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SARAH J.
MAAS

EMPIRE
OF
STORMS

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY



EMPIRE
OF
STORMS

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

BOOKS BY SARAH J. MAAS

The Throne of Glass series

Throne of Glass

Crown of Midnight

Heir of Fire

Queen of Shadows

Empire of Storms

•

The Assassin's Blade

•

The Throne of Glass Coloring Book



A Court of Thorns and Roses

A Court of Mist and Fury

EMPIRE OF STORMS

— A *Throne of Glass* NOVEL —

SARAH J. MAAS



BLOOMSBURY

NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

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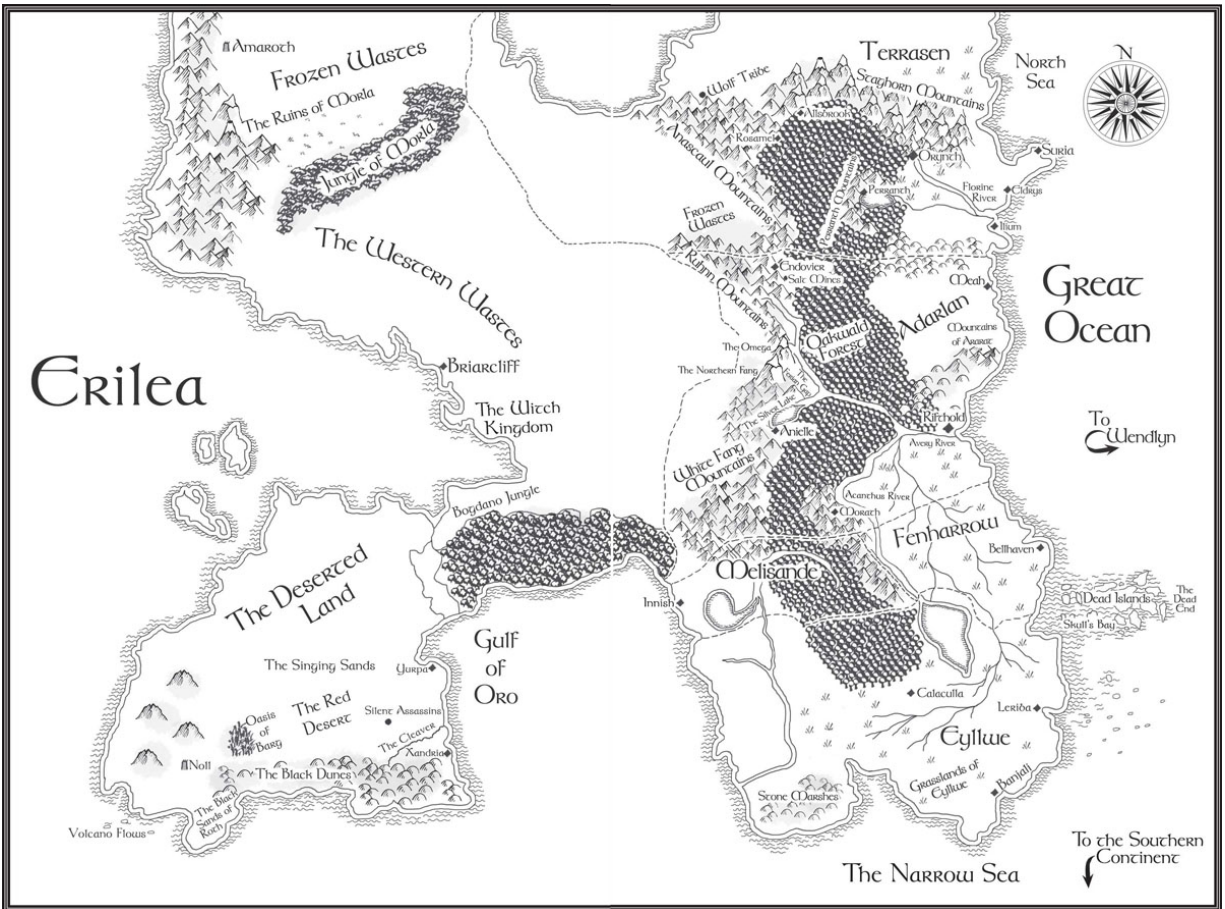
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



NIGHTFALL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And she had led them all here.

Gavin did not answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We'll all die one day anyway."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her friends.

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

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

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

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

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

He had arrived at last.

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

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

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

Erawan had come.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.” An order and a plea.

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

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

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

Gavin only stared at her.

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

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

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

She nodded. “I know.”

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

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

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

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

His lips tightened, his sapphire eyes wide.

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

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

Agony rippled across his features. But he nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART ONE

The Fire-Bringer

CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

Right before Kaltain turned Morath into a smoldering ruin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and moss over the dead stream. Perfect.

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

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

The beating of mighty, leathery wings. Wyverns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Someone was following her.

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

She wished the witch had taught her how to kill.



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

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

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

Twin witch armies now stood poised to take the continent: one in Morath, one in the Ferian Gap. The Yellowlegs knew nothing of what power Duke Perrington wielded—knew nothing of what Lorcan hunted: the other two Wyrdkeys, the siblings to the one he wore on a long chain around his neck. Three slivers of stone cleaved from an unholy Wyrdgate, each key capable of tremendous and terrible power. And when all three Wyrdkeys were united ... they could open that gate between worlds. Destroy those worlds—or summon their armies. And far, far worse.

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

Her sisters had been hunting him since.

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

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

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

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

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

She knew he was out there, somehow.

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

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

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

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

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

Human. Definitely human, but—

He knew that scent.

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

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

her weaknesses.

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

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

And so Lorcan began his hunt.