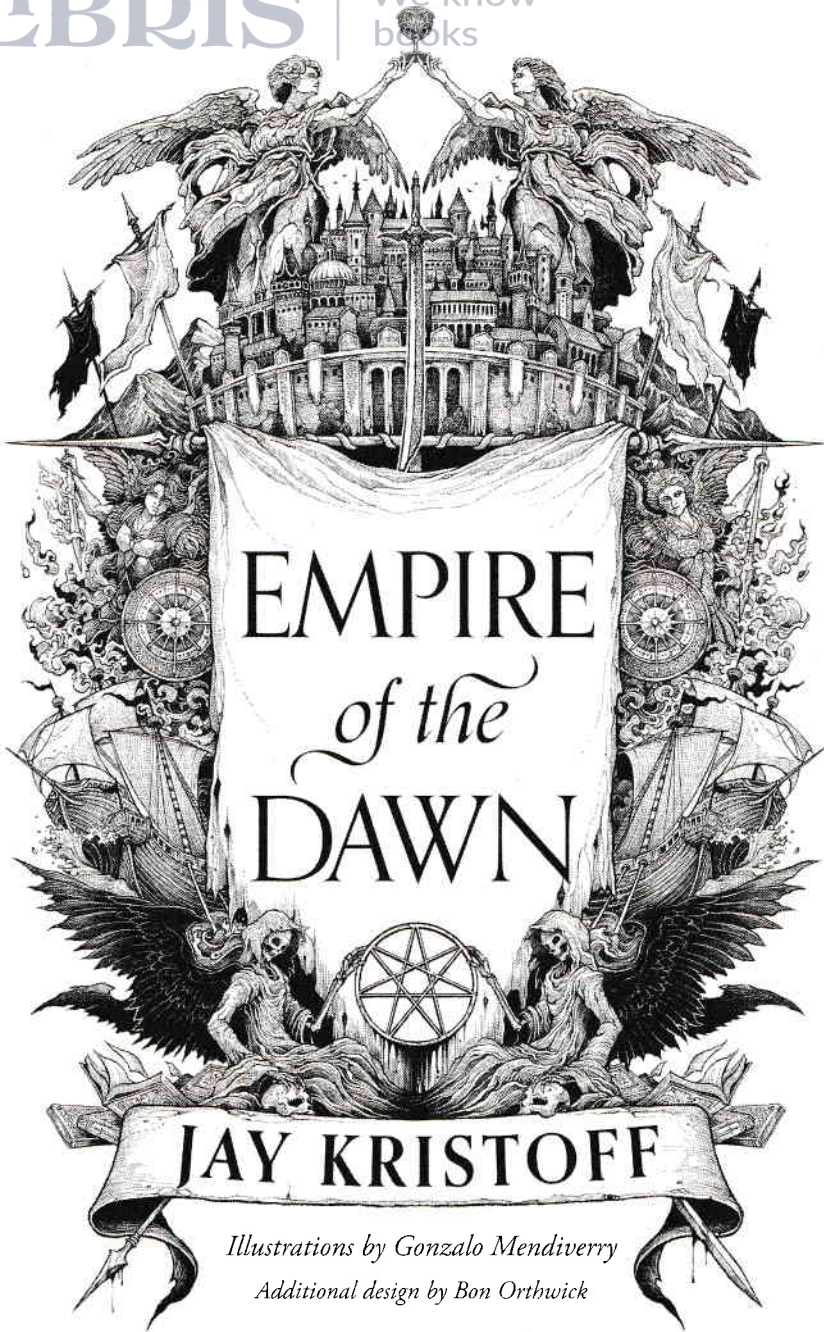


LBRIS

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Illustrations by Gonzalo Mendiverry

Additional design by Bon Orthwick


HARPER
Voyager

SUNSET

♦ I ♦

IT WAS THE twenty-seventh year of daysdeath in the realm of the Forever King, and his murderer was still waiting to die.

The killer stood again at a thin window, watching his finale arrive. Tattooed hands were clasped at his back, stained with blood, both fresh and merely remembered. His room stood high in the reaches of his lonely tower, battered by a tempest just as sleepless as he. His door remained locked like a secret. His heart, locked tighter still.

From his vantage, the killer studied the procession below, his eyes the grey of the storm above. The figures wending towards the gatehouse were few, antlike; tiny black spots crawling on a plain of frost. But their coming was a portent, shaking the stones beneath him like no earthly thunder could, and their arrival told him that his departure was not too distant now. That this game, like all good things, must soon see its end.

The château was awake, the deathless who called it home arrayed in their finest to impress the newcomers. Thrall soldiers in dark steel stood the battlements, twin wolves and twin moons emblazoned on black cloaks. All along the ringed ramparts, burning braziers licked the freezing air, tongues brighter than the failing sunset. Within the innermost bailey, among her bloodless court, an Empress of Wolves and Men awaited her guests. A pale historian lurked beside her, chocolat eyes drifting to the killer overhead.

The sky above was dark as sin.

The horizon, red as his lady's lips the last time he kissed her.

The killer ran one thumb across his fingers, the letters inked below his knuckles.

'Patience,' he whispered.

◆ II ◆

THE GATES OF Sul Adair opened with the song of splintering ice, the groan of frozen hinges.

The Marquis Jean-François, historian of the Blood Chastain, stood at his Empress's right hand, watching the great portcullis rise like an executioner's blade. Three more had opened in sequence before it, clearing the path through four baileys, encircled by mighty ramparts of black ironstone. Gears rimed with ice crackled and moaned, razor-sharp winds whipping flurries of grey snow up the long, cobbled road to the outer walls. Watching the tiny figures approaching from its far end, the Marquis felt his lower lip curl.

Frost clung to his lashes, golden hair whipping about his face in the bitterbleak gale. His flailing curls were an annoyance – he'd have commanded his majordomo, Meline, to bind them back properly had he the time, but he'd been roused before sunset by one of his mother's minions, pounding on his boudoir door as if all hell had come calling. Jean-François had lifted his head from his bloody feast between Meline's thighs and snarled at the interruption, but with sparse apology, a thrall boy in his Empress's livery had informed the Marquis his presence was required in the bailey *immediately*. Jean-François barely had time to wipe his chin before the bells began to sing, signalling the approach of guests most honoured. Slipping on some dark silken finery and an embroidered frockcoat mantled with hawk feathers, he'd hurried downstairs, cursing the lack of decorum in it all.

Not for two more nights were these carrion eaters set to darken their doorstep, but thankfully, their early arrival had not thrown Margot's court into *much* disarray. By the time the visitors reached the outer walls, a small army of courtiers had assembled upon the grand steps leading to the château, gathered around their eldest in a wall of crimson silk and black fur and pale brocade. Empress Margot herself was arrayed as befitting royalty; a stunning gown of golden velvet and midnight lace, her greying hair bound back in bejewelled braids, her four great black wolves sat in a row before her. She'd been a slight woman of middle age when she Became, but long centuries had bestowed Margot Chastain a grandeur that dwarfed all around her. Her flesh

was purest marble, her face a bloodless mask, eyes black as hell watching the portcullis finally fall still.

Standing dutifully at Margot's side in the falling snow, the Marquis studied the dozen figures trudging beneath the gatehouse arches, borne by a motley of thrallled horses. Reaching out to the beasts with the gifts of his blood, Jean-François could sense their exhaustion – whipped through seven sleepless days and nights to get here.

Glancing sidelong at his maker, Jean-François idly wondered if his Empress had bid her servants wash her feet this morning.

They were about to be kissed by royalty, after all.

Bringing his steaming horse to a halt, the lead rider climbed from his steed, snow crunching as his boots struck the flagstones. A greatsword near twice the length of a man was strapped to his saddle, the hilt adorned with roaring bears. His companions dismounted as the leader drew back his hood, cold gaze roaming the thralls on the snow-clad battlements, the storm raging above. He was tall, nowhere near burly, though glancing at that terrible blade, Jean-François was under no illusions about the strength coiled within his wiry frame. His hair was long and snow grey, his beard likesame, encrusted with frost and whipping in the wind. His ice-pale skin had the leathered look of a man who'd sailed long years beneath a harsh sun before he Became; the faded tattoo of a bare-breasted maid with a fish's tail wound up one side of his throat. And as he spoke, Jean-François caught the glint of golden fangs in the vampire's upper gums.

'Margot Chastain of the Blood Chastain, eldest of her line, and Priori of the Shepherds.' The vampire inclined his head slightly. 'I bid you greetings, cousin.'

'Draigann Dyvok of the Blood Dyvok, firstborn broodchild of Lilidh, and now Priori of the Untamed.' Margot smiled, almost imperceptible. 'We bid thee welcome, cousin.'

'We thank you kindly for your invitation, Lady Chastain, and for y—'
'Empress.'

The vampire named Draigann faltered as Margot spoke.

'*Empress* Chastain,' she said, her smile warming slightly.

Thunder rocked the skies as the Draigann glanced to the kith he'd arrived with. They were a small band, as bedraggled as the steeds they'd ridden in on. A youngish brute clad in a travel-stained cloak of children's skin – from the recountings of the silversaint and his sister, Jean-François knew this one's name was Rémille. A pretty woman in the robes of a holy sister; a burly thug with a moustache long enough to hang its owner; a wizened crone, toothless save for the canines gleaming in her black gums; a scattering of half a dozen

others. The sigil of bears rampant on broken shields adorned their gear – a belt buckle here, a pommel there. These were escapees from the attack on Dún Maergenn, the remnants of a shattered court, the last dregs of a line once mighty.

Pitiful, Jean-François mused.

The Draigann's gaze returned to Margot.

'Your reputation precedes you, cousin. And I am aware we are guests in your home, so I choose my words carefully. But though Margot is Empress of both wolves and men, me and mine are neither. We are the blood of mighty Tolyev. The Blood of Dyvok. We are Untamed, Lady Chastain. And we kneel for none.'

Displeasure rippled through the assembled courtiers, narrowed eyes and muttered threats. But Margot herself only smiled the gentler.

'Time shall tell.'

She reached out to the closest wolf; a hulking brute named Fealty. The beast lifted its chin, revelling as the Empress's claws skimmed its fur. Her gaze never left the Draigann.

'We were cleaved to our heart to hear of thy mother's murder. Great fondness was harboured in our breast for Contessa Lilidh.' Margot's smile dimmed slightly. 'Her brother Nikita, less so. Yet still, the destruction of a Priori is no trifling affair. Our condolences, cousin, on the loss of thine eldest, the fall of thy capital, the ruin of thy line.'

The Dyvok rankled, but none were foolish enough to rise to Margot's bait.

'We thank you for your kindness, cousin.' The Draigann clenched his jaw. 'And for opportunity to mete justice upon he who so stained himself with the blood of Dyvok.'

Margot blinked, black eyes gleaming. 'Justice?'

'In your invitation . . . you made mention you had captured the dog who slew mighty Tolyev at Crimson Glade. Who led the assault on Dún Maergenn. Who murdered a *score* of my kin, my own *dam* among them.' The Draigann glanced around the deathless courtiers, a hint of gravel in his tone as his golden fangs flashed. 'Do you have the keeping of Gabriel de León? Or have we trekked to this forsaken hovel for naught?'

'You forget yourself, Dyvok.'

Jean-François's eyes drifted to the speaker, gathered among the kith at Margot's left hand. A woman, tall and buxom, long blonde hair woven into a gold-threaded wreath around her brow, the velvet of her gown spilling to the floor in a crimson flood. She held a tiny ball of pale fluff beneath one arm – a dog barely worthy of the name.

'This *forsaken hovel* is the most impregnable fortress in all Elidaen,' she

declared. 'And this Empress you refuse to kneel before is the eldest kith yet walking this earth. If not allegiance, at the very least you owe great Margot respect—'

'Viscontessa.'

Margot's gaze had not left the Dyvok, but her cool tone cut the younger vampire's lecture in half. Jean-François smiled as the Viscontessa bowed, falling silent as tombs.

'We hath the Black Lion's keeping,' Empress Margot said, smiling once more at the Draigann. 'Thanks to the ingenuity of our talkative granddaughter, Nicolette, here. But not for some tawdry display of mortal justice hath we invited thee to our home.'

The Draigann scowled, but held his tongue.

'These wars betwixt our kind and the sheep hath drained this empire white as yesteryear snows,' Margot continued. 'Upstart bloodlords carve petty fiefdoms and feud for the dregs that remain. Foulbloods maraud unchecked, swelling their rotting number further every night. And he who styled himself our Forever King is slain. But if our great houses do not come to accord, soon we shall *all* join Fabiën on the shores of hell. And I for one harbour no burning desire to suffer my due judgement in the Houses of the Fallen.'

The Draigann clenched his jaw.

'Nor I, Lady Chastain.'

'Then be at peace, cousin. Only a century or two hath ye walked this earth with deathless feet, but thy dam was ancien true, and know ye full well, the sanctity of Courtesy offered by the eldest. Thee and thine are welcome here in Sul Adair. Honoured guests, one and all. We have news 'pon the winds that Kariim the Spider draws near, and the Iron Maiden shall arrive by Damesday. Once the Priori of Ilon and Voss are seated beside thee at mine table, we shall all of us decide how this new night shall be ruled.'

Margot smiled, cold as winter's kiss.

'And who shall kneel for whom.'

The Draigann pressed his lips thin behind his frozen beard, but with a swift glance to his motley court, this beggar king slowly nodded.

'You speak truth, cousin. Not misplaced are rumours of the wisdom of the Priori Chastain. But on one matter, I must regretfully dissent.'

'Prithee, cool thy blood, Priori. Thy vengeance shall have its slaking, doubt it not. Slender entertainment doth the Black Lion of Lorson yet provide, but soon shall Gabriel de León's cup runneth dry. We shall allow thee witness as his throat is cut in the end.'

'I thank you, Lady.' The Draigann actually dropped into a decent sort of bow at that, his courtiers following likewise. 'And well will we savour the

punishment due. Yet not on the matter of de León do I dissent, but your estimation of your other guests.'

Margot blinked. 'Indeed?'

'Perhaps these storms have grounded your eyes, cousin. But they've not slowed the Ironhearts. If you expected their coming by weekend, you underestimated their resolve to see their maker avenged. We caught sight of them on the road here, and I tell you truly: Kestrel and her court will be knocking on your door well before Damesday.'

Margot's face remained impassive, and she nodded once, as if news of the Ironhearts' early arrival held no more heft than a feather. But throwing a hateful glance to the tempest above, Jean-François knew full well the weight of this revelation.

'Come ye,' Margot said, gesturing to the ironbound doors of the grand keep behind. 'Parched ye must be after so long a journey. Enter and be welcome, children of Dyvok. And know no fear. The Blood Chastain shall see thy thirsts *well* satisfied.'

The Untamed cohort bowed once more, Margot's courtiers parting like black water, thralls scurrying forth into the falling snows to take charge of their beasts. But the Dyvok themselves waited politely – not wholly an unruly mob, these sons and daughters of Lilidh. The Draigann inclined his head, gesturing to the keep.

'After you, great Lady.'

'So rare to find a gentleman in these sunless days. But ye must forgive us, Priori. Matters of state demand our brief attentions. Certain are we, thou art familiar with how heavy the mantle of eldest can weigh. Even 'pon shoulders as impressive as thine own.'

The Draigann nodded. 'I will await your pleasure within, Lady.'

The Empress smiled, dark as poison. 'Not long.'

Margot glanced to the once-talkative Viscontessa at her left hand.

'Show our honoured guests to the dining hall, Nicolette. We shall join thee presently.'

With a curt nod and a swish of red velvet, Nicolette climbed the snow-clad stairs, leading the Dyvok through towering doors wrought with warring angels. Margot's courtiers followed, a procession of venomous whispers and eyes like knives. Jean-François remained at his Empress's side, eyes roaming the keep's façade; the magnificent tree-tall windows of stained glass, the flying buttresses, the spires piercing the dusk-deep skies.

Though he'd dwelled here for a decade, the Marquis was still slightly awed at the scale of this place. Viscontessa Nicolette had spoken true: Sul Adair – *Black Tower* in the tongue of Sūdhaem – was the realm's mightiest fortress

now great Augustin was fallen. At least a dozen different armies had broken like cheap pottery upon these walls over the centuries, and the mighty mont upon which it was built was known as Akhiv Dha Th'oth — *the Mountain that Drinks Soldiers*. Once this fortress had guarded the goldglass mines of Lashaame and Raa, the grand cityport of Asheve, but now the—

‘For what dost thou wait, child?’

Jean-François blinked, turning to his Empress. Margot was stood in the falling snow, a full head shorter than he, yet somehow towering above. Kith could not choose which of their victims were granted the Gift, and Jean-François knew many in Sul Adair whispered his dark mother spoiled her youngest son. But gazing at him now, Margot’s presence was a chill bleaker than any storm, her eyes as dark as the oubliettes beneath this keep. The fires struggling upon the battlements threw long shadows on the ground, and as Margot stared at him, they seemed to deepen, to *bend*, the dark between them rippling and warping as her gaze drank him like a desert drinks the rain.

‘Mother? What—’

‘We are blinded in this tempest. But if this fool just spake truth, Kestrel Voss may be but a few turnings of the moons from our doorstep. Though this Draigann is a beggar in a king’s guise, no paupered orphan be the Iron Maiden. Kestrel is eldest of the Ironhearts, battle-bloodied, and a true Prince of Forever. And she is *close*, my son.’

Jean-François glanced to the tower window above, jaw clenched. He could sense storm-grey eyes upon him, remember those fingers around his throat, hand drifting up to his cravat and caressing the still-healing wounds beneath. Thunder cracked the skies.

‘De León,’ he said.

‘And his sister. There is more to their tale, Marquis. The army of the Moonsthroner, the fall of Dún Maergenn, the discovery of dread Maryn beneath, all these songs have they sung. But the red snows of Augustin, the Battle of Charbourg, the fate of the Grail . . .’

‘They are *liars*, Mother,’ the Marquis hissed. ‘Since the first night we spoke, De León has repeated his claim: *The cup is broken. The Grail is gone*. He *wept* testifying to Lachance’s murder at Lilidh’s hands. Yet not one hour later, his sister confessed the Grail soon awoke in the tomb where they buried her, alive and well.’

‘Then her *breaking* must be yet to come in his tale.’ Margot lowered her chin, black gaze boring into his. ‘And I would have the rest of it.’

‘The Last Silversaint and Last Liathe are serpents, filled with the same rank venom. Their fondness for deceit is equalled only by their hatred for each other.’

‘Then *use* it, Jean-François.’

The shadows warped further, a faint screaming rising behind the roar of the wind as the Empress Chastain took one step closer to her youngest.

‘The Iron Maiden and the Spider draw near. The haste of their approach speaketh volumes to the prick of their desire. But still, we need *advantage* if we expect them to bend the knee, and de León and his wretched sister hold it. For what purpose did the Forever King covet Dior Lachance, Jean-François? Why did Fabién seek the child alive? And if indeed she *was* the key to ending the death of days, how is it the sun still wears its ashen mantle, and dawn yet dons cold midnight’s crown?’

Margot fell silent, black gaze pressing on the Marquis until it was all he could do not to fall to his knees. But as thunder tore the skies, she reached out, too swift for mortal eyes to follow, hand resting upon his flawless cheek.

‘De León still feels a kinship with thee, my pale beauty. His pride in himself and his hatred for his sibling shall provide the rest. *Use* him, Jean-François. Promise him the earth. Only claim me that which I need. The truths at the root of the Grail’s fall, the failure of the Faithless, the breaking of our Lion’s wretched heart.’

The Empress pressed gentle upon the Marquis’s skin. But a chill trickled down his spine as he felt her fingers skimming his wounded throat.

‘But do it *swiftly*, child.’

Jean-François swallowed, nodding slowly.

‘As my Empress commands.’

Margot’s hand fell like dead leaves. Thunder in her wake, she ascended the stairs, her wolves trailing behind, leaving the Marquis in the falling snow alone.

Jean-François’s hand drifted up to his neck.

His eyes to the figure watching above.

And jaw set, the vampire stalked inside.

✦ III ✦

HE WAS HALFWAY up the tower stair when the bloodscent struck him.

Not an uncommon perfume in a keep full of monsters, granted, and so keen were Jean-François's senses, he could smell the feast now underway in the dining hall. Beneath the thunder outside and Margot's choir within, the murmur of silken voices could be heard, coupled with snatches of distant laughter. The copper-sweet bouquet of fresh blood had tugged the historian downwards even as he'd climbed, and he'd glanced over his shoulder to Meline, ever three steps behind. He saw his majordomo's lips curl at remembrance of his interrupted feast earlier this afternoon. Despite the cadre of thrallswords following, the Marquis was entertaining the notion of just rucking up Meline's skirts and finishing what he'd started right there on the stairwell when he smelled it drifting from the tower above.

Iron-bright.

Lead-heavy.

'Dario,' Jean-François realized.

Meline bristled at the name, her lips pressed into a pout. Jean-François could still recall his majordomo's jealousy as the lad was presented to him by Viscontessa Nicolette. Dario hadn't been a gift freely given, of course – Empress Margot had been displeased at the Viscontessa's conduct during her recent expedition in Talhost, and Nicolette expected a kind word in Margot's ear in exchange for the boy. But Nicolette was Jean-François's niece by blood, and Dario was so beautiful, the Marquis hadn't been able to summon will to refuse. Yet now, he wondered how much of his newest thrall might be left.

Lions were rarely merciful to their victims.

Soundless as cats, the historian climbed the remaining stairs and opened the cell door. A figure stood at the window, hands at his back, smeared with fresh blood. Looking to the fireplace, Jean-François saw the source, crumpled on the hearthstone. A handsome beau in his fresh twenties, dark hair splayed across ashen cheeks, blood congealing on the twin punctures in his throat.

Jean-François drifted to the hearth, standing over the fallen thrall. The