how.”

He didn't try to pretend otherwise. “Having magic free would result only in chaos—it would make things worse. Perhaps make it easier for those demons to find and feed on magic-wielders.”

“You might very well regret those words when you hear the rest of what I have to say,” she hissed, raging and roaring inside. She kept her voice low enough that no one nearby might overhear as she continued. “That collar Dorian is wearing—let me tell you what it does, and let's see if you refuse to tell me then, if you dismiss what I've been doing these past months.” With every word, his face further drained of color. A small, wicked part of

her revealed in it. “They target magic-wielders, feeding off the power in their blood. They drain the life from those that aren’t compatible to take in a Valg demon. Or, considering Rifthold’s new favorite pastime, just execute them to drum up fear. They feed on it—fear, misery, despair. It’s like wine to them. The lesser Valg, they can seize a mortal’s body through those black rings. But their civilization—a whole damn *civilization*,” she said, “is split into hierarchies like our own. And their princes want to come to our world very, *very* badly. So the king uses collars. Black Wyrdstone collars.” She didn’t think Chaol was breathing. “The collars are stronger, capable of helping the demons stay inside human bodies while they devour the person and power inside. Narrok had one inside him. He *begged* me at the end to kill him. Nothing else could. I witnessed monsters you cannot begin to imagine take on one of them and fail. Only flame, or beheading, ends it.

“So you see,” she finished, “considering the gifts I have, you’ll find that you *want* to tell me what you know. I might be the only person capable of freeing Dorian, or at least giving him the mercy of killing him. If he’s even in there.” The last words tasted as horrible as they sounded.

Chaol shook his head. Once. Twice. And she might have felt bad for the panic, for the grief and despair on his face. Until he said, “Did it even occur to you to send us a warning? To let *any* of us know about the king’s collars?”

It was like a bucket of water had been dumped on her. She blinked. She *could* have warned them—could have tried. Later—she’d think about that later.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “Right now, we need to help Aedion and Dorian.”

“There is no *we*.” He unfastened the Eye of Elena from around his neck and chucked it at her. It glimmered in the streetlights as it flew between them. She caught it with one hand, the metal warm against her skin. She didn’t look at it before sliding it into her pocket. He went on. “There hasn’t been a *we* for a while, Celaena—”

“It’s Aelin now,” she snapped as loudly as she dared. “Celaena Sardothien doesn’t exist anymore.”

“You’re still the same assassin who walked away. You came back only when it was useful for *you*.”

It was an effort to keep from sending her fist into his nose. Instead she pulled the silver amethyst ring out of her pocket and grabbed his hand, slamming it into his gloved palm. “Why were you meeting with Arobynn Hamel tonight?”

“How—”

“It doesn’t matter. Tell me why.”

“I wanted his help to kill the king.”

Aelin started. “Are you insane? Did you *tell* him that?”

“No, but he guessed it. I’d been trying to meet with him for a week now, and tonight he summoned me.”

“You’re a fool for going.” She began walking again. Staying in one spot, however deserted, wasn’t wise.

Chaol fell into step beside her. “I didn’t see any *other* assassins offering their services.”

She opened her mouth, then shut it. She curled her fingers, then straightened them one by one. “The price won’t be gold or favors. The price will be the last thing you see coming. Likely the death or suffering of the people you care about.”

“You think I didn’t know that?”

“So you want to have Arobynn kill the king, and what? Put Dorian on the throne? With a Valg demon inside him?”

“I didn’t know that until now. But it changes nothing.”

“It changes everything. Even if you get that collar off, there’s no guarantee the Valg hasn’t taken root inside him. You might replace one monster with another.”

“Why don’t you say whatever it is you’re getting at, *Aelin*?” He hissed her name barely loud enough for her to hear.

“Can you kill the king? When it comes down to it, could you kill your king?”

“*Dorian* is my king.”

It was an effort not to flinch. “Semantics.”

“He killed Sorscha.”

“He killed millions before her.” Perhaps a challenge, perhaps another question.

His eyes flared. “I need to go. I’m meeting Brullo in an hour.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said, glancing toward the glass castle towering over the northeastern quarter of the city. Perhaps she’d learn a bit more about what the Weapons Master knew about Dorian. And how she might be able to put down her friend. Her blood turned icy, sluggish.

“No, you won’t,” Chaol said. Her head snapped toward him. “If you’re there, I have to answer too many questions. I won’t jeopardize Dorian to satisfy your curiosity.”

He kept walking straight, but she turned the corner with a tight shrug. “Do what you want.”

Noticing she was heading away, he halted. “And what are *you* going to be doing?”

Too much suspicion in that voice. She paused her steps and arched an eyebrow. “Many things. Wicked things.”

“If you give us away, Dorian will—”

She cut him off with a snort. “You refused to share your information, Captain. I don’t think it’s unreasonable for me to withhold mine.” She made to walk down the street, toward her old apartment.

“Not captain,” he said.

She looked over her shoulder and studied him again. “What happened to your sword?”

His eyes were hollow. “I lost it.”

Ah. “So is it Lord Chaol, then?”

“Just Chaol.”

For a heartbeat, she pitied him, and part of her wished she could say it more kindly, more compassionately. “There’s no getting Dorian out. There’s no saving him.”

“Like hell there isn’t.”

“You’d be better off considering other contenders to put on the throne—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence.” His eyes were wide, his breathing uneven.

She’d said enough. She rolled her shoulders, leashing her temper. “With my magic, I could help him—I could try to find a way to free him.”

But most likely kill him. She wouldn’t admit that aloud. Not until she could see him for herself.

“And what then?” Chaol asked. “Will you hold all of Rifthold hostage the way you did Doranelle? Burn anyone who doesn’t agree with you? Or will you just incinerate our kingdom from spite? And what of others like you, who feel that they have a score to settle with Adarlan?” He huffed a bitter laugh. “Perhaps we’re better off without magic. Perhaps magic doesn’t exactly make things fair amongst us mere mortals.”

“Fair? You think that any part of this is *fair*?”

“Magic makes people dangerous.”

“Magic has saved your life a few times now, if I recall correctly.”

“Yes,” he breathed, “you and Dorian both—and I’m grateful, I am. But where are the checks against your kind? Iron? Not much of a deterrent, is it? Once magic is free, who is to stop the monsters from coming out again? Who is to stop *you*?”

A spear of ice shot through her heart.

Monster.

It truly had been horror and revulsion that she’d seen on his face that day she revealed her Fae form in the other world—the day she’d cleaved the earth and called down fire to save him, to save Fleetfoot. Yes, there would always need to be checks against any sort of power, but . . . *Monster.*

She wished he’d struck her instead. “So Dorian is allowed to have magic. You can come to terms with his power, and yet my power is an abomination to you?”

“Dorian has never killed anyone. Dorian didn’t gut Archer Finn in the tunnels or torture and kill Grave and then chop him up into pieces. Dorian didn’t go on a killing spree at Endovier that left dozens dead.”