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# CRILEA



North Sea

Great Ocean

To Wendlyn

To the Southern Continent

The Narrow Sea



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## **PART ONE**

### *The Fire-Bringer*

## 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.

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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

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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.

## 2

The patter of rain trickling through the leaves and low-lying mists of Oakwald Forest nearly drowned out the gurgle of the swollen stream cutting between the bumps and hollows.

Crouched beside the brook, empty skins forgotten on the mossy bank, Aelin Ashryver Galathynius extended a scarred hand over the rushing water and let the song of the early-morning storm wash over her.

The groaning of breaking thunderheads and the sear of answering lightning had been a violent, frenzied beat since the hour before dawn—now spreading farther apart, calming their fury, as Aelin soothed her own burning core of magic.

She breathed in the chill mists and fresh rain, dragging them deep into her lungs. Her magic guttered in answer, as if yawning good morning and tumbling back to sleep.

Indeed, around the camp just within view, her companions still slept, protected from the storm by an invisible shield of Rowan's making, and

warmed from the northern chill that persisted even in the height of summer by a merry ruby flame that she'd kept burning all night. It was the flame that had been the difficult thing to work around—how to keep it crackling while also summoning the small gift of water her mother had given her.

Aelin flexed her fingers over the stream.

Across the brook, atop a mossy boulder tucked into the arms of a gnarled oak, a pair of tiny bone-white fingers flexed and cracked, a mirror to her own movements.

Aelin smiled and said so quietly it was barely audible over the stream and rain, "If you have any pointers, friend, I'd love to hear them."

The spindly fingers darted back over the crest of the rock—which, like so many in these woods, had been carved with symbols and whorls.

The Little Folk had been tracking them since they crossed the border into Terrasen. *Escorting*, Aedion had insisted whenever they spotted large, depthless eyes blinking from a tangle of brambles or peering through a cluster of leaves atop one of Oakwald's famed trees. They hadn't come close enough for Aelin to even get a solid look at them.

But they'd left small gifts just outside the border of Rowan's nightly shields, somehow deposited without alerting whichever of them was on watch.

One morning, it had been a crown of forest violets. Aelin had given it to Evangeline, who had worn the crown on her red-gold head until it fell apart. The next morning, two crowns waited: one for Aelin, and a smaller one for the scarred girl. Another day, the Little Folk left a replica of Rowan's hawk form, crafted from gathered sparrow feathers, acorns, and beetle husks. Her Fae Prince had smiled a bit when he'd found it—and carried it in his saddlebag since.

Aelin herself smiled at the memory. Though knowing the Little Folk were following their every step, listening and watching, had made things . . . difficult. Not in any real way that mattered, but slipping off

into the trees with Rowan was certainly less romantic knowing they had an audience. Especially whenever Aedion and Lysandra got so sick of their silent, heated glances that the two made up flimsy excuses to get Aelin and Rowan out of sight and scent for a while: the lady had dropped her nonexistent handkerchief on the nonexistent path far behind; they needed more logs for a fire that did not require wood to burn.

And as for her current audience . . .

Aelin splayed her fingers over the stream, letting her heart become as still as a sun-warmed forest pool, letting her mind shake free of its normal boundaries.

A ribbon of water fluttered up from the stream, gray and clear, and she wended it through her spread fingers as if she were threading a loom.

She tilted her wrist, admiring the way she could see her skin through the water, letting it slip down her hand and curl about her wrist. She said to the faerie watching from the other side of the boulder, "Not much to report to your companions, is it?"

Soggy leaves crunched behind her, and Aelin knew it was only because Rowan wanted her to hear his approach. "Careful, or they'll leave something wet and cold in your bedroll next time."

Aelin made herself release the water into the stream before she looked over a shoulder. "Do you think they take requests? Because I'd hand over my kingdom for a hot bath right about now."

Rowan's eyes danced as she eased to her feet. She lowered the shield she'd put around herself to keep dry—the steam off the invisible flame blending with the mist around them. The Fae Prince lifted a brow. "Should I be concerned that you're so chatty this early in the morning?"

She rolled her eyes and turned toward the rock where the faerie had been monitoring her shoddy attempts to master water. But only rain-slick leaves and snaking mist remained.

Strong hands slid over her waist, tugging her into his warmth, as Rowan's lips grazed her neck, right under her ear.

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Aelin arched back into him while his mouth roved across her throat, heating mist-chilled skin. "Good morning to you," she breathed.

Rowan's responding grumble set her toes curling.

They hadn't dared stop at an inn, even after crossing into Terrasen three days ago, not when there were still so many enemy eyes fixed on the roads and taprooms. Not when there were still streaming lines of Adarlanian soldiers finally marching out of her gods-damned territory—thanks to Dorian's decrees.

Especially when those soldiers might very well march right back here, might choose to ally themselves with the monster squatting down in Morath rather than their true king.

"If you want to take a bath so badly," Rowan murmured against her neck, "I spotted a pool about a quarter mile back. You could heat it—for both of us."

She ran her nails down the back of his hands, up his forearms. "I'd boil all the fish and frogs inside it. I doubt it'd be very pleasant then."

"At least we'd have breakfast prepared."

She laughed under her breath, and Rowan's canines scratched the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. Aelin dug her fingers into the powerful muscles of his forearms, savoring the strength there. "The lords won't be here until sundown. We've got time." Her words were breathless, barely more than a whisper.

Upon crossing the border, Aedion had sent messages to the few lords he trusted, coordinating the meeting that was to happen today—in this clearing, which Aedion himself had used for covert rebel meetings these long years.

They'd arrived early to scope out the land, the pitfalls and advantages. Not a trace of any humans lingered: Aedion and the Bane had always ensured any evidence was wiped away from unfriendly eyes. Her cousin and his legendary legion had already done so much to ensure the safety of

Terrasen this past decade. But they were still taking no risks, even with lords who had once been her uncle's banner men.

"Tempting as it might be," Rowan said, nipping her ear in a way that made it hard to think, "I need to be on my way in an hour." To scout the land ahead for any threats. Featherlight kisses brushed over her jaw, her cheek. "And what I said still holds. I'm not taking you against a tree the first time."

"It wouldn't be against a tree—it'd be in a pool." A dark laugh against her now-burning skin. It was an effort to keep from taking one of his hands and guiding it up to her breasts, to beg him to touch, take, taste. "You know, I'm starting to think you're a sadist."

"Trust me, I don't find it easy, either." He tugged her a bit harder against him, letting her feel the evidence pushing with impressive demand against her backside. She nearly groaned at that, too.

Then Rowan pulled away, and she frowned at the loss of his warmth, at the loss of those hands and that body and that mouth. She turned, finding his pine-green eyes pinned on her, and a thrill sparked through her blood brighter than any magic.

But he said, "Why *are* you so coherent this early?"

She stuck out her tongue. "I took over the watch for Aedion, since Lysandra and Fleetfoot were snoring loud enough to wake the dead." Rowan's mouth twitched upward, but Aelin shrugged. "I couldn't sleep anyway."

His jaw tightened as he glanced to where the amulet was hidden beneath her shirt and the dark leather jacket atop it. "Is the Wyrdkey bothering you?"

"No, it's not that." She'd taken to wearing the amulet after Evangeline had looted through her saddlebags and donned the necklace. They'd only discovered it because the child had returned from washing herself with the Amulet of Orynth proudly displayed over her traveling clothes. Thank the gods they'd been deep in Oakwald at the time, but—Aelin wasn't taking any other chances.

Especially since Lorcan still believed he had the real thing.

They hadn't heard from the immortal warrior since he'd left Rifthold, and Aelin often wondered how far south he'd gotten—if he'd yet realized he bore a fake Wyrdkey within an equally fake Amulet of Orynth. If he'd discovered where the other two had been hidden by the King of Adarlan and Duke Perrington.

Not Perrington—Erawan.

A chill snaked down her back, as if the shadow of Morath had taken form behind her and run a clawed finger along her spine.

"It's just . . . this meeting," Aelin said, waving a hand. "Should we have done it in Orynth? Out in the woods like this just seems so . . . cloak-and-dagger."

Rowan's eyes again drifted toward the northern horizon. At least another week lay between them and the city—the once-glorious heart of her kingdom. Of this continent. And when they got there, it would be an endless stream of councils and preparations and decisions that only she could make. This meeting Aedion had arranged would just be the start of it.

"Better to go into the city with established allies than to enter not knowing what you might find," Rowan said at last. He gave her a wry smile and aimed a pointed look at Goldryn, sheathed across her back, and the various knives strapped to her. "And besides: I thought 'cloak-and-dagger' was your middle name."

She offered him a vulgar gesture in return.

Aedion had been so careful with his messages while setting up the meeting—had selected this spot far from any possible casualties or spying eyes. And even though he trusted the lords, whom he'd familiarized her with these past weeks, Aedion still hadn't informed them how many traveled in their party—what their talents were. Just in case.

No matter that Aelin was the bearer of a weapon capable of wiping out this entire valley, along with the gray Staghorn Mountains watching over it. And that was just her magic.

Rowan played with a strand of her hair—grown almost to her breasts again. "You're worried because Erawan hasn't made a move yet."

She sucked on a tooth. "What is he waiting for? Are we fools for expecting an invitation to march on him? Or is he letting us gather our strength, letting *me* return with Aedion to get the Bane and raise a larger army around it, only so he can savor our utter despair when we fail?"

Rowan's fingers stilled in her hair. "You heard Aedion's messenger. That blast took out a good chunk of Morath. He might be rebuilding himself."

"No one has claimed that blast as their doing. I don't trust it."

"You trust nothing."

She met his eyes. "I trust you."

Rowan brushed a finger along her cheek. The rain turned heavy again, its soft patter the only sound for miles.

Aelin lifted onto her toes. She felt Rowan's eyes on her the whole time, felt his body go still with predatory focus, as she kissed the corner of his mouth, the bow of his lips, the other corner.

Soft, taunting kisses. Designed to see which one of them yielded first.

Rowan did.

With a sharp intake of breath, he gripped her hips, tugging her against him as he slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss until her knees threatened to buckle. His tongue brushed hers—lazy, deft strokes that told her precisely what he was capable of doing elsewhere.

Embers sparked in her blood, and the moss beneath them hissed as rain turned to steam.

Aelin broke the kiss, breathing ragged, satisfied to find Rowan's own chest rising and falling in an uneven rhythm. So new—this thing between them was still so new, so . . . raw. Utterly consuming. The desire was only the start of it.

Rowan made her magic sing. And maybe that was the *carranam* bond