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SARAH J.
MAAS



KINGDOM
OF
ASH

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY



KINGDOM
OF
ASH

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

BOOKS BY SARAH J. MAAS

The Throne of Glass series

The Assassin's Blade
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The Throne of Glass Coloring Book



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A Court of Thorns and Roses Coloring Book



KINGDOM
OF
ASH

— A *Throne of Glass* NOVEL —

SARAH J. MAAS

BLOOMSBURY

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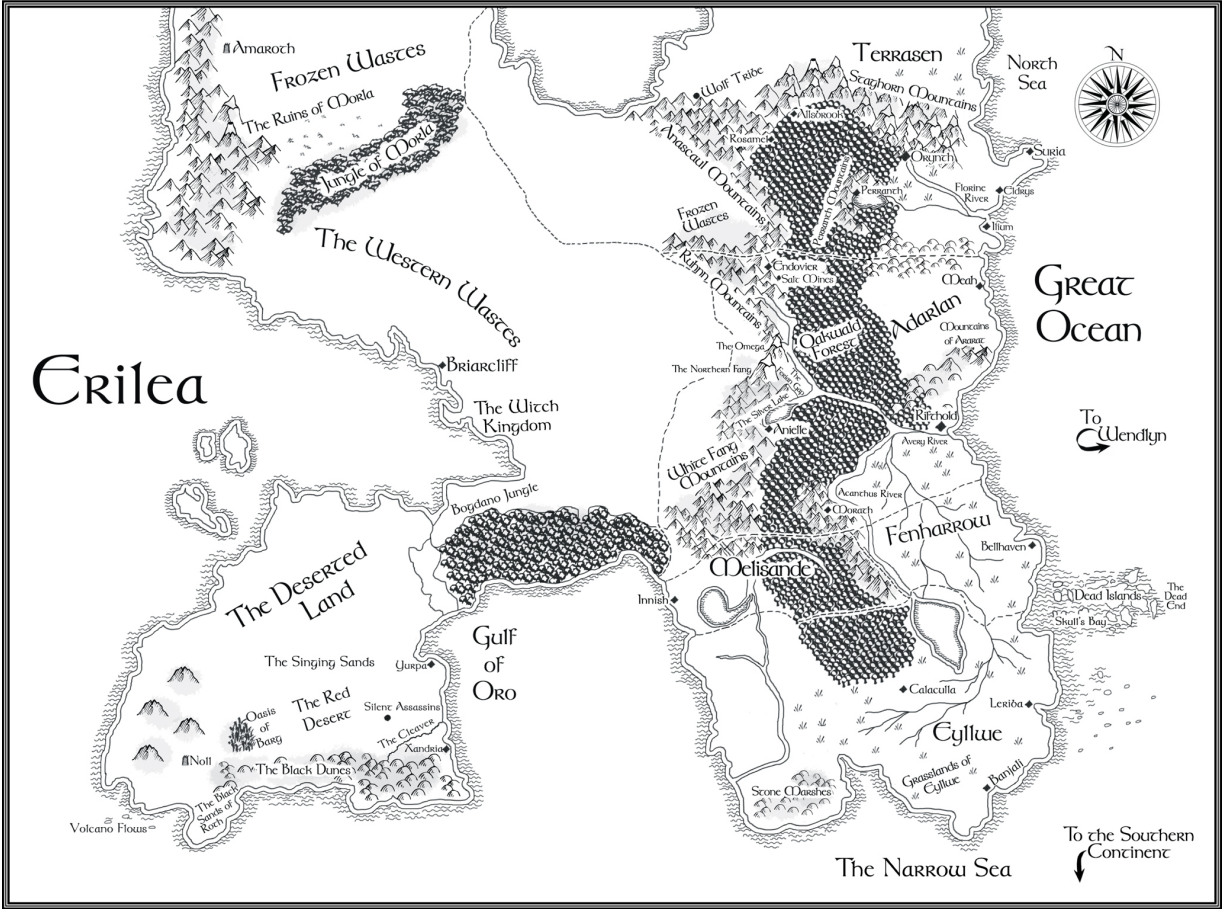
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A Better World
Acknowledgments



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

CHAPTER 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 Stagorns: 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 Stagorns 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 Havilliard 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 Caraverre, 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 Terrasen’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?”