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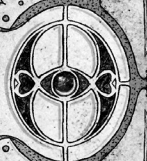
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CRILEA





*For my parents—
who taught me to believe that girls can save the world*

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The Prince

He had been hunting for her since the moment she was taken from him.

His mate.

He barely remembered his own name. And only recalled it because his three companions spoke it while they searched for her across violent and dark seas, through ancient and slumbering forests, over storm-swept mountains already buried in snow.

He stopped long enough to feed his body and allow his companions a few hours of sleep. Were it not for them, he would have flown off, soared far and wide.

But he would need the strength of their blades and magic, would need their cunning and wisdom before this was through.

Before he faced the dark queen who had torn into his innermost self, stealing his mate long before she had been locked in an iron coffin. And after he was done with her, after that, then he'd take on the cold-blooded gods themselves, hell-bent on destroying what might remain of his mate.

So he stayed with his companions, even as the days passed. Then the weeks.

Then months.

Still he searched. Still he hunted for her on every dusty and forgotten road.

And sometimes, he spoke along the bond between them, sending his soul on the wind to wherever she was held captive, entombed.

I will find you.

The Princess

The iron smothered her. It had snuffed out the fire in her veins, as surely as if the flames had been doused.

She could hear the water, even in the iron box, even with the iron mask and chains adorning her like ribbons of silk. The roaring; the endless rushing of water over stone. It filled the gaps between her screaming.

A sliver of island in the heart of a mist-veiled river, little more than a smooth slab of rock amid the rapids and falls. That's where they'd put her. Stored her. In a stone temple built for some forgotten god.

As she would likely be forgotten. It was better than the alternative: to be remembered for her utter failure. If there would be anyone left to remember her. If there would be anyone left at all.

She would not allow it. That failure.

She would not tell them what they wished to know.

No matter how often her screams drowned out the raging river. No matter how often the snap of her bones cleaved through the bellowing rapids.

She had tried to keep track of the days.

But she did not know how long they had kept her in that iron box. How long they had forced her to sleep, lulled into oblivion by the sweet smoke they'd poured in while they traveled here. To this island, this temple of pain.

She did not know how long the gaps lasted between her screaming and waking. Between the pain ending and starting anew.

Days, months, years—they bled together, as her own blood often slithered over the stone floor and into the river itself.

A princess who was to live for a thousand years. Longer.

That had been her gift. It was now her curse.

Another curse to bear, as heavy as the one placed upon her long before her birth. To sacrifice her very self to right an ancient wrong. To pay another's debt to the gods who had found their world, become trapped in it. And then ruled it.

She did not feel the warm hand of the goddess who had blessed and damned her with such terrible power. She wondered if that goddess of light and flame even cared that she now lay trapped within the iron box—or if the immortal had transferred her attentions to another. To the king who might offer himself in her stead and in yielding his life, spare their world.

The gods did not care who paid the debt. So she knew they would not come for her, save her. So she did not bother praying to them.

But she still told herself the story, still sometimes imagined that the river sang it to her. That the darkness living within the sealed coffin sang it to her as well.

Once upon a time, in a land long since burned to ash, there lived a young princess who loved her kingdom . . .

Down she would drift, deep into that darkness, into the sea of flame. Down so deep that when the whip cracked, when bone sundered, she sometimes did not feel it.

Most times she did.

It was during those infinite hours that she would fix her stare on her companion.

Not the queen's hunter, who could draw out pain like a musician coaxing a melody from an instrument. But the massive white wolf, chained by invisible bonds. Forced to witness this.

There were some days when she could not stand to look at the wolf. When she had come so close, too close, to breaking. And only the story had kept her from doing so.

Once upon a time, in a land long since burned to ash, there lived a young princess who loved her kingdom . . .

Words she had spoken to a prince. Once—long ago.

A prince of ice and wind. A prince who had been hers, and she his. Long before the bond between their souls became known to them.

It was upon him that the task of protecting that once-glorious kingdom now fell.

The prince whose scent was kissed with pine and snow, the scent of that kingdom she had loved with her heart of wildfire.

Even when the dark queen presided over the hunter's ministrations, the princess thought of him. Held on to his memory as if it were a rock in the raging river.

The dark queen with a spider's smile tried to wield it against her. In the obsidian webs she wove, the illusions and dreams she spun at the culmination of each breaking point, the queen tried to twist the memory of him as a key into her mind.

They were blurring. The lies and truths and memories. Sleep and the blackness in the iron coffin. The days bound to the stone altar in the center of the room, or hanging from a hook in the ceiling, or strung up between chains anchored into the stone wall. It was all beginning to blur, like ink in water.

So she told herself the story. The darkness and the flame deep within

her whispered it, too, and she sang it back to them. Locked in that coffin hidden on an island within the heart of a river, the princess recited the story, over and over, and let them unleash an eternity of pain upon her body.

Once upon a time, in a land long since burned to ash, there lived a young princess who loved her kingdom . . .

PART ONE

Armies and Allies

1

The snows had come early.

Even for Terrasen, the first of the autumnal flurries had barreled in far ahead of their usual arrival.

Aedion Ashryver wasn't entirely sure it was a blessing. But if it kept Morath's legions from their doorstep just a little longer, he'd get on his knees to thank the gods. Even if those same gods threatened everything he loved. If beings from another world could be considered gods at all.

Aedion supposed he had more important things to contemplate, anyway.

In the two weeks since he'd been reunited with his Bane, they'd seen no sign of Erawan's forces, either terrestrial or airborne. The thick snow had begun falling barely three days after his return, hindering the already-slow process of transporting the troops from their assembled armada to the Bane's sweeping camp on the Plain of Theralis.

The ships had sailed up the Florine, right to Orynth's doorstep, banners of every color flapping in the brisk wind off the Staghorns: the cobalt

and gold of Wendlyn, the black and crimson of Ansel of Briarcliff, the shimmering silver of the Whitethorn royals and their many cousins. The Silent Assassins, scattered throughout the fleet, had no banner, though none was needed to identify them—not with their pale clothes and assortment of beautiful, vicious weapons.

The ships would soon rejoin the rearguard left at the Florine's mouth and patrol the coast from Ilium to Suria, but the footsoldiers—most hailing from Crown Prince Galan Ashryver's forces—would go to the front.

A front that now lay buried under several feet of snow. With more coming.

Hidden above a narrow mountain pass in the Staghorns behind Allsbrook, Aedion scowled at the heavy sky.

His pale furs blended him into the gray and white of the rocky outcropping, a hood concealing his golden hair. And keeping him warm. Many of Galan's troops had never seen snow, thanks to Wendlyn's temperate climate. The Whitethorn royals and their smaller force were hardly better off. So Aedion had left Kyllian, his most trusted commander, in charge of ensuring that they were as warm as could be managed.

They were far from home, fighting for a queen they did not know or perhaps even believe in. That frigid cold would sap spirits and sprout dissent faster than the howling wind charging between these peaks.

A flicker of movement on the other side of the pass caught Aedion's eye, visible only because he knew where to look.

She'd camouflaged herself better than he had. But Lysandra had the advantage of wearing a coat that had been bred for these mountains.

Not that he'd said that to her. Or so much as glanced at her when they'd departed on this scouting mission.

Aelin, apparently, had secret business in Eldrys and had left a note with Galan and her new allies to account for her disappearance. Which allowed Lysandra to accompany them on this task.

No one had noticed, in the nearly two months they'd been maintaining this ruse, that the Queen of Fire had not an ember to show for it. Or that

she and the shape-shifter never appeared in the same place. And no one, not the Silent Assassins of the Red Desert, or Galan Ashryver, or the troops that Ansel of Briarcliff had sent with the armada ahead of the bulk of her army, had picked up the slight tells that did not belong to Aelin at all. Nor had they noted the brand on the queen's wrist that no matter what skin she wore, Lysandra could not change.

She did a fine job of hiding the brand with gloves or long sleeves. And if a glimmer of scarred skin ever showed, it could be excused as part of the manacle markings that remained.

The fake scars she'd also added, right where Aelin had them. Along with the laugh and wicked grin. The swagger and stillness.

Aedion could barely stand to look at her. Talk to her. He only did so because he had to uphold this ruse, too. To pretend that he was her faithful cousin, her fearless commander who would lead her and Terrasen to victory, however unlikely.

So he played the part. One of many he'd donned in his life.

Yet the moment Lysandra changed her golden hair for dark tresses, Ashryver eyes for emerald, he stopped acknowledging her existence. Some days, the Terrasen knot tattooed on his chest, the names of his queen and fledgling court woven amongst it, felt like a brand. Her name especially.

He'd only brought her on this mission to make it easier. Safer. There were other lives beyond his at risk, and though he could have unloaded this scouting task to a unit within the Bane, he'd needed the action.

It had taken over a month to sail from Eyllwe with their newfound allies, dodging Morath's fleet around Rifthold, and then these past two weeks to move inland.

They had seen little to no combat. Only a few roving bands of Adarlanian soldiers, no Valg amongst them, that had been dealt with quickly.

Aedion doubted Erawan was waiting until spring. Doubted the quiet had anything to do with the weather. He'd discussed it with his men, and with Darrow and the other lords a few days ago. Erawan was likely waiting until the dead of winter, when mobility would be hardest for Terrasen's army, when Aedion's soldiers would be weak from months in the

snow, their bodies stiff with cold. Even the king's fortune that Aelin had schemed and won for them this past spring couldn't prevent that.

Yes, food and blankets and clothes could be purchased, but when the supply lines were buried under snow, what good were they then? All the gold in Erilea couldn't stop the slow, steady leeching of strength caused by months in a winter camp, exposed to Terrasen's merciless elements.

Darrow and the other lords didn't believe his claim that Erawan would strike in deep winter—or believe Ren, when the Lord of Allsbrook voiced his agreement. Erawan was no fool, they claimed. Despite his aerial legion of witches, even Valg foot soldiers could not cross snow when it was ten feet deep. They'd decided that Erawan would wait until spring.

Yet Aedion was taking no chances. Neither was Prince Galan, who had remained silent in that meeting, but sought Aedion afterward to add his support. They had to keep their troops warm and fed, keep them trained and ready to march at a moment's notice.

This scouting mission, if Ren's information proved correct, would help their cause.

Nearby, a bowstring groaned, barely audible over the wind. Its tip and shaft had been painted white, and were now barely visible as it aimed with deadly precision toward the pass opening.

Aedion caught Ren Allsbrook's eye from where the young lord was concealed amongst the rocks, his arrow ready to fly. Cloaked in the same white and gray furs as Aedion, a pale scarf over his mouth, Ren was little more than a pair of dark eyes and the hint of a slashing scar.

Aedion motioned to wait. Barely glancing toward the shape-shifter across the pass, Aedion conveyed the same order.

Let their enemies draw closer.

Crunching snow mingled with labored breathing.

Right on time.

Aedion nocked an arrow to his own bow and ducked lower on the outcropping.

As Ren's scout had claimed when she'd rushed into Aedion's war tent five days ago, there were six of them.

They did not bother to blend into the snow and rock. Their dark fur, shaggy and strange, might as well have been a beacon against the glaring white of the Staghorns. But it was the reek of them, carried on a swift wind, that told Aedion enough.

Valg. No sign of a collar on anyone in the small party, any hint of a ring concealed by their thick gloves. Apparently, even demon-infested vermin could get cold. Or their mortal hosts did.

Their enemies moved deeper into the throat of the pass. Ren's arrow held steady.

Leave one alive, Aedion had ordered before they'd taken their positions.

It had been a lucky guess that they'd choose this pass, a half-forgotten back door into Terrasen's low-lying lands. Only wide enough for two horses to ride abreast, it had long been ignored by conquering armies and the merchants seeking to sell their wares in the hinterlands beyond the Staghorns.

What dwelled out there, who dared make a living beyond any recognized border, Aedion didn't know. Just as he didn't know why these soldiers had ventured so far into the mountains.

But he'd find out soon enough.

The demon company passed beneath them, and Aedion and Ren shifted to reposition their bows.

A straight shot down into the skull. He picked his mark.

Aedion's nod was the only signal before his arrow flew.



Black blood was still steaming in the snow when the fighting stopped.

It had lasted only a few minutes. Just a few, after Ren and Aedion's arrows found their targets and Lysandra had leaped from her perch to shred three others. And rip the muscles from the calves of the sixth and sole surviving member of the company.

The demon moaned as Aedion stalked toward him, the snow at the man's feet now jet-black, his legs in ribbons. Like scraps of a banner in the wind.

Lysandra sat near his head, her maw stained ebony and her green eyes fixed on the man's pale face. Needle-sharp claws gleamed from her massive paws.

Behind them, Ren checked the others for signs of life. His sword rose and fell, decapitating them before the frigid air could render them too stiff to hack through.

"Traitorous filth," the demon seethed at Aedion, narrow face curdling with hate. The reek of him stuffed itself up Aedion's nostrils, coating his senses like oil.

Aedion drew the knife at his side—the long, wicked dagger Rowan Whitethorn had gifted him—and smiled grimly. "This can go quickly, if you're smart."

The Valg soldier spat on Aedion's snow-cruled boots.



Allsbrook Castle had stood with the Staghorns at its back and Oakwald at its feet for over five hundred years.

Pacing before the roaring fire ablaze in one of its many oversized hearths, Aedion could count the marks of every brutal winter upon the gray stones. Could feel the weight of the castle's storied history on those stones, too—the years of valor and service, when these halls had been full of singing and warriors, and the long years of sorrow that followed.

Ren had claimed a worn, tufted armchair set to one side of the fire, his forearms braced on his thighs as he stared into the flame. They'd arrived late last night, and even Aedion had been too drained from the trek through snowbound Oakwald to take the grand tour. And after what they'd done this afternoon, he doubted he'd muster the energy to do so now.

The once-great hall was hushed and dim beyond their fire, and above them, faded tapestries and crests from the Allsbrook family's banner men

swayed in the draft creeping through the high windows that lined one side of the chamber. An assortment of birds nested in the rafters, hunkered down against the lethal cold beyond the keep's ancient walls.

And amongst them, a green-eyed falcon listened to every word.

"If Erawan's searching for a way into Terrasen," Ren said at last, "the mountains would be foolish." He frowned toward the discarded trays of food they'd devoured minutes ago. Hearty mutton stew and roasted root vegetables. Most of it bland, but it had been hot. "The land does not forgive easily out here. He'd lose countless troops to the elements alone."

"Erawan does nothing without reason," Aedion countered. "The easiest route to Terrasen would be up through the farmlands, on the northern roads. It's where anyone would expect him to march. Either there, or to launch his forces from the coast."

"Or both—by land and sea."

Aedion nodded. Erawan had spread his net wide in his desire to stomp out what resistance had arisen on this continent. Gone was the guise of Adarlan's empire: from Eyllwe to Adarlan's northern border, from the shores of the Great Ocean to the towering wall of mountains that cleaved their continent in two, the Valg king's shadow grew every day. Aedion doubted that Erawan would stop before he clamped black collars around all their necks.

And if Erawan attained the two other Wyrddkeys, if he could open the Wyrddgate at will and unleash hordes of Valg from his own realm, perhaps even enslave armies from other worlds and wield them for conquest . . . There would be no chance of stopping him. In this world, or any other.

All hope of preventing that horrible fate now lay with Dorian Haviliard and Manon Blackbeak. Where they'd gone these months, what had befallen them, Aedion hadn't heard a whisper. Which he supposed was a good sign. Their survival lay in secrecy.

Aedion said, "So for Erawan to waste a scouting party to find small mountain passes seems unwise." He scratched at his stubble-coated cheek. They'd left before dawn yesterday, and he'd opted for sleep over a shave.

“It doesn’t make sense, strategically. The witches can fly, so sending scouts to learn the pitfalls of the terrain is of little use. But if the information is for terrestrial armies . . . Squeezing forces through small passes like that would take months, not to mention risk the weather.”

“Their scout just kept laughing,” said Ren, shaking his head. His shoulder-length black hair moved with him. “What are we missing here? What aren’t we seeing?” In the firelight, the slashing scar down his face was starker. A reminder of the horrors Ren had endured, and the ones his family hadn’t survived.

“It could be to keep us guessing. To make us reposition our forces.” Aedion braced a hand on the mantel, the warm stone seeping into his still-chilled skin.

Ren had indeed readied the Bane the months Aedion had been away, working closely with Kyllian to position them as far south from Orynth as Darrow’s leash would allow. Which, it turned out, was barely beyond the foothills lining the southernmost edge of the Plain of Theralis.

Ren had since yielded control to Aedion, though the Lord of Allsbrook’s reunion with *Aelin* had been frosty. As cold as the snow whipping outside this keep, to be exact.

Lysandra had played the role well, mastering Aelin’s guilt and impatience. And since then, wisely avoiding any situation where they might talk about the past. Not that Ren had demonstrated a desire to reminisce about the years before Terrasen’s fall. Or the events of last winter.

Aedion could only hope that Erawan also remained unaware that they no longer had the Fire-Bringer in their midst. What Terrasen’s own troops would say or do when they realized Aelin’s flame would not shield them in battle, he didn’t want to consider.

“It could also be a true maneuver that we were lucky enough to discover,” Ren mused. “So do we risk moving troops to the passes? There are some already in the Staghorns behind Orynth, and on the northern plains beyond it.”

A clever move on Ren’s part—to convince Darrow to let him station

part of the Bane *behind* Orynth, should Erawan sail north and attack from there. He'd put nothing past the bastard.

"I don't want the Bane spread too thin," said Aedion, studying the fire. So different, this flame—so different from Aelin's fire. As if the one before him were a ghost compared to the living thing that was his queen's magic. "And we still don't have enough troops to spare."

Even with Aelin's desperate, bold maneuvering, the allies she'd won didn't come close to the full might of Morath. And all that gold she'd amassed did little to buy them more—not when there were few left to even entice to join their cause.

"Aelin didn't seem too concerned when she flitted off to Eldrys," Ren murmured.

For a moment, Aedion was on a spit of blood-soaked sand.

An iron box. Maeve had whipped her and put her in a veritable coffin. And sailed off to Mala-knew-where, an immortal sadist with them.

"Aelin," said Aedion, dredging up a drawl as best he could, even as the lie choked him, "has her own plans that she'll only tell us about when the time is right."

Ren said nothing. And though the queen Ren believed had returned was an illusion, Aedion added, "Everything she does is for Terrasen."

He'd said such horrible things to her that day she'd taken down the ilken. *Where are our allies?* he'd demanded. He was still trying to forgive himself for it. For any of it. All that he had was this one chance to make it right, to do as she'd asked and save their kingdom.

Ren glanced to the twin swords he'd discarded on the ancient table behind them. "She still left." Not for Eldrys, but ten years ago.

"We've all made mistakes this past decade." The gods knew Aedion had plenty to atone for.

Ren tensed, as if the choices that haunted him had nipped at his back.

"I never told her," Aedion said quietly, so that the falcon sitting in the rafters might not hear. "About the opium den in Rifthold."

About the fact that Ren had known the owner, and had frequented

the woman's establishment plenty before the night Aedion and Chaol had hauled in a nearly unconscious Ren to hide from the king's men.

"You can be a real prick, you know that?" Ren's voice turned hoarse.

"I'd never use that against you." Aedion held the young lord's raging dark stare, let Ren feel the dominance simmering within his own. "What I meant to say, before you flew off the handle," he added when Ren's mouth opened again, "was that Aelin offered you a place in this court without knowing that part of your past." A muscle flickered in Ren's jaw. "But even if she had, Ren, she still would have made that offer."

Ren studied the stone floor beneath their boots. "There is no court."

"Darrow can scream it all he wants, but I beg to differ." Aedion slid into the armchair across from Ren's. If Ren truly backed Aelin, with Elide Lochan now returned, and Sol and Ravi of Suria likely to support her, it gave his queen three votes in her favor. Against the four opposing her.

There was little hope that Lysandra's vote, as Lady of Caraverre, would be recognized.

The shifter had not asked to see the land that was to be her home if they survived this war. Had only changed into a falcon on the trek here and flown off for a while. When she'd returned, she'd said nothing, though her green eyes had been bright.

No, Caraverre would not be recognized as a territory, not until Aelin took up her throne.

Until Lysandra instead was crowned queen, if his own did not return. She *would* return. She had to.

A door opened at the far end of the hall, followed by rushing, light steps. He rose a heartbeat before a joyous "*Aedion!*" sang over the stones.

Evangeline was beaming, clad head to toe in green woolen clothes bordered with white fur, her red-gold hair hanging in two plaits. Like the mountain girls of Terrasen.

Her scars stretched wide as she grinned, and Aedion threw open his

arms just before she launched herself on him. “They said you arrived late last night, but you left before first light, and I was worried I’d miss you again—”

Aedion pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You look like you’ve grown a full foot since I last saw you.”

Evangeline’s citrine eyes glowed as she glanced between him and Ren. “Where’s—”

A flash of light, and there she was.

Shining. Lysandra seemed to be shining as she swept a cloak around her bare body, the garment left on a nearby chair for precisely this purpose. Evangeline hurled herself into the shifter’s arms, half sobbing with joy. Evangeline’s shoulders shook, and Lysandra smiled, deeply and warmly, stroking the girl’s head. “You’re well?”

For all the world, the shifter would have seemed calm, serene. But Aedion knew her—knew her moods, her secret tells. Knew that the slight tremor in her words was proof of the raging torrent beneath the beautiful surface.

“Oh, yes,” Evangeline said, pulling away to beam toward Ren. “He and Lord Murtaugh brought me here soon after. Fleetfoot’s with him, by the way. Murtaugh, I mean. She likes him better than me, because he sneaks her treats all day. She’s fatter than a lazy house cat now.”

Lysandra laughed, and Aedion smiled. The girl had been well cared for.

As if realizing it herself, Lysandra murmured to Ren, her voice a soft purr, “Thank you.”

Red tinted Ren’s cheeks as he rose to his feet. “I thought she’d be safer here than in the war camp. More comfortable, at least.”

“Oh, it’s the most wonderful place, Lysandra,” Evangeline chirped, gripping Lysandra’s hand between both of hers. “Murtaugh even took me to Caraverre one afternoon—before it started snowing, I mean. You must see it. The hills and rivers and pretty trees, all right up against the mountains. I thought I spied a ghost leopard hiding atop the rocks, but Murtaugh said it was a trick of my mind. But I swear it was one—even

bigger than yours! And the house! It's the loveliest house I ever saw, with a walled garden in the back that Murtaugh says will be full of vegetables and roses in the summer."

For a heartbeat, Aedion couldn't endure the emotion on Lysandra's face as Evangeline prattled off her grand plans for the estate. The pain of longing for a life that would likely be snatched away before she had a chance to claim it.

Aedion turned to Ren, the lord's gaze transfixed on Lysandra. As it had been whenever she'd taken her human form.

Fighting the urge to clench his jaw, Aedion said, "You recognize Caravere, then."

Evangeline continued her merry jabbering, but Lysandra's eyes slid toward them.

"Darrow is not Lord of Allsbrook," was all Ren said.

Indeed. And who wouldn't want such a pretty neighbor?

That is, when she wasn't living in Orynth under another's skin and crown, using Aedion to sire a fake royal bloodline. Little more than a stud to breed.

Lysandra again nodded her thanks, and Ren's blush deepened. As if they hadn't spent all day trekking through snow and slaughtering Valg. As if the scent of gore didn't still cling to them.

Indeed, Evangeline sniffed at the cloak Lysandra kept wrapped around herself and scowled. "You smell terrible. All of you."

"Manners," Lysandra admonished, but laughed.

Evangeline put her hands on her hips in a gesture Aedion had seen Aelin make so many times that his heart hurt to behold it. "*You* asked me to tell you if you ever smelled. Especially your breath."

Lysandra smiled, and Aedion resisted the tug on his own mouth. "So I did."

Evangeline yanked on Lysandra's hand, trying to haul the shifter down the hall. "You can share my room. There's a bathing chamber in there." Lysandra conceded a step.

“A fine room for a guest,” Aedion muttered to Ren, his brows rising. It had to be one of the finest here, to have its own bathing chamber.

Ren ducked his head. “It belonged to Rose.”

His oldest sister. Who had been butchered along with Rallen, the middle Allsbrook sibling, at the magic academy they’d attended. Near the border with Adarlan, the school had been directly in the path of invading troops.

Even before magic fell, they would have had few defenses against ten thousand soldiers. Aedion didn’t let himself often remember the slaughter of Devellin—that fabled school. How many children had been there. How none had escaped.

Ren had been close to both his elder sisters, but to high-spirited Rose most of all.

“She would have liked her,” Ren clarified, jerking his chin toward Evangeline. Scarred, Aedion realized, as Ren was. The slash down Ren’s face had been earned while escaping the butchering blocks, his parents’ lives the cost of the diversion that got him and Murtaugh out. Evangeline’s scars hailed from a different sort of escape, narrowly avoiding the hellish life her mistress endured.

Aedion didn’t let himself often remember that fact, either.

Evangeline continued pulling Lysandra away, oblivious to the conversation. “Why didn’t you wake me when you arrived?”

Aedion didn’t hear Lysandra’s answer as she let herself be led from the hall. Not as the shifter’s gaze met his own.

She had tried to speak with him these past two months. Many times. Dozens of times. He’d ignored her. And when they’d at last reached Ter-rasen’s shores, she’d given up.

She had lied to him. Deceived him so thoroughly that any moment between them, any conversation . . . he didn’t know what had been real. Didn’t want to know. Didn’t want to know if she’d meant any of it, when he’d so stupidly left everything laid out before her.

He’d believed this was his last hunt. That he’d be able to take his time

with her, show her everything Terrasen had to offer. Show her everything he had to offer, too.

Lying bitch, he'd called her. Screamed the words at her.

He'd mustered enough clarity to be ashamed of it. But the rage remained.

Lysandra's eyes were wary, as if asking him, *Can we not, in this rare moment of happiness, speak as friends?*

Aedion only returned to the fire, blocking out her emerald eyes, her exquisite face.

Ren could have her. Even if the thought made him want to shatter something.

Lysandra and Evangeline vanished from the hall, the girl still chirping away.

The weight of Lysandra's disappointment lingered like a phantom touch.

Ren cleared his throat. "You want to tell me what's going on between you two?"

Aedion cut him a flat stare that would have sent lesser men running. "Get a map. I want to go over the passes again."

Ren, to his credit, went in search of one.

Aedion gazed at the fire, so pale without his queen's spark of magic.

How long would it be until the wind howling outside the castle was replaced by the baying of Erawan's beasts?



Aedion got his answer at dawn the next day.

Seated at one end of the long table in the Great Hall, Lysandra and Evangeline having a quiet breakfast at the other, Aedion mastered the shake in his fingers as he opened the letter the messenger had delivered moments before. Ren and Murtaugh, seated around him, had refrained from demanding answers while he read. Once. Twice.

Aedion at last set down the letter. Took a long breath as he frowned



toward the watery gray light leaking through the bank of windows high on the wall.

Down the table, the weight of Lysandra's stare pressed on him. Yet she remained where she was.

"It's from Kyllian," Aedion said hoarsely. "Morath's troops made landfall at the coast—at Eldrys."

Ren swore. Murtaugh stayed silent. Aedion kept seated, since his knees seemed unlikely to support him. "He destroyed the city. Turned it to rubble without unleashing a single troop."

Why the dark king had waited this long, Aedion could only guess.

"The witch towers?" Ren asked. Aedion had told him all Manon Blackbeak had revealed on their trek through the Stone Marshes.

"It doesn't say." It was doubtful Erawan had wielded the towers, since they were massive enough to require being transported by land, and Aedion's scouts surely would have noticed a one-hundred-foot tower hauled through their territory. "But the blasts leveled the city."

"Aelin?" Murtaugh's voice was a near-whisper.

"Fine," Aedion lied. "On her way back to the Orynth encampment the day before it happened." Of course, there was no mention of her whereabouts in Kyllian's letter, but his top commander had speculated that since there was no body or celebrating enemy, the queen had gotten out.

Murtaugh went boneless in his seat, and Fleetfoot laid her golden head atop his thigh. "Thank Mala for that mercy."

"Don't thank her yet." Aedion shoved the letter into the pocket of the thick cloak he wore against the draft in the hall. *Don't thank her at all*, he almost added. "On their way to Eldrys, Morath took out ten of Wendlyn's warships near Ilium, and sent the rest fleeing back up the Florine, along with our own."

Murtaugh rubbed his jaw. "Why not give chase—follow them up the river?"

“Who knows?” Aedion would think on it later. “Erawan set his sights on Eldrys, and so he has now taken the city. He seems inclined to launch some of his troops from there. If unchecked, they’ll reach Orynth in a week.”

“We have to return to the camp,” Ren said, face dark. “See if we can get our fleet back down the Florine and strike with Rolfe from the sea. While we hammer from the land.”

Aedion didn’t feel like reminding them that they hadn’t heard from Rolfe beyond vague messages about his hunt for the scattered Mycenians and their legendary fleet. The odds of Rolfe emerging to save their asses were as slim as the fabled Wolf Tribe at the far end of the Anascaul Mountains riding out of the hinterland. Or the Fae who’d fled Terrasen a decade ago returning from wherever they’d gone to join Aedion’s forces.

The calculating calm that had guided Aedion through battle and butchering settled into him, as solid as the fur cloak he wore. Speed would be their ally now. Speed and clarity.

The lines have to hold, Rowan ordered before they’d parted. *Buy us whatever time you can.*

He’d make good on that promise.

Evangeline fell silent as Aedion’s attention slid to the shifter down the table. “How many can your wyvern form carry?”

2

Elide Lochan had once hoped to travel far and wide, to a place where no one had ever heard of Adarlan or Terrasen, so distant that Vernon didn't stand a chance of finding her.

She hadn't anticipated that it might actually happen.

Standing in the dusty, ancient alley of an equally dusty, ancient city in a kingdom south of Doranelle, Elide marveled at the noontime bells ringing across the clear sky, the sun baking the pale stones of the buildings, the dry wind sweeping through the narrow streets between them. She'd learned the name of this city thrice now, and still couldn't pronounce it.

She supposed it didn't matter. They wouldn't be here long. Just as they had not lingered in any of the cities they'd swept through, or the forests or mountains or lowlands. Kingdom after kingdom, the relentless pace set by a prince who seemed barely able to remember to speak, let alone feed himself.

Elide grimaced at the weathered witch leathers she still wore, her fraying gray cloak and scuffed boots, then glanced at her two companions in the alley. Indeed, they'd all seen better days.

“Any minute now,” Gavriel murmured, a tawny eye on the alley’s entrance. A towering, dark figure blended into the scant shadows at the half-crumbling archway, monitoring the bustling street beyond.

Elide didn’t look too long toward that figure. She’d been unable to stomach it these endless weeks. Unable to stomach him, or the unbearable ache in her chest.

Elide frowned at Gavriel. “We should have stopped for lunch.”

He jerked his chin to the worn bag sagging against the wall. “There’s an apple in my pack.”

Glancing toward the building rising above them, Elide sighed and reached for the pack, riffling through the spare clothes, rope, weapons, and various supplies until she yanked out the fat red-and-green apple. The last of the many they’d plucked from an orchard in a neighboring kingdom. Elide wordlessly extended it to the Fae lord.

Gavriel arched a golden brow.

Elide mirrored the gesture. “I can hear your stomach grumbling.”

Gavriel huffed a laugh and took the apple with an incline of his head before cleaning it on the sleeve of his pale jacket. “Indeed it is.”

Down the alley, Elide could have sworn the dark figure stiffened. She paid him no heed.

Gavriel bit into the apple, his canines flashing. Aedion Ashryver’s father—the resemblance was uncanny, though the similarities stopped at appearance. In the brief few days she’d spent with Aedion, he’d proved himself the opposite of the soft-spoken, thoughtful male.

She’d worried, after Asterin and Vesta had left them aboard the ship they’d sailed here, that she might have made a mistake in choosing to travel with three immortal males. That she’d be trampled underfoot.

But Gavriel had been kind from the start, making sure Elide ate enough and had blankets on frigid nights, teaching her to ride the horses they’d spent precious coin to purchase because Elide wouldn’t stand a chance of keeping up with them on foot, ankle or no. And for the times when they had to lead their horses over rough terrain, Gavriel had even

braced her leg with his magic, his power a warm summer breeze against her skin.

She certainly wasn't allowing Lorcan to do so for her.

She would never forget the sight of him crawling after Maeve once the queen had severed the blood oath. Crawling after Maeve like a shunned lover, like a broken dog desperate for its master. Aelin had been brutalized, their very location betrayed by Lorcan to Maeve, and still he tried to follow. Right through the sand still wet with Aelin's blood.

Gavriel ate half the apple and offered Elide the rest. "You should eat, too."

She frowned at the bruised purple beneath Gavriel's eyes. Beneath her own, she had no doubt. Her cycle, at least, had come last month, despite the hard travel that burned up any reserves of food in her stomach.

That had been particularly mortifying. To explain to three warriors who could already smell the blood that she needed supplies. More frequent stops.

She hadn't mentioned the cramping that twisted her gut, her back, and lashed down her thighs. She'd kept riding, kept her head down. She knew they would have stopped. Even Rowan would have stopped to let her rest. But every time they paused, Elide saw that iron box. Saw the whip, shining with blood, as it cracked through the air. Heard Aelin's screaming.

She'd gone so Elide wouldn't be taken. Had not hesitated to offer herself in Elide's stead.

The thought alone kept Elide astride her mare. Those few days had been made slightly easier by the clean strips of linen that Gavriel and Rowan provided, undoubtedly from their own shirts. When they'd cut them up, she had no idea.

Elide bit into the apple, savoring the sweet, tart crispness. Rowan had left some coppers from a rapidly dwindling supply on a stump to account for the fruit they'd taken.

Soon they'd have to steal their suppers. Or sell their horses.

A thumping sounded from behind the sealed windows a level above, punctuated with muffled male shouting.

“Do you think we’ll have better luck this time?” Elide quietly asked.

Gavriel studied the blue-painted shutters, carved in an intricate latticework. “I have to hope so.”

Luck had indeed run thin these days. They’d had little since that blasted beach in Eyllwe, when Rowan had felt a tug in the bond between him and Aelin—the mating bond—and had followed its call across the ocean. Yet when they’d reached these shores after several dreadful weeks on storm-wild waters, there had been nothing left to track.

No sign of Maeve’s remaining armada. No whisper of the queen’s ship, the *Nightingale*, docking in any port. No news of her returning to her seat in Doranelle.

Rumors were all they’d had to go on, hauling them across mountains piled deep with snow, through dense forests and dried-out plains.

Until the previous kingdom, the previous city, the packed streets full of revelers out to celebrate Samhuinn, to honor the gods when the veil between worlds was thinnest.

They had no idea those gods were nothing but beings from another world. That any help the gods offered, any help Elide had ever received from that small voice at her shoulder, had been with one goal in mind: to return home. Pawns—that’s all Elide and Aelin and the others were to them.

It was confirmed by the fact that Elide had not heard a whisper of Anneith’s guidance since that horrible day in Eyllwe. Only nudges during the long days, as if they were reminders of her presence. That someone was watching.

That, should they succeed in their quest to find Aelin, the young queen would still be expected to pay the ultimate price to those gods. If Dorian Havilliard and Manon Blackbeak were able to recover the third and final Wyrdkey. If the young king didn’t offer himself up as the sacrifice in Aelin’s stead.

So Elide endured those occasional nudges, refusing to contemplate what manner of creature had taken such an interest in her. In all of them.

Elide had discarded those thoughts as they’d combed through the

streets, listening for any whisper of Maeve's location. The sun had set, Rowan snarling with each passing hour that yielded nothing. As all other cities had yielded nothing.

Elide had made them keep strolling the merry streets, unnoticed and unmarked. She'd reminded Rowan each time he flashed his teeth that there were eyes in every kingdom, every land. And if word got out that a group of Fae warriors was terrorizing cities in their search for Maeve, surely it would get back to the Fae Queen in no time.

Night had fallen, and in the rolling golden hills beyond the city walls, bonfires had kindled.

Rowan had finally stopped growling at the sight. As if they had tugged on some thread of memory, of pain.

But then they'd passed by a group of Fae soldiers out drinking and Rowan had gone still. Had sized the warriors up in that cold, calculating way that told Elide he'd crafted some plan.

When they'd ducked into an alley, the Fae Prince had laid it out in stark, brutal terms.

A week later, and here they were. The shouting grew in the building above.

Elide grimaced as the cracking wood overpowered the ringing city bells. "Should we help?"

Gavriel ran a tattooed hand through his golden hair. The names of warriors who had fallen under his command, he'd explained when she'd finally dared ask last week. "He's almost done."

Indeed, even Lorcan now scowled with impatience at the window above Elide and Gavriel.

As the noon bells finished pealing, the shutters burst open.

Shattered was a better word for it as two Fae males came flying through them.

One of them, brown-haired and bloodied, shrieked while he fell.

Prince Rowan Whitethorn said nothing while he fell with him. While he held his grip on the male, teeth bared.

Elide stepped aside, giving them ample space while they crashed into the pile of crates in the alley, splinters and debris soaring.

She knew a gust of wind kept the fall from being fatal for the broad-shouldered male, whom Rowan hauled from the wreckage by the collar of his blue tunic.

He was of no use to them dead.

Gavriel drew a knife, remaining by Elide's side as Rowan slammed the stranger against the alley wall. There was nothing kind in the prince's face. Nothing warm.

Only cold-blooded predator. Hell-bent on finding the queen who held his heart.

"Please," the male sputtered. In the common tongue.

Rowan had found him, then. They couldn't hope to track Maeve, Rowan had realized on Samhuinn. Yet finding the commanders who served Maeve, spread across various kingdoms on loan to mortal rulers—that, they could do.

And the male Rowan snarled at, his own lip bleeding, *was* a commander. A warrior, from the breadth of his shoulders to his muscled thighs. Rowan still dwarfed him. Gavriel and Lorcan, too. As if, even amongst the Fae, the three of them were a wholly different breed.

"Here's how this goes," Rowan said to the sniveling commander, his voice deadly soft. A brutal smile graced the prince's mouth, setting the blood from his split lip running. "First I break your legs, maybe a portion of your spine so you can't crawl." He pointed a bloodied finger down the alley. To Lorcan. "You know who that is, don't you?"

As if in answer, Lorcan prowled from the archway. The commander began trembling.

"The leg and spine, your body would eventually heal," Rowan went on as Lorcan continued his stalking approach. "But what Lorcan Salvaterre will do to you . . ." A low, joyless laugh. "You won't recover from that, friend."

The commander cast frantic eyes toward Elide, toward Gavriel.

The first time this had happened—two days ago—Elide hadn't been

able to watch. That particular commander hadn't possessed any information worth sharing, and given the unspeakable sort of brothel they'd found him in, Elide hadn't really regretted that Rowan had left his body at one end of the alley. His head at the other.

But today, this time . . . *Watch. See*, a small voice hissed in her ear. *Listen.*

Despite the heat and sun, Elide shuddered. Clenched her teeth, bottling up all the words that swelled within her. *Find someone else. Find a way to use your own powers to forge the Lock. Find a way to accept your fates to be trapped in this world, so we needn't pay a debt that wasn't ours to begin with.*

Yet if Anneith now spoke when she had only nudged her these months . . . Elide swallowed those raging words. As all mortals were expected to. For Aelin, she could submit. As Aelin would ultimately submit.

Gavriel's face held no mercy, only a grim sort of practicality as he beheld the shaking commander dangling from Rowan's iron grip. "Tell him what he wants to know. You'll only make it worse for yourself."

Lorcan had nearly reached them, a dark wind swirling about his long fingers.

There was nothing of the male she'd come to know on his harsh face. At least, the male he'd been before that beach. No, this was the mask she'd first seen in Oakwald. Unfeeling. Arrogant. Cruel.

The commander beheld the power gathering in Lorcan's hand, but managed to sneer at Rowan, blood coating his teeth. "She'll kill all of you." A black eye already bloomed, the lid swollen shut. Air pulsed at Elide's ears as Rowan locked a shield of wind around them. Sealing in all sound. "Maeve will kill every last one of you traitors."

"She can try," was Rowan's mild reply.

See, Anneith whispered again.

When the commander began screaming this time, Elide did not look away.

And as Rowan and Lorcan did what they'd been trained to do, she couldn't decide if Anneith's order had been to help—or a reminder of precisely what the gods might do should they disobey.

3

The Staghorns were burning, and Oakwald with them.

The mighty, ancient trees were little more than charred husks, ash thick as snow raining down.

Embers drifted on the wind, a mockery of how they had once bobbed in her wake like fireflies while she'd run through the Beltane bonfires.

So much flame, the heat smothering, the air itself singeing her lungs.

You did this you did this you did this.

The crack of dying trees groaned the words, cried them.

The world was bathed in fire. Fire, not darkness.

Motion between the trees snared her attention.

The Lord of the North was frantic, mindless with agony, as he galloped toward her. As smoke streamed from his white coat, as fire devoured his mighty antlers—not the immortal flame held between them on her own sigil, the immortal flame of the sacred stags of Terrasen, and of Mala Fire-Bringer before that. But true, vicious flames.

The Lord of the North thundered past, burning, burning, burning.

She reached a hand toward him, invisible and inconsequential, but the proud stag plunged on, screams rising from his mouth.

Such horrible, relentless screams. As if the heart of the world were being shredded.

She could do nothing when the stag threw himself into a wall of flame spread like a net between two burning oaks.

He did not emerge.



The white wolf was watching her again.

Aelin Ashryver Whitethorn Galathynius ran an ironclad finger over the rim of the stone altar on which she lay.

As much movement as she could manage.

Cairn had left her here this time. Had not bothered moving her to the iron box against the adjacent wall.

A rare reprieve. To wake not in darkness, but in flickering firelight.

The braziers were dying, beckoning in the damp cold that pressed to her skin. To whatever wasn't covered by the iron.

She'd already tugged on the chains as quietly as she could. But they held firm.

They'd added more iron. On her. Starting with the metal gauntlets.

She did not remember when that was. Where that had been. There had only been the box then.

The smothering iron coffin.

She had tested it for weaknesses, over and over. Before they'd sent that sweet-smelling smoke to knock her unconscious. She didn't know how long she'd slept after that.

When she'd awoken here, there had been no more smoke.

She'd tested it again, then. As much as the irons would allow. Pushing with her feet, her elbows, her hands against the unforgiving metal. She didn't have enough room to turn over. To ease the pain of the chains digging into her. Chafing her.

The lash wounds etched deep into her back had vanished. The ones that had cleaved her skin to the bone. Or had that been a dream, too?

She had drifted into memory, into years of training in an assassin's keep. Into lessons where she'd been left in chains, in her own waste, until she figured out how to remove them.

But she'd been bound with that training in mind. Nothing she tried in the cramped dark had worked.

The metal of the glove scraped against the dark stone, barely audible over the hissing braziers, the roaring river beyond them. Wherever they were.

Her, and the wolf.

Fenrys.

No chains bound him. None were needed.

Maeve had ordered him to stay, to stand down, and so he would.

For long minutes, they stared at each other.

Aelin did not reflect on the pain that had sent her into unconsciousness. Even as the memory of cracking bones set her foot twitching. The chains jangled.

But nothing flickered where agony should have been rampant. Not a whisper of discomfort in her feet. She shut out the image of how that male—Cairn—had taken them apart. How she'd screamed until her voice had failed.

It might have been a dream. One of the endless horde that hunted her in the blackness. A burning stag, fleeing through the trees. Hours on this altar, her feet shattered beneath ancient tools. A silver-haired prince whose very scent was that of home.

They blurred and bled, until even this moment, staring at the white wolf lying against the wall across from the altar, might be a fragment of an illusion.

Aelin's finger scratched along the curved edge of the altar again.

The wolf blinked at her—thrice. In the early days, months, years of this, they had crafted a silent code between them. Using the few moments

she'd been able to dredge up speech, whispering through the near-invisible holes in the iron coffin.

One blink for yes. Two for no. Three for *Are you all right?* Four for *I am here, I am with you.* Five for *This is real, you are awake.*

Fenrys again blinked three times. *Are you all right?*

Aelin swallowed against the thickness in her throat, her tongue peeling off the roof of her mouth. She blinked once. *Yes.*

She counted his blinks.

Six.

He'd made that one up. *Liar*, or something like it. She refused to acknowledge that particular code.

She blinked once again. *Yes.*

Dark eyes scanned her. He'd seen everything. Every moment of it. If he were permitted to shift, he could tell her what was fabricated and what was real. If any of it had been real.

No injuries ever remained when she awoke. No pain. Only the memory of it, of Cairn's smiling face as he carved her up over and over.

He must have left her on the altar because he meant to return soon.

Aelin shifted enough to tug on the chains, the mask's lock digging into the back of her head. The wind had not brushed her cheeks, or most of her skin, in . . . she did not know.

What wasn't covered in iron was clad in a sleeveless white shift that fell to mid thigh. Leaving her legs and arms bare for Cairn's ministrations.

There were days, memories, of even that shift being gone, of knives scraping over her abdomen. But whenever she awoke, the shift remained intact. Untouched. Unstained.

Fenrys's ears perked, twitching. All the alert Aelin needed.

She hated the trembling that began to coil around her bones as strolling footsteps scuffed beyond the square room and the iron door into it. The only way in. No windows. The stone hall she sometimes glimpsed beyond was equally sealed. Only the sound of water entered this place.

It surged louder as the iron door unlocked and groaned open.

She willed herself not to shake as the brown-haired male approached.

“Awake so soon? I must not have worked you hard enough.”

That voice. She hated that voice above all others. Crooning and cold.

He wore a warrior’s garb, but no warrior’s weapons hung from the belt at his slim waist.

Cairn noted where her eyes fell and patted the heavy hammer dangling from his hip. “So eager for more.”

There was no flame to rally to her. Not an ember.

He stalked to the small pile of logs by one brazier and fed a few to the dying fire. It swirled and crackled, leaping upon the wood with hungry fingers.

Her magic didn’t so much as flicker in answer. Everything she ate and drank through the small slot in the mask’s mouth was laced with iron.

She’d refused it at first. Had tasted the iron and spat it out.

She’d gone to the brink of dying from lack of water when they forced it down her throat. Then they’d let her starve—starve until she broke and devoured whatever they put in front of her, iron or no.

She did not often think about that time. That weakness. How excited Cairn had grown to see her eating, and how much he raged when it still did not yield what he wanted.

Cairn loaded the other brazier before snapping his fingers at Fenrys. “You may see to your needs in the hall and return here immediately.”

As if a ghost hoisted him up, the enormous wolf padded out.

Maeve had considered even that, granting Cairn power to order when Fenrys ate and drank, when he pissed. She knew Cairn deliberately forgot sometimes. The canine whines of pain had reached her, even in the box.

Real. That had been real.

The male before her, a trained warrior in everything but honor and spirit, surveyed her body. “How shall we play tonight, Aelin?”

She hated the sound of her name on his tongue.

Her lip curled back from her teeth.

Fast as an asp, Cairn gripped her throat hard enough to bruise. “Such rage, even now.”

She would never let go of it—the rage. Even when she sank into that burning sea within her, even when she sang to the darkness and flame, the rage guided her.

Cairn’s fingers dug into her throat, and she couldn’t stop the choking noise that gasped from her. “This can all be over with a few little words, Princess,” he purred, dropping low enough that his breath brushed her mouth. “A few little words, and you and I will part ways forever.”

She’d never say them. Never swear the blood oath to Maeve.

Swear it, and hand over everything she knew, everything she was. Become slave eternal. And usher in the doom of the world.

Cairn’s grip on her neck loosened, and she inhaled deeply. But his fingers lingered at the right side of her throat.

She knew precisely what spot, what scar, he brushed his fingers over. The twin small markings in the space between her neck and shoulder.

“Interesting,” Cairn murmured.

Aelin jerked her head away, baring her teeth again.

Cairn struck her.

Not her face, clad in iron that would rip open his knuckles. But her unprotected stomach.

The breath slammed from her, and iron clanked as she tried and failed to curl onto her side.

On silent paws, Fenrys loped back in and took up his place against the wall. Concern and fury flared in the wolf’s dark eyes as she gasped for air, as her chained limbs still attempted to curl around her abdomen. But Fenrys could only lower himself onto the floor once more.

Four blinks. *I am here, I am with you.*

Cairn didn’t see it. Didn’t remark on her one blink in reply as he smirked at the tiny bites on her neck, sealed with the salt from the warm waters of Skull’s Bay.

Rowan’s marking. A mate’s marking.

She didn't let herself think of him too long. Not as Cairn thumbed free that heavy-headed hammer and weighed it in his broad hands.

"If it wasn't for Maeve's gag order," the male mused, surveying her body like a painter assessing an empty canvas, "I'd put my own teeth in you. See if Whitethorn's marking holds up then."

Dread coiled in her gut. She'd seen the evidence of what their long hours here summoned from him. Her fingers curled, scraping the stone as if it were Cairn's face.

Cairn shifted the hammer to one hand. "This will have to do, I suppose." He ran his other hand down the length of her torso, and she jerked against the chains at the proprietary touch. He smiled. "So responsive." He gripped her bare knee, squeezing gently. "We started at the feet earlier. Let's go higher this time."

Aelin braced herself. Took plunging breaths that would bring her far away from here. From her body.

She'd never let them break her. Never swear that blood oath.

For Terrasen, for her people, whom she had left to endure their own torment for ten long years. She owed them this much.

Deep, deep, deep she went, as if she could outrun what was to come, as if she could hide from it.

The hammer glinted in the firelight as it rose over her knee, Cairn's breath sucking in, anticipation and delight mingling on his face.

Fenrys blinked, over and over and over. *I am here, I am with you.*

It didn't stop the hammer from falling.

Or the scream that shattered from her throat.

4

“This camp has been abandoned for months.”

Manon turned from the snow-crueted cliff where she'd been monitoring the western edge of the White Fang Mountains. Toward the Wastes.

Asterin remained crouched over the half-buried remnants of a fire pit, the shaggy goat pelt slung over her shoulders ruffling in the frigid wind. Her Second went on, “No one's been here since early autumn.”

Manon had suspected as much. The Shadows had spotted the site an hour earlier on their patrol of the terrain ahead, somehow noticing the irregularities cleverly hidden in the leeward side of the rocky peak. The Mother knew Manon herself might have flown right over it.

Asterin stood, brushing snow from the knees of her leathers. Even the thick material wasn't enough to ward against the brutal cold. Hence the mountain-goat pelts they'd resorted to wearing.

Good for blending into the snow, Edda had claimed, the Shadow even letting the dark hair dye she favored wash away these weeks to reveal the moon white of her natural shade. Manon's shade. Briar had kept the

dye. One of them was needed to scout at night, the other Shadow had claimed.

Manon surveyed the two Shadows carefully stalking through the camp. Perhaps no longer Shadows, but rather the two faces of the moon. One dark, one light.

One of many changes to the Thirteen.

Manon blew out a breath, the wind tearing away the hot puff.

“They’re out there,” Asterin murmured so the others might not hear from where they gathered by the overhanging boulder that shielded them from the wind.

“Three camps,” Manon said with equal quiet. “All long abandoned. We’re hunting ghosts.”

Asterin’s gold hair ripped free of its braid, blowing westward. Toward the homeland they might very well never see. “The camps are proof they’re flesh and blood. Ghislaine thinks they might be from the late-summer hunts.”

“They could also be from the wild men of these mountains.” Though Manon knew they weren’t. She’d hunted enough Crochans during the past hundred years to spot their style of making fires, their neat little camps. All the Thirteen had. And they’d all tracked and killed so many of the wild men of the White Fangs earlier this year on Erawan’s behalf that they knew their habits, too.

Asterin’s gold-flecked black eyes fell on that blurred horizon. “We’ll find them.”

Soon. They had to find at least *some* of the Crochans soon. Manon knew they had methods of communicating, scattered as they were. Ways to get out a call for help. A call for aid.

Time was not on their side. It had been nearly two months since that day on the beach in Eyllwe. Since she’d learned the terrible cost the Queen of Terrasen must pay to put an end to this madness. The cost that another with Mala’s bloodline might also pay, if need be.

Manon resisted the urge to glance over her shoulder to where the King

of Adarlan stood amongst the rest of her Thirteen, entertaining Vesta by summoning flame, water, and ice to his cupped palm. A small display of a terrible, wondrous magic. He set three whorls of the elements lazily dancing around each other, and Vesta arched an impressed brow. Manon had seen the way the red-haired sentinel looked at him, had noted that Vesta wisely refrained from acting on that desire.

Manon had given her no such orders, though. Hadn't said anything to the Thirteen about what, exactly, the human king was to her.

Nothing, she wanted to say. Someone as unmoored as she. As quietly angry. And as pressed for time. Finding the third and final Wyrdkey had proved futile. The two the king carried in his pocket offered no guidance, only their unearthly reek. Where Erawan kept it, they had not the faintest inkling. To search Morath or any of his other outposts would be suicide.

So they'd set aside their hunt, after weeks of fruitless searching, in favor of finding the Crochans. The king had protested initially, but yielded. His allies and friends in the North needed as many warriors as they could muster. Finding the Crochans . . . Manon wouldn't break her promise.

She might be the disowned Heir of the Blackbeak Clan, might now command only a dozen witches, but she could still hold true to her word.

So she'd find the Crochans. Convince them to fly into battle with the Thirteen. With her. Their last living Crochan Queen.

Even if it led them all straight into the Darkness's embrace.

The sun arched higher, its light off the snows near-blinding.

Lingering was unwise. They'd survived these months with strength and wits. For while they'd hunted for the Crochans, they'd been hunted themselves. Yellowlegs and Bluebloods, mostly. All scouting patrols.

Manon had given the order not to engage, not to kill. A missing Iron-teeth patrol would only pinpoint their location. Though Dorian could have snapped their necks without lifting a finger.

It was a pity he hadn't been born a witch. But she'd gladly accept such a lethal ally. So would the Thirteen.

“What will you say,” Asterin mused, “when we find the Crochans?”

Manon had considered it over and over. If the Crochans would know who Lothian Blackbeak was, that she had loved Manon’s father—a rare-born Crochan Prince. That her parents had dreamed, had *believed* they’d created a child to break the curse on the Ironteeth and unite their peoples.

A child not of war, but of peace.

But those were foreign words on her tongue. *Love. Peace.*

Manon ran a gloved finger over the scrap of red fabric binding the end of her braid. A shred from her half sister’s cloak. Rhiannon. Named for the last Witch-Queen. Whose face Manon somehow bore. Manon said, “I’ll ask the Crochans not to shoot, I suppose.”

Asterin’s mouth twitched toward a smile. “I meant about who you are.”

She’d rarely balked from anything. Rarely feared anything. But saying the words, *those* words . . . “I don’t know,” Manon admitted. “We’ll see if we get that far.”

The White Demon. That’s what the Crochans called her. She was at the top of their to-kill list. A witch every Crochan was to slay on sight. That fact alone said they didn’t know what she was to them.

Yet her half sister had figured it out. And then Manon had slit her throat.

Manon Kin Slayer, her grandmother had taunted. The Matron had likely relished every Crochan heart that Manon had brought to her at Blackbeak Keep over the past hundred years.

Manon closed her eyes, listening to the hollow song of the wind.

Behind them, Abraxos let out an impatient, hungry whine. Yes, they were all hungry these days.

“We will follow you, Manon,” Asterin said softly.

Manon turned to her cousin. “Do I deserve that honor?”

Asterin’s mouth pressed into a tight line. The slight bump on her nose—Manon had given her that. She’d broken it in the Omega’s mess hall for

brawling with mouthy Yellowlegs. Asterin had never once complained about it. Had seemed to wear the reminder of the beating Manon bestowed like a badge of pride.

“Only you can decide if you deserve it, Manon.”

Manon let the words settle as she shifted her gaze to the western horizon. Perhaps she'd deserve that honor if she succeeded in bringing them back to a home they'd never set eyes on.

If they survived this war and all the terrible things they must do before it was over.



It was no easy thing, to slip away from thirteen sleeping witches and their wyverns.

But Dorian Havilliard had been studying them—their watches, who slept deepest, who might report seeing him walk away from their small fire and who would keep their mouths shut. Weeks and weeks, since he'd settled on this idea. This plan.

They'd camped on the small outcropping where they'd found long-cold traces of the Crochans, taking shelter under the overhanging rock, the wyverns a wall of leathery warmth around them.

He had minutes to do this. He'd been practicing for weeks now—making no bones of rising in the middle of the night, no more than a drowsy man displeased to have to brave the frigid elements to see to his needs. Letting the witches grow accustomed to his nightly movements.

Letting Manon become accustomed to it, too.

Though nothing had been declared between them, their bedrolls still wound up beside each other every night. Not that a camp full of witches offered any sort of opportunity to tangle with her. No, for that, they'd resorted to winter-bare forests and snow-blasted passes, their hands roving for any bit of bare skin they dared expose to the chill air.

Their couplings were brief, savage. Teeth and nails and snarling. And not just from Manon.

But after a day of fruitless searching, little more than a glorified guard against the enemies hunting them while his friends bled to save their lands, he needed the release as much as she did. They never discussed it—what hounded them. Which was fine by him.

Dorian had no idea what sort of man that made him.

Most days, if he was being honest, he felt little. Had felt little for months, save for those stolen, wild moments with Manon. And save for the moments when he trained with the Thirteen, and a blunt sort of rage drove him to keep swinging his sword, keep getting back up when they knocked him down.

Swordplay, archery, knife-work, tracking—they taught him everything he asked. Along with the solid weight of Damaris, a witch-knife now hung from his sword belt. It had been gifted to him by Sorrel when he'd first managed to pin the stone-faced Third. Two weeks ago.

But when the lessons were done, when they sat around the small fire they dared to risk each night, he wondered if the witches could sniff out the restlessness that nipped at his heels.

If they could now sniff out that he had no intention of taking a piss in the frigid night as he wended his way between their bedrolls, then through the slight gap between Narene, Asterin's sky-blue mare, and Abraxos. He nodded toward where Vesta stood on watch, and the red-haired witch, despite the brutal cold, threw a wicked smile his way before he rounded the corner of the rocky overhang and disappeared beyond view.

He'd picked her watch for a reason. There were some amongst the Thirteen who never smiled at all. Lin, who still seemed like she was debating carving him up to examine his insides; and Imogen, who kept to herself and didn't smile at *anyone*. Thea and Kaya usually reserved their smiles for each other, and when Faline and Fallon—the green-eyed demon twins, as the others called them—smiled, it meant hell was about to break loose.

All of them might have been suspicious if he vanished for too long. But Vesta, who shamelessly flirted with him—she'd let him linger outside

the camp. Likely from fear of what Manon might do to her if she was spotted trailing after him into the dark.

A bastard—he was a bastard for using them like this. For assessing and monitoring them when they currently risked everything to find the Crochans.

But it made no difference if he cared. About them. About himself, he supposed. Caring hadn't done him any favors. Hadn't done Sorscha any favors.

And it wouldn't matter, once he gave up everything to seal the Wyrddate.

Damaris was a weight at his side—but nothing compared to the two objects tucked into the pocket of his heavy jacket. Mercifully, he'd swiftly learned to drown out their whispering, their otherworldly beckoning. Most of the time.

None of the witches had questioned why he'd been so easily persuaded to give up the hunt for the third Wyrddkey. He'd known better than to waste his time arguing. So he'd planned, and let them, let Manon, believe him to be content in his role to guard them with his magic.

Reaching the boulder-shrouded clearing that he'd scouted earlier under the guise of aimlessly wandering the site, Dorian made quick work of his preparations.

He had not forgotten a single movement of Aelin's hands in Skull's Bay when she'd smeared her blood on the floor of her room at the Ocean Rose.

But it was not Elena whom he planned to summon with his blood.

When the snow was red with it, when he'd made sure the wind was still blowing its scent away from the witch camp, Dorian unsheathed Damaris and plunged it into the circle of Wyrddmarks.

And then waited.

His magic was a steady thrum through him, the small flame he dared to conjure enough to heat his body. To keep him from shivering to death while the minutes passed.

Ice had been the first manifestation of his magic. He supposed that should give him some sort of preference for it. Or at least some immunity.

He had neither. And he'd decided that if they survived long enough to endure the scorching heat of summer, he'd never complain about it again.

He'd been honing his magic as best he could during these weeks of relentless, useless hunting. None of the witches possessed power, not beyond the Yielding, which they'd told him could only be summoned once—to terrible and devastating effect. But the Thirteen watched with some degree of interest while Dorian kept up the lessons Rowan had started. Ice. Fire. Water. Healing. Wind. With the snows, attempting to coax life from the frozen earth had proved impossible, but he still tried.

The only magic that always leapt at his summons remained that invisible force, capable of snapping bone. That, the witches liked best. Especially since it made him their greatest line of defense against their enemies. Death—that was his gift. All he seemed able to offer those around him. He was little better than his father in that regard.

The flame flowed over him, invisible and steady.

They hadn't heard a whisper of Aelin. Or Rowan and their companions. Not one whisper of whether the queen was still Maeve's captive.

She had been willing to yield everything to save Terrasen, to save all of them. He could do nothing less. Aelin certainly had more to lose. A mate and husband who loved her. A court who'd follow her into hell. A kingdom long awaiting her return.

All he had was an unmarked grave for a healer no one would remember, a broken empire, and a shattered castle.

Dorian closed his eyes for a moment, blocking out the sight of the glass castle exploding, the sight of his father reaching for him, begging for forgiveness. A monster—the man had been a monster in every possible way. Had sired Dorian while possessed by a Valg demon.

What did it make him? His blood ran red, and the Valg prince who'd infested Dorian himself had delighted on feasting on him, on making him *enjoy* all he'd done while collared. But did it still make him fully human?

Blowing out a long breath, Dorian opened his eyes.

A man stood across the snowy clearing.
Dorian bowed low. "Gavin."



The first King of Adarlan had his eyes.

Or rather Dorian had Gavin's eyes, passed down through the thousand years between them.

The rest of the ancient king's face was foreign: the long, dark brown hair, the harsh features, the grave cast of his mouth. "You learned the marks."

Dorian rose from his bow. "I'm a quick study."

Gavin didn't smile. "The summoning is not a gift to be used lightly. You risk much, young king, in calling me here. Considering what you carry."

Dorian patted the jacket pocket where the two Wyrkeys lay, ignoring the strange, terrible power that pulsed against his hand in answer. "Everything is a risk these days." He straightened. "I need your help."

Gavin didn't reply. His stare slid to Damaris, still plunged in the snow amid the marks. A personal effect of the king, as Aelin had used the Eye of Elena to summon the ancient queen. "At least you have taken good care of my sword." His eyes lifted to Dorian's, sharp as the blade itself. "Though I cannot say the same of my kingdom."

Dorian clenched his jaw. "I inherited a bit of a mess from my father, I'm afraid."

"You were a Prince of Adarlan long before you became its king."

Dorian's magic churned to ice, colder than the night around him. "Then consider me trying to atone for years of bad behavior."

Gavin held his gaze for a moment that stretched into eternity. A true king, that's what the man before him was. A king not only in title, but in spirit. As few had been since Gavin was laid to rest beneath the foundations of the castle he'd built along the Avery.

Dorian withstood the weight of Gavin's stare. Let the king see what remained of him, mark the pale band around his throat.

Then Gavin blinked once, the only sign of his permission to continue.

Dorian swallowed. “Where is the third key?”

Gavin stiffened. “I am forbidden to say.”

“Forbidden, or won’t?” He supposed he should be kneeling, should keep his tone respectful. How many legends about Gavin had he read as a child? How many times had he run through the castle, pretending to be the king before him?

Dorian pulled the Amulet of Orynth from his jacket, letting it sway in the bitter wind. A silent, ghostly song leaked from the gold-and-blue medallion—speaking in languages that did not exist. “Brannon Galathynius defied the gods by putting the key in here with a warning to Aelin. The least you could do is give me a direction.”

Gavin’s edges blurred, but held. Not much time. For either of them. “Brannon Galathynius was an arrogant bastard. I have seen what interfering with the gods’ plans brings about. It will not end well.”

“Your wife, not the gods, brought this about.”

Gavin bared his teeth. And though the man was long dead, Dorian’s magic flared again, readying to strike.

“My mate,” Gavin snarled, “is the cost of this. My mate, should the keys be retrieved, will vanish *forever*. Do you know what that is like, young king? To have eternity—and then have it ripped away?”

Dorian didn’t bother to reply. “You don’t wish me to find the third key because it will mean the end of Elena.”

Gavin said nothing.

Dorian let out a growl. “Countless people will *die* if the keys aren’t put back in the gate.” He shoved the Amulet of Orynth back into his jacket, and once again ignored the otherworldly hum pulsing against his bones. “You can’t be that selfish.”

Gavin remained silent, the wind shifting his dark hair. But his eyes flickered—just barely.

“Tell me where,” Dorian breathed. He had mere minutes until even Vesta came looking for him. “Tell me where the third key is.”

“Your life will be forfeit, too. If you retrieve the keys and forge the

Lock. Your soul will be claimed as well. Not one scrap of you will live on in the Afterworld.”

“There’s no one who would really care about that anyway.” He certainly didn’t. And he’d certainly deserved that sort of end, when he’d failed so many times. With all he’d done.

Gavin studied him for a long moment. Dorian held still beneath that fierce stare. A warrior who had survived the second of Erawan’s wars.

“Elena helped Aelin,” Dorian pressed, his breath curling in the space between them. “She didn’t balk from it, even knowing what it meant for her fate. And neither did Aelin, who will have neither a long life with her own mate, nor eternity with him.” *As I will not have, either.* His heart began thundering, his magic rising with it. “And yet you would. You would run from it.”

Gavin’s teeth flashed. “Erawan could be defeated without sealing the gate.”

“Tell me how, and I will find a way to do it.”

Yet Gavin fell silent again, his hands clenching at his sides.

Dorian snorted softly. “If you knew, it would have been done long ago.” Gavin shook his head, but Dorian plunged ahead. “Your friends died battling Erawan’s hordes. Help me avoid the same fate for my own. It might already be too late for some of them.” His stomach churned.

Had Chaol made it to the southern continent? Perhaps it would be better if his friend never returned, if he stayed safe in Antica. Even if Chaol would never do such a thing.

Dorian glanced toward the rocky corner he’d rounded. Not much time left.

“And what of Adarlan?” Gavin demanded. “You would leave it kingless?” The question said enough of Gavin’s opinion regarding Hollin. “This is how you would atone for years spent idling as its Crown Prince?”

Dorian took the verbal blow. It was nothing but truth, dealt by a man who had served its nameless god. “Does it really matter anymore?”

“Adarlan was my pride.”

“It is no longer worthy of it,” Dorian snapped. “It hasn’t been for a long, long time. Perhaps it deserves to fall into ruin.”

Gavin angled his head. “The words of a reckless, arrogant boy. Do you think you are the only one who has endured loss?”

“And yet your own fear of loss makes you choose one woman over the fate of the world.”

“If you had the choice—your woman or Erilea—would you have chosen any differently?”

Sorscha or the world. The question rang hollow. Some of the fire within him banked. Yet Dorian dared to say, “You’d delude yourself about the path ahead, yet you served the god of truth.” Chaol had told him of their discovery in the catacombs beneath Rifthold’s sewers this spring. The forgotten bone temple where Gavin’s deathbed confession had been written. “What does *he* have to say about Elena’s role in this?”

“The All-Seeing One does not claim kinship with those spineless creatures,” Gavin growled.

Dorian could have sworn a dusty, bone-dry wind rattled through the pass. “Then what is he?”

“Can there not be many gods, from many places? Some born of this world, some born elsewhere?”

“That’s a question to debate at another time,” Dorian ground out. “When we’re not at war.” He took a long breath. Another one. “Please,” he breathed. “Please help me save my friends. Help me make it right.”

It was all he really had left—this task.

Gavin again watched him, weighed him. Dorian withstood it. Let him read whatever truth was written on his soul.

Pain clouded the king’s face. Pain, and regret, as Gavin finally said, “The key is at Morath.”

Dorian’s mouth went dry. “Where in Morath?”

“I don’t know.” Dorian believed him. The raw dread in Gavin’s eyes confirmed it. The ancient king nodded to Damaris. “That sword is not ornamental. Let it guide you, if you cannot trust yourself.”

“It really tells the truth?”

“It was blessed by the All-Seeing One himself, after I swore myself to him.” Gavin shrugged, a half-tamed gesture. As if the man had never really left the wilds of Adarlan where he’d risen from war leader to High King. “You’ll still have to learn for yourself what is truth and what is lie.”

“But Damaris will help me find the key at Morath?” To break into Erawan’s stronghold, where all those collars were made . . .

Gavin’s mouth tightened. “I cannot say. But I will tell you this: do not venture toward Morath just yet. Until you are ready.”

“I’m ready now.” A fool’s lie. Gavin knew it, too. It was an effort not to touch his neck, the pale band forever marring his skin.

“Morath is no mere keep,” Gavin said. “It is a hell, and it is not kind to reckless young men.” Dorian stiffened, but Gavin went on, “You will know when you are truly ready. Remain at this camp, if you can convince your companions. The path will find you here.”

Gavin’s edges warped further, his face turning murky.

Dorian dared a step forward. “Am I human?”

Gavin’s sapphire eyes softened—just barely. “I’m not the person who can answer that.”

And then the king was gone.

5

The commander in the alley had claimed his latest orders had been dispatched from Doranelle.

None of them knew whether to believe him.

Sitting around a tiny fire in a dusty field on the outskirts of a ramshackle city, the blood long since washed from his hands, Lorcan Salvaterra again mulled over the logic of it.

Had they somehow overlooked the simplest option? For Maeve to have been in Doranelle this entire time, hidden from her subjects?

But that commander had been lying filth. He'd spat in Lorcan's face before they'd ended it.

The other commander they'd found today, however, after a week of hunting him down at the nearest seaport, had claimed he'd received orders from a distant kingdom they'd searched three weeks ago. In the opposite direction of Doranelle.

Lorcan toed at the dirt.

None of them had felt like speaking since the commander this afternoon had contradicted the first's claim.

"Doranelle is Maeve's stronghold," Elide said at last, her steady voice filling the heavy quiet. "Simple as it is, it would make sense for her to bring Aelin there."

Whitethorn only stared into the fire. He hadn't washed the blood from his dark gray jacket.

"It would be impossible, even for Maeve, to keep her hidden in Doranelle," Lorcan countered. "We would have heard about it by now."

He wasn't sure when he'd last spoken to the woman before him.

She hadn't balked from how he'd broken Maeve's commanders, though. She'd cringed during the worst of it, yes, but she'd listened to every word Rowan and Lorcan had wrung from them. Lorcan supposed she'd seen worse at Morath—hated that she had. Hated that her monster of an uncle still breathed.

But that hunt would come later. After they found Aelin. Or whatever remained of her.

Elide's eyes grew cold, so cold, as she said, "Maeve managed to conceal Gavriel and Fenrys from Rowan in Skull's Bay. And somehow hid and spirited away her entire fleet."

Lorcan didn't reply. Elide went on, her gaze unwavering, "Maeve knows Doranelle would be the obvious choice—the choice we'd likely reject because it's *too* simple. She anticipated that we'd believe she'd haul Aelin to the farthest reaches of Erilea, rather than right back home."

"Maeve *would* have the advantage of an easily summoned army," Gavriel added, his tattooed throat bobbing. "Which would make rescue difficult."

Lorcan refrained from telling Gavriel to shut his mouth. He hadn't failed to notice how often Gavriel went out of his way to help Elide, to talk to her. And yes, some small part of him was grateful for it, since the gods knew she wouldn't accept any sort of help from *him*.

Hellas damn him, he'd had to resort to giving his cut-up shirt to

Whitethorn and Gavriel to hand to her for her cycle. He'd threatened to skin them alive if they'd said it was his, and Elide, with her human sense of smell, hadn't scented him on the fabric.

He didn't know why he bothered. He hadn't forgotten her words that day on the beach.

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.

Her vow, her curse, whatever it had been, had held true. Every word of it.

He'd broken something. Something precious beyond measure. He'd never cared until now.

Even the severed blood oath, still gaping wide within his soul, didn't come close to the hole in his chest when he looked at her.

She'd offered him a home in Perranth knowing he'd be a dishonored male. Offered him a home with her.

But it hadn't been Maeve's sundering of the oath that had rescinded that offer. It had been a betrayal so great he didn't know how to fix it.

Where is Aelin? Where is my wife?

Whitethorn's wife—and his mate. Only this mission of theirs, this endless quest to find her, kept Lorcan from plunging into a pit from which he knew he would not emerge.

Perhaps if they found her, if there was still enough left of Aelin to salvage after Cairn's ministrations, he'd find a way to live with himself. To endure this . . . person he'd become. It might take him another five hundred years to do so.

He didn't let himself consider that Elide would be little more than dust by then. The thought alone was enough to turn the paltry dinner of stale bread and hard cheese in his stomach.

A fool—he was an immortal, stupid fool for starting down this path with her, for forgetting that even if she forgave him, her mortality beckoned.

Lorcan said at last, "It would also make sense for Maeve to go to the

Akkadians, as the commander today claimed. Maeve has long maintained ties with that kingdom.” He, Whitethorn, and Gavriel had been to war and back in that sand-blasted territory. He’d never wished to set foot in it again. “Their armies would shield her.”

For it would take an army to keep Whitethorn from reaching his mate.

He turned toward the prince, who gave no indication he’d been listening. Lorcan didn’t want to consider if Whitethorn would soon need to add a tattoo to the other side of his face.

“The commander today was much more forthcoming,” Lorcan went on to the prince he’d fought beside for so many centuries, who had been as cold-hearted a bastard as Lorcan himself until this spring. “You barely threatened him and he sang for us. The one who claimed Maeve was in Doranelle was still sneering by the end.”

“I think she’s in Doranelle,” Elide cut in. “Anneith told me to listen that day. She didn’t the other two times.”

“It’s something to consider, yes,” Lorcan said, and Elide’s eyes sparked with irritation. “I see no reason to believe the gods would be that clear.”

“Says the male who feels the touch of a god, telling him when to run or fight,” Elide snapped.

Lorcan ignored her, that truth. He hadn’t felt Hellas’s touch since the Stone Marshes. As if even the god of death was repulsed by him. “Akkadia’s border is a three-day ride from here. Its capital three days beyond that. Doranelle is over two weeks away, if we travel with little rest.”

And time was not on their side. With the Wyrdkeys, with Erawan, with the war surely unleashing itself back on Elide’s own continent, every delay came at a cost. Not to mention what each day undoubtedly brought upon the Queen of Terrasen.

Elide opened her mouth, but Lorcan cut her off. “And then, to arrive in Maeve’s stronghold exhausted and hungry . . . We won’t stand a chance. Not to mention that with the veiling she can wield, we might very well walk right past Aelin and never know it.”

Elide's nostrils flared, but she turned to Rowan. "The call is yours, Prince."

Not just a prince, not anymore. Consort to the Queen of Terrasen.

At last, Whitethorn lifted his head. As those green eyes settled on him, Lorcan withstood the weight in his gaze, the innate dominance. He'd been waiting for Rowan to claim the vengeance he deserved, waiting for that blow. Hoping for it. It had never come.

"We've come this far south," Rowan said at last, his voice low. "Better to go to Akkadia than risk venturing all the way to Doranelle to find we were wrong."

And that was that.

Elide only threw a seething glare toward Lorcan and rose, murmuring about seeing to her needs before she went to sleep. Her gait held steady as she crunched through the grass—thanks to the brace Gavriel kept around her ankle.

It should have been his magic helping her. Touching her skin.

Her steps turned distant, near-silent. She usually went farther than necessary to avoid having them hear anything. Lorcan gave her a few minutes before he stalked into the dark after her.

He found Elide already heading back, and she paused atop a little hill, barely more than a hump of dirt in the field. "What do you want?"

Lorcan kept walking, until he was at the base of the hill, and stopped. "Akkadia is the wiser choice."

"Rowan decided that, too. You must be so pleased."

She made to stomp past him, but Lorcan stepped into her path. She craned back her neck to see his face, yet he'd never felt smaller. Shorter. "I didn't push for Akkadia to spite you," he managed to say.

"I don't care."

She tried to edge around him, Lorcan easily keeping ahead of her. "I didn't . . ." The words strangled him. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Elide let out a soft, vicious laugh. "Of course you didn't. Why would you have intended for your wondrous queen to sever the blood oath?"

“I don’t care about that.” He didn’t. He’d never spoken truer words. “I only wish to make things right.”

Her lip curled. “I would be inclined to believe that if I hadn’t seen you *crawling* after Maeve on the beach.”

Lorcan blinked at the words, the hatred in them, stunned enough that he let her walk past this time. Elide didn’t so much as look back.

Not until Lorcan said, “I didn’t crawl after Maeve.”

She halted, hair swaying. Slowly, she glanced over her shoulder. Imperious and cold as the stars overhead.

“I crawled . . .” His throat bobbed. “I crawled after Aelin.”

He shut out the bloody sand, the queen’s screams, her final, pleading requests to Elide. Shut them out and said, “When Maeve severed the oath, I couldn’t move, could barely breathe.”

Such agony that Lorcan couldn’t imagine what it would be like to sever the oath on his own, without bidding. It was not the sort of pain one walked away from.

The oath could be stretched, drawn thin. That Vaughan, the last of their cadre, still undoubtedly roamed the wilds of the North in his “hunt” for Lorcan was proof enough that the blood oath’s restraints might be worked around. But to break it outright of his own will, to find some way to snap the tether, would be to embrace death.

He’d wondered during these months if he should have done just that.

Lorcan swallowed. “I tried to get to her. To Aelin. I tried to get to that box.” He added so quietly only Elide could hear it, “I promise.”

His word was his bond, the only currency he cared to trade in. He’d told her that once, during those weeks on the road. Nothing flickered in her eyes to tell him she remembered.

Elide merely strode back for the camp. Lorcan remained where he was. He had done this. Brought this upon her, upon them.

Elide reached the campfire, and Lorcan followed at last, nearing its ring of light in time to see her plop down beside Gavriel, her mouth tight.

The Lion murmured to her, “He wasn’t lying, you know.”

Lorcan clenched his jaw, making no attempt to disguise his footsteps. If Gavriel's ears were sharp enough to have heard every word of their conversation, the Lion certainly knew he was approaching. And certainly knew better than to shove his nose in their business.

Yet Lorcan still found himself scanning Elide's face, waiting for her answer.

And when she ignored both the Lion and Lorcan, he found himself wishing he hadn't spoken at all.



Prince Rowan Whitethorn Galathynius, consort, husband, and mate of the Queen of Terrasen, knew he was dreaming.

He knew it, because he could see her.

There was only darkness here. And wind. And a great, yawning chasm between them.

No bottom existed in that abyss, that crack in the world. But he could hear whispers snaking through it, down far below.

She stood with her back to him, hair blowing in a sheet of gold. Longer than he'd seen it the last time.

He tried to shift, to fly over the chasm. His body's innate magic ignored him. Locked in his Fae body, the jump too far, he could only stare toward her, breathe in her scent—jasmine, lemon verbena, and crackling embers—as it floated to him on the wind. This wind told him no secrets, had no song to sing.

It was a wind of death, of cold, of nothing.

Aelin.

He had no voice here, but he spoke her name. Threw it across the gulf between them.

Slowly, she turned to him.

It was her face—or it would be in a few years. When she Settled.

But it wasn't the slightly older features that knocked the breath from him.

It was the hand on her rounded belly.

She stared toward him, hair still flowing. Behind her, four small figures emerged.

Rowan fell to his knees.

The tallest: a girl with golden hair and pine-green eyes, solemn-faced and as proud as her mother. The boy beside her, nearly her height, smiled at him, warm and bright, his Ashryver eyes near-glowing beneath his cap of silver hair. The boy next to him, silver-haired and green-eyed, might as well have been Rowan's twin. And the smallest girl, clinging to her mother's legs . . . A fine-boned, silver-haired child, little more than a babe, her blue eyes harking back to a lineage he did not know.

Children. His children. Their children.

With another mere weeks from being born.

His family.

The family he might have, the future he might have. The most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Aelin.

Their children pressed closer to her, the eldest girl peering up to Aelin in warning.

Rowan felt it then. A lethal, mighty black wind sweeping for them.

He tried to scream. Tried to get off his knees, to find some way to them.

But the black wind roared in, ripping and tearing everything in its path.

They were still staring at him as it swept them away, too.

Until only dust and shadow remained.



Rowan jerked awake, his heart a frantic beat as his body bellowed to *move*, to *fight*.

But there was nothing and no one to fight here, in this dusty field beneath the stars.

A dream. That same dream.

He rubbed at his face, sitting up on his bedroll. The horses dozed, no

sign of distress. Gavriel kept watch in mountain-lion form just beyond the light of the fire, his eyes gleaming in the dark. Elide and Lorcan didn't stir from their heavy slumber.

Rowan scanned the position of the stars. Only a few hours until dawn.

And then to Akkadia—to that land of scrub and sand.

While Elide and Lorcan had debated where to go, he'd weighed it himself. Whether to fly to Doranelle alone and risk losing precious days in what might be a fool's search.

Had Vaughan been with them, had Vaughan been freed, he might have dispatched the warrior in his osprey form to Doranelle while they continued on to Akkadia.

Rowan again considered it. If he pushed his magic, harnessed the winds to him, the two weeks it would take to reach Doranelle could be done in days. But if he somehow did find Aelin . . . He'd waged enough battles to know he'd need Lorcan and Gavriel's strength before things were over. That he might jeopardize Aelin in trying to free her without their help. Which would mean flying *back* to them, then making the agonizingly slow trip northward.

And with Akkadia so close, the wiser choice was to search there first. In case the commander today had spoken true. And if what they learned in Akkadia led them to Doranelle, then to Doranelle they would go. Together.

Even if it went against every instinct as her mate. Her husband. Even if every day, every hour, that Aelin spent in Maeve's clutches was likely bringing her more suffering than he could stand to consider.

So they'd travel to Akkadia. Within a few days, they'd enter the flat plains, and then the distant dried hills beyond. Once the winter rains began, the plain would be green, lush—but after the scorching summer, the lands were still brown and wheat-colored, water scarce.

He'd ensure they stocked up at the next river. Enough for the horses, too. Food might be in short supply, but there was game to be found on

the plains. Scrawny rabbits and small, furred things that burrowed in the cracked earth. Precisely the sort of food Aelin would cringe to eat.

Gavriel noticed the movement at their camp and padded over, massive paws silent even on the bone-dry grass. Tawny, inquisitive eyes blinked at him.

Rowan shook his head at the unspoken question. “Get some sleep. I’ll take over.”

Gavriel angled his head in a gesture Rowan knew meant, *Are you all right?*

Strange—it was still strange to work with the Lion, with Lorcan, without the bonds of Maeve’s oath binding them to do so. To know that they were here by choice.

What it now made them, Rowan wasn’t entirely certain.

Rowan ignored Gavriel’s silent inquiry and stared into the dwindling fire. “Get some rest while you can.”

Gavriel didn’t object as he prowled to his bedroll, and plopped onto it with a feline sigh.

Rowan suppressed the twinge of guilt. He’d been pushing them hard. They hadn’t complained, hadn’t asked him to slow the grueling pace he’d set.

He’d felt nothing in the bond since that day on the beach. Nothing.

She wasn’t dead, because the bond still existed, yet . . . it was silent.

He’d puzzled over it during the long hours they’d traveled, during his hours on watch. Even the hours when he should have been sleeping.

He hadn’t felt pain in the bond that day in Eyllwe. He’d felt it when Dorian Havilliard had stabbed her in the glass castle, had felt the bond—what he’d so stupidly thought was the *carranam* bond between them—stretching to the breaking point as she’d come so, so close to death.

Yet that day on the beach, when Maeve had attacked her, then had Cairn *whip* her—

Rowan clenched his jaw hard enough to hurt, even as his stomach roiled. He glanced to Goldryn, lying beside him on the bedroll.

Gently, he set the blade before him, staring into the ruby in the center of its hilt, the stone smoldering in the firelight.

Aelin had felt the arrow he'd received during the fight with Manon at Temis's temple. Or enough of a jolt that she'd known, in that moment, that they were mates.

Yet he hadn't felt anything at all that day on the beach.

He had a feeling he knew the answer. Knew that Maeve was likely the cause of it, the damper on what was between them. She'd gone into his head to trick him into thinking Lyria was his mate, had fooled the very instincts that made him a Fae male. It wouldn't be beyond her powers to find a way to stifle what was between him and Aelin, to keep him from knowing that she'd been in such danger, and now to keep him from finding her.

But he should have known. About Aelin. Shouldn't have waited to get the wyverns and the others. Should have flown right to the beach, and not wasted those precious minutes.

Mate. His mate.

He should have known about that, too. Even if rage and grief had turned him into a miserable bastard, he should have known who she was, what she was, from the moment he'd bitten her at Mistward, unable to stop the urge to claim her. The moment her blood had landed on his tongue and it had *sung* to him, and then refused to leave him alone, its taste lingering for months.

Instead, they'd brawled. He'd let them brawl, so lost in his anger and ice. She'd been just as raging as he, and had spat such a hateful, unspeakable thing that he'd treated her like any of the males and females who had been under his command and mouthed off, but those early days still haunted him. Though Rowan knew that if he ever mentioned the brawling they'd done with a lick of shame, Aelin would curse him for a fool.

He didn't know what to do about the tattoo down his face, his neck and arm. The lie it told of his loss, and the truth it revealed of his blindness.

He'd come to love Lyria—that had been true. And the guilt of it ate him alive whenever he thought of it, but he could understand now. Why

Lyria had been so frightened of him for those initial months, why it had been so damn hard to court her, even with that mating bond, its truth unknown to Lyria as well. She had been gentle, and quiet, and kind. A different sort of strength, yes, but not what he might have chosen for himself.

He hated himself for thinking it.

Even as the rage consumed him at the thought, at what had been stolen from him. From Lyria, too. Aelin had been his, and he had been hers, from the start. Longer than that. And Maeve had thought to break them, break *her* to get what she wanted.

He wouldn't let that go unpunished. Just as he could not forget that Lyria, regardless of what truly existed between them, had been carrying their child when Maeve had sent those enemy forces to his mountain home. He would never forgive that.

I will kill you, Aelin had said when she'd heard what Maeve had done. How badly Maeve had manipulated him, shattered him—and destroyed Lyria. Elide had told him every word of the encounter, over and over. *I will kill you*.

Rowan stared into the burning heart of Goldryn's ruby.

He prayed that fire, that rage, had not broken. He knew how many days it had been, knew who Maeve had promised would oversee the torture. Knew the odds were stacked against her. He'd spent two weeks strapped on an enemy's table. Still bore the scar on his arm from one of their more creative devices.

Hurry. They had to hurry.

Rowan leaned forward, resting his brow against Goldryn's hilt. The metal was warm, as if it still held a whisper of its bearer's flame.

He had not set foot in Akkadia since that last, horrible war. Though he'd led Fae and mortal soldiers alike to victory, he'd never had any desire to see it again.

But to Akkadia they would go.

And if he found her, if he freed her . . . Rowan did not let himself think beyond that.

To the other truth that they would face, the other burden. *Tell Rowan 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.*

He refused to accept that. Would never accept that she would be the ultimate cost to end this, to save their world.

Rowan scanned the blanket of stars overhead.

While all other constellations had wheeled past, the Lord of the North remained, the immortal star between his antlers pointing the way home. To Terrasen.

Tell him he has to fight. He must save Terrasen, and remember the vows he made to me.

Time was not on their side, not with Maeve, not with the war unleashing itself back on their own continent. But he had no intention of returning without her, parting request or no, regardless of the oaths he'd sworn upon marrying her to guard and rule Terrasen.

And tell him thank you—for walking that dark path with me back to the light.

It had been his honor. From the very beginning, it had been his honor, the greatest of his immortal life.

An immortal life they would share together—somehow. He'd allow no other alternative.

Rowan silently swore it to the stars.

He could have sworn the Lord of the North flickered in response.

6

The winter winds off the rough waves had chilled Chaol Westfall from the moment he'd emerged from his quarters belowdecks. Even with his thick blue cloak, the damp cold seeped into his bones, and now, as he scanned the water, it seemed the heavy cloud cover wasn't likely to break anytime soon. Winter was creeping over the continent, as surely as Morath's legions.

The brisk dawn had revealed nothing, only the roiling seas and the stoic sailors and soldiers who had kept this ship traveling swiftly northward. Behind them, flanking them, half of the khagan's fleet followed. The other half still lingered in the southern continent as the rest of the mighty empire's armada rallied. They'd only be a few weeks behind if the weather held.

Chaol sent a prayer on the briny, icy wind that it would. For despite the size of the fleet gathered behind him, and despite the thousand ruk riders who were just taking to the skies from their roosts on the ships for morning hunts over the waves, it might still not be enough against Morath.

And they might not arrive fast enough for that army to make a difference anyway.

Three weeks of sailing had brought them little news of the host his friends had assembled and supposedly brought to Terrasen, and they'd kept far enough from the coast to avoid any enemy ships—or wyverns. But that would change today.

A delicate, warm arm looped through his, and a head of brown-gold hair leaned against his shoulder. "It's freezing out here," Yrene murmured, scowling at the wind-whipped waves.

Chaol pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "The cold builds character."

She huffed a laugh, the steam of her breath torn away by the wind. "Spoken like a man from the North."

Chaol slid his arm around her shoulders, tucking her into his side. "Am I not keeping you warm enough these days, wife?"

Yrene blushed, and elbowed him in the ribs. "Cad."

Over a month later, and he was still marveling at the word: *wife*. At the woman by his side, who had healed his fractured and weary soul.

His spine was secondary to that. He'd spent these long days on the ship practicing how he might fight—whether by horseback or with a cane or from his wheeled chair—during the times when Yrene's power became drained enough that the life-bond between them stretched thin and the injury took over once more.

His spine hadn't healed, not truly. It never would. It had been the cost of saving his life after a Valg princess had taken him to death's threshold. Yet it did not feel like a cost too steeply paid.

It had never been a burden—the chair, the injury. It would not be now.

But the other part of that bargain with the goddess who had guided Yrene her entire life, who had brought her to Antica's shores and now back to their own continent . . . that part scared the hell out of him.

If he died, Yrene went as well.

To funnel her healing power into him so he might walk when her magic was not too drained, their very lives had been entwined.

So if he fell in battle against Morath's legions . . . It would not be just his own life lost.

"You're thinking too hard." Yrene frowned up at him. "What is it?"

Chaol jerked his chin toward the ship sailing nearest their own. On its stern, two ruks, one golden and one reddish brown, stood at attention. Both were already saddled, though there was no sign of Kadara's or Salkhi's riders.

"I can't tell if you're motioning to the ruks or the fact that Nesryn and Sartaq are smart enough to remain in bed on a morning like this." *As we should be*, her golden-brown eyes added tartly.

It was Chaol's turn to nudge her with an elbow. "You're the one who woke *me* up this morning, you know." He brushed a kiss to the column of her neck, a precise reminder of how, exactly, Yrene had awoken him. And what they'd spent a good hour around dawn doing.

Just the warmed silk of her skin against his lips was enough to heat his chilled bones. "We can go back to bed, if you want," he murmured.

Yrene let out a soft, breathless sound that had his hands aching to roam along her bundled-up body. Even with time pressing upon them, hurrying them northward, he'd loved learning all her sounds—loved coaxing them from her.

But Chaol drew his head away from the crook of her neck to gesture again to the ruks. "They're heading on a scouting mission soon." He'd bet that Nesryn and the khagan's newly crowned Heir were currently buckling on weapons and layers. "We've sailed far enough north that we need information on where to moor." So they could decide where, exactly, to dock the armada and march inland as quickly as possible.

If Rifthold was still held by Erawan and the Ironteeth legions, then sailing the armada up the Avery and marching northward into Terrasen would be unwise. But the Valg king might very well have forces lying in wait at any point ahead. Not to mention Queen Maeve's fleet, which had vanished after her battle with Aelin and mercifully remained unaccounted for.

By their captain's calculations, they were just nearing the border

Fenharrow shared with Adarlan. So they needed to decide where, exactly, they were sailing *to*. As swiftly as possible.

They'd already lost precious time skirting the Dead Islands, despite the news that they once more belonged to Captain Rolfe. Word had likely already reached Morath about their journey, but there was no need to proclaim their exact location.

But their secrecy had cost them: he'd had no news on Dorian's location. Not a whisper as to whether he had gone north with Aelin and the fleet she'd gathered from several kingdoms. Chaol could only pray that Dorian had, and that his king remained safe.

Yrene studied the two ruks on the nearby ship. "How many scouts are going?"

"Just them."

Yrene's eyes flared with warning.

"Easier for smaller numbers to stay hidden." Chaol pointed to the sky. "The cloud cover today makes it ideal for scouting, too." When the worry in her face didn't abate, he added, "We will have to fight in this war at some point, Yrene." How many lives did Erawan claim for every day that they delayed?

"I know." She clasped the silver locket at her neck. He'd given it to her, had a master engraver carve the mountains and seas onto the surface. Inside, it still bore the note Aelin Galathynius had left her years ago, when his wife worked as a barmaid in a backwater port, and the queen lived as an assassin under another name. "I just . . . I know it's foolish, but I somehow didn't think it would come upon us this quickly."

He'd hardly call these weeks at sea quick, but he understood what she meant. "These last days will be the longest yet."

Yrene nestled into his side, her arm going around his waist. "I need to check on the supplies. I'll get Borte to fly me over to Hasar's ship."

Arcas, the fierce ruk rider's mount, was still dozing where he slept on the stern. "You might have to wait awhile for that."

Indeed, they'd both learned these weeks *not* to disturb either ruk

or rider while they were sleeping. Gods help them if Borte and Aelin ever met.

Yrene smiled, and lifted her hands to cup his face. Her clear eyes scanned his. “I love you,” she said softly.

Chaol lowered his brow until it rested against hers. “Tell me that when we’re knee-deep in freezing mud, will you?”

She snorted, but made no move to pull away. Neither did he.

So brow to brow and soul to soul, they stood there amid the bitter wind and lashing waves, and waited to see what the ruks might discover.



She’d forgotten how damn cold it was in the North.

Even while living amongst the ruk riders in the Tavan Mountains, Nesryn Faliq had never been this frozen through.

And winter had not fully descended.

Yet Salkhi showed no hint that the cold affected him as they rushed over cloud and sea. But that might also be because Kadara flew beside him, the golden ruk unfaltering in the bitter wind.

A soft spot—her ruk had developed a soft spot and an undimming admiration for Sartaq’s mount. Though Nesryn supposed the same could be said about her and the ruk’s rider.

Nesryn tore her eyes from the swirling gray clouds and glanced to the rider at her left.

His shorn hair had grown out—barely. Just enough to be braided back against the wind.

Sensing her attention, the Heir to the khaganate signaled, *All is well?*

Nesryn blushed despite the cold, but signaled back, her numbed fingers clumsy over the symbols. *All clear.*

A blushing schoolgirl. That’s what she became around the prince, no matter the fact that they’d been sharing a bed these weeks, or what he’d promised for their future.

To rule beside him. As the future empress of the khaganate.

It was absurd, of course. The idea of her dressed like his mother, in those sweeping, beautiful robes and grand headdresses . . . No, she was better suited to the rukhin leathers, to the weight of steel, not jewels. She'd said as much to Sartaq. Many times.

He'd laughed her off. Had said she might walk around the palace naked if she wished. What she wore or didn't wear wouldn't bother him in the least.

But it was still a ridiculous notion. One the prince seemed to think was the only course for their future. He'd staked his crown on it, had told his father that if being prince meant not being with her, then he'd walk away from the throne. The khagan had offered him the title of Heir instead.

Before they'd left, his siblings had not seemed angered by it, though they'd spent their entire lives vying to be crowned their father's Heir. Even Hasar, who sailed with them, had refrained from her usual, sharp-tongued comments. Whether Kashin, Arghun, or Duva—all still in Antica, with Kashin promised to sail with the rest of his father's forces—had changed their minds about Sartaq's appointment, Nesryn didn't know.

A flutter of activity to her right had her steering Salkhi after it.

Falkan Ennar, shape-shifter and merchant-turned-rukhin-spy, had taken a falcon's form this morning, and wielded the creature's remarkable speed to fly ahead. He must have seen something, for he now banked and swept past them, then soared inland again. *Follow*, he seemed to say.

Sailing to Terrasen was still an option, depending on what they found today along the coast. Whether Lysandra might be there, if she might still be alive, was another matter entirely.

Falkan had sworn that his fortune, his properties, would be her inheritance well before he knew that she'd survived childhood, or received his family's gifts. A strange family from the Wastes, who'd spread across the continent, his brother ending up in Adarlan long enough to sire Lysandra and abandon her mother.

But Falkan had not spoken of those desires since they'd left the Tavan

Mountains, and had instead dedicated himself to helping in whatever manner he could: scouting, mostly. But a time would soon come when they'd need his further assistance, as they had against the *kharankui* in the Dagul Fells.

Perhaps as vital as the army they'd brought with them was the information they'd gleaned there. That Maeve was not a Fae Queen at all, but a Valg imposter. An ancient Valg queen, who had infiltrated Doranelle at the dawn of time, ripping into the two sister-queens' minds and convincing them that they had an elder sister.

Perhaps the knowledge would bring about nothing in this war. But it might shift it in some way. To know that another enemy lurked at their backs. And that Maeve had fled to Erilea to escape the Valg king she'd wed, brother to two others—who in turn had sundered the Wyrdkeys from the gate, and ripped through worlds to find her.

That the three Valg kings had broken into this world only to be halted here, unaware that their prey now lurked on a throne in Doranelle, had been a strange twist of fate. Only Erawan remained here of those three kings, brother to Orcus, Maeve's husband. What would he pay to know who she truly was?

It was a question, perhaps, for others to ponder. To consider how to wield.

Falkan dropped into a swooping dive through the cloud cover, and Nesryn followed.

Cold, misty air ripped at her, but Nesryn leaned into the descent, Salkhi trailing Falkan without command. For a minute, only clouds flowed past, and then—

White cliffs rose from the gray waves, and beyond them dried grasses spread in the last of Fenharrow's northernmost plains.

Falkan soared toward the shore, checking his speed so he didn't lose them.

Kadara kept pace with them easily, and they flew in silence as the coast grew clearer.

The grasses on the plains weren't winter-dried. They'd been burned. And the trees, barren of leaves, were little more than husks.

On the horizon, plumes of smoke stained the winter sky. Too many and too great to be farmers scorching the last of the crops to fertilize the soil.

Nesryn signaled to Sartaq, *I'm taking a closer look.*

The prince signaled back, *Skim the clouds, but don't get below them.*

Nesryn nodded, and she and her ruk disappeared into the thin bottom layer of the clouds. Through occasional gaps, glimpses of the charred land flashed below.

Villages and farmsteads: gone. As if a force had swept in from the sea and razed everything in its path.

But there had been no armada camped by the shore. No, this army had been on foot.

Keeping just within the veil of clouds, Nesryn and Sartaq crossed the land.

Her heart pounded, faster and faster, with every league of seared, barren landscape they covered. No signs of an opposing army or ongoing battles.

They'd burned it for their own sick enjoyment.

Nesryn marked the land, the features she could make out. They'd indeed barely crossed over Fenharrow's borders, Adarlan a sprawl to the north.

But inland, growing closer with each league, an army marched. It stretched for miles and miles, black and writhing.

The might of Morath. Or some terrible fraction of it, sent to instill terror and destruction before the final wave.

Sartaq signaled, *A band of soldiers below.*

Nesryn peered over Salkhi's wing, the drop merciless, and beheld a small group of soldiers in dark armor wending through the trees—an offshoot of the teeming mass far ahead. As if they had been sent to hunt down any survivors.

Nesryn's jaw clenched, and she signaled back to the prince, *Let's go.*

Not back to the ships. But to the six soldiers, beginning the long return trek to their host.

Nesryn and Salkhi plummeted through the sky, Sartaq a blur on her left.

The band of soldiers didn't have the chance to shout before Nesryn and Sartaq were upon them.



Lady Yrene Westfall, formerly Yrene Towers, had counted the supplies about six times now. Every boat was full of them, yet Princess Hasar's ship, the personal escort to the Healer on High, held the most vital mix of tonics and salves. Many had been crafted prior to sailing from Antica, but Yrene and the other healers who had accompanied the army had spent long hours concocting them as best they could on board.

In the dim hold, Yrene steadied her feet against the rocking of the waves and closed the lid on the crate of salve tins, jotting down the number on the piece of paper she'd brought with her.

"The same number as two days ago," an old voice clucked from the stairs. Hafiza, the Healer on High, sat on the wooden steps, hands resting atop the heavy wool skirt covering her skinny knees. "What do you worry will happen to them, Yrene?"

Yrene flicked her braid over a shoulder. "I wanted to make sure I'd counted right."

"Again."

Yrene pocketed the piece of parchment and swept up her fur-lined cloak from where she'd tossed it over a crate. "When we're on the battlefields, keeping stock of our supplies—"

"Will be vital, yes, but also impossible. When we're on the battlefields, girl, you'll be lucky if you can even *find* one of these tins amid the chaos."

"That's what I'm trying to avoid."

The Healer on High offered her a sympathetic sigh. "People will die,

Yrene. In horrible, painful ways, they will die, and even you and I will not be able to save them.”

Yrene swallowed. “I know that.” If they did not hurry, did not make landfall soon and discover where the khagan’s army would march, how many more would perish?

The ancient woman’s knowing look didn’t fade. Always, from the first moment Yrene had laid eyes on Hafiza, she had emanated this calm, this reassurance. The thought of the Healer on High on those bloody battlefields made Yrene’s stomach churn. Even if this sort of thing was precisely why they had come, why they trained in the first place.

But that was without the matter of the Valg, squatting in human hosts like parasites. Valg who would kill them immediately if they knew what the healers planned to do.

What Yrene planned to do to any Valg who crossed her path.

“The salves are made, Yrene.” Hafiza groaned as she rose from her perch on the steps and adjusted the lapels of her thick woolen jacket—cut and embroidered in the style of the Darghan riders. A gift from the last visit the Healer on High had made to the steppes, when she’d taken Yrene along with her. “They are counted. There are no more supplies with which to make them, not until we reach land and can see what might be used there.”

Yrene clutched her cloak to her chest. “I need to be doing *something*.”

The Healer on High patted the railing. “You will, Yrene. Soon enough, you will.”

Hafiza ascended the stairs with that, leaving Yrene in the hold amid the stacks of crates.

She didn’t tell the Healer on High that she wasn’t entirely sure how much longer she’d be a help—not yet. Hadn’t whispered a word of that doubt to anyone, even Chaol.

Yrene’s hand drifted across her abdomen and lingered.

7

Morath. The final key was at Morath.

The knowledge hung over Dorian through the night, keeping him from sleep. When he did doze, he awoke with a hand at his neck, grasping for a collar that was not there.

He had to find some way to go. Some way to reach it.

Since Manon would undoubtedly be unwilling to take him. Even if she'd been the one who'd suggested he might be able to take Aelin's place to forge the Lock.

The Thirteen had barely escaped Morath—they were in no hurry to return. Not when their task in finding the Crochans had become so vital. Not when Erawan might very well sense their arrival before they neared the keep.

Gavin had claimed the path would find him here, in this camp. But finding a way to convince the Thirteen to remain, when instinct and urgency compelled them to move on . . . that might prove as impossible a task as attaining the third Wyrdkey.

Their camp stirred in the gray light of dawn, and Dorian gave up on sleep. Rising, he found Manon's bedroll packed, and the witch herself standing with Asterin and Sorrel by their mounts. It was that trio he'd have to convince to remain—somehow.

Already waiting near the mouth of the pass, the other wyverns shifted as they readied for the unbearably cold flight.

Another day, another hunt for a clan of witches who had no desire to be found. And would likely have little desire to join this war.

"We move out in five minutes." Sorrel's rocky voice carried across the camp.

Convincing would have to wait, then. Delaying it was.

Within three minutes, the fire was out and weapons were donned, bedrolls bound to saddles and needs seen to before the long day of flying.

Buckling on Damaris, Dorian aimed for Manon, the witch standing with that preternatural stillness. Beautiful, even here in the blasted snow, a shaggy goat pelt slung over her shoulders. As he neared, her eyes met his in a flash of burnt gold.

Asterin gave him a wicked grin. "Morning, Your Majesty."

Dorian inclined his head. "Where are we wandering today?" He knew the casual words didn't quite meet his eyes.

"We were just debating it," Sorrel answered, the Third's face stony but open.

Behind them, Vesta swore as the buckle on her saddle came undone. Dorian didn't dare to look, to confirm that the invisible hands of his magic had worked.

"We already searched north of here," Asterin said. "Let's keep heading south—make it to the end of the Fangs before we backtrack."

"They might not even be in the mountains," Sorrel countered. "We've hunted them in the lowlands in decades past."

Manon listened with a cool, unruffled expression. As she did every morning. Weighing their words, listening to the wind that sang to her.

Imogen's saddlebag snapped free of its tether. The witch hissed as she

dismounted to retie it. How long these little delays could keep them here, he didn't know. Not indefinitely.

"If we abandon these mountains," Asterin argued, "then we'll be far more trackable in the open lands. Both our enemies and the Crochans will spot us before we ever find them."

"It'd be warmer," Sorrel grumbled. "Eyllwe would be a hell of a lot warmer."

Apparently, even immortal witches with steel in their veins could grow tired of the leeching cold.

But to go so far south, into Eyllwe, when they were still near enough to Morath . . . Manon seemed to consider that, too. Her eyes dipped to his jacket. To the keys within, as if she could sense their pulsing whisper, their slide against his power. All that lay between Erawan and his dominion over Erilea. To bring them within a hundred miles of Morath . . . No, she'd never allow it.

Dorian kept his face blandly pleasant, a hand resting on the eye-shapedommel of Damaris. "This camp has no clues about where they went?"

He knew they hadn't the faintest notion. Knew it, but waited for their answer anyway, trying not to grip Damaris'sommel too hard.

"No," Manon said with a hint of a growl.

Yet Damaris gave no answer beyond a faint warmth in the metal. He didn't know what he'd expected: some verifying hum of power, a confirming voice in his mind.

Certainly not the unimpressive whisper of heat.

Heat for truth; likely cold for lies. But—at least Gavin had spoken true about the blade. He shouldn't have doubted it, considering the god Gavin still honored.

Holding his stare with that relentless, predatory focus, Manon gave the order to move out. Northward.

Away from Morath. Dorian opened his mouth, casting for anything to say, do, to delay this departure. Short of snapping a wyvern's wing, there was nothing—

The witches turned toward the wyverns, where Dorian would ride with one of the sentinels for the next leg of this endless hunt. But Abraxos roared, lunging for Manon with a snap of teeth.

As Manon whirled, Dorian's magic surged, already lashing at the unseen foe.

A mighty white bear had risen from the snow behind her.

Teeth flashing, it brought down its massive paw. Manon ducked, rolling to the side, and Dorian hurled out a wall of his magic—wind and ice.

The bear was blasted back, hitting the snow with an icy thump. It was instantly up again, racing for Manon. Only Manon.

Half a thought had Dorian flinging invisible hands to halt the beast. Just as it collided with his magic, snow spraying, light flashed.

He knew that light. A shifter.

But it was not Lysandra who emerged from the bear's perfectly camouflaged hide.

No, the thing that came out of the bear was made of nightmares.

A spider. A great, stygian spider, big as a horse and black as night.

Its many eyes narrowed on Manon, pincers clicking, as it hissed, "*Blackbeak.*"



The stygian spider had found her, somehow. After all these months, after the thousands of leagues Manon had traveled over sky and earth and sea, the spider from whom she'd stolen the silk to reinforce Abraxos's wings had found her.

But the spider had not anticipated the Thirteen. Or the power of the King of Adarlan.

Manon drew Wind-Cleaver as Dorian held the spider in place with his magic, the king showing little signs of strain. Powerful—he grew more powerful each day.

The Thirteen closed ranks, weapons gleaming in the blinding sun and snow, the wyverns forming a wall of leathery hides and claws behind them.

Manon stalked a few steps closer to those twitching pincers. “You’re a long way from the Ruhnns, sister.”

The spider hissed. “You were not so very hard to find, despite it.”

“You know this beast?” Asterin asked, prowling to Manon’s side.

Manon’s mouth curled in a cruel smile. “She donated the Spidersilk for Abraxos’s wings.”

The spider snarled. “You *stole* my silk, and shoved me and my weavers off a cliff—”

“How is it that you can shape-shift?” Dorian asked, still pinning the spider in place as he approached Manon’s other side, one hand gripping the hilt of his ancient sword. “The legends make no mention of that.” Curiosity indeed brightened on his face. She supposed the white line through his golden skin on his throat was proof that he’d dealt with far worse. And supposed that whatever bond lay between them was also proof he had little fear of pain or death.

A good trait for a witch, yes. But in a mortal? It would likely wind up getting him killed.

Perhaps it was not a lack of fear, but rather a lack of . . . of whatever mortals deemed vital to their souls. Ripped from him by his father. And that Valg demon.

The spider seethed. “I took two decades from a young merchant’s life in exchange for my silk. The gift of his shifting flowed through his life force—some of it, at least.” All those eyes narrowed on Manon. “*He* willingly paid the price.”

“Kill her, and be done with it,” Asterin murmured.

The spider recoiled as much as the king’s invisible leash would allow. “I had no idea our sisters had become so cowardly, if they now require magic to skewer us like pigs.”

Manon lifted Wind-Cleaver, contemplating where between the spider’s many eyes to plunge the blade. “Shall we see if you squeal like one when I do?”

“Coward,” the spider spat. “Release me, and we’ll end this the old way.”

Manon debated it. Then shrugged. “I shall keep this painless. Consider that my debt owed to you.” Sucking in a breath, Manon readied for the blow—

“Wait.” The spider breathed the word. “*Wait.*”

“From insults to pleading,” Asterin murmured. “Who is spineless now?”

The spider ignored the Second, her depthless eyes devouring Manon, then Dorian. “Do you know what moves in the South? What horrors gather?”

“Old news,” Vesta said, snorting.

“How do you think I found you?” the spider asked. Manon stilled. “So many possessions left at Morath. Your scents all over them.”

If the spider had found them here that easily, they had to move out. Now.

The spider hissed, “Shall I tell you what I spied a mere fifty miles south of here? Who I saw, Blackbeak?” Manon stiffened. “Crochans,” the spider said, then sighed deeply. Hungrily.

Manon blinked. Just once. The Thirteen had gone equally still. Asterin asked, “You’ve seen the Crochans?”

The spider’s massive head bobbed in a nod before she sighed again. “The Crochans always tasted of what I imagine summer wine to be like. What *chocolate*, as you call it, would taste like.”

“Where,” Manon demanded.

The spider named the location—vague and unfamiliar. “I will show you where,” she said. “I will guide you.”

“It could be a trap,” Sorrel said.

“It’s not,” Dorian said, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. Manon studied the clarity of his eyes, the squared shoulders. The pitiless face, yet inquisitive angle to his head. “Let’s see if her information holds true—and decide her fate afterward.”

Manon blurted, “What.” The Thirteen shifted at the denied kill.

Dorian jerked his chin to the shuddering spider. “Don’t kill her. Not yet. There’s more she might know beyond the Crochans’ whereabouts.”

The spider hissed, “I do not need a boy’s mercy—”

“It is a king’s mercy you receive,” Dorian said coldly, “and I’d suggest

being quiet long enough to receive it.” Rarely, so rarely did Manon hear that voice from him, the tone that sent a thrill through her blood and bones. A king’s voice.

But he was not her king. He was not the coven leader of the Thirteen. “We let her live and she’ll sell us to the highest bidder.”

Dorian’s sapphire eyes churned, the hand on his sword tightening. Manon tensed at that contemplative, cold stare. The hint of the calculating predator beneath the king’s handsome face. He only said to the spider, “You mastered shape-shifting in a matter of months, it seems.”



A path would find him here, Gavin had said.

A path into Morath. Not a physical road, not a course of travel, but this.

The unholy terror remained quiet for a beat before she said, “Our gifts are strange and hungry things. We feed not just on your life, but your powers, too, if you possess them. Once magic was freed, I learned to wield the abilities the shape-shifter had transferred to me.”

Damaris warmed in his hand. Truth. Every word the spider had spoken had been truth. And this . . . A way into Morath—as something else entirely. In another’s skin.

Perhaps a human slave, like Elide Lochan. Someone whose presence would go unmarked.

His raw power had lent itself to every other form of magic, able to move between flame and ice and healing. To shape-shift . . . might he learn it, too?

Dorian only asked the spider, “Do you have a name?”

“A king without his crown asks for a lowly spider’s name,” she murmured, her depthless eyes setting on him. “You cannot pronounce it in your tongue, but you may call me Cyrene.”

Manon ground her teeth. “It doesn’t matter what we call you, as you’ll be dead soon.”

But Dorian cut her a sidelong glance. “The Ruhnns are a part of my kingdom. As such, Cyrene is one of my subjects. I think that gives me the right to decide whether she lives or dies.”

“You are *both* at the mercy of my coven,” Manon snarled. “Step aside.”

Dorian gave her a slight smile. “Am I?” A wind colder than the mountain air filled the pass.

He could kill them all. Whether by choking the air from them or snapping their necks. He could kill them all, and the wyverns included. The knowledge carved out another hollow within him. Another empty spot. Had it ever troubled his father, or Aelin, to bear such power? “Bring her with us—question her more thoroughly at the next camp.”

Manon snapped, “You plan to bring *that* with us?”

In answer, the spider shifted, donning the form of a pale-skinned, dark-haired woman. Small and unremarkable, save for those unnerving black eyes. Not pretty, but with a deadly, ancient sort of allure that even a new hide couldn’t conceal. And utterly naked. She shivered, rubbing her hands down her thin arms. “Shall this form suffice to travel lightly?”

Manon ignored the spider. “And when she shifts in the night to rip us apart?”

Dorian only inclined his head, ice dancing at his fingertips. “She won’t.”

Cyrene sucked in a breath. “A rare gift of magic.” Her stare turned ravenous as she took in Dorian. “For a rare king.”

Dorian only frowned with distaste.

Manon glanced to Asterin. Her Second’s eyes were wary, her mouth a tight line. Sorrel, a few feet behind, glowered at the spider, but her hand had dropped from her sword.

The Thirteen, on some unspoken signal, peeled away to their wyverns. Only Cyrene watched them, those horrible, soulless eyes blinking every now and then as her teeth began to clack.

Manon angled her head at him. “You’re . . . different today.”

He shrugged. “If you want someone to warm your bed who cowers at your every word and obeys every command, look elsewhere.”

Her stare drifted to the pale band around his throat. “I’m still not convinced, princeling,” she hissed, “that I shouldn’t just kill her.”

“And what would it take, witchling, to convince you?” He didn’t bother to hide the sensual promise in his words, nor their edge.

A muscle flickered in Manon’s jaw. Things from legends—that’s who surrounded him. The witches, the spider . . . He might as well have been a character in one of the books he’d lent Aelin last fall. Though none of them had ever endured such a yawning pit inside them.

Scowling at her bare feet in the snow, Cyrene’s hands twitched at her sides, an echo of the pincers she’d borne moments before.

Dorian tried not to shudder. Suicide to sneak into Morath—once he learned what he needed from this thing.

The weight of Manon’s gaze fell upon him again, and Dorian didn’t balk from it. Didn’t balk from Manon’s words as she said, “If you find so little value in your existence that it compels you to trust this thing, then by all means, bring her along.” A challenge to look not toward Morath or the spider, but inward. She saw exactly what gnawed on his empty chest, if only because a similar beast gnawed on her own. “We’ll find out soon enough whether she spoke true about the Crochans.”

The spider had. Damaris had warmed in his hand when Cyrene had spoken.

And when they found the Crochans, when the Thirteen were distracted, he’d learn what he needed from the spider, too.

Manon turned to the Thirteen, the witches thrumming with impatience. “We fly now. We can reach the Crochans by nightfall.”

“And what then?” Asterin asked. The only one of them who had permission to do so.

Manon stalked for Abraxos, and Dorian followed, tossing Cyrene a spare cloak as his magic tugged her with him. “And then we make our move,” Manon hedged. And for once, she did not meet anyone’s stare. Didn’t do anything but gaze southward.

The witch was keeping secrets, too. But were hers as dire as his?

8

Blackness greeted Aelin as she rose to consciousness. Tight, contained blackness.

A shift of her elbows had them digging into the sides of the box, chains reverberating through the small space. Her bare feet could graze the end if she wriggled slightly.

She lifted her bound hands to the solid wall of iron mere inches above her face. Traced the whorls and suns embossed onto its surface. Even on the inside, Maeve had ordered them etched. So Aelin might never forget that this box had been made for her, long before she'd been born.

But—those were her own bare fingertips brushing over the cool, rough metal.

He'd taken off the iron gauntlets. Or had forgotten to put them back on after what he'd done. The way he'd held them over the open brazier, until the metal was red-hot around her hands and she was screaming, screaming—

Aelin pressed her palms flat against the metal lid and pushed.

The shattered arm, the splinters of bone jutting from her skin: gone.
Or had never been. But it had felt real.

More so than the other memories that pressed in, demanding she acknowledge them. Accept them.

Aelin shoved her palms against the iron, muscles straining.

It didn't so much as shift.

She tried again. That she had the strength to do so was thanks to the other *services* Maeve's healers provided: keeping her muscles from atrophying while she lay here.

A soft whine echoed into the box. A warning.

Aelin lowered her hands just as the lock grated and the door groaned open.

Cairn's footsteps were faster this time. Urgent.

"Relieve yourself in the hall and wait by this door," he snapped at Fenrys.

Aelin braced herself as those steps halted. A grunt and hiss of metal, and firelight poured in. She blinked against it, but kept still.

They'd anchored her irons into the box itself. She'd learned that the hard way.

Cairn didn't say anything as he unfastened the chains from their anchor.

The most dangerous time for him, right before he moved her to the anchors on the altar. Even with her feet and hands bound, he took no chances.

He didn't today, either, despite not bothering with the gauntlets.

Perhaps they'd melted away over that brazier, along with her skin.

Cairn yanked her upright as half a dozen guards silently appeared in the doorway. Their faces held no horror at what had been done to her.

She'd seen these males before. On a bloodied bit of beach.

"Varik," Cairn said, and one of the guards stepped forward, Fenrys now at his side by the door, the wolf as tall as a pony. Varik's sword rested against Fenrys's throat.

Cairn gripped her chains, tugging her against his chest as they walked toward the guards, the wolf. "You make a move, and he dies."

Aelin didn't tell him she wasn't entirely sure she had the strength to try anything, let alone run.

Heaviness settled into her.

She didn't fight the black sack shoved over her head as they passed through the arched doorway. Didn't fight as they walked down that hall, though she counted the steps and turns.

She didn't care if Cairn was smart enough to add in a few extras to disorient her. She counted them anyway. Listened to the rush of the river, growing louder with each turn, the rising mist that chilled her exposed skin, slicking the stones beneath her feet.

Then open air. She couldn't see it, but it grazed damp fingers over her skin, whispering of the gaping openness of the world.

Run. Now.

The words were a distant murmur.

She had no doubt the guard's blade remained at Fenrys's throat. That it would spill blood. Maeve's order of restraint bound Fenrys too well—along with that strange gift of his to leap between short distances, as if he were moving from one room to another.

She'd long since lost hope he'd find some way to use it, to bear them away from here. She doubted he'd miraculously reclaim the ability, should the guard's sword strike.

Yet if she heeded that voice, if she ran, was the cost of his life worth her own?

"You're debating it, aren't you," Cairn hissed in her ear. She could feel his smile even through the sack blinding her. "If the wolf's life is a fair cost to get away." A lover's laugh. "Try it. See how far you get. We've a few minutes of walking left."

She ignored him. Ignored that voice whispering to *run, run, run*.

Step after step, they walked. Her legs shook with the effort.

It told her enough about how long she had been here. How long she had not been able to properly move, even with the healers' ministrations to keep her muscles from wasting away.

Cairn led her up a winding staircase that had her rasping for breath, the mist fading away to cool night air. Sweet smells. Flowers.

Flowers still existed. In this world, this hell, flowers bloomed somewhere.

The water's bellow faded behind them to a blessedly dull rushing, soon replaced by merry trickling ahead. Fountains. Cold, smooth tiles bit into her feet, and through the hood flickering fire cast golden ripples. Lanterns.

The air tightened, grew still. A courtyard, perhaps.

Lightning pulsed down her thighs, her calves, warning her to slow, to rest.

Then open air yawned again wide around her, the water once more roaring.

Cairn halted, yanking her against his towering body, his various weapons digging into her chains, her skin. The other guards' clothes rustled as they stopped, too. Fenrys's claws clicked on stone, the sound no doubt meant to signal her that he remained nearby.

She realized why he'd feel the need to do so as a female voice that was both young and old, amused and soulless, purred, "Remove the hood, Cairn."

It vanished, and Aelin needed only a few blinks to take everything in. She had been here before.

Had been on this broad veranda overlooking a mighty river and waterfalls, had walked through the ancient stone city she knew loomed at her back.

Had stood in this very spot, facing the dark-haired queen lounging on a stone throne atop the dais, mist wreathing the air around her, a white owl perched on the back of her seat.

Only one wolf lay sprawled at her feet this time. Black as night, black as the queen's eyes, which settled on Aelin, narrowing with pleasure.

Maeve seemed content to let Aelin look. Let her take it in.

Maeve's deep purple gown glistened like the mists behind her, its long train draped over the few steps of the dais. Pooling toward—

Aelin beheld what glittered at the base of those steps and went still.

Maeve's red lips curved into a smile as she waved an ivory hand. "If you will, Cairn."

The male didn't hesitate as he hauled Aelin toward what lay on the ground.

Shattered glass, piled and arranged in a neat circle.

He halted just outside, the first of the thick shards an inch from Aelin's bare toes.

Maeve motioned to the black wolf at her feet and he rose, plucking up something from the throne's broad arm before trotting to Cairn.

"I thought your rank should at least be acknowledged," Maeve said, that spider's smile never faltering as Aelin beheld what the wolf offered to the guard beside Cairn. "Put it on her," the queen ordered.

A crown, ancient and glimmering, shone in the guard's hands. Crafted of silver and pearl, fashioned into upswept wings that met in its peaked center, encircled with spikes of pure diamond, it shimmered like the moon's rays had been captured within as the guard set it upon Aelin's head.

A terrible, surprising weight, the cool metal digging into her scalp. Far heavier than it looked, as if it had a core of solid iron.

A different sort of shackle. It always had been.

Aelin reined in the urge to recoil, to shake the thing from her head.

"Mab's crown," Maeve said. "Your crown, by blood and birthright. Her true Heir."

Aelin ignored the words. Stared toward the circle of glass shards.

"Oh, that," Maeve said, noting her attention. "I think you know how this shall go, Aelin of the Wildfire."

Aelin said nothing.

Maeve gave a nod.

Cairn shoved her forward, right into the glass.

Her bare feet sliced open, new skin shrieking as it ripped.

She inhaled sharply through her teeth, swallowing her cry just as Cairn pushed her onto her knees.