The Machiavellian Political Influence in Epic Fantasy

Dissertation
The Machiavellian Political Influence in Epic Fantasy

Novel
The Councillor

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University.
This thesis is my own original work.

Signed: Elizabeth Beaton
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Abstract

The creative component of the thesis presents an excerpt (Chapters 1-7) of an original novel, *The Councillor*, with the remainder of the novel (Chapters 8-15) attached as the Appendix to the thesis. *The Councillor* is an epic fantasy novel set in the imaginary land of Elira. It explores the experiences of the protagonist, Lysande Prior, the palace scholar. After the death of Sarelin Brey, the realm’s monarch, Lysande is forced to attempt to select the best candidate for the crown from amongst the city-rulers: Luca Fontaine, Cassia Ahl-Hafir, Dante Dalgēreth and Jale Montignac. Whilst facing this task she is helped by her advisor, Henrey Derset, and her maid Litany. *The Councillor* differs from epic fantasy novels with a patriarchal, Western-centric setting in that its story is set in a gender-equalised and multicultural world. Female and non-white characters are part of mainstream political culture. The plot follows Lysande’s journey into the political machinations of the realm of Elira, and her attempts to combat the traitor working for the White Queen, an “elemental” rebel. Elementals, in *The Councillor*, are magical people who can move one of the elements, and they are stigmatised and persecuted in the story’s world.

The dissertation component of the thesis contextualises the creative work by identifying and analysing the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy politics, and discussing how *The Councillor* both falls into and departs from this trend. This dissertation uses the Machiavellian political realism of Shakespearean drama as a framework for understanding the themes and stylistic elements of the representation of Machiavellian politics in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire (ASOIAF)* series and in my own novel. The influences of Shakespeare and Machiavelli on my work are therefore discussed in the context of the genre. The structure proceeds from setting up this framework to an analysis of my own work: Chapter One identifies three features of Shakespeare’s presentation of Machiavellian politics as important elements that will inform discussion of both *ASOIAF* and *The Councillor*. The chapter examines examples from the *Henriad* to illustrate these features. Chapter Two discusses Martin's *ASOIAF* as a series containing Shakespearean elements within the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy, analysing the parallels between
ASOIAF and the Machiavellian politics of Shakespeare’s plays. The third chapter explores *The Councillor*’s similarities and differences to existing work in this trend, discussing the politics of the narrative and expanding on aspects of gender, race and sexuality in the novel. The aims of this study are to identify and analyse the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy, to explore its significance for new writers, to discuss the representation of politics in Shakespeare’s plays and to draw parallels with the Shakespearean echoes in Martin’s work, and to locate *The Councillor* within this context: as a part of the Machiavellian shift and also as different to existing work.
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Creative component of the thesis:

Chapters 1-7 of *The Councillor*, a novel

(Please see Appendix for Chapters 8-15 of *The Councillor*, the remainder of the novel)
Chapter One

Blood crusted the queen’s robe, giving off scents of salt and metal. Lysande Prior placed her fingers below the stain and peeled back the silk to reveal three pink gashes. One of the cuts had sliced so deep that she glimpsed the top of intestine.

“I’m surprised you’re still breathing,” she murmured.

“The old poets wrote that Axium Forest can leave you breathless.” Sarelin Brey sat up in bed, straightening against the pillows.

Peering down, Lysande ran her hand over the edge of the wound. Infection, in its early stages, and the injury to the tissue could not be underestimated. She flipped through the pages of the manuals and treatises in her head, trying to keep her forehead from creasing.

“Three jabs on the Mud Field. I lived through that mess of a battle. And look at me now, lying back on a silk pillow.” Sarelin shook her head, and chuckled. “Killed by a big cat. My father’s laughing his backside off, somewhere in the halls below.”

Lysande’s fingers traced the edges of the gashes, while she counted the inches. She tapped the skin beside the wounds.

Calculating, she shifted to the edge of her seat, leaning towards the bed. The enormous frame was hung with fabric, its posts glittering with emeralds the size of dove’s eggs, and as Lysande caught her reflection in the facet of a stone, she saw a frown spreading across her face.

She fought to recompose her features. The lines melted slowly, vanishing. As she looked up at the bed, she met Sarelin’s gaze, and though a pang struck her, she did not attempt to look away.

“You’re not going anywhere yet,” she said. “Not even to the capital.”

Sarelin sank back, and Lysande studied her friend for a moment. Forty-six years had not dulled the fire in the queen’s blue eyes, and Lysande observed that the lines etched on her brow seemed only to increase her majesty; she had always thought that Sarelin had a certain grace in her features, with her blonde hair reaching just to her shoulders. But she could truly see it now, with the queen ignoring the wound. As Sarelin shifted against the pillow, the set of long-handled Axium daggers next to her clinked.
Lysande recognised that clink. The sound that had accompanied her in the
target range or in the corridors of the palace seemed louder in the tent.

After inspecting Sarelin’s gashes for another minute, she pulled the robe back
across.

“Well?”

“There is a considerable amount of laceration. I would not say it is
congealed, yet; but the movement of blood – ”

“Don’t speak scholar to me.”

“It grieves me to say that the wound is severe.” Lysande swallowed. “It may
grow worse, if the physician does not hurry.”

“Then we’d better hope the little prat rides fast.” Sarelin slapped Lysande on
the shoulder. “I’ve got plenty of physic in here. The real kind. Bring me the Axium
red.”

Lysande took in the expectant look on Sarelin’s face, and held back a reply.

You can’t refuse a monarch of Elira, a voice intoned, inside her head. She
recognised it as the clipped voice of the headmistress, calling across the orphanage
floorboards. How about a very stubborn friend? Lysande replied.

Rising, she walked across the tent. The table was groaning with strings of
purple water-berries and pale starfruit, fine cheeses from Rhime, cobs of bread in
every shape and size, and dishes of butter, honey and jam, placed around the platters
in little rings. She opened a bottle of wine with a practised twist and filled a goblet
with the rich burgundy. Dozens of candles cast a glow from the tiered stands behind
the food, lighting up her fiery locks as she turned.

“That’s more like it. Pour yourself one, too, and bring us some of that
bread… the soft loaf, not that northern stuff. I don’t want to die too early.”

Lysande smiled as she handed the goblet over, but her smile faded as she saw
Sarelin glance down at the pocket of her robe. The queen’s fingers reached into the
cloth. It was hard to say what she was expecting, but as Sarelin drew out an
envelope, sealed with a nub of emerald wax with the shape of the crown pressed into
it, something knotted and re-knotted in her chest.

Her legs moved before she knew it. She made it half-way across the tent
when the flaps swung open, and a little dried prune of a man strode in, his robe
swirling around his legs. “Rossio Iffizi, Your Majesty. I am a senior physician in
Rhime.”
Lysande saw the queen’s eyes narrow as she took in the cobra sewn on the man’s robe, reared up in red thread.

The wizened gentleman dropped to one knee, bowing. Already, one of Sarelin’s hands was fingering the end of a hilt. Lysande’s feet unlocked themselves from their positions. She knew that Sarelin would not skewer a physician – at least not without real cause – and she retreated before Sarelin could stop her, hurrying to the tent-flaps.

“If I might examine your wound, Your Majesty,” she heard Iffizi venture, in what he must have thought was a pacifying tone.

The sky was glowering outside, and the guards had scattered. A woman was pacing by a blackfoot tree on the right, running a hand through her hair; a few other soldiers were looking over a map, but most had dispersed to the fires where they were speaking in low tones. The only sound to rise above the susurration was a kind of chant, coming from a group over by the horses. Two rows of guards knelt holding talismans, the stone carvings placed upwards in their palms, to show the designs of Crudelis, Vindicatus, Cognita and Fortituda.

*Prayers will comfort where they can. Let them pray.* Lysande thought, setting off. She wove between tents with silver and emerald banners, horses tethered in rows, and women and men in Axium armour, picturing the envelope in Sarelin’s hands all the while. She only vaguely heard the muttering as she moved through the camp. A line of damaged trees bordered the clearing – some trunks were scored with marks from blades, and some infused with a dark fire that had twisted the wood into curious shapes – and she moved through them into the forest.

It was hard to say how long she walked for. The crunch of leaves under her boots made a steady rhythm, and the faint calls of starlings followed her as she looped back to the clearing. A thick tree stood near the border of the camp, and once she had checked that she was alone, she sank down against it, the wet bark dampening her neck.

Something wet was pushing at the back of her eyes, too. She held it back – held it with all her strength, straining – and listened to her breathing: in and out. In and out. There was nothing but that pattern for a moment.

She thought of the inkwell on the table; the envelope in Sarelin’s hand. The gashes in the queen’s side. When she was sure that tears were not going to break free, she got up and walked on.
She wandered, drifting, until she reached a group of women and men sitting just inside the clearing. The guards turned and eyed her, but once they had glanced at her flecked doublet and trousers, they rose in a scraping of greaves.

“It’s the scholar,” one woman muttered. “Let her through.”

A big shape hulked on the grass behind them. It was not the panther she had come to see, however. Looking past the guards, her eyes locked on a bull-like man with a crown on his breastplate.

“How’s Her Majesty?” he called.

“Ailing, but her spirits are high.” Lysande rose, and brushed off her trousers. “She seemed ready to slaughter the physician.”

Captain Raden Hartleigh wove through his officers and stopped a few feet from Lysande. He pulled her into a hug. When they had embraced long enough for Lysande to draw several deep breaths, he released her, and clapped a hand on her arm. “Did she say anything about the Councillor?”

The envelope in the queen’s fingers hovered in Lysande’s mind. “I forgot to ask.”

“For someone who spends her days with a quill and ink, you can be thick as northern ice.”

“I’ve more pressing things to ponder than politics.”

“The affairs of the crown don’t interest you in the slightest?”

“No. As you know perfectly well. Any book of poetry is worth a thousand deeds by people in robes. At any measure, you can ask her yourself.”

Raden’s expression was half-way between frustration and amusement. “As if she’d listen to anyone but you. Bring the Prince of Rhime or the First Sword of Valderos to her tent, and she’d still ask for the palace scholar.” He snorted. “Well, the silver-bloods in Axium court will hound her about it soon enough.”

Lysande remembered the scent of the blood on Sarelin’s robe. She looked over at the watching guards. She considered, for a moment, asking Raden to go into the tent and deal with the envelope himself, but did not speak.

“Listen to me, Lysande. You know what this means. You know it’s any city’s game, if she dies. We don’t want the Lyrians bribing the court, or the Rhimese doing gods-know-what to get the crown. You have to get Her Majesty to hurry up and name someone. If only she’d had an heir...”
He trailed off, and the same feeling pressed at the back of Lysande’s eyes again. She repressed it. It was disloyal to Sarelin, somehow, to imagine an Elira without her. The city-rulers were people she had never met, in places she had never seen. Only Sarelin was real: her smile and her warm hands, and the sound of her laugh, booming through a corridor.

“Let’s head back,” she said.

Raden gave an order, and they watched the guards truss, tie, and bundle up the big cat. The animal that had clawed the queen was almost six feet long, and bulging with muscles, and two of the largest women had to heft it together. Lysande walked with Raden through the tents, past muttering groups; there were few words discernible through the crackle of the campfires, but she heard “succession” more than once. Sinking into thought, she did not really see the ground in front of her.

The sight of Rossio Iffizi by the royal tent jerked her to alertness. The little man was clutching a physician’s knife, his forearms streaked with scarlet.

“Queen Sarelin is very ill,” he said, bowing to Raden. “I have done everything I can, but unless we give her a dose of vivantica –”

“That is a strong draught!”

“It is the only remedy that can help her, now.” Iffizi wiped a hand across his forehead, leaving a smear. “Even that may not be enough, captain; the wound is pernicious.”

Raden looked at Lysande. Over fourteen years of friendship, they had perfected a silent exchange – he asked, and she answered – and it took her only a moment to nod, now.

“Go on, then.” He inclined his head. “Give her the dose.”

“I cannot give what I do not have.” Iffizi spread his arms. “It can only be made from the viva-flower, and the bushes are in Axium Palace, in the queen’s private garden.”

In minutes, the officers were rounding up the guards and readying the queen’s carriage; they had to move without any delay, to the chagrin of the attendants who had to explain this to Sarelin. The royal patient was still well enough to curse as she was helped through the carriage door.

Lysande had ridden home with Sarelin from a hunt before, and she remembered the queen slowing her mare to a walk, waving to the crowds in the capital, her daggers held aloft and her armour shining in the pale Axium sun. The
commoners would not watch their queen approach atop her horse today. *They will have no such spectacle for a while,* she thought, watching the guards draw the curtains closed on the carriage.

Steel clanked on steel as arm-guards were fitted and sheaths fastened. Women and men packed up bread and bottles; the horses were led from the trees where they were tethered, a chorus of whinnying drifting through the camp. Rossio Iffizi was offered a bigger horse, but he insisted on riding his own Rhimese mount, a fine, glossy animal, draped in the black and red of his city.

Lysande hesitated outside the carriage. She put her fist to the door. But as she readied herself to knock, something dragged her hand back. She let it fall to her side, and walked away into the camp.

"Have a bite of something from our supplies, Lysande," Raden said, bringing his horse up beside her. "You can follow with a guard when you’ve rested."

"And you can dunk your head in a privy. I’m coming with you and Sarelin."

He said nothing, but after a moment, nodded.

They set off at a gallop, the northern breeze rushing past their cheeks. The women and men of the Axium Guards were seasoned riders, and Lysande had to use her heels to urge her horse to stay beside Raden’s. For a while, she wished that she had the power of an elemental, to summon the wind and surge on. She could feel the stares upon her back – stares born of a firm belief about who was fit to mix with royalty – but she was not about to turn and face them. *Give a vine water,* Sarelin always said, and you let it grow.

Trees slipped past them on either side. The forest road followed the greatest patch of greenery in the north until it reached its end, weaving a dark thread through a blanket of jade. The path wound alongside plants from an earlier time: weeping ferns; tufts of nightjade moss and sprigs of paradisiac; northern heather that clung to rocks, and blackfoot trees that threw shadows across their path, towering over them. Lysande loved to imagine the dragons walking in Axium Forest, before the Conquest, in the old days when elementals ruled the land. On nights when she could not sleep, she had conjured up visions of the great beasts wandering freely amongst the trees, their scales glittering as they passed from grove to grove. She could not picture them today. She could only see Sarelin’s face.

The riding-party passed under branches and over brambles, into the middle of the woodland, where a string of signs pointed them to a lake, a clearing, and a place
for prayer: each turning was labelled with a sign, even in the heart of the forest. *Everything in its place,* Lysande thought, echoing the Axium motto, as a guard on her right pointed at her and whispered to his friend.

The wind had been lashing them for some time when they entered the lower reach, and Raden pushed ahead with her through the miles of trees. The earth crumbled like dark cake beneath their horses' hooves.

"I need you to sit with Her Majesty." Raden glanced across at her. "As soon as they've seen to her, and she's awake."

"Of course." Lysande nodded.

"Not just to see how she fares. You have to get the name of —"

A thump shuddered through the ground. They wheeled their horses around. Lysande followed Raden through the ranks of guards, through the sounds of neighing and raised voices, over to the carriage. She drew in her breath. The blackfoot branch had fallen diagonally, and it crossed the road, its wood tooth-white at the end where it had broken from the tree. It lay not half a foot behind the carriage.

The horse sprawled on the ground lay almost in symmetry with the branch, a dark body stretched out like a log — except for the neck, which made an odd angle where it had snapped. The rider stood beside it. He was cupping the fingers of his right hand.

"We must've ridden out with luck beside us." A woman came over to Raden. "Just the animal. A little bit closer, captain, and Her Majesty…"

Lysande gripped her reins tightly, looking at the horse's bent neck.

She heard the guards debating whether it could have been an elemental attacking them, sending a wind to fell the branch; she saw the guards shifting the wood from the ground; and she watched two riders streak off into the forest, steel disappearing into green and brown. She could not find the words to speak. Raden was over by the carriage door, saying something to Sarelin. When the scouts returned again, she heard the cries of "nothing", and dismounted.

"Give me a few minutes, while we're stopped," she said, as Raden returned. He paused, but took the reins of her horse.

She knocked, this time, and when she heard Sarelin's reply, she climbed into the carriage. Although there was scarcely room, several of the pillows had been arranged on the carriage seat; the queen had placed her daggers on one of them. Her blankets had been pushed to one side. Spots of red sat high in her cheeks.
“Finally. She returns,” Sarelin said.

“Thought I’d see if you’d passed out from the pain.”

“Impossible. I thought it might’ve been an elemental, out there. Some magical scum trying to knock my head off might have livened up the ride.”

There was a bottle in the box on the carriage floor, Lysande knew, as well as two goblets packed carefully inside. She could still remember her hurried trip to the cellar, before the hunt left. Her only surprise was that the wine had not yet been opened. Sarelin had always preferred a natural remedy to medicine.

She lifted the box up onto the seat – there was an Axium banner draped over it, and she laid it on the queen’s knees, before unpacking the wine.

“A fourth-century vintage. I chose it myself,” she said, handing Sarelin a goblet and watching as the queen glugged the liquid down.

“Ugh.” Sarelin made a face. “You’re sure it’s not swill?”

“It is from your third chest... so it’s not exactly the elixir of youth; but I wouldn’t go that far.”

Sarelin’s strong hands raised the vessel, and the wine sloshed up to the rim. Lysande waited until it had disappeared. Minutes ago, she had been looking down at a branch, flung across the road, and a horse flattened at the neck.

There was a pause. They both waited. Outside, the guards called orders to each other.

“I believe you had an envelope,” Lysande said.

Sarelin took the paper out of her pocket again. “We both choke on sentiment. Let’s get this over with. You know I’ve always looked on you as a daughter, Lys.”

“A poor substitute, I fear.” Lysande tried to ignore the thrum of talk outside.

“You’ve more brains than any daughter I could have produced. You have a way with words and numbers I never had... and the dedication to go over pointless old Valderran laws, even when your queen would rather hunt bears.”

“Well, you’re a pig-headed pupil, that’s for sure.”

Sarelin grinned. It was the same grin Lysande had basked in when they were playing at cards in the royal suite, or practicing their aims in the target range. “Now, you see, that is the reason I trust you. You have the ability to speak the truth. Never underestimate the value of the truth in this realm full of snakes and whisperers, Lys.”

Another pause. Lysande watched Sarelin run a finger over the edge of the envelope. “I know what Captain Hartleigh’s been whispering in your ear,” the queen
said at last. "He’s been bleating about what the commoners are saying. And as much as I hate to admit it, he’s got a point. The realm needs a Councillor, in case the gods aren’t kind to me. Can’t give this to one of my advisors. They’d open the damned thing and scrawl their own name inside. So I’m entrusting it to you."

Although she heard the words, Lysande still did not reach out for the envelope. Her body had tensed further. Her mind was churning up memories of afternoons poring over heavy law-books, bringing back every mention of a Councillor: she was in the library again, surrounded by pillars of leather-bound tomes, with one of Sarelin’s long scrolls in front of her, copying out the procedure for Elira’s succession. Her quill traced the phrase, “in the event of the death of an heir-less monarch…”

_No_, she thought. _She can’t be inked into some history._

“Why must _I_ keep the envelope?” she said.

“Because you’re the cleverest person I know.” Sarelin leaned forward and dangled it in front of her. “Apart from myself, of course: and I can’t arrange things when I’m boots-up in the crypt. If anything should happen to me, you will open this envelope and read my choice of Councillor. See that the doves get sent. The Councillor would need to call a meeting of the city-rulers within a week, at the latest.”

“I don’t want to think about your death!”

“Then you are hopelessly behind the times. All of Elira is thinking about my death right now, Lys. Valderos, and Lyria, and Pyrrha and Rhime: the cities are thinking about my death. Our neighbours, too: the Bastillonians, and the Chiamese, if they still watch us from behind that wall. And any remnants of the White Army hobbling around out there on the other side of the North Sea are thinking about it, you can bet your horse – every foreigner with an eye on my throne will be very interested in my accident.”

It was the first time Sarelin had used the phrase “White Army” outside of a speech at a ceremony, and Lysande watched her run a finger over the scar on her neck. _She still does not utter the White Queen’s name. Except in dreams._

Lysande had held blood-soaked rags as Sarelin endured deep cuts to the body from bear-stalking and slashes from sword practice, but she knew it was not the fresh wounds that kept the queen shouting into an empty chamber in the night.
“No honourable soldier would strike at you while you’re recovering,” she said.

Sarelin laughed. “The three lands aren’t full of honourable soldiers.” She pushed the envelope into Lysande’s palm. “You can put this away for a while, but some day you’ll need to open it. Promise me you’ll do it.”

Her other hand closed around Lysande’s wrist. The vitality of the flesh was still there.

“As soon as you know I’m dead, you must break the seal straight away.”

“Of course.”

“I mean immediately, Lys.”

Lysande’s mouth had turned dry. “Why so much haste, for all love?”

“This is why.” Sarelin pointed to the Axium banner folded on her knees: the silver crown embroidered on the emerald cloth. “When I die, that little ornament will turn the city-rulers into savages, tearing each other’s insides out through their stomachs... and the longer it goes on, the longer our enemies will have to strike.” Her expression darkened. “I won’t have Bastillón marching across our borders to take the throne – even if it means that bastard Fontaine sitting in my chair, I will see Elira safe.”

A gust of wind battered the carriage wall. The cold air that snuck through a crack pierced Lysande’s shirt and doublet. She could hear all the fears of the realm in that gust. The scars of war were still carved in towns where the White Army had passed – scars that did not heal, like the line of white skin, upraised on Sarelin’s neck.

“I’ll do as you wish.” Lysande tucked the envelope into her doublet pocket.

“Promise me. Make a vow.”

“I promise, by the sun and stars.”

A little smile curved Sarelin’s mouth. “That’s as like a vow as I’ll get from you. You’d trust a book of old poems sooner than you’d trust the gods.”

They both shifted back into the pillows. Sarelin slumped, while Lysande felt something eddying inside her. She heard the queen describing the hunt again; heard her talking of the chase, with deer flitting out of reach and the panther emerging from the shadows, but the words washed over her, leaving no mark on her mind.

By the time the queen had moved onto an anecdote about a Pyrrhan brawl, she felt as if she were swelling, until she were nearly ready to burst. She wanted to
grab onto Sarelin – to clutch her tight. But that would rip open the wound. Rossio Iffizi’s knock at the door interrupted her. The physician was bobbing on his horse, holding out a vial.

The liquid inside was murky, with dark beads swirling inside it. “Serum of the blackseed?” Lysande said.

“Captain Hartleigh says it may be a rough ride ahead.”

“Captain Hartleigh has his usual subtle sense of timing, I see.” Lysande dropped her voice to a whisper. “Blackseed is far too strong, Iffizi.”

“This is diluted. But still, in its weaker form, enough to knock a woman out for four hours.”

A look passed between them. Lysande held out her hand and took the vial.

Lacing the next goblet of wine was simple. It was a deception that she felt no qualms about – Sarelin had always been stubborn to a fault with physicians, even when she was bleeding – and she tipped it into Sarelin’s goblet while her back was turned. When the queen’s head began to nod, Lysande re-packed the box, and was draping a blanket over Sarelin’s silken robe when the moan slipped out. She caught a word, half-whispered.

“Mea.”

Her fingers froze. The wheeze of Sarelin’s lungs returned. Looking down for a moment, Lysande brushed a strand of blonde hair from the queen’s face, taking in the fevered colour of her cheeks.

_The same name, after twenty-five years._ She gave Sarelin a last glance. With a yank, she pulled the carriage door shut, checking that it was locked. _Always the same name._

“Thought you’d never finish,” Raden said, as she joined him again.

“She had a lot to say.” Lysande glanced over to where the horse’s corpse was lying, then back at the carriage. “At least she should sleep like a boar.”

“And the Councillor?”

“We’re losing time. Let’s not lose the wind, too.” Lysande turned her face away, and climbed up onto her horse.

It was a rough ride, and not only due to the terrain. Thoughts swarmed in Lysande’s head with every stumble over a tree-root – the jolts of the horse seemed to drive the worries deep into her mind – Councillor, arrangements, succession. _Mea._ It
was the last bolt that punched home, every time. She tried to confine herself to something smaller: something she could do to help.

Had not the naturalist Haxley written that some animals could detect poisons, in his *Guide to Eliran Wild Beasts*? She thought she remembered reading it, but she was not sure. The palace tasters were numerous. But they might not be enough, in a time like this. She knew where to look for a trained animal. She slowed down, her fingers woven into her horse’s mane, while the crusting on Sarelin’s robe swam back into her mind.

Raden was talking over the wind. “The Bastillonians would’ve attacked years ago, if they weren’t too scared of the Iron Queen.”

“Mmm,” Lysande said.

“That old ram looks at Elira and what do you think he sees? Five climates. Eight different colours of skin. The white race of the desert and the black race of the jungle. Every family with its own talents. Paintings, by the hundred; music and poetry, mathematical books; strange weapons with curves and hinges... if I had nothing but moors and cliffs in my kingdom, I’d probably want the puzzle realm, too.”

Lysande ducked her head as she passed under a bough. With so much swirling in her head, the sound of a voice was somehow soothing. She caught the phrase *diversity is our strength*. The motto on Elira’s crest flashed through her mind like bright steel. It was Sarelin that she remembered saying those words, though; the queen was standing in front of the crowd in the city square again, while Lysande watched from a villa window, at the last jubilee of the war. Sarelin was repeating the phrase with her hands spread wide, and the crowd was cheering.

“I said, sometimes I don’t think you’re listening to me, Lysande.”

“I heard everything.” Lysande straightened up on her horse. “About the Eastern minutes.”

“The Western menace.” Raden steered his horse around a tree. “Honestly. Aren’t you worried at all? The Chiamese send their ambassadors to smile and crook their knees in our court, but I don’t trust them. I guarded the queen when they were last in Axium. Saw them simpering. They’re probably waiting for the right moment to slit our throats.”

“You’ve been saying that since I was a girl.” Lysande smiled. “We should all have lattice-work necks by now.”
“Jest all you like. But I don’t doubt that they’d massacre thousands, if Her Majesty’s death brought them out from behind that big stone wall. Though I do doubt they could muster an army.” He gave a chuckle. “Everyone knows they’re barbarians.”

A retort began to form on Lysande’s tongue about the master-works of Chiamese epic poetry – the rumoured invention of paper in the West – the evidence of mule-carts in Chiam over three thousand years before Eliran civilisation began – but she swallowed the remark. Arguing with Raden was a pastime that brought no change.

They passed a string of mileposts as they neared the end of the forest. A flock of doves took flight from a post on their right, crying out as they flapped into the air, and Lysande watched them winging away. The birds flew towards the clouds, never separating. They arced up and disappeared into a puff of grey, feathers slipping out of sight.

“Sarelin said something to me about war, once,” she said, slowly. “She told me the real enemy was not a country: it was the army you could not fight in one place. The army that belongs to no land, but springs up across all three lands, and fights with fire and water and air.”

“I don’t like to talk about elementals.” Raden looked across at her.

“She still moans in her sleep.” She met his gaze. “Just before, after I gave her the serum of blackseed, she uttered a word. *Mea*. Has it occurred to you that you may be wondering about the wrong enemy, Raden?”

She could feel the crackle; the prickling in the air that came when something forbidden was voiced.

They shared a silence. A single dove flew up from a tree and soared after the group, shrieking. As the seconds passed, its cries grew fainter.

“Even if Mea Tacitus survived up there in the north,” Raden said, when the bird had disappeared into the sky, “she’s probably crawling from outpost to outpost, looking for bread. The White Queen was smashed in the war.”

“Is that what you truly believe?”

“Her fighters scattered into the northern waste, and disappeared.”

“Or what you’ve weighed up as safe to repeat?”

“Lysande…”
“I think we should give her a double guard. And she’s got tasters, but she’ll need something more.” Lysande hesitated, watching him. “If the White Queen’s not starving... if she’s waiting, Raden...”

His smile was grim, and she read his thoughts in the set of his shoulders.

“Let’s just hope Her Majesty recovers quickly,” he said. “You could try praying, for once.”

He spurred his horse on. Lysande picked up her pace, the wind slapping her cheeks, her horse’s hooves pounding the dirt. She followed him through the last patch of forest and into the sunlight, towards the glimmer of silver on the horizon, where the capital was waiting.
Chapter Two

The bodies arrived the next morning. Outside the eastern gate of the palace, the cart trundled to a halt, and Lysande watched the driver unload a bundle of sack-cloth. She stood by her window, peering at the wagon painted with the symbol of the crown.

Something inside her recoiled as the woman in the hooded robe trudged across the grass. Hunched on the back of the cart, four creatures gazed up at the palace, their faces streaked with grime; the fat missing from their cheeks gave them the aspect of ghosts, and they shivered, their hands cuffed behind their backs. The executioner waited at the gate, tapping her foot.

*Of course,* Lysande thought. *Sarelin's not awake to give permission.*

She threw on her coat. As she saw the envelope perched on a stack of books on her desk, she paused.

With an almost furtive movement, she tucked it into her pocket. It was flat, yet she was conscious of the shape of it under the cloth. By the time she had hurried down the stairs and crossed the lawn, a man in an emerald doublet was standing at the gate, conversing with the woman in the hooded robe.

“All killings must be halted,” the man declared. “You know how Her Majesty does these things. She likes to look them in the eyes before they die.” He was staring at the executioner as if she were a fly.

Lysande hesitated, and stopped a few feet away. The woman muttered something about coming all the way out to the palace, but the man in the doublet cut her off. “I don’t give three bronze rackets for the inconvenience. While she’s locked away, being prodded by that Rhimese dolt, you can cart that lot back to where they came from.”

Silently, Lysande edged towards the gate. She could make out the cargo through the bars; the arms of the spectre on the left were smeared with mud, and the two in the middle huddled together, as if leaning on each other could save them.

Although she had seen the painting in the eastern corridor that showed elementals flying over villages on dragons, the people in it had bulged with muscles beneath their armour – they had looked down with the contempt of the mighty, like the magical people in all the ancient histories. All of the ancient histories had informed her that at the time of the Conquest, those who could move the elements
were powerful beyond measure, but tempero handcuffs, from the metal quarried in the northern mines, had put a stop to that. She felt strangely uncomfortable as she looked at the cuffs in front of her. The only thing this lot looks capable of moving is their bowels.

Lysande looked at the bundle of sack-cloth on the ground.

"Where will she take them?" she asked.

The man in the emerald doublet turned, and stared at her.

"Back to jail," he said. "We can't have them burning houses and flooding the streets." He surveyed the frayed edges of her coat and his gaze lingered on her hair.

"Good day, young lady."

He gave her a nod and a tight smile. The velvet of his doublet shone as he walked away, and his robe swirled about his legs. Lysande turned back to the gate and watched the cart jolt its way down the road until the faces of the prisoners on the back were nothing more than dots.

Sarelin wouldn't execute anyone without reason, she thought.

There was little enough light making its way through the clouds, but it was sufficient for the walls of Axium Palace to glow: a pale, cold, glittering silver that could be seen for miles, turning the twenty-four spires atop its buildings into shining needles. The hedges and fountains that stretched from the gates to the palace steps were amongst the best places to walk in, to bask in the quiet spots when all her duties were done, but today Lysande crossed the lawn, passed the archery range and quickened her pace to the staff tower without a backward glance.

The white roses were blooming around the base, their pale carpet sprinkled with a few red buds. Their scent reached her as she entered the tower. It was a steep climb up the spiral staircase to the sixth floor, and in her chamber, she navigated her way through piles of papers, stepping between a stack of mathematical proofs and a battered dictionary, and toppling a tome whose cover bore the words A Study of Northern Flora and Fauna.

Eighteen hours. She had waited long enough. But her entreaties to be admitted to the royal suite had fallen on physicians' ears.

She took out the envelope from her pocket and held it up in front of the window, then quickly put it down again. Even if the Councillor could advise her, it was a sin to break a promise to a friend – or so Sarelin had told her, once, after three
glasses of Axium red. (Anything before the fifth goblet was usually still worth remembering.)

She placed the envelope back in her pocket. By the time she had tied her belt and fastened the buckles on her boots, she had made her decision, and she nearly walked straight into Raden as she came out at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Going somewhere?" He stepped aside, leaning against the doorframe.

"I have an errand in Axium."

"An errand. Oh, I know how you love those. I suppose it's pointless to ask what you're really doing?"

She allowed him a smile in reply, and slipped past. "That's what I like about you, Raden. You have the gift of foresight."

The road between the palace and the capital could be traversed in half an hour, and Lysande was not stopping for anything today. The wind buffeted her hair, blowing about her as she rode, and as she galloped into Axium the bells were ringing: four chimes on the hour, once for each of the goddesses and gods, a toll that informed every citizen in every quarter of the queen's state of health.

Squares across the city bustled with queues that extended into the street, and worshippers cupped prayer-bowls filled with water in their hands, peering towards the front of the lines; children jostled to see past their parents' legs, and Lysande had to weave around the groups. Over twenty-two years, she had seen her fellow Axiumites line up for bread, cheese pies, saddles and daggers, yet she had rarely seen such queues outside prayer-houses. Her chest tightened.

Cutting through a crowd near the baker's, she excused herself and took the south exit into the trading quarter, where she tethered her horse; here, the open plaza teemed with people, and like true Axiumites, they had separated into two halves. The group clad in finery and jewels was gathered around a big statue of Sarelin, while the mass of women and men in rags thronged around a smaller bust. They were all queuing to decorate the monuments with silver and emerald ribbons. The division between nobles and commoners left a slim path across the square, and down this she walked, trying to avoid the stares from both sides and looking ahead. She heard the phrases "queen's pet" and "gutter-born", but kept her eyes fixed on the other side.

The hawkers were shouting their wares as she arrived at Traders' Street. She had to elbow her way across and into the first laneway, where, behind the hubbub, she passed merchants' premises bursting with loaves of bread and grain, metal and
leather goods, garments and wine, until at last she found the mouth of an unmarked lane and slipped through. At the end of the narrow street, a sign declared “Dangerous Animals and Elixirs – Everything Poisonous for a Price.”

The curtains on the window of the shop were drawn. The door was not locked, however, and she stepped into a space so dim that she blinked for a moment.

Lamps around the room gave out globs of gold, just big enough to illuminate the cages lining the walls; some of these shimmered with masses of dark fur, while others held pairs of eyes, or teeth that seemed to float in the gloom. Glass tanks teemed with snakes. Fish glowed in bowls, floating ponderously near the surface or hiding amongst shining pebbles. Lysande tiptoed down the right wall. She could feel dozens of eyes watching her from the cages, and a growling sound was emanating from further along, yet she fixed her eyes on the signs below each animal.

Wolves, leopards, dogs... one monkey’s description promised a lethal bite and “pleasingly quick paralysis on the victim”... there were eight spearfish from the Lyrian delta, sharing a tank with a puffing-snake and a cobra. At the back of the room, a sign proclaimed “panther: black, Pyrrhan, with excellent bite and speed.”

She drew closer to the cage. The animal was stalking up and down behind the bars and as she came nearer, it paused and regarded her; the eyes glittered in the black fur, like chips of emerald sewed on a bodice.

“Interested?” a voice said, at her side. “A rare beast, signora. That one’s a hundred cadres, forty mettles, and twenty-six rackets.”

A man clad in a brown merchant’s doublet was standing not five inches from her elbow.

“Forgive me, signor. The door was open...”

“The panther is a querulous beast,” the man went on, as if she had not spoken. “It cannot be tamed, by human hand or elemental... so it waits for a buyer who will understand its value. Perhaps that buyer is you, signora. Perhaps you are a connoisseur of danger.”

Something about the little chuckle he gave after this speech made her teeth clench. She noticed a glint in the gloom, and made out vials and jars filled with powder on the shelf on the adjacent wall.

“Actually, I’ve come about poisons.”

“Ah.” He moved nearer to her, and the proximity prompted her to edge back.

“You wish to dispose of some... animal that is bothering you? We have some
excellent venom just arrived. Bastillonian. From the eels they breed over there, off
the coast.”

“You mistake me, signor. I wish to detect poison, not use it.”

“Then you must come this way, and wait, Miss Prior.”

She had stepped forward, ready to follow him, but now she halted. “How did
you know my name?”

“There aren’t too many red-haired girls who speak with a palace accent in
the capital.” He edged closer, until his breath touched her cheek. “If Her Majesty has
need of a tasting-animal, I would be happy to supply her.”

He disappeared into the back room of the shop. After a couple of minutes, in
which she heard the sound of keys jingling, he came back bearing a basket; a ball of
golden fur dropped out of it, capered across the floor and sprang up into Lysande’s
hand. To her astonishment, in the light of the lamp, it was exactly as it had looked in
A Study of Northern Flora and Fauna. Daubed with white on the cheeks, and barely
the size of a puppy: a pygmy monkey was rare, and difficult to acquire, she knew.

“I’ll take it,” she said.

“The price – ”

“Will be settled by Queen Sarelin’s treasurer within the week.”

“Most kind, Miss Prior. Though I confess, I did not expect to part with him;
not to you. I have trained Her Majesty’s tasters myself. I should have thought six of
the best young women and men were enough to check her food. Is Her Majesty
concerned about something?”

“Sarelin is never concerned.” Lysande watched him put the monkey into a
small cage, which was then slipped into a bag with a strap. “If she met concern in her
bedchamber at night, she would run it through. But it is my job to be concerned for
her.”

He inclined his head.

She had just turned to leave when she saw two lights in the gloom: two green
lights, shining. She stopped, clutching the bag.

“Tell me, signor, can a panther be transported? If I wanted to remove an
obstacle from my path – not that I intend any such thing, you understand – but if I
did, could I bring a panther somewhere and unleash it, knowing it would attack the
right target?”
It was a guess, and a sudden one at that, but the man considered it for a moment. “I think it possible. Not with this beast, though. You’ll find no tame panther in Elira. Nor Bastillón. The Chiamese panthers were good for dispatching an enemy – a work of art when they kill – but you couldn’t tell the beasts what to do. And we have no trade with the West these days, since they doubled the patrol on the Chiamese wall. You’d have to look north.”

“Over the North Sea?”

“Aye. They have a special breed in the outlands that can be trained, if you know how to handle it. I could procure one for you, if you like.” He dangled a hand into the cage, and the panther licked it: a pink tongue darting out to clean the fingers. “But it’ll be expensive. Those northern mercenaries know their business. Shake with their right hand and rob you with their left.”

She thought of Axium Forest, footfalls in the dark places; the animal waiting. “I’ll think it over. Thank you, signor.”

“Will you take something for Her Majesty’s health and protection?”

The tone of his voice made Lysande stop. There was something hopeful about it. He had moved to under the shelf, and he jabbed a finger at the vials and bottles. “Blackseed, snakeseed, seed of bliss.” He pointed to the coloured powders. “Some would pay a pretty price for the seven powders of the goddesses – all unadulterated.”

“I’m afraid I have got all I came for.”

“These two are my most sought-after products.” If he had heard her, he did not seem to register it. “Dragon-eye essence. Draught of shredded scale. Not much left, now; but Her Majesty could take it. How I envy those first merchants, when the dragons were still around… a fortune in gold every time they sold an egg, not to mention the other properties of the beast – the finest toxin in the known world. I’d get noble buyers, for dragonblood. Hundreds of cadres for a vial.” He sighed again. “Still, we cannot turn back time, and more’s the pity, Miss Prior.”

She made her bow, and walked towards the door. As she passed the wolf, it lunged towards the bars of its cage, growling at the bag in her hands.

The bells of the prayer-houses were ringing as she emerged into the street, but the merchant’s words were still echoing in her ears, and she crossed the bridge without really hearing the clangour. Over the mirror of the King’s Lake, she rode towards the collection of towers and cloisters that waited on the other side. The
magnitude of Axium Palace always struck her as she passed over the water: in the
surface of the lake, she could see the buildings that contained the chapel and the
crown wing; the Great Hall for big feasts and ceremonies, and the silver and emerald
halls for smaller gatherings; the main quadrangle with the statue of Queen Brettelin
where she and Raden had once acted out the queen’s last charge on the Mud Field,
rushing into red paper that the guards were holding; the galleries full of art; the
Pavilion where she had first sung the Exaltation, determined to impress Sarelin; and
the den of King Trichard’s wine cellar, dank and glutted with barrels, underneath the
tapestry room. All of these chambers she had walked in. From here they were
distant, sleeping under spires that tapered towards the sky.

It was the grounds that gave her the feeling of relief as she cantered to the
stables: the lake that squiggled around in a semi-circle, and the rows of trees that
shielded paths. Those paths carved the routes to memories. Afternoons in the target
range, training with daggers; how many times had Sarelin forced her to take up a
sword?

“You don’t need to worry,” the queen had said, when she admitted that
sword-fighting made her nervous. “What you need is to be the blade. If you are steel,
can you be worried? No.”

“I’m not a blade. I’m a woman. I have a brain, and it worries.” She had
picked up the sword, nonetheless.

“Then you must forget how to be a woman. Listen to me, Lys. When you run,
are you worried about your legs?”

“I suppose not.”

“Because you trust your feet not to trip.”

“They’re part of my body. Of course I trust them.”

“So are your hands. And they grip the sword.” Sarelin took advantage of her
limp posture, charging in and beating her back, and grinning. “Try.”

And she had tried: entered the flow, for a moment. The moment became a
little longer each time, until she could beat the queen back.

Afterwards they would walk in the garden of Fortituda, Sarelin’s favourite
deity (“anyone who loves that sap Crudelis over the lady of valour is a complete
dolt”), debating the law or trading jokes, until the queen went to meet a noble or an
advisor and Lysande made her way back, walking slowly, to the staff tower.
She gave the monkey to the steward, today, to pass on to the physicians, before climbing the stairs of the tower to her chamber. She took out Sarelin’s envelope and examined it, but put it away again. It was a mad idea.

Copying out the *History of the Dragonwar* into modern Eliran had always helped her think. There was something about translation that soothed; a pattern to the sentences and breaks that provided a rhythm for the mind; yet no matter how hard she tried to concentrate, working away, every sentence seemed to speak of Sarelin. Descriptions of battle called up images of her own queen in her armour, leading the jubilee parade; passages about feasts reminded her of Sarelin sharing plates of quince pies and cheeses with her in the royal suite; her head was filled with a barking laugh, and she put down her quill after a half-hour, rising from her chair.

_I must see her_, she thought. _I might be wrong, but I don’t think she should be alone._

She loitered around the door to the royal suite all afternoon, trying to gain entry, but after being rebuffed for the umpteenth time by the physicians, she was forced to make her way to the library. Two hours of researching the migration patterns of animals in the outlands turned up nothing. Her eyelids were drooping by the time she had packed up, and the sky was dark outside the window, the candles casting a pale glow on the floor.

Sleep, when it came at last, seemed like relief. She fell deeper and deeper into a blackness where all was still, until the darkness shifted and took the form of a giant panther, its yellow eyes fixed on her. The big cat stalked towards her, and leapt before she could flee; claws dug into her breast, tearing skin and flesh. Rivulets of warm blood ran down her side. She pushed the animal off, but the gashes on her chest kept flowing; and then she was screaming, while the forest around her rang with the cries of guards...

She woke with a jolt. The knocking at the door sounded real. For a moment she lay in bed, breathing hard, feeling her sides, and staring at the ceiling.

When she had ascertained that her chest was not actually running with blood, she threw on a pair of trousers and hurried to the door. The pimply face of Arthal Yorke, the queen’s messenger, greeted her in the stairwell.

“What is it, Yorke?”

The boy raised his hand, trying to regain his breath. “If you please, Miss Prior, it’s the queen.”
“Where is she?”
“She’s awake in her chamber, and healing well. She’s asking for you.”
“Truly?”
Her disbelief must have been written on her face, for the boy smiled. “Truly, Miss Prior. She was very insistent that I bring you at once.”

Lysande could’ve kissed Yorke, if not for the enormous blemish on his nose. She gathered her keys and put on her best doublet, a thick garment in the royal green, without a single ink-spot in sight. Pausing, she took the envelope with the green seal from her desk and slipped it into her pocket.

The physicians were leaving the royal suite as she arrived, carrying baskets of tools – only Rossio Iffizi lingered in the corridor, wiping his hands on his robe. He shuffled over to Lysande. “Her Majesty must drink one dose of vivantica every hour until the wound is closed, Miss Prior.”

Lysande produced the best smile she could manage. They exchanged bows, and she turned to the royal suite.

The polished oak doors gave way at her touch, and she walked through the antechamber, past the swords and daggers mounted in silver brackets. Her stomach was swirling with every step, but she kept her back straight and her hands from trembling.

The windows of the bedchamber had been thrown open and she stopped in the doorway, shielding her eyes from the glare. Beams of sunlight struck the queen’s coronation cabinet, glancing off the swirls of diamonds inlaid in the sides, and off the doors of the jewelled closet beside it. In the middle of the room, an oak table was laid out with silver platters, goblets, and jugs of water, and one jug held a rose-coloured liquid that Lysande had never seen before. Vivantica. Distilled from the pink viva-flower.

As she moved into the room, light embossed the shelves on the wall, sending their contents into dazzling relief: necklaces and headpieces dripping with rubies and diamonds set in the ceremonial style; a set of scales gleaming bronze, their flat bowls rimmed with onyx, decorated with little black snakes that glistened like wet glass. On the end, a Lyrian smallsword glinted in the light, its hilt studded with sapphires in the shape of a harp.

One object shone even brighter than the others – a silver chalice engraved with the Elira crest. In the panels of the engraving, Lysande recognised the animals
of the four cities: the ice-bear of Valderos, grey and howling; the crimson-coloured cobra of Rhime; the blue spearfish of Lyria; and the purple leopard of Pyrrha, with the Axium crown sitting in the centre of the crest, in pride of place. A ray of sun illuminated the inscription on the handles:

*Sarelin Brey – Unifier, Warrior, Conqueror –
the Hand that pushed back the White Tide
and restored our Great Realm to its Glory.
Long may her Reign flourish in Elira.*

Lysande could not resist a smile. Sarelin had many qualities to recommend her as queen, but she had never dwelt on the passage on humility in the Silver Songs.

“Sarelin?” Her voice resounded off the walls.

The queen was nowhere to be seen. She walked to the bed, but behind the silver hangings only a discarded robe lay on the sheets, spotted with blood.

“Sarelin?” she repeated, a little louder this time. “Are you awake?”

“I hope so,” a woman’s voice replied. “If this is the next life, it’s lacking wine.”

Lysande turned just in time to see a woman emerging from the side of the screen. The sun struck the top of her breastplate and set it ablaze. From head to toe, she was encased in heavy plates of silver – her daggers shone at her left hip, and her sword hung at her right, its sheath emblazoned with the insignia of the Axium crown. The dent in her armour, marking the place where the sword of one of Mea Tacitus’ captains had struck, reflected the light.

“Thank the sun and stars!” Lysande cried. “You’re all right!”

“You can thank those damned physicians.” Sarelin strode over and clapped her on the shoulder, so hard that her teeth knocked together. “They’ve got me drinking their potion on the hour. Ghastly stuff.”

As she clanked her way into the chamber and poured herself a goblet of the pink liquid, Lysande noted the absence of any flush in her cheeks. She was not the wan figure she was when the guards carried her into the palace; but she was still pale after the accident. *Too pale by far.*

“Ugh.” Sarelin eyed the medicine with distaste, swirling it in the cup. “Here, Trichard, Trichard!”
A ball of golden fur leaped up from one of the chairs into Sarelin’s hand. Lysande felt a surge of relief as it reached out and took the goblet in two tiny paws. She patted the monkey on the head.

“You did a good job with my new taster,” Sarelin said, stroking the animal behind the ears. “I named him after my father. Trichard could never shut his mouth, either.”

The little monkey chattered, as if on cue. It took a sip of the drink and smacked its lips in the same manner as the queen, and the two women – one scarred on the neck, with the ample muscle of a soldier; the other tall and contemplative in aspect – laughed as one.

“And did the physicians tell you why I got him?” Lysande asked.

“A monkey doesn’t go wandering in the pleasure quarter at night, leaving me without a taster.” Sarelin gave the animal another stroke. “And yes, Trichard’s special talents help, too.”

“That little nose can sniff out any poison in seconds. Haxley records it.”

“Well, thank Cognita for Haxley. With the whole realm thinking I’m about to collapse, there’s some who’d like me to collapse faster”

_Tell her what the merchant said. She needs to hear about the panther._ But the forceful set to Sarelin’s jaw told Lysande that the queen had some other matter she was about to broach, and she pushed her discovery back through the corridors of her mind, to the book-lined chamber from whence it came.

Trichard didn’t seem to have found anything amiss with the pink liquid; if anything, he seemed quite pleased with his refreshment, and Sarelin downed the goblet of vivantica in one go, shuddering as the potion went down.

“Fortituda’s fist,” she uttered, banging the goblet down on the table. “You’d think if the stuff was saving my life, it wouldn’t taste like pig shit.”

“You should be glad you’re still standing. I don’t see why you’ve covered yourself in silver.”

“Nothing like a suit of armour to make you feel alive again.”

The queen reached underneath one of the platters – sending the monkey skittering up to her shoulder – and pulled out a long, flat box. Carrying it to the bed, she sank down, and patted the spot beside her. Lysande took care not to crumple the cover as she sat.
“There’s something I’ve been meaning to give you.” Sarelin thrust the box under Lysande’s nose.

“Sarelin, you can’t —”

“How dare you tell a queen what she can’t do?” But as Lysande glanced up, Sarelin’s face was half-split with a smile. “Go on.”

Lysande was not sure what she would find inside, but she opened the lid. The feather dazzled her eyes. Every hair was star-bright; the stem was pointed, long, and finely whittled. She lifted the quill out of the box.

“Sarelin...” But she could say no more.

“Twenty-two years in this world. And I’ve had you with me for fourteen of them. For that, I should be the one giving thanks.” The queen embraced her, then leaned back, as Lysande winced under the impact of the armour. “I know it’s late, but take this as the second half of your present.”

The first half had been a gold dagger. The weapon had sliced air, carving straw enemies in the target range.

“My grandmother told me a queen should be strong in battle: that she should seize what was hers. Be a warrior. The tutor who hectored me with history and mathematics told me that leaders should be clever. She would wave her little stick when she said so, like this.” Sarelin wiggled her hand. “Even the Lyrian ambassador tried to give me advice, when I was a girl — he informed my father that I should practice one of the arts.” Sarelin shook her head. “I won’t lecture you. Never have. But I will say one thing, today. You might be dangerous with a Rhimese rapier, or a good shot with a dagger, like a real Axiumite... you might be a Lyrian singer, a Pyrrhan hunter, a Valderran quarrier... a merchant, or a weaver, or a diplomat... or half a dozen of those things at once. A woman should not be one thing alone. That’s what I learned over half a lifetime, in court.” The bed creaked as Sarelin rose. “I’ve trained you in daggers, at the range, and you’ll improve with the sword, in time... but you should be proud of your own weapon, too.”

Lysande returned her gaze to the quill. She could see her own face in the stem, if she squinted. Not a single speck of dust marred the gold.

“You’re spoiling me,” she said.

“It’s an exchange. You’re going to copy out my new laws, tomorrow. Anyway, you should allow yourself to be spoilt one day a year. You’re the girl who translated the Silver Songs, Lys. The girl with the quill.”
Those were the same words Sarelin had spoken the day she had visited the orphanage. *I’ll take the girl with the quill*, she had said. Lysande swallowed.

She placed the quill back in its hollow.

_If I tell her now, she’ll call for the panther’s carcass, to examine it_, she thought. _And what if she falls ill? In the excitement and worry? The vivantica’s just begun to work._

She hugged Sarelin, her fingers interlacing behind the silver breastplate.

*Positioning daggers was easy: point, measure with your eye, and find the angle. Throwing them was harder. It made her stop thinking, however, long enough to let her hands flick, transcribing an aim into a strike._

She left the target range with a purposeful stride, and sent a note to Raden.

“Here you are,” he said, hefting a mass of black fur through the doorway of her chamber, some half-hour later. “Though why you want to poke a dead cat around, I’ll never know.”

Lysande ignored the remark. She knelt down and bent over the panther’s body. This animal could not have been called small, even by the most seasoned hunter; and its irises were not green, but a bright yellow.

“Ugh,” she heard Raden mutter.

“The corpse may be a wealth of knowledge. There are details in every retina, information in every spleen... have you never heard of scientific inquiry, Raden?”

He shook his head, and strode out. She barely heard his footsteps echoing down the stairs. Turning to the _Guide_ again, she skimmed through the chapter on wild cats until she found the paragraph. Every panther in Elira had green eyes, Haxley asserted; those found in the jungle exhibited a grey tinge around the iris, and the desert panthers had pupils that glowed purple in the sun, but none of them had yellow eyes.

“Why yellow?” she asked the carcass.

Edging around the corpse, she went over the merchant’s words. “You’ll find no tame panther in Elira... you’d have to look north.” (She poked the animal’s side.) “They have a special breed in the outlands that can be trained.” (Tilted the jaw up.) “If you know how to handle it.”
Did someone lead the panther to Axium Forest? Did they follow the hunt and lie in wait?

She hesitated. But she remembered the pale colour of Sarelin’s cheeks, and the weary look on her face, under the bravado.

By nightfall, she was staring at the panther, then going over the paragraph in the Guide again. She rotated the envelope on her desk, observing the seal, her eyes discerning the edges of the paper inside.

This time, she dreamed she was riding through a forest with the queen, heading towards a sunrise she could never reach.

The morning brought her to the royal suite before breakfast, and the woman and man on the doors did not shift from their places. She reached past them to knock. After several attempts, until there was a shout of “all right, you dragon-heads” from within, and the doors swung open.

The guards stepped apart and an athletic-looking man edged through. He nodded his head slightly to each of them, before hastening off down the corridor. Lysande noticed that the laces on his doublet were only half done-up, and a lock of hair was splayed across his forehead.

When Sarelin finally emerged, she was dressed in a gown that billowed out like a silver bell. Lysande smiled down at the floor.

“Don’t give me that look.” Sarelin beckoned her in, and stuck her head out again. “The two of you get some rest.”

“Your Majesty, Captain Hartleigh said —”

“Never mind Raden’s fretting. I’ve got Trichard in here. The monkey,” the queen said, as they exchanged looks. “And the next lot’ll be here any minute.”

The guards walked away down the corridor, and Sarelin turned back into her suite. “I wasn’t giving you any look,” Lysande said, as the doors slammed behind them.

“You’re practically glowing with amusement.”

“I’m concerned for your health. Are you sure you should exert yourself, so soon?”

“He did all the exerting.” Sarelin was smiling, too, as she lifted the cover from a platter of hazelnut tarts. “I don’t think I can eat this alone – I hope you’ve got an appetite, whatever you’ve decided.”
Lysande began to protest, but Sarelin waved a hand at the rest of the table, to the tomatoes and mushrooms in brine, the boiled eggs, the morning-flower soup and butter-cakes— all tasted, by women, men, and monkey. While they sat side by side, eating and watching Trichard play with an egg, Lysande thought of the panther’s yellow eyes. She watched Sarelin dutifully pour her vivantica into a goblet and hold it out to Trichard to taste, cursing again after she downed it.

The queen was wearing her crown. Every time she put it on, it seemed to speak of battle, with its silver cut thickly, inlaid with diamonds that glittered and gave out shards of light— yet for all the awful power of her dress, Sarelin’s eyes were dancing, whenever she looked across.

After taking the last sip of medicine, she rose and kissed Lysande on the brow. Striding to the end of the room, she threw open the double doors to the private garden.

Lysande took the unspoken invitation and joined her, walking arm-in-arm, into the quiet grove. The red roses were blooming here, as at the tower, unfurling like wounds on the skin of the earth: their fragrant scent filled the air, and silence reigned, for a moment, except for the sound of Trichard chattering to himself.

They moved further into the garden, meandering between the bushes. Lysande wondered what the queen was thinking of, but when Sarelin slid her arm inside hers, she thought she knew the answer.

“It means a lot to me, you know. To be sure that you’ll help things get sorted when the day comes.”

“I hope it never comes.”

“Don’t be a stubborn ass. That’s my job.”

They walked on, their arms linked like chain-mail, through the little patch of verdant green. Lysande opened her mouth, and shut it again. The right words were hard to find.

“Listen, Sarelin.” She waited until Sarelin was looking at her. “Will you promise me something in return for keeping the Councillor’s message? Don’t go hunting. Not for a while.” She was not going to falter at Sarelin’s surprise. “It’s like you said— everyone in the three lands will know you’re injured— and if you ride out again, an attacker could set something on you, out there.”

“Set something on me?”
“It’s the panther. You see, Haxley is clear on that too – the eyes – they’re not native to the realm. And the merchant told me there were panthers you could train and lead, outside of Elira. I think someone waited until you were stalking game, with your armour off, and set that panther on you. I think – ” She became vaguely aware that the garden had gone quiet.

She looked around, but there was no sign of golden fur.

“Where’s Trichard?” she asked.

Sarelin shrugged. “In the roses, I expect, eating my best black-petals. What’s this about a merchant?”

Her mind was still full of panthers and eyes; and the words of the paragraph in the Guide; but when Sarelin’s words clicked into place in her mind, she ran along the length of the flower-beds, looking for a flash of gold.

“Trichard! Here, Trichard, Trichard!”

No reply came. She got down on her knees and began to crawl, pushing the leaves back as she searched among the bushes, until the thorns pricked her fingers and drew blood.

“Trichard!” she shouted. “Trichard!”

She saw it at last – the patch of orange-gold amongst the dark green leaves. The monkey was lying under a rose bush. Almost before she laid hands upon the body, she knew what she would find; but she pressed her fingers to the throat and the tiny chest anyway, searching for a pulse.

_How?_ she thought, staring into Trichard’s frozen eyes. _How did you die?_

There was no obvious sign of blood. No paralysis. No trace of poison at all; but the closed eyes and the lifeless body told their own story.

“What is it, Lys?”

She ignored the question, turning the animal over and combing through the fur with her nails. No obvious marks or swelling. Yet the monkey’s skin was somehow already cold.

“I said, what is it, Lys?”

The sound of Sarelin’s voice pierced her thoughts. _Sarelin_. If the monkey was dead…

She turned just as the queen fell, grabbing at a branch but failing to gain purchase and tumbling onto the grass. Sarelin’s blue eyes clouded with confusion. For a second her lips opened wordlessly – then she convulsed, gasping for air.
“Fortituda judge me,” she gasped. “Vindictus... strike my enemies...”

“No!” Lysande dropped Trichard and sprinted over.

Sarelin scrabbled at her bodice, fighting some invisible pain. The spasms wracked her body she roared and lashed out. One of her arms struck Lysande as she clutched at her throat, clawing the skin.

The physicians were gone. There were no guards waiting outside. She could run and get help, but by the time she returned Sarelin might be dead – and she knew the only hope of a cure was a dose of vivantica. But Trichard was stiff and cold from the medicine.

“Listen to me,” she said, grabbing hold of the queen’s shoulders, as the jerking ceded to a stiff twitching. “I’ll run and find help. I’ll get Iffizi – anyone –”

Sarelin’s fingers closed around her wrist. “No use,” she managed, before another shudder ran through her.

The skin against her hand was already turning cold – it made no sense. Lysande felt tears welling up behind her eyes.

“No use... don’t leave... Lys... don’t forget... to open...”

One of Sarelin’s fingers twitched in the direction of Lysande’s jacket pocket. Lysande glanced down, and saw the corner of the envelope poking out.

“And you must...”

She strained for air, and Lysande leaned closer, crouching until their noses were almost touching.

“What, Sarelin? I must what?”

“Find the Resistance. Tell them I’m sorry.” Sarelin’s voice had turned into a croak. “They knew. They tried. Tell them they were right, about –”

But the rest of the words never came out. Another breath strained, barely making it from her lips. The queen gave a shudder, hacked out one last cough, and lay still.

Lysande stood up. She heard the door of the royal suite banging, and a big, bull-like man in armour came running through the bedchamber and out into the garden. You’re too late, she wanted to shout at Raden. The words stuck in her throat.

The captain’s boots trampled a rose bush as he hurried to her side. Lysande stepped back. Her friend knelt down beside Sarelin’s body, and she heard his cry, hoarse with disbelief.

“She was nearly recovered!”
“Poison.” Lysande picked up the little monkey’s body and held it before him. “The animal tasted it first.”

“But Her Majesty was only to drink vivantica!”

“It was in the vivantica. Someone must have slipped it into the jug.”

Raden was checking Sarelin’s mouth and ears, his hands skimming over her body. Lysande knew he would find nothing. The staff might have mocked her for reading at supper, but all the medicinal manuals and scientific books she had absorbed in twenty-two years told her that if it was an ordinary poison, there would have been stiffening of the muscles, and coughing up of blood. Sarelin had said the monkey could detect any poison in seconds, and poor Trichard had not detected anything.

Her mind was racing. She moved closer to the queen. The flow of thoughts was coming so fast that it was hard to fish the details from the stream in her mind. “Check the nape of her neck,” she said, quickly. “Her neck?” Raden looked up. “Just do it.”

He rolled Sarelin gently onto her front and pushed her blonde hair back. Below the hairline and just above the cloth, there was a small purplish mark, about the size of a fingernail; a little darker than an ordinary bruise.

Lysande stared down at the dark spot. “Dragonblood only leaves one mark, on the nape of the neck.”

His gaze locked on hers for a long moment. The respect they had always held for each other was preventing him from dismissing her, she was sure; but after half a minute, he let out a short, sharp laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous, Lysande.”

“It takes several minutes, then kills in a quick stroke. I watched her die, Raden! Right here! And they say the body goes cold at once – feel her skin!”

He placed his hand to Sarelin’s neck. She saw him hold it there for a few seconds. Slowly, he removed his hand and rolled Sarelin onto her back, before rising to his feet.

“It’s impossible,” he said, slowly. “It hasn’t been used for a hundred years. You know all the gold in Lyria couldn’t buy a vial.”

_Rare. Like a panther with yellow eyes. A panther that couldn’t have been born in Elira._
“I’ll round up the physicians.” Raden’s powerful jaw clenched. “They were the only ones who got near her. There’s a cell under the palace where they can rot, while the guards question them. My women and men are trained to be persuasive.”

“There was a man. This morning. Coming out of her chamber. Very fit; black hair.”

“Lord Brackton. Her latest. I’ll get him, too.”

Lysande gazed ahead. Panther. Poison. It was all part of the same picture. She kept her gaze trained on Raden’s face. It was easier to look at him than to gaze down at Sarelin, her body limp in her gown, all the colour drained from her cheeks.

“I’ll have to get the damned steward to call the court at once, and have a vote for the Councillor. If only she’d named somebody...” Raden trailed off.

Lysande pulled the envelope from her pocket and felt the emerald wax of the seal, still warm.

“She gave me this.”

His eyes widened. “Is that...?”

“It was to be opened after her death.”

“Are you waiting for a decree?” Raden pointed a finger at the queen’s body.

“We can’t waste a minute.”

Lysande only nodded. It did not seem real, to see Sarelin lying there on the ground, still and cold; she did not want to think about the realm or the crown, or anything other than Sarelin. Yet Raden’s stare reminded her that she didn’t have time to hesitate. Hadn’t the queen said it herself – that she needed to act immediately?

Her fingers fumbled as she tore the envelope. The little slip of paper inside had been folded many times, but it bore Sarelin’s messy scrawl, recognisable anywhere.

“In the event of my death, I appoint a Councillor to choose between the city-rulers of Valderos, Lyria, Pyrrha and Rhime. I invest in the Councillor the power to judge these rulers fairly, and to bestow on one of them the honour of ruling Elira. I ask them to make their choice in the best interests of the realm.”

“Go on,” Raden said.

“I hereby name as Councillor...”

But she could not finish. She stared at the paper, unable to digest the words.

“Who? It’s not that leech, Pelory, is it?”
Her hands were trembling. There was no way to make sense of it. It was like some horrible illusion – only the words did not shimmer and melt away.

Raden snatched the page from her and held it up.

“I hereby name Lysande Prior, the scholar of Axium Palace, as Councillor,” he read.

There was no sound but the wind whipping through the garden and shaking the heads of flowers. A gust caught the rose bush beside them, and red petals rained down on the soil.
Chapter Three

The audience was waiting, and as she glanced across the room, she could see ruffled sleeves and breeches of starched cloth, doublets trimmed with silver thread, gowns made of fabric so rich that they glistened, and stoles of deep emerald draped over their wearers. She twisted the bottom of her sleeve, and let it fall.

The steward nudged her forward to where the ladies and lords were standing. The Rinthrops, Stutcliffs, Munts and Lynsons, the Buckingdish family and the remaining Pembrakes: a smattering of stiff chins and arched brows passed before her, all the nobles smiling as they made their pleasantries and sized her up with their stares.

At the end, beyond the last bench, Raden was waiting.

“Well done,” he said, pulling her away. “You’ve survived the first mauling.”

She tried to force a smile. The sight of the court-room with its dark oak benches and its portraits of queens and kings could do nothing to allay the pain inside her; yet she could not weep, either. As she looked around, she tried to keep her hands from trembling. Sarelin had said once that she should hold her head high and keep her back straight when she met nobles – like Captain Tromwell riding over the battlefield towards the Rhimese in the Forty Years War. Never quaver, never yield.

“Tell me you have some news, please,” she said.

“I should do, after all the tricks my guards’ve tried. But Brackton says nothing. And the physicians won’t break.” He shook his head. “Even that Rhimese dog, Iffizi, maintains his innocence, and we can’t keep holding them – physicians are no use if their hands are mangled.”

“So we have nothing.”

The last two weeks had slipped by: the funeral in a public prayer-house packed with the common people, four hundred roses placed around Sarelin’s body; the choir singing while she walked towards the casket, head raised; the hours of signing orders that she did not really see, her hand scribbling out her name; and the memorial on the palace lawn, where a few hundred people had offered words of
comfort, holding candles for the gods: while they spoke she had nodded – nodded and given thanks, until her neck was sore.

“I miss her just as much,” Raden said, quietly.

He was smiling sadly at her. The patches under his eyes had darkened.

“You know we can’t talk about what happened.” Lysande dropped her voice.

If she peeled back the skin of grief that had covered her all morning, she could still hear the words she had heard the guards mutter last night. *We’re vulnerable without the Iron Queen.* “If rumours spread, Elira might — ”

“Panic.” Raden nodded. “From the north to the south they’re thinking about Bastillón and Chiam. Can’t say I blame them. I’ll do my best to calm the guards down.” He looked at the steward, who was hovering to her right. “You’ve got other matters to attend to. The advisors are waiting for you in the Oval.”

“The advisors? The queen’s advisors?”

“Do you know of any other advisors, Lysande?”

The women and men closest to the crown. They were sitting upstairs, waiting for *her*, in the Oval. She took the Councillor’s staff from the steward – a heavy, orbed thing made of silver – and tried not to look at Lady Scarbrook, who was staring at her as she passed through to the doorway.

The staircase to the fourth floor curved around in a long arc, its walls lined with portraits of Axiumites of note, and the ascent dampened Lysande’s spirits: the pictures seemed to sneer at her as she passed. There was a distinct disapproval in Captain Prexley’s eye, as if she had no right to disturb his painted repose. Lady Westborough’s face loomed above her, distinguished by a pointed chin. The portrait that made her stop, however, was the one at the top, shining in a silver frame: it stretched almost from ceiling to floor, showing Sarelin in her armour, clutching a dagger in her left hand and a tapestry in her right.

Lysande felt something straining inside her, as if her very flesh was trying to shift from her bones. Her body wanted to throw itself into the frame. It was a flat image. She knew that. And yet knowing that made no difference; the ghost of so much joy was standing in front of her.

She did not need a scholar’s training to recognise that the tapestry in Sarelin’s hand was Elira, the land of many colours, climates and cities, sewn together by one leader; and that the dagger was the one that Sarelin had hurled to strike the first blow on the Mud Field. The position with the blade held high echoed the style
of a famous statue – a model of a warrior who had helped defeat elementals at the
Conquest, called the First Victor – and Lysande had translated the Silver Songs,
from which the story came. It was a marvellous likeness. But then, images and
symbols had been weapons in Sarelin’s armoury, as important as her sword; the
queen’s putting-on of her dented breastplate at every jubilee had shown her that.

She stood before the frame for a long time, staring into Sarelin’s face. Those
blue eyes gazed back at her. When she walked on again she could hear her boots
ringing against the floor of the corridor, steady as a knell.

The Oval was named after its table, a long oval construction of dark wood
that dated back to the first century, and the room was built entirely without windows,
with only a few candles nestled in apertures on the walls. It had the ambience of a
tomb. The oak doors were ajar when she arrived, and she hesitated before pressing
her face to the crack.

Six women and men were sitting around the table, eating and talking, dressed
in emerald robes. The man closest to the doors was reaching for a sugar-dusted
biscuit from one of the many platters.

“Capital,” he was saying, to a woman. “Better than what I had at the Irriqi’s
banquet last month.”

Lysande forced herself to let the shining figure in the painting go. Sarelin
would want her to do her job. She concentrated on the speaker: his face was angled
away from her, but she could make out his close-cropped white curls, and the roll of
neck that bulged out of his collar. The woman he was addressing nodded from
behind a mountain of fruit-cake.

“Better a banquet in Pyrrha than a feast in Valderos. I was stuck in the north
for the last two months. The food up there’s thicker than a Rhimese plot,” she said.
Her shoulders bulged out below a bull-like neck, and the dagger-belt strapped on
over her robe peeked out above the table as she sat up.

To her left, a man sipped a cup of tea with an expression of sincere boredom.
He was the youngest of the group, by at least five years, and his fingers gleamed
with silver rings, his collar almost drooping under the weight of a lavish emerald
brooch.

The thin, cadaverous woman opposite him was holding forth in a nasal drone.

“Pillar of the realm. That’s what the commoners called her. It wasn’t just for
her strength, though, was it – when you take away a pillar, everything comes
crashing down around your ears.” She bristled, and her voice rose to a higher pitch. “It’s not paying the old debts I mind, though. It’s tallying up the new ones. Half a fortune on roses at the funeral, and of course the casket has to be aged oak, can’t possibly be fresh-cut…”

At the far end sat a man that Lysande had never seen: his brown hair was sprinkled with a few strands of grey, but she put him in his mid-forties — around the same age as Sarelin, though less beaten by the elements. His robe was longer-sleeved than the others, and came up to his neck. There was something plain about him: he wore no pins, and he was chewing an almond biscuit with an earnest expression, looking down at his plate. The conversation of the others seemed to wash over him.

“Well,” the woman in the dagger-belt interrupted, cutting off the gaunt woman’s flow, “a Brey was never going to go out on the cheap. King Trichard’s funeral went for half a month.”

She noticed a man further along; a man she had not seen until now. He was peeling an apple, his grey eyes fixed on the knife. With a start, Lysande recognised the nobleman who had fended off the executioner at the palace gate and spoken so curtly to her.

As he looked up, Lysande ducked backwards. Her breathing sounded in her ears. The corridor stretched before her, still empty, but her heart was racing; she held onto one of the doors for a moment, breathing deeply.

When she pressed her eye to the gap between the door and the frame again, the man with the grey eyes was speaking.

“I say her death is a piece of luck. No one could get the warrior-bitch to do a thing she didn’t want. You all know she didn’t listen to a word we said. But we’ve got an opportunity, now, with this orphan girl.”

Lysande had never heard anyone but herself refer to the queen as “Sarelin”; but then, she had never heard anyone refer to her as a “warrior-bitch”, either. Her fist wanted to clench. She watched the man flick a strip of rind onto a saucer.

“What do you mean about an opportunity, Pelory?” The young advisor put down his teacup.

“To take charge of things ourselves. You know the rabble are jittering. Fear can make an advisor very popular. We get this girl to pick an elemental from prison and claim that the woman — or man — plotted to kill the queen.” Lord Pelory — if that
was his name – looked around the table, and his eyes did not smile with his lips.

"Villain caught. Head lopped off."

Lysande was struck by a recollection of Pelory striding away, his robe swirling in the northern breeze.

"Puppeteer Pelory speaks," the woman in the dagger-belt thundered. "Always fiddling, aren't you? Didn't work out so well when you tried to get Queen Sarelin to pick your friend Herkeley for her bed-mate."

"A trivial matter. Only a fool would compare it with politics. And as you're quite aware, Tuchester, Sarelin Brey could not stick to one man any more than she could stick to one bottle of wine."

"Close the doors, will you, Chackery?" the young man said. "I fear the Iron Queen might come back from the halls below and fling her daggers into our stomachs."

Laughter, ringing around the room, and then the sound of one chair squeaking. Lysande had not moved so quickly since she joined in the sprint at the silver jubilee. The doors swung shut; for a few seconds, she could hear nothing but the muffled sound of laughter. When the talk began again, it was impossible to make out the words.

She dropped to her knees. Pressing her ear to the floor, she listened for a moment, but the sound was blocked by the wood.

She counted a minute before getting up and prising the doors apart. The wood moved so gradually that she nearly winced. At any moment they were going to notice. Yet after she had strained for the best part of a minute, a crack formed again. Breathing out, she pressed herself against the door and peered through the gap.

The left half of the table was sniggering and looking at Pelory. The grey-eyed lord only shrugged. "I mean to keep my position. And to keep one's position in this turbulent time, one must keep one's influence with the crown. Do you follow me, Tuchester?"

There was a pause while the others considered his words. The gaunt woman stroked her chin. Pelory peeled another strip of apple, slicing the skin closely with the blade. "Kill a foreigner or elemental, and you'll reap the rewards for life," he said. "Scapegoat is the people's favourite dish."
“What about the cities?” Chackery, the portly man with white hair, leant in. “You speak of opportunities, Pelory. I say the real opportunity is choosing the next monarch. Need I remind you that the Councillor is on her way here?”

“We’ll need to choose one queen or king between us. Steel talks. I’ve walked in the Irriqi of Pyrrha’s armouries.” The woman in the dagger-belt folded her arms. There were nods, and remarks of “true”.

“But steel gives out, against thick stone. The First Sword of Valderos has a castle that’s been battered for decades. Those walls can withstand any siege,” the cadaverous advisor said.

The young man was unmoved. “You can buy swords and build castles, if you have a bank. And in case you’ve forgotten, the Lyrians have the only one in the realm.”

Lysande listened to them with a half-open mouth. They all sounded so assured that the city-rulers would be pieces to be moved around a tactos-board: in fact, Pelory spoke as if the choice of queen or king was a mere formality, to be arranged once they had drawn up a contract and signed it. They were discussing rulers like merchants comparing steel.

The only man not to share their enthusiasm was the earnest-faced stranger at the end of the table. He was following the conversation in silence.

Lysande heard a slap of boots in the corridor, and ducked back from the door again. She leant quickly against the wall. Lifting the Councillor’s staff and examining it nonchalantly, she ignored the pair of maids who rounded the corner; they gave her a glance, and looked at the door of the Oval, but they walked on.

As she returned to the crack, the woman with the dagger-belt was running through a list, tapping each finger on her left hand as she recited each item. “Goring-lance. Scorpion pike. Player’s sword. Incisor. Sun-axe and night throwing axe. Starsword. Queen’s mace.”

“Yes, yes,” Pelory said. “We all know the Irriqi has enough weapons to kill a dragon, and invents a different one every year. The question is, can she rule somewhere outside the jungle? Can she keep order without her guards dropping down from trees?”

The man at the end of the table cleared his throat. “Don’t you think you’re overlooking something very important?”

Pelory’s lip curled. “What would that be, Derset?”
"The scholar: our new Councillor." Lord Derset, whoever he was, ran a hand through his greying hair. "You all seem to think you will be able to control her, but do you not think she will have ideas of her own about who should rule?"

"An orphan's ideas." Chackery scoffed. "Hardly substantial."

"I asked around about the girl, like all of you, I expect," Derset continued. "She was picked out as palace scholar at the age of eight, when Her Majesty happened to be passing through an orphanage. The queen made the girl her particular companion."

"So Sarelin Brey took a liking to her." Pelory's voice cut through the room. "I would sooner have our leader chosen by women and men of blood than by a red-haired whelp of some farmer or cloth-peddler."

"She translated the Silver Songs into modern Eliran when she was ten. I know few women of thirty years who could perform such a feat, Pelory."

Lysande did not mean to enter, but as she leant forward to catch their words, she moved a little too keenly, and her shoulder pressed against the wood. The doors swung open before her.

The advisors scrambled to get to their feet and made their bows; there were cries of "Good morning, Councillor", and "At your pleasure, Councillor" as they recognised the orbed staff in her hand. Chairs scraped on the floor. It would almost have been comical if Lysande had not wanted to disappear. She cleared her throat as she took a few steps forward, trying to give the air of one who had deliberately interrupted a group of royal advisors.

"Please, do not trouble yourselves for me." She raised a hand, motioning to them. "Keep your places."

It had been intended as a courtesy, but as she walked towards the empty chair between the portly man and the ex-captain, she realised that she towered over them now, and suddenly she was not in a rush to sit down. The orb of the Councillor's staff boomed as she placed it upon the table.

"Perhaps you would introduce yourselves," she said.

"Chackery," the portly lord said. "I have the honour to be envoy to Pyrrha and Lyria."

The woman beside him hitched up her dagger-belt. She had the honour to be Lady Tuchester, envoy to Valderos and Rhime, and a former captain of the Axium Guards, Lysande was informed. The cadaverous lady who had complained about
Sarelin’s expenses turned out to be Lady Bowbray, the Treasurer. ("Not that there’s much to treasure about the job.") The young lord with the rings and brooch gave a simpering smile; he bowed low, and introduced himself as the Master of Works and intermediary to the priesthood. Lysande remembered that the queen had referred to Addischild on more than one occasion as the Master of No Works, since, coming from one of the oldest families, he had never laboured on a bridge or a road in his life.

The man with the grey eyes was staring at her. His countenance was glazed, but there was a slight pucker to the corners of his mouth, as if suspicion were about to break forth and crack the glaze. Had Lord Pelory guessed that her entrance had been an accident – that she had been listening outside the door?

“Pelory. Son of Lady Pelory. My role is Master of Laws, Councillor,” he put in, smiling without a hint of geniality. “An intricate job, but one which yields much profit.”

*Especially for you,* Lysande thought, noting the silver stud on each wrist of his robe – a touch that was barely noticeable to the eye. Unlike Addischild’s bulbous jewellery, the studs were of an elegant make, each fashioned in the shape of a crown.

The man with the sober manner rose to his feet and bowed.

“My name is Henrey Derset, Councillor, and I serve as the crown’s envoy to foreign lands,” he said.

“Did you ride a long way to be here, Lord Derset?”

“I was on my way back from Llara in Bastillón when I heard what had passed. My grief sped me onwards, and I offer you my condolences, Councillor.” He inclined his head again. “This loss must be the cruellest of blows, Councillor Prior. Queen Sarelin was a leader to all of us, but to you, I expect, she was more than just a ruler… I have heard some say she was like a mother.”

The sentiment took Lysande by surprise, and her reply caught in her throat. No one aside from Raden had spared a thought for her feelings; they had been more interested in assessing her, and now, she drew in a breath. It would not do to show her emotions, when she had hidden them for so long.

“Thank you Lord Derset,” she managed, after a moment. “Her loss will be felt by us all.”

Derset sat down again, and Lysande busied herself with looking around the table. *Never tremble. Never yield.*
"You are all people of importance, I see, with many roles to play. It would be selfish of me to detain you for long."

"Not at all, Councillor," Pelory interjected. "We wait at your pleasure."

"Well, it would please me to see two matters settled. The executions of elementals must be stopped, until a monarch sits upon the throne. That is the law."

She was not sure when she had made the decision, but the faces of the elementals on the executioner's cart swam back into her mind, and she knew she had decided.

"You may use the abandoned castle near the forest as a jail for any magical people the guards arrest. Prexley Castle, is it not? See that the prisoners are treated like people there – not animals." Pelory's snort was not quite soft enough to pass unheard. "While you do so, doves must be sent to every corner of the realm. The people need to hear that the city-rulers are meeting here tomorrow, or they may fear for their future."

"You ask a lot, Councillor." Addischild eyed her over the rim of his teacup. "Cleaning out the castle and finding staff? Organising guards? These things can't be done with a snap of the fingers. We have to guide you through this banquet, too. And our own affairs don't stall for a feast."

"That is why I must dispense with so many advisors. The matters of the treasury, the laws, our public works and our diplomatic relations; these cannot be neglected on my account. I would not have you taken from your duties to counsel me."

It had the effect she had expected. All the advisors except Derset began protesting at once, babbling over each other, and she had to raise a hand to silence them.

Chackery rose, drawing his quivering bulk up straight. "Miss Prior – Councillor Prior, that is – I have dealt with the Prince of Lyria and the Irriqi of Pyrrha for long enough to know their ways."

"I could say the same of Valderos and Rhime," Lady Tuchester said. "I've spoken with their rulers for years on Queen Sarelín's behalf – the goddess Fortituda keep her."

Lord Addischild coughed disdainfully, and the skeletal Lady Bowbray began her appeal. As the advisors muttered to each other, Lysande looked to Henrey Derset. He had one hand in his hair, rubbing his scalp, and he regarded her with the same sober attention.
"Will you not argue your own merits, Lord Derset?"

Derset shook his head. "I do not seek to sway your judgment. If you would make this decision alone, then it is your right, no doubt."

"You have no advice to offer?"

"I will offer it when I am called to do so, Councillor. I can promise only that."

"Wise words. Yet an advisor’s job is to advise." Pelory smiled his mirthless smile. "Councillor Prior, I can offer an understanding of the laws of Valderos, Lyria, Pyrrha and Rhime, as well as our fine capital. I think you may find that some of the cities have very different practices to ourselves. Different, and savage practices. Do you know what the Valderrans call an execution by ice-bear mauling?" He glanced at Lysande. "Lenience. And these people could rule over Elira. I do not wish for influence or reward, for myself: only to ensure that the crown falls to the most suitable candidate."

Lysande nodded. She had not missed the calculating look on Pelory’s countenance. She let a silence hang over the table as she looked from one face to another; the Councillor’s staff glinted on the table, and she saw herself opening the envelope again; saw Sarelin’s hand on the paper, the letters jutting out across the page to proclaim her Councillor of Elira. She wanted me. Not an envoy, or a treasurer.

"I will take one of you to advise me," she said, "and one only."

"A wise concession," Pelory said, smoothly.

"Lord Derset, stand up."

Derset rose, his eyebrows rising with him.

"I name you as my sole advisor, to meet with me as required, as long as I am Councillor. Someone else will have to take over your normal duties, so see that you choose a good rider who speaks the foreign tongues." She looked around the table. "The rest of you may return to your work without further interruption."

"Councillor, I thank you." Derset bowed. "I would be honoured to aid you."

The mood in the room had shifted in the space of moments. Lord Chackery rose, his arm knocking the table as he moved. The impact sent a shudder through the wood.

"Perhaps you are acting hastily, Councillor." Lady Bowbray’s tone was mild. "If you had more time to reflect; to consider that Queen Sarelin had six advisors..."
Queen Sarelin trusted this decision to me. Besides, you said it yourself, my lady: the Treasurer holds the most important office in Elira. I would not be so selfish to take you from your work, when the realm is changing.”

Bowbray’s mouth opened for a moment; then gathering up her robe, she stormed from the room. Tuchester and Chackery rose too, glaring at Lysande, and made their exits in a swirl of emerald green. She heard Tuchester’s voice echoing off the corridor’s walls, and a door slamming somewhere.

Lord Addischild followed them lazily, shrugging as he passed Lysande. “In all honesty, Councillor, I did not expect much more from you,” he remarked, placing his teacup on the table.

Pelory was last to leave. He stopped a few inches from Lysande, close enough for her to see the scrutiny in his eyes. “I hope your decision serves you well, Councillor,” he said. “I would not want you to regret it.”

He swept through the door, and she let her breath out slowly as he disappeared from sight.

Derset’s cough reminded her that she was not alone.

Standing back for him to leave, she bowed, but Derset stopped beside her. “You are the higher-ranking of us, now, Councillor. You must walk through first.”

Everything in its place. “Your fellow advisors did not stand on ceremony.”

“My fellow advisors have the manners of a troupe of Rhimese monkeys.” He looked down at the floor, barely hiding a smile. “If I may say so, Councillor.”

She returned the smile, and gestured to the door. But Derset’s eyes were fixed on her with something like sympathy. He shifted on the spot. “I expect you have had little privacy since you became Councillor. Forgive me for the impertinence of the suggestion, but I know a place where you might mourn without the steward at your heels.”

Lysande hesitated for a moment. Mourning was one luxury she had not had, with all the duties of the last week. “Very well. Show me to this sanctuary.”

Derset picked up the staff and passed it to her. They walked out, and when he offered his arm, she took it. She tried not to think of the last time she had walked arm-in-arm with Sarelin; the memory remained a wound, and picking it open would not help it to scab.

Her new advisor seemed to pick up on her mood, for he said nothing, leaving her to her thoughts as they walked on. The main building of Axium Palace had many
capacious chambers, and the hallway that passed through the western wing could have taken them to the ballroom or the smaller gallery, yet Derset guided her down a staircase, to a realm she had never ventured into. The guards who stood at the top of the staircase had been among the cruellest where taunts about her birth were concerned. Oxbury and Risset did not say a word now, but their eyes ran over her from top to toe.

They descended several flights, until she guessed they were down among the cells. It was not prison bars that greeted her, however, but a long and narrow corridor, its silver stone stretching as far as she could see.

"Have you ever been to the crypt before, Councillor?" Derset said.
She shook her head.
"I know you were close to Queen Sarelin." He glanced at her. "I thought you might want to say goodbye."
Lysande did not trust herself to speak, so she gripped his arm tighter and walked onwards in silence.

Down, down, into the bowels of the palace; the royal crypt was buried even further below than the cells, and the air was icy against her neck. The unadorned walls led to a single door at the end, whose hinges protested shrilly. They passed into a long room with a low ceiling, its silver stone almost entirely hidden behind slabs of white marble; hundreds and hundreds of squares lined the floor and walls, engraved with capital letters. Lysande recognised the names of advisors and envoys through the ages: a long catalogue of the women and men who had worked for each dynasty. Some of them had helped leaders to rise; others had been instrumental in their falls.

On the right side of the chamber, ten white tombs stood in a line, spaced apart, each several times the size of a commoner's grave and fashioned of thick marble. The statues on top of the headstones loomed over the graves: everything from bells and roses, to a bear with its claws raised, and a pair of stallions, their hooves interlocked. The sculptures bore wounds, most likely from those forty years when Rhime made war on Axium and a group of Rhimese spies broke into the crypt—Lysande noticed that a lion was missing its left paw as well as a large chip from its tail, and one of the roses had lost a thorn.

"This is King Hue Addischild's tomb." She ran a hand over the first headstone, whose eagle monument cast a shadow over the inscription. "This room is old... very old. I would guess it dates back to the construction of the palace."
“It is old indeed. The bones of all the queens and kings of Elira lie here.”
Derset was looking closely at her. “It is also a place where a servant of the crown
might speak without being overheard, if he were commanded to, my lady. These
walls extend ten feet deep.”

“I am no lady, Lord Derset. I have no blood claim.”

“Yet I know that you were the queen’s companion. The woman I knew as the
Iron Queen wasted no affection on those she found unworthy. In fact, I suspected
years ago that she had reason for keeping you close. One day, when we were
meeting over a bottle of wine in her suite, I asked if her young scholar was proving
helpful, having seen you tailing her through the corridors. She told me that the girl
had been useful for her discerning mind, but she had become more fond of laughing
with her – she had decided to train her up so that the girl might one day have a
higher post. Lysande Prior, she said, was like Cognita mixed with Queen Brettelin –
the right combination of wisdom and strength.” He looked into her eyes. “You do
not fawn on your advisors, but nor do you insult those who presume upon you, or fly
into a rage. Queen Sarelin raised you well.”

She almost blushed. Henrey Derset seemed to her like a knight from the old
days – all courtesy and chivalry, but without design.

“If you have advice about my task, I would hear it. No,” she gave him a
smile, “I would command it, if you prefer.”

He bowed. “You must know, my lady, that Queen Sarelin was very dear to
me. What fortune I have, I owe to her. She gave me my position as envoy to the
foreign lands. The news of her death struck me hard; it was as if a shaft had pierced
my side.”

“Queen Sarelin was very dear to me, too.”

“That is why I support you without question.”

Lysande considered telling him that she had heard him defend her in the
Oval, but she felt that admitting to eavesdropping would not be a good way to repay
his trust.

“I must say this now, or I will forever regret it.” His tone turned grave. “You
are going to be dining with these four rulers, and entertaining them. For two days,
you will be surrounded by the ice-bear, the cobra, the spearfish, and the leopard.
What do the four animals of the cities have in common, my lady?”

“They are all beautiful. Symbols of royal grace.”
“Beautiful, yes, but more than that. They can all kill.”

The animals engraved on Sarelin’s silver chalice swam into her mind. She had been gazing at them just minutes before the queen died; yet everything she knew of the cities was distant, filtered through the pages of books, or passed on through Sarelin’s anecdotes. Sarelin had asked her to come with her on trips to the cities, but she had refused, thinking of the sneering faces and upturned noses that would greet her. It was different for a scholar from how it was for a queen. Had she not been reasonable in saying that Axium Forest had always been enough of a journey for her?

“These are dangerous people, my lady,” Derset continued. “Who do you think gains the most from Queen Sarelin’s death? Who profits, in all the realm, by the queen dying without an heir?”

“It did occur to me that one of the city-rulers might have killed her.”

“It is a guess, and only a guess, but I think you would be unwise not to consider it, my lady. Once the word of Queen Sarelin’s hunting accident spread across the country, the city-rulers had an opportunity ripe for the taking. One of them may well have taken it, with poison... it could have been done while the physicians slept. Even men at work grow drowsy after a time. And there are assassins who know the ways of silence, my lady.”

Lysande hesitated for a moment. She thought of Sarelin’s words in her chamber, before that terrible walk in the garden. All of Elira is thinking about my death right now. Valderos, and Lyria, and Pyrrha and Rhime.

“I was always in awe of the Iron Queen, as a boy. I saw her tackle a rebel who tried to stab her in the marketplace – wrestled him to the ground – put her sword right through the man’s belly. Bread flying, wine spilling everywhere, blood running with the wine. No sane person would dare to attack Queen Sarelin, if she was alert. But if she were weakened, by a slash in her side...”

“Lord Derset,” she said, suddenly, “there is something I must tell you, too. Queen Sarelin did not die from her wound.”

It slipped out of her, then: all the events of that horrible morning, from the physicians leaving the suite to the monkey capering amongst the bushes, and the jug of clear pink vivantica. It stripped away something inside her, to voice those memories out loud. She added in the facts she had found in Haxley’s Guide about yellowed-eyed panthers, but left out Sarelin’s last words about the Resistance – those
had been meant for her alone, she was sure. Derset listened in silence. When she had finished telling him of Raden’s efforts to extract a confession from the physicians, he shook his head.

“I doubt the physicians are to blame. They had the jug in their hands, it’s true; but if one of them did it, they had someone guiding them. Someone with much deeper pockets.”

“That was my thinking, too.”

“A physician’s salary is a drabble of coin; not the river needed to buy poison. And it was an exceptionally rare poison, too, almost impossible to find.”

She nodded, relieved that someone could understand at last. “I have puzzled over it for two days, but it makes no sense. Dragonblood cannot be bought in Axium. The records say it disappeared from even the Bastillonian black market after the first century.”

“I knew the queen chose you for a reason.” Derset smiled grimly. “Yes, it is as you say. Dragonblood is gone from every market in the three lands, since the smugglers ran out. Some of the richest ladies and lords in history have offered their fortunes for a small vial, if rumours at court are to be believed, only to find themselves with a false product. In Bastillón, I saw one lady put every trader in her town to the sword when she found out that her purchase was in fact python’s blood, mixed with milk.” He paused. “There are rumours in the East that the last vials of dragonblood were bought by outlanders. I have also heard it said that they were bought by someone who dwells amongst outlanders, across the North Sea.”

Lysande almost wanted to laugh. It sounded so ridiculous: but Henrey Derset was not joking, she could tell.

“Mea Tacitus crawled through the frozen northlands, towards the sea,” she said, repeating a remark she had heard Sarelin utter. “They never found proof that she died.”

“That is so, my lady.”

Her pulse was galloping. “So you think one of the city-rulers may be working as a spy for the White Queen?”

“It is possible. The White Queen may be dead or broken in spirit. The question is, can we afford to assume that she is vanquished, at a time when no monarch sits on the throne?”
Lysande was silent for a long time. She thought of Sarelin jerking on the ground in the rose-garden, and remembered the story she had once recited in the orphanage — about the queen riding into the flames, her hair burning, as the power of the most terrible elemental came to a stop — the legend of the Iron Queen whose will alone had brought down her enemy.

_The poets said she charged out of death’s grasp_, Lysande thought, gazing at the tombs. _But death came back for her, in the end._

“So one of the rulers who will walk into this palace and greet me tomorrow is a traitor,” she said, slowly.

“It may be so.”

“What would you do, Lord Derset, if you were Councillor? How would you know which leader to suspect, and which to make queen or king of Elira?”

His brow creased, along lines that had creased before. “I would observe them, my lady, and note their actions. And never allow them to be alone with each other. I will have the steward order a watch on your door, too — a double watch.”

“There is no need, my lord —”

“There is every need!” He stopped short, and checked himself. “Forgive me, my lady, but I have served as an envoy for years. City-rulers are not to be trusted. Those who plot with elementals are to be trusted even less, and I would not have them harm a finger on your hand.”

Lysande was a little stunned by this speech. If the devotion Derset felt to Sarelin could also be felt for her orphan scholar, it must have been a great devotion indeed. She had opened her mouth to reply when there was a knock at the door.

“I must leave you, with your permission, my lady.” Derset made a low bow.

“I will call on you tomorrow morning, if you send me word.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“For tonight, I hope you will let your mind rest, Councillor Prior. It may seem little comfort, but I promise to protect you while we prepare for this banquet.”

She wanted to cling to him; to thank him profusely; but the knocking had grown more persistent, and there was no time to betray her feelings. Derset made another bow and took his leave. As he went out, a maid came in.

“What is it?” Lysande said.

“The palace steward — my lady — Councillor Prior — he asked me to bring you at once.”
Lysande recognised a skinny little thing called Litany who had once smiled at her in the staff kitchens when the stable-hands had been teasing her about her hair. Litany had stood in front of them and blocked their view.

"I will be with you in a minute, Litany," she promised.

"It’s only that the steward wants to see you now, Councillor."

"Let the steward stew." She gestured to the door. "I will see that he does not punish you. Some goodbyes must be said slowly."

The maid bowed and tiptoed out. As the door closed, Lysande turned to the line of tombs and walked slowly on, past the resting places of Queen Ann Montfolk and King Redmund Chackery. The statues cast shadows on the wall: a lion and a dog; a sculpture of three crowns for King Georde, who had been famous for his lavish decoration of the palace; a shield on Queen Brettelin’s headstone: Sarelin’s grandmother had established a regime of soldierly virtue; her son, Trichard, had been more interested in vice. A poem stretched below his name. She had never thought she would stand beside the monarchs, in a place like this; a girl of no breeding, amongst the crowned dead.

Yet it was the tomb at the far end of the crypt that led her down the chamber, picking up her pace. Dust had not yet settled on its surface. She could see a stone dagger mounted on the headstone, pointing up at the ceiling; and although she knew whose name she would find before she reached the edge of the marble, she bent down to kneel beside it.

Sarelin’s headstone bore no verses, nor any engravings of flowers. There were only four words, carved beneath her name:

*Saviour of the Realm.*

Something wet fell on Lysande’s cheek, and she realised that she was crying at last. The tears flowed out now, faster for having been checked, and she leant down to press her lips to the cold stone.

"Help me, Sarelin," she whispered. "If you’re in the halls below… if there are halls below, as you always said, then guide me through this. You gave me this task."

There was no answer from the tomb.

"Please. Don’t be so damned selfish, Sarelin. I love you."
The words echoed off the stone. She was talking to silent bones, and waiting for a reply.

When she left the crypt, the door swung shut with a bang, stone ringing on stone, and a symphony of echoes followed her into the corridor. Litany averted her eyes quickly from Lysande’s tear-stained face. The air grew warmer with each step they climbed the stairs, yet the chill of the marble slabs in the crypt still lingered; she felt it in her flesh long after she had left the tower.

*Give me strength,* she thought, as she climbed into bed that night. *Just let me do what Sarelin wanted, and get the right ruler on the throne before swords are drawn.*

This time, she slept without dreams. A soft blackness enveloped her until she floated, light as a piece of bark, in the empty air. All the cares that had borne her down were gliding away from her body to somewhere out of sight, until she was passionless; feelingless; drifting on the tide of a sea without sorrow or pain.

When she woke, it was to the sound of horns.
Chapter Four

At dawn, the party from Valderos arrived, waking the palace with a string of blasts that seemed to shake the walls. The Pyrrhans came at ten, and the Rhimese and Lyrians later in the afternoon. None of the city-rulers showed the slightest regard for their instructions to arrive at noon, rolling up to the gates with their carriages and parties as it pleased them.

Rumours flew around the corridors that the Lyrian carriage was decorated with solid gold, and that Prince Fontaine of Rhime had brought some exotic animal in a basket, with strict orders to be handled only by his highness – in case it killed any unfortunate attendants. As Lysande moved through the corridors, she heard snippets of debates about the city-rulers. Boys and girls skittered out of her way. She was not to meet the leaders until the banquet, but she was already hampered with lists, complaints and requests.

"Put the Valderrans in the crown wing, if you please," she told Derset, when they were seated in the Oval, going over the arrangements.

"The Rhimese are meant to go in the crown wing, too, my lady."

"Can they not share it?"

"The last time soldiers from Valderos and Rhime were that close to each other, they were trying to drive swords into each other's necks."

She sighed. "Put the Valderrans in the western tower, then, near the Pyrrhans."

"It would not be wise to put anyone near the Pyrrhans, my lady."

It was a relief to have an advisor to sort out these things; yet even after the city-rulers had been settled in their suites, she had no hope of quiet. She could barely walk down a corridor without bumping into a kitchen-hand carrying a stack of silver plates. Outside her chamber an endless procession tramped up and down the stairs, until she put aside her pages of notes on the city-rulers, took a portion of bread and a handful of plums from the cook, and slipped into the gardens.

A spot of white was moving on the lake. It glided around the far side, and as it came near to where she sat she saw the visor of black atop the beak; the bird was shaking its feathers, rising up, its feet skimming water marbled by sun. She had
watched swans bathing here from time to time, as she ate her breakfast. Something about the way this one puffed out its chest reminded her of someone she knew, and it took a moment for her to realise who it was.

She felt her throat tighten.

Back at her chamber, she walked over the doorstep, and it was as if she was walking in for the first time, flinging open the curtains, and declaring that this was the room she wanted – the one up high, farthest from everyone – and Sarelin was laughing, loud enough for all the tower to hear. “You’re a gem, all right,” the queen said. Then a horse was trotting under her, while strong hands held her waist. Sarelin’s voice instructed her on how to move the reins. She felt the neck move, as the animal neighed. Then the two of them were throwing hazelnuts from the eastern balcony at Lady Wessex and her husband, ducking out of sight when the nobles looked up. And then she was talking steadily to Sarelin, about the old Elira in Cicera’s poems, while the physician pulled a sliver of wood from a tournament lance out of the queen’s side, and a shout echoed off the walls. When the morning came, and the pain was gone, Sarelin’s arms wrapped around her. She closed her eyes again, but not from sadness.

She had to fold those memories away, like pieces of paper in her drawer. There was just enough time left for a trip to the target range. Her first dagger carved the air, soaring into the heart of a straw woman. The next dagger struck the shoulder; but as she found the flow of her practice, she hit the neck, stomach, heart and left lung. Six out of seven. She made a note in her mind to tell Sarelin. She was picturing her queen’s grin, when she remembered that she would never see it again.

She pulled the gold dagger from her belt. The metal felt cool in her hand, and she gazed at the smoothness of the blade, watching the tiny prisms of light caught in the gold. But after a minute had passed, she resheathed it.

Derset joined her as she was pulling the last dagger out of the straw woman, labouring to get the tip free.

“Preparing for our royal company?” He smiled.

“Perhaps.” She yanked the blade out a little harder than she had intended, sending the target wobbling on its stand.

“You don’t complain, but the red streaks in your eyes tell me enough.”

“It still feels like she’ll walk into a room, or clap a hand on my shoulder.” She dropped her voice. “My lord, I keep thinking about what you said to me in the
crypt. None of the city-rulers can be trusted – so what if I pick the wrong one? What if I pick…”

“The one who poisoned the queen?”

Lysande said nothing for a moment, then nodded.

“You must use your judgment carefully, then.” He watched her slide the last dagger into its sheath on her belt. “Make sure that you get to know each prince, and linger with them beyond the dinner. It is customary to provide some entertainment for one’s guests the next morning.”

“What kind of thing do you have in mind?”

“There is a mercenary tournament tomorrow. Prize fighters will compete for a sack of gold in the capital. Terrible people, my lady, and a terrible thing to watch, but all the city-rulers love tournaments. And if you sit with them while you watch the fighting –”

“I will have a chance to observe them.”

“Much more than if they were off revelling in Axium.”

She smiled. “You have a talent for this sort of thing, Lord Derset.”

It did lift her spirits a little, to know that there was at least some chance of getting to know the leaders and deciding, as Sarelin would have wished. When she returned to her room, she found Litany laying out a set of new clothes on the bed.

“Begging your pardon, Councillor,” the maid cried, jumping up, “but the steward says you’re to wear this.”

Lysande eyed the velvety green doublet, the shirt and trousers, and the gleaming crown pin with deep suspicion. Tiny emeralds had been studded onto the neck and shoulders of the doublet. *It could have been worse*, she told herself. *It could have been a gown.*

She nodded, but the girl lingered. “He says I’m to dress you, for the banquet. He says I’m to wait on you at all times while you’re Councillor, to be your proper maid. It’s no trouble,” Litany added, blushing, when Lysande opened her mouth to protest. “I’ve never had the chance to serve a woman of the crown before.”

It was a very curious feeling, having another person strip her clothes off and dress her again. She knew that this was what ladies and lords did every morning, standing like statues so that others could lace their boots; but it was all an uncomfortable fuss, especially with Litany making little noises of consideration. The girl insisted on plaiting her hair and fixing it with little silver crown pins like the one
on her waistcoat, and there was a silver ribbon, too, which Lysande attempted to tie without success.

"You must think me ridiculous," she said, as the maid took it from her and fixed a perfect bow. "A Councillor who doesn't know how to fasten a bow."

"I think you've got better things to do than fuss with ribbons." Litany coloured again. "I think you're brilliant."

Lysande stared at her. The girl's cheeks were still flushed, and she dropped her gaze, busyng herself with powdering Lysande's hands until they bore a strong resemblance to cream puffs.

The Great Hall was buzzing when they arrived, and Lysande felt a squirming in her stomach. She had never seen the room so packed. The four long tables had been separated into two pairs with a wide space left as a walkway down the middle: palace staff and commoners sat on the far left, the captains and senior guards beside them, while on the right side of the walkway all the members of the royal court were decked out in their most lavish jewels. Beyond the long tables, four smaller tables stood empty. Their tablecloths had been sewn with the animal designs of the cities: the ice-bear, the leopard, the cobra and the spearfish.

"Come and fill your goblet in the Hall, tonight," Sarelin had said, once, when the city-rulers arrived for a ball. She had caught glimpses of silk and fur in the corridors, carried by chattering attendants. On the afternoon before the ball, she had peeped into the court-room and seen the descendants of Axium's oldest houses, gathered in groups, inspecting each other's velvet cloaks. She had imagined the eyes fixed on her from every side of the Great Hall — eyes chipping off pieces of her as she walked between the tables — and she had sent her apology.

She could feel those eyes upon her now, digging away at her. One final table loomed at the end of the hall: a thick, oak structure with high-backed chairs, furnished with plates and goblets of solid silver and cutlery embellished with little diamonds. On the upraised platform, six seats had been placed around it: the four city-rulers, Derset, and herself would make up the number.

The high table. On any ordinary day, she could never have worked up the courage to sit there; but since Sarelin had died all the world seemed upside down.

"Oh!" cried Litany, her eyes shining, "look at all those birds, Councillor! Do you not think the steward has done a marvellous job?"
The steward had indeed done a marvellous job, no doubt motivated by the desire to impress the capital’s might on the parties from the rest of Elira. In cages on either side of the high table, green and silver birds were twittering merrily, their fluty song weaving through the hum of talk. The Axium flag fluttered at the back of the room, and a great portrait of Sarelin in her armour had been hung on the long expanse of the right wall – dwarfing the portraits of the other Brey monarchs and making the picture of King Georde Pelory on a horse look like a miniature.

Even the benches were garlanded with green and silver cloth, and adorned with little cushions in the shape of the crown. The sight reminded Lysande of the last time she had seen the real crown of Elira, lying against the grass in the garden of the royal suite, and she looked away. She kept her back straight and her chin firm. Sarelin would not want her to break down. As she made her way down between the benches she saw a familiar group waiting at the end: Chackery’s bulk and Tuchester’s burly frame stood out even from thirty paces; Addischild had put on an over-sized silver brooch that made his chest a blaze of light; and beside him, Lady Bowbray had turned her head determinedly in the direction of the high table, ignoring Lysande. Pelory’s cold eyes followed her from the end of the group.

“Are you nervous, my lady?” he said, as he took his place on her right.

“He smiled. “Of course not.”

“I have scarcely met such honourable ladies and lords.”

“I believe you are to stand in front of us, with Lord Derset and Captain Hartleigh.” Pelory smiled. “What a noble company we will make.”

Raden and Derset seemed to know this already, for they came up to join her. The sight of Derset’s sober attire was somehow reassuring: he was wearing his advisor’s robe, with its high neck and long sleeves, and he had parted his hair to the side, revealing a streak of deep silver that somehow made him look younger.

“He smiled. “If you were not nervous at a time like this, I would think something amiss.”

“I just hope I don’t trip over and fall on my face.” Low-born girls were said to be clumsy: Oxbury and Risset had always been happy to remind her of the fact whenever she passed the western stairs. They were stationed there now. She had checked it, with the steward.
Hundreds of pairs of eyes were turned upon her. It was impossible not to be aware that the great oak doors at the end might open at any minute and reveal the city-rulers, yet with Raden on her left and Derset on her right, she stood firm, wondering if Sarelin would approve. A fanfare of trumpets drowned out the crowd's chatter: the doors opened at last, pushed by two heralds who were sporting emerald jackets embroidered with the silver crown.

"Ushers and heralds," Addischild said, somewhere over her shoulder. "I do like to see things done properly."

Heads turned across the hall as a troupe of musicians marched through, some of them playing brass instruments, others plucking strings, and one or two beating drums. The sound billowed out in a harmony that spoke of silver and gold and treasures from places Lysande had never seen, in cities far beyond Axium. Her fingers tingled.

This is it, she told herself. I am really the Councillor of Elira, now.

She gripped the staff tightly, her hands wrapped around the orb. As the trumpets died away, the musicians began to play a march, and another herald strode down the middle.

"I now present, from our fair city on the delta," the woman shouted, "the jewel of the south, and the true son of the desert..."

"Son of a rich philanderer, more like," Raden whispered.

"...and most radiant Prince of all Lyria, Jale Montignac!"

For a moment, Lysande thought that she must be staring into the sun. So much gold and jewellery erupted from the end doors that she blinked; the candle-light bounced off sapphire earrings and necklaces of solid gold, huge baubles of diamond rings, pendants in the shape of fishes and headpieces set with a rainbow of different jewels. Every type of gold in the realm seemed to be on display. From pale white-gold to the thick, yellow metal from the northern mines, the Lyrians had put on enough ornaments for a party three times their size.

The southerners shimmered as they made their way down the hall; the women's gowns, in particular, were so light and gauzy that they looked like liquid gold, and threatened to slip off their wearers and pool on the floor. Desert clothes, she realised. With white desert skin underneath. She had seen traders from the south in the capital before, but never a big group, and the Lyrians looked queerly uniform. The Silver Songs had informed her that those from southern Elira were descended
from white people before the Conquest, while those from the west came from black ancestors, and those from the north were brown – so why was she so surprised? Perhaps it was because traders came in twos or threes. Not congregations, like this.

The Lyrians were shivering, and looking around with less than pleased expressions.

“Look at their eyes,” she heard Lady Tucheyster whisper, somewhere behind her. “Just like last time.”

As they drew nearer, she saw what the former captain meant. Dark kohl lined the men’s eyes, while the eyelids of the women glimmered in colours to match their jewellery; only such slender and graceful people could have carried off make-up, gold and jewels all at once. They reminded Lysande of the elegant Lyrians from the histories: the singers, dancers, and beauties of fame.

Yet none of them was as beautiful as the boy who marched at their head, a long, gauzy cape trailing from his shoulders. He was blonde and blue-eyed, like Sarelin, but there the similarity ended. This boy was slight, and walked with graceful steps, his wispy hair falling across his forehead. A sapphire ring shone on his hand in the candle-light, sending beams of blue across his features. He could not have been more than seventeen years of age, but despite his youth, he seemed undaunted by the stares – even breaking into a smile as he neared the end of the walkway.

“Councillor, how charming to meet you.” Prince Jale Montignac stopped, and his guards stopped behind him in perfect alignment. “And what a show you’ve put on… birds in cages and everything. The last time I was in Axium Palace, it was as gloomy as your Lady Bowbray.”

Lysande guessed that Bowbray was grimacing sourly somewhere behind her. She suppressed a grin.

“Still,” the prince carried on, “if you ask me, the tables could do with a little more silver. And a lot more gold. There’s nothing like a dash of gold to brighten the mood, we always say in Lyria. We’d have this place drowning in the stuff.”

From anyone else such brashness might have seemed like arrogance, but the smile on the young prince’s face disarmed her.

“We welcome you to the capital, Your Highness,” she said, beaming back. “Jale, please. And I daresay you’re the first person to welcome a Lyrian in fifty years. My father had a habit of stealing people’s wives.” He shook his head. “I
always wondered why he didn’t get invited to more feasts, until I learned he had sampled more than just the fare.”

Bowing with a flourish, he walked on, leading his party to their table. Several noblewomen were leaning across their seats to look at Jale. Whispers broke out across the hall as the southerners took their seats. Lysande could feel her fingers gripping the orb again. People were not looking at her any more.

Derset leaned over to her. “There are four things Lyrians love, or so they say. Eating, drinking, enjoying the arts, and showing off their gold,” he said. “Prince Montignac’s father, Chaléon Montignac, was good at all four of them. A keen fighter, too. There will be big expectations for his son in the delta.”

“You said that he has been on the throne a short time.”

“Just two years, my lady. Since he was fifteen.”

Lysande thought privately that if Jale Montignac had held the biggest city in Elira securely since he was fifteen, he had already achieved rather a lot – but she did not get a chance to say so. Another fanfare of trumpets blared through the hall, drowning her out.

The herald marched back down the walkway and shouted:

“From the snow of the north, I present the son of Raina, slayer of wolves and warriors, and First Sword of Valderos: Dante Dalgēreth!”

If any group could have been more different to the Lyrian delegation, it was striding through the doors now. The Valderrans moved with heavy steps, their longswords at their hips. With strong jaws and dark brown hair, the women and men stood a head taller than most Axiumites, and the fur trim on their coats only seemed to increase their size. Their expressions were so resolute that Lysande wondered if they ever smiled, and as Dante Dalgēreth entered the hall she saw the nobles at the back lean away from the walkway, muttering.

The First Sword of Valderos stood as tall as any of his guards, but his eyes were soulful, offsetting the power of his physique. His fur hung slightly open as he made his way along. Judging by the stares from some of the tables, the women had not failed to notice the skin exposed under the cloak. Yet the northern leader did not linger in the crowd. Two banner-bearers followed him down the hall, carrying the grey ice-bear of Valderos on brown cloth.

As they came close to Lysande, the banner-bearers dropped down onto one knee, and Dante Dalgēreth bent his head.
“The north grieves with you, Councillor,” he said, in a deep and resonant voice. “Queen Sarelin and I had our differences from time to time, I won’t deny it; but she was a just ruler.”

“I thank you, Your Highness.”

“You may count on our support. Valderos does not change its loyalties for profit, you will find.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No matter who you choose as queen or king, so long as they are true to us, the north will be true to them.”

He bowed and marched on past, and the whole pack of Valderrans followed to their table, their boots beating a tattoo on the floor.

“A bit serious, isn’t he?” Raden muttered.

“The Valderrans are not known for their levity. I suppose there’s not much to joke about, when your winters are full of sleet and your blizzards last for weeks,” Derset said drily.

Half the room was talking loudly and pointing at the Valderrans, while the other half were craning their necks for a better view of the Lyrians. Whoever came next, they would have a hard time matching the excitement that the first two princes had caused, Lysande thought, watching some of the slender southerners casting glances at the new guests. The intensity of some of those stares did not put her at ease.

She was studying the cloth of one of the Lyrian gowns – crafted with a southern technique, she suspected, to achieve that diaphanous effect – when she felt pain seize her head. The room blurred and she gripped Raden’s arm.

“My lady?” Derset turned a solicitous gaze on her.

It was as if her skull was being pressed from both sides, threatening to cave in.

“It’s nothing.” She took a deep breath.

“I’ve never seen ‘nothing’ have such an impact,” Raden said.

“It’s just a passing headache, that’s all.”

“I could call for a physician,” Derset suggested.

She shook her head. There was some sense to what he said – headaches were normally splitting pains, not this strange crushing sensation – yet she was aware of
Chackery and Tucheater watching her from one side and Pelory looking from the other.

“That will not be necessary,” she said, letting go and straightening up. “I can manage.”

This time, once the words left her lips, they came curiously true. The crushing sensation at both temples ceased, and her head cleared. The pain had disappeared as swiftly as it came.

She did not have time to contemplate her relief, for the herald was already in the middle of the hall again, and was reading from a piece of parchment.

“From the jungle beyond the mountains, where leopards prowl…”

“She we go,” Raden whispered. “More titles than a Rhimese library.”

“I present the supreme leader of the west, tamer of leopards, and mistress of the purple hills… venerated from Suhai to Neiran, the breaker of bones and winner of fifty-eight tournaments in the Hungry Pit, where warriors fear to tread… the first lady of mist and steam, dangerous by day and lethal by night… ordained by the four gods themselves… the Irriqi of Pyrrha, Cassia Ahl-Hafir!”

The doors rattled. Guests sat up in their seats. The northerners and southerners stopped trading stares. The rattling came again – and again. Someone’s locked the Pyrrhans out, Lysande thought.

She could see Pelory smirking. A hot feeling crept through her cheeks. Everyone was waiting.

Then the doors burst open with a crash, and a mass of people thundered through. Lightly muscled, they wore gowns and billowing pants of a deep purple, the colour of ripe plums against darker skin. There were so many of them that the procession seemed never-ending; walking five-by-five, they could barely fit across the walkway, and the crowd had to lean back to let them pass. Somebody gasped at the back of the hall.

A stir built around the Pyrrhans as they walked, and as they drew closer, Lysande saw its cause: tucked into the belts tied around the men’s waists and slung across the women’s gowns were hundreds of weapons. Some of the swords were hooked or bent at strange angles: there were tiny bows and enormous crossbows with needle-thin arrow-tips, and the jagged edges on the daggers were unlike any Axium blades she had seen. She stared as a man with a curved sword walked past, swinging his blade casually and looking around at the tables.
“Gods below,” Raden said. “If I could get my hands on a hook-sword like that...”

“Don’t think about trying to steal the Irriqi’s. I saw her kill a man at fifty paces in the Pyrrhan court,” Chackery put in.

“I don’t see why she has to call herself ‘Irriqi’. You’d think ‘princess’ was good enough.” Tuchester had leaned across to Bowbray to whisper.

“It’s a traditional title, given to every leader of Pyrrha,” Lysande said. She was conscious that if another remark was made, the Irriqi might hear it – Tuchester’s whisper was another woman’s shout. “The Pyrrhans were the last to accept Axium as the capital. They keep as many of their own customs as possible.”

The woman in the front-and-centre of the guards strode through the tables. She gripped a sword, holding it out just a little, and drew gasps from the crowd. Two hilts were visible at her left hip, and another three at her right; she wore the same long purple gown as the other women, but her forehead shone with a silver band shaped in an upwards ‘V’ that bore an egg-like amethyst surrounded by many smaller purple stones. The silver stood out brilliantly against her black skin. The Pyrrhan leopard on her gown, too, gleamed white against the dark cloth, and Lysande thought the emblem was particularly apt: everything about the Irriqi suggested she could destroy her prey in seconds.

Cassia Ahl-Hafir was not smiling as she approached them. The women and men on either side of her wore equally unimpressed looks.

“So you are the Councillor,” she said.

“I am, Irriqi. Welcome to our fine capital.” Lysande bowed.

“You were close to the queen. I did not see eye-to-eye with Sarelin Brey, as everyone knows... but I respected her.”

“Perhaps you will respect her Councillor, too.”

The words slipped out of her mouth before she could check herself. For a moment she was sure that she would be rebuked, even seized; but the ruler of Pyrrha only gave her a cursory glance.

“We shall all know each other better soon,” she replied, dispassionately.

She led her guards onwards, and the Pyrrhans settled themselves beside the Lyrians, who were turning their heads to look at their new neighbours. Cassia Ahl-Hafir shot a contemptuous glance at Jale Montignac. He turned his back to her and began polishing his ring, chatting away loudly to one of his advisors.
“Well done, my lady,” Derset said.
“I’m surprised I did not pay for my cheek.”
“A little vigour is exactly what the Pyrrhans need. They respect a woman with strength.”
“Hard to tell the difference between strength and a good deal of insolence, sometimes.” Raden was smiling. Behind the advisors, Lysande saw a group of kohl-eyed southerners pointing at the Valderrans and chuckling. She did not like the look of that.

But she was interrupted before she could remark upon it: the herald was coming back up the walkway, her hair bouncing as she ran.
“Excuse me, Councillor, captain... advisors.”
“Is something the matter?” Lysande said.
“It’s the Rhimese party. They’re not here, Councillor. They were meant to arrange themselves in the first chamber while the Pyrrhans made their entrance, but the whole group has disappeared. Prince Fontaine is nowhere to be seen.”

For a moment, Lysande entertained the notion that someone had made an attack on the Rhimese, but she soon dismissed it again – the party might be tarrying on purpose, for all she knew. Raden and Derset were both looking at her.

“Go and search the grounds for them,” she told the herald. “Send a party of guards, if you must.”

The crowd were beginning to stir. Many of them cast glances at the front of the Great Hall. Lysande glanced to her right and saw Pelory watching her, his grey eyes as cold as ever.
“I’m sure they’ll be here in a moment,” Derset said.
“Maybe Prince Fontaine’s gone and jumped into the King’s Lake,” Raden said, evenly.
“We had best hope not, Captain Hartleigh. Even a prince could not survive the water, when the northern winds are blowing down from the mountains.”

The seconds dragged on. In the cavernous hall, the walkway drew all eyes, and the wait was threatening to turn into an incident that would be whispered about for weeks; Pelory looked on the verge of making a remark when a chair scraped at the front of the room, and one of the Valderrans stood up, drawing her sword and brandishing it a Lyrian guard. She let out a stream of curses.
“You dare slander the north? Vindictus strike your children down!”
The man in blue and gold rose to his feet. "Stay your tongue, or I'll cut it out for you!" he said. Within seconds the pair of them were gesturing and shouting at each other, their cheeks flushed. It was impossible to hear every word, but Lysande caught something about skinning ice-bears from the man, and an utterance about gutting southerners in their fancy frocks from the woman, with several others joining in before Raden strode forward. At a nod from him, two Axium Guards strode over and steered each participant back to their seat.

The Lyrian man simmered down after seeing the expression on his guard's face, but the Valderran woman was still holding forth, making a few gestures with her hands that required no translation. The crowd's testiness had turned to lively interest. There was nothing so stimulating as watching one's guests fight, and for a few minutes the hall buzzed with a spirited exchange of views: everyone knew that Lyrians and Valderrans couldn't resolve an argument without shouting and hallooing like warriors on a battlefield. Raina Dalgèreth had been a fierce woman. Her blood flowed in her son's veins. There might be a duel before the meal was through: perhaps a brawl, if they were lucky.

When the boom of the doors rang out again, Lysande looked up. The herald was puffing her way down the walkway again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your patience," she cried. "I present to you the crown prince of our eastern city, master of science and steel, and ruler of all Rhime... Prince Luca Fontaine!"

The tables fell silent. Even the Valderran who had brandished the sword peered toward the doors.

The Lyrians had dazzled the crowd with gold, the Valderrans with furs, and the Pyrrhans with their weapons; yet the Rhimese party marched in with a relaxed air, observing the crowd. Not even the splendour of the Scarbrooks and the Lynsons in their finery seemed to intimidate them. They flowed into the hall: a stream of ink. Lysande saw that they wore black doublets with a red cobra emblazoned upon them, and no jewels, yet they were not entirely without adornment — as the guards and nobles approached, she noticed that some of the captains carried long, curved bows and quivers of silver arrows, as well as swords with rubies on the hilts.

The first group of Rhimese cast disdainful glances at the twittering birds as they filed past to their table. Lysande was half-tempted to ask them to bow.

"Which one of them is Prince Fontaine?" she said to Derset.
“None of them, my lady.”

“What do you mean, none of them?”

“He is not marching in the first group.” Derset’s eyes quickly scanned the faces. “I do not see him in the second, either.”

The third group of did not yield the prince of Rhime. Nor did the fourth cluster. Lysande began to feel unease stir in her stomach. By the time the seventh group of Rhimese had entered the hall, the crowd were talking over the band’s horns and pointing at each party as they passed.

“This is his plan, isn’t it?” Raden scowled as another wave of black walked by them. “He’s going to turn up late, so that everyone’ll be in a frenzy.”

If it was a ploy to excite the crowd, it had certainly worked. By the time the last group passed and cleared the way for Prince Fontaine, the sound had risen to almost a roar, and as the doors opened again it scarcely diminished.

“Finally,” Bowbray remarked, with a sideways glance at Lysande. “One could be forgiven for thinking we had lost control.”

She barely noticed the jibe. Her attention was fixed on the figure coming through the great doors, moving slowly down the walkway.

Prince Luca Fontaine wore only a simple black cloak over a black tunic and trousers, his collar fastened with a single ruby which glittered as he walked. Aside from the stone, there was no other adornment upon him, and his simple attire allowed all the attention to fall on his face. By anyone’s reckoning, it was not the countenance of a hero. Dark-eyed, with luxuriant black hair and pallid skin, he reminded Lysande of a plant that had been grown away from the sun; and there was something very discomfiting about his eyes, which seemed to assess her as they met her gaze, sifting through her thoughts.

This was the man who had taken his mother’s last name, and cast aside that of his father, Prince Marcio Sovrano. He moved with easy strides, making his way at a leisurely pace down the length of the hall – on either side of the walkway the crowd seemed torn between shying away from their new guest and staring openly, murmuring to one another all the while, yet Luca Fontaine did not bother to acknowledge the attention.

“You will forgive me my tardiness,” he said, as he drew to a stop. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Councillor.”
The words came out in Old Rhimese. Lysande stared at him, her mouth slightly open. After a pause, she replied in the same tongue:

“It is a pleasure to welcome you to the capital, Your Highness.”

Luca Fontaine’s left eyebrow lifted. “So you do speak Old Rhimese. I had heard you were fluent in all the old tongues... there’s nothing like seeing for oneself, though.” This time, he spoke in Ancient Pyrrhan.

“Clearly, you are a scholar of languages yourself, Your Highness.” Lysande shifted into Ancient Lyrian. “And clearly, you take an exceptional interest in a mere commoner, to research her background.”

“I wouldn’t say it was common to translate the Silver Songs at the age of ten, would you?” He pronounced the Lyrian ‘e’ with a flawless accent; short and soft. “You should be pleased, Councillor Prior. Your reputation precedes you.”

“As does yours, Your Highness.”

She realised, after she had spoken the words, that such a remark might be horribly unwise to a bastard son – that he would be within his rights to rebuke her publicly. Derset had told her that the prince of Rhime had a maid for a mother, and the whole realm knew it. But there was no petty anger in that look, only a kind of intense interest. Curiosity, she realised, as Luca Fontaine’s eyes bored into her.

“Indeed,” he said, when the pause had stretched for some time, “one is far more resourceful, as a second child. A first child is hauled up the ladder, step by step; but a second child finds his own way. It makes for better stories.” He glanced at the high table. “Now, Councillor, I hope you won’t mind if I bring a friend to dinner. He has so been looking forward to an Axium banquet.”

“We can seat only the city-rulers and ourselves at the high table, Your Highness,” Derset cut in. “Perhaps if you put your friend at the Rhimese table...”

“Oh, Tiberus needs no chair. You need not worry about that.”

The prince lifted the right side of his cloak back with one hand, and there on his shoulder, a pile of smooth, black muscle was shifting and bunching. Lysande did not recognise it at first. It was some sort of animal, she knew; but it was not until the creature reared its head to face her that she felt fear catch in her throat.

Two eyes like drops of blood narrowed, watching her. A pink tongue flicked out and drew back in, and the long body shifted again.

“Is something the matter, Councillor?” Luca inquired.

“Your friend is a cobra.” She spoke more calmly than she felt.
"I see your powers of observation are as sharp as the Iron Queen’s grindstone. You needn’t worry about Tiberus, though; he doesn’t eat much."

All the other advisors had edged back from the snake, leaving Lysande and Derset standing alone. The crowd erupted into a babble of competing voices as they realised what Luca was carrying. The Lyrians were craning their necks, trying to get a better view of the snake, while some of the Pyrrhans had drawn their weapons from their sheaths – including several of the hooked swords.

"Can you keep the snake under control?" Lysande said.

"Of course." Luca stroked the snake’s head. "He is a spitting cobra, but he never spits on the floor; which is more than can be said of the Valderrans." Several of the Rhimese ladies and lords smirked.

"If you can command the animal, you may keep it with you. But I warn you, if it should strike anyone, you will be answerable to the law of Elira, like any citizen," Lysande added.

"I tremble at the thought."

Without further comment, Luca walked onwards and joined the Rhimese table, where his party had left a seat in the very middle of their ranks. To let the most powerful man in Rhime bring a snake to a feast was some kind of madness – but to stand there another minute with hundreds of pairs of eyes on her person seemed like an even worse prospect. Lysande stepped forward and raised the Councillor’s staff.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we make the rulers of our cities welcome in the capital. There will be five courses tonight: one dish each from Lyria, Pyrrha, Valderos, Rhime, and Axium: a taste of the great cities of our land!" she announced.

The musicians struck up a regal air, and the four city-rulers got up from their seats, whilst Lysande and Derset led the way to the high table; Raden busied himself with dispersing his guards, and for a moment there was nothing but the scraping of chairs and the bustle of people moving.

As Derset pulled out Lysande’s chair for her, he leant down by her ear.

"Remember, my lady; the hand behind Queen Sarelin’s murder may be at this table tonight," he whispered.

"I am not likely to forget it."

"I only mean to remind you that the poisoner may sit amongst us."
Lysande watched as the city-rulers seated themselves around her. Dante Dalgereth’s huge frame looked even huger in a high-backed chair. Prince Montignac’s ring glittered in the candle-light, and Cassia Ahl-Hafir had one hand on her sword-hilt as she sat down; while Luca Fontaine’s cobra nestled in to his neck, rubbing its head against his skin.

“Is there something you would have me do, my lord?”

Derset kept his eyes trained ahead as he took his seat beside her.

“If I were you,” he said, “I should keep an eye on my food.”

The first course turned out to be a traditional Axium pie, coated in flaky pastry and decorated with swirls of dark butter-sauce, far more extravagant than anything she had eaten as palace scholar. As the kitchen staff put down dishes of vegetables and began to serve, Lysande wondered if she should make a speech. Sarelin had told her, once, that it was always better to let your guests start a conversation, so you could figure out what they were after before you joined in. But she had not said whether that applied to royal banquets. Maybe there was some kind of ritual she should have looked up; some custom everyone expected her to observe.

The problem was solved for her when Dante Dalgereth leaned across the table to Jale and began speaking like a friend long parted. The blonde boy smiled and laughed, closing the gap between them. Their geniality seemed to break the ice; taking a cue from the high table, the rest of the hall began talk and pour their wine.

Lysande leaned over to Derset, leaving a gap for an attendant to spoon some carrots onto her plate.

“I thought the north and south were ill friends,” she whispered.

“Yes... as that little scuffle reminded everyone. After Chaléon Montignac, Prince Montignac’s father, nearly started a war with Raina Dalgereth, you might expect them to be at odds. Yet whatever their parents’ grudges, they have managed to maintain a peace.”

“You told me this morning that Valderrans and Lyrians do not break bread with each other.”

“That is so, my lady.” He glanced across at the Valderran and the Lyrian, bent together in conversation. “But apparently their leaders do.”

_A mystery_, she thought, watching Dante cut Jale a slice of pie. There was a softness on the First Sword’s face for the first time since he had entered the Great Hall.
Before long, Derset was pulled into conversation with Cassia Ahl-Hafir, politely voicing his approval of Pyrrhan wrestling; and since Lysande had no desire to be left alone in conversation with Luca Fontaine, whose black eyes were making her neck prickle. She summoned her courage, took her spoon and tapped the side of her goblet.

Cassia and Derset ceased talking at once. Dante and Jale had to be tapped on the shoulders, but eventually they stopped.

“You all know why you are here,” Lysande said, with just the slightest tremor in her voice, “so I will not attempt to dress the matter in silver cloth. Queen Sarelin left no heir behind. In the event of her tragic death, it has fallen to me to choose between you for the crown.”

“A tragic death, indeed,” Luca Fontaine remarked.

All heads turned in his direction. The Rhimese prince only wrapped his long fingers around a goblet and gazed back at them nonchalantly.

“Do you mean to suggest something, Fontaine?” Dante said.

“I merely think it unlikely that the woman who defeated the White Army would suddenly expire from an animal’s scratch.”

“And why not?” Cassia demanded. “Was she not mortal, like the rest of us?”

“Sarelin Brey took three blows during the White War. You all know she was stabbed through the ribs with a longsword in the battle on the Mud Field, ripping her side open like a butchered stag. Elemental flames scalded her neck as she charged into the White Queen’s fire. But she survived all that.” Luca looked around the table.

“Ask yourself: if the whole White Army could not finish her, do you really think a panther could?”

There was silence as they all considered this, and Lysande met Luca’s gaze. The smug satisfaction in his eyes was obvious. *He knows,* she realised. *Whether he killed her or not, he knows it was poison.*

“If the queen did not die from a wound,” Dante Dalgéreth said, slowly, “then she was murdered.”

“Excellent reasoning, even for a northerner. I had every confidence you would get there.”

“Very well,” Lysande said, quickly, for Dante looked as if he would like to answer Luca with his sword, “I think we have speculated enough. Forgive me, Your Highnesses, but Sarelin wanted a queen or king on the throne immediately after she
died. Rather than trading words like spice-sellers over the manner of her death, we should be thinking of the realm.”

“Hear, hear,” said Jale, with a reproachful look at Luca.

“Yet as well as reflecting, let tonight’s dinner be a time for joy,” she continued. “Share this fine food, and we Axiumites will share our company.”

Cassia Ahl-Hafir raised her goblet. “To a fine banquet,” she said.

“And to Queen Sarelin,” Dante added.

Lysande felt a tightness in her throat.

“Yes,” she agreed. “To Sarelin.”

They all drank as one. They had scarcely downed their wine before the second course arrived: several great tureens of stew, carried by two men apiece, containing a thick broth of potatoes and something which looked suspiciously like tree-bark but which Dante insisted was a northern delicacy. As it was being ladled out, Cassia leaned over to speak to Lysande.

“You are a scholar by trade, Miss Prior?” she asked.

“Queen Sarelin was kind enough to make me so.”

“You know little of weapons, then?”

“I can throw daggers in the Axium style, Irriqi, but that is all.” She attempted to chew a piece of the bark-like substance, but after a moment, turned her head away and spat it into her hand. “Sarelin trained me. But she always said my quill was my sword.”

“We have three royal armouries in Pyrrha, each the size of this hall.” Cassia gestured at the room. “We have five hundred bows, and eighty different types of sword, and a whole wall for shields.”

“That is beyond my imagining, indeed.”

“When I took back the throne from Mukiri the Gold-Fingered, I made sure that Pyrrhan money would really go to our defence. Our city is the cradle of invention, you know... they say a Pyrrhan with a stick can make a sword.” She tapped one of the hilts at her hip, as if for emphasis. “If you ever come west of the hills and into the jungle, I will show you around our armouries myself.”

“That is too much honour, Irriqi.”

“I have five longswords from the ancient era – one from Kharain, two from Qaffar, one each from Hiraz and Jiddalah. All Pyrrhan steel. All used in real battles or duels.”
“Formidable blades, I expect.”

“They are yours, Councillor, if you choose to have them.”

Lysande did not know what to say, so she stammered out a quick thanks. She had never been given so much as a visit by the ladies and lords of Axium, let alone a gift. As Cassia called for another goblet of wine, she felt a gentle nudge at her elbow.

“Eighty types of sword.” Derset was wearing a wry smile. “That is quite something.”

“She certainly loves her weaponry. But why she offers me five ancient swords…”

“It is what we call a bribe, my lady.” At her expression, he grinned. “Come, now, do not look so surprised.”

“I am meant to be judging her as a leader!”

“The Irriqi believes that one who can defend the crown is most worthy to wear it. It is not an altogether foolish idea.” He placed his hand lightly on her arm. “I expect you will be a popular woman before the night is through.”

The stew was cleared away, and the Lyrian course came out: plates of pale yellow noodles, still steaming from the griddle, and garnished with little red flakes in the middle. Jale Montignac insisted on serving them, much to the table’s amusement. “This is no bland forest-food, or drab dish from the mountains: this is the splendour of the south,” he proclaimed. “Hot, like the sands and sun.”

Lysande reached for her fork, but found that it had disappeared. In its place, the staff had quietly put two long, silver sticks, honed at the ends. She picked one up, and a smile spread across her face.

“I still can’t believe these are for eating,” Dante said, prodding a stick.

“Charsticks,” Lysande said, with delight. “Named after Princess Charine Orvergne, who ruled Lyria in the second century. She invented the duel, and reformed the eating of noodles forever.”

“You do know your history.” Jale grinned. “You hold charsticks with your forefinger, like so… and grip with your thumb.”

None of them were particularly good at mastering the silver sticks, but they managed to pinch their noodles between them eventually, finding great amusement in the process of doing so. Only Cassia sniffed and cast a haughty stare at her pair of charsticks.

“It is vulgar to eat with sticks,” she said, to no one in particular.
“I would sooner eat with sticks than with my hands, like a Pyrrhan.” Jale smiled sweetly. “Of course, a barbarian might find them difficult to handle.”

“Your father liked to throw around the word ‘barbarian’. He did not think himself so witty after we cornered him at Flemency.”

Derset asked Cassia to pass him the butter-dish and immediately engaged her with questions about Pyrrha, keeping up a steady flow; Lysande turned her attention to Jale, who cheerfully launched into a description of the most elegant dances of Lyria: the sapphire waltz, the stately passedanse, and the quatre-lignes, which could only be performed with four lines of couples. When he had exhausted the subject of the lively lyrianesque, he turned and whistled to the Lyrian party.

A pair of men, their shirts almost transparent in the candle-light, set a golden box down beside Lysande. It thumped on the table. Peering down, she saw that its sides were encrusted with dozens of sapphires.

“For you, Councillor,” Jale said. “A little token of Lyria’s support.”

She could barely lift the lid. Wondering what he had brought that weighed so heavily, she opened it with both hands. Slabs of gold winked at her from the inside — at least twenty bars, gleaming in neat rows.

“Enough to buy a proper gown, I should think,” Jale said, casting a glance at Lysande’s doublet.

“Your Highness, I cannot accept this.” There was more gold in that box than all the coin she had possessed in her life. The thought of touching it was dizzying. “To give away something so rare, to one who only holds a short office…”

“Rare in Axium, perhaps. On the delta, we have plenty of gold.”

“But to bestow it on me…”

“On the capital, Councillor.” His pretty smile turned fox-like. “We can spare plenty for Axium’s first lady — and nothing glitters quite like a dash of gold, does it?”

She gave the slightest nod, and returned the lid to its position.

Dante Dalgêreth was the next prince to engage her in conversation, and while he might have appeared like a strong and silent warrior, Lysande saw quickly how foolish her first impression had been: the First Sword of Valderos could rise to the same heights of eloquence as the others when he spoke of quarrying in the northern mines, or the hymn-singing in the prayer-houses of the north. His tale of a northern blizzard that lasted for a fortnight, covering Valderos in a shroud of pure white, was
beautiful and terrifying all at once. When the Rhimese course was brought to the table, however, Lysande forgot her interest in glacier walls.

Had there ever been a meal like this at an Axium table? An oval dish in the middle bore a wheel of flat bread topped with tomatoes, baked cheese, pumpkin, and all kinds of herbs and spices; and the colours made an exquisite harmony, carefully arranged to complement each other. Around it, a ring of smaller dishes held fine cheeses streaked with blue veins or crusted with pure white rind; cured vegetables sparkling in brine; fresh bread with a thick crust, garnished with salt and oil; and dollops of yellow butter. Yet it was the final ring of dishes, filled with gleaming black olives, that made her lean forward and let out a gasp.

"Rhimese olives!" she cried, picking up one of the little dishes. "These are prodigiously rare."

"They are," Luca said, looking at her over his wine.

"Olive are much coveted in the capital, Your Highness. If Rhime would trade them outside of its own city, our lords would probably buy them all within a week."

"If Rhime traded more freely, the Rhimese would not make so much profit," Dante said, with a glare at Luca.

"Making next to no profit is Valderos's speciality." Luca Fontaine stroked Tiberus' head. "I shouldn't like to tread on your territory."

"You're a clever man, Fontaine."

"From you, I suppose that's an insult."


"I suppose a blade is indispensable, for those who lack wit."

Dante looked as if he would like to make another retort, but he glowered and said no more. As the buzz of conversation began again, he turned back to Lysande.

"Do you know why the common folk call Fontaine the 'red prince', Councillor Prior?"

"I do not believe so, First Sword."

"Luca Fontaine murdered his brother. The whole realm knows. It is said that he stabbed him so hard that the blood spurted from his body, staining Fontaine's face and hands... when his father found him, his shirt was drenched so that it looked like it had been painted red." Dante's voice gave the word red a deep resonance, but it
was just low enough not to carry to the rest of the table. “That kind of picture rests in the mind.”

“You tell me this purely for the good of Elira, I presume.”

“Do you really want a man like Luca Fontaine on the throne?”

“That depends.” She studied Dante closely. “How do you describe ‘a man like Luca Fontaine?’”

“Unnatural. That’s how I describe him.” Dante’s eyes spat fire. “He spends half his time locked up in his castle in Rhime, inventing things and looking at formulas... all sorts of queer habits, our envoys say. Keeps a huge library just for himself, like a damned scholar – begging your pardon of course, Councillor, but he doesn’t hunt or ride out like a prince should. Any man who carries a snake around cannot be well in the head.”

Across the table, she saw Luca feed an olive to Tiberus from the palm of his hand. As he looked up, his gaze sliced through her again.

“I understand that Valderos and Rhime are not friends.” She kept her voice low. “But I mean to consider the whole realm in deciding the next ruler, as Sarelin would have wanted.”

“Only you can choose who is fit to wear the crown. Cognita be your guide.” He bowed his head slightly. “But I promise that if the task should fall on me, you will never have cause to regret your choice.”

“I thank you, Your Highness.”

“In the north, our word is our bond.”

That much was true, she reflected, as the attendants began to clear away the dishes. Dante Dalgereth was probably the most serious of the lot. *That did not stop him from trying to impress his own merits upon me, though... and criticising Luca Fontaine.* It was still an attempt at persuasion, despite being a different kind to offering ancient swords or sapphire-coated boxes.

The next course arrived in a stream of dishes, and whispers flew around the table – had there been a mistake? Why were there more than twenty plates? And why were they dotted around the table, instead of lined up in one row? The mystery was solved when Cassia explained that a traditional Pyrrhan dessert was served in many small pieces, each of which was to be swapped from place to place before it was uncovered.
“We must all trade plates,” she ordered, pushing a plate to Derset. “It is a symbol of unity. My neighbour who shares my food is my sister, or my brother.”

“How fitting,” Luca said. “We are such a united party.”

Lysande pushed her plate over to him. Soon they were all sending plates back and forth. Her own dessert turned out to be a slice of yellow cake soaked in wine; the others had colourful sweets that smelled like rose-water, pastries drizzled with honey, and dark balls of buttery chocolate filled with coconut cream; there was nothing but chewing for a minute as they devoured the food, the rich sweetness of it lulling them all into silence.

She was nearly ready to take a second plate and set to work on a chocolate truffle when Cassia began to cough.

Heads turned, and Derset rose from his seat. The Irriqi rose, too, spluttering so loudly that all the crowd looked over.

Lysande put down her cake-fork. “Are you all right, Irriqi?”

Cassia was making gargling noises now. She strained for air. The Pyrrhans were getting up, staring at their leader – yet they hesitated, as if they did not dare to come and touch her.

Lysande did not pause to consider propriety. She rushed to wrap her hands around Cassia’s body and heaved her upwards under her ribs, as she had once seen a huntsman do to a stable-boy when he was choking on a bone. Cassia’s chest convulsed under her hands. The Irriqi gripped the table, pulling at the silver cloth – time seemed to stop as she hacked and spluttered, and Lysande wondered if she might well die in her arms.

Then Cassia shuddered – gave one final hack – and spat out something into her palm.

The others rushed to the end of the table, all shouting over each other, clustering around the Pyrrhan ruler.

“Gods be good,” Dante was saying. “You could have died.”

“It’d be awful timing, dying in the middle of dessert.” Jale did not sound terribly concerned.

People were standing up, staring in the direction of the city-table. Some of the Axium Guards were hovering near the high table; the Pyrrhans stood beside them, offering help to the Irriqi, and thanking the goddess Cognita for her life. Voices buzzed through the hall. Lysande was watching Cassia, even while the crowd
argued around them. The Irriqi’s chest was still rising and falling forcefully, but she had regained her composure.

“Someone is baking with money, it seems.” Cassia held out her palm and Lysande squinted at the little piece of metal. It was tiny – so small that it had easily fit inside the cake – and there was an even tinier carving on the surface.

Behind them, the Axium Guards moved back a few paces.

“It’s not a coin,” Lysande said, pointing to the object in Cassia’s hand.

“There’s no Eliran crest. Only a picture.”

They all bent their heads to look at it, but only Luca nodded in recognition.

“A silent sword,” he said.

“A what?” Cassia asked.

“A silent sword. A little piece of metal to be slipped into the food of one’s enemy: just small enough that they will swallow it, but large enough to make them choke. They were named after the group of trained assassins – the Silent Swords of the Steelsong era – because they kill so swiftly, and leave no sign.”

“Rhime and Axium used to use them, before the unification of Elira,” Lysande said. She was thinking of the weapons chapter in the History of the Conquest. “They are carved with the symbol of the ruler that made them – a crown for Axium, and a cobra for Rhime, to show the killer’s loyalty.”

Over Jale’s head, she saw that Raden was looking at her. She gestured with the back of her hand to move. He turned to the Axium Guards, sending them back to their places, and chivvying the Pyrrhans away.

“Seems pretty clumsy. Assassinate someone, then accidentally let on who’s done it,” Jale said.

“Accidentally?” Luca shook his head. “No. A silent sword is meant to be found. It’s a warning. A message of intimidation, from the killer.”

They all leaned down to peer at Cassia’s palm. The picture on the silent sword was just discernible, etched on the metal. It showed a beast with a dog-like jaw, a large body topped by a pair of wings, and a tail trailing behind: not a wolf, nor a bird, nor a serpent, but something of all three.

There had been a picture of an animal like that in the History of the Conquest, too, beside the description of the worst massacre in Eliran history. But Lysande had read, on the same page, that there had been no such beasts for four hundred years.
“Who uses a silent sword with a dragon on it?” Cassia said, taking the piece of metal between her thumb and finger.

No one answered. The word ‘dragon’ seemed to hang in the air.

“I am afraid I do not know, Irriqi,” Lysande said at last. “As I said, I have never heard of this kind.”

“I have.”

They all looked up at Luca Fontaine. This time, there was no trace of amusement in his mouth. His black eyes were thoughtful, fixed on the silent sword.

“One such piece was used to kill a nobleman in Rhime, twenty-three years ago,” he said. “They dug it out of his body with a knife and took it to my dear father. He never found the killer, but he kept the silent sword in his private vault. He was convinced that if the enemy kept records and files of evidence, we should, too.”

“No one would willingly take a dragon as their symbol,” Jale said.

“One would. The same person then as now.” Luca looked back at him. “The one who styles herself as leader of the elementals. The woman who wanted Sarelin Brey dead above all other things.”

“The White Queen,” Lysande said.

A story Sarelin had told her of the White War leapt into her head. Two weeks after declaring war, the White Queen brought her army to a town east of Axium called Sacton, where she stood outside the ramparts and shouted for the lord and lady of the town to surrender. A messenger from Sacton rode out, and was given a scroll bearing the White Army’s promise of surrender.

When she entered the town, Mea Tacitus showed the lord and lady a certain kind of mercy. She roasted them alive with a jet of flame from her palm, killing them in seconds. They did not live to see soldiers run through their streets, murdering and pillaging, slitting the necks of any of the guards who tried to stand in their way.

One little boy was left to decorate the archway of a prayer-house after the soldiers had riddled him with arrows. Legend had it that the White Queen took an axe from one of her captains – an old weapon, and small – and placed it between the child’s teeth. While the blood was still dripping down the boy’s chest, she took a piece of ribbon from a dead woman’s hairpiece and tied a bow around his neck.

“An iron gift,” she announced, to the two citizens of Sacton left standing. “Send it to your Iron Queen.”
Lysande remembered the dark fury on Sarelin’s face when she had repeated the remark. It had made her shiver, even beside the fire in the queen’s suite. A grudge between two women who made the world tremble would end only when one of them was gone – the work of the White War finally complete.

If the White Queen was attacking the Council, however, Sarelin’s death had not just been the end of a twenty-five-year grudge. It was part of a much bigger game. One that the White Queen had designed for something more than revenge.

_And one of these rulers is helping her play._

She watched as Cassia dropped the silent sword on the table. The dragon span, and span, and span, and landed face-up, gleaming in the light.
Chapter Five

The carriage turned out of the silver walls of the city centre and into the northern road, spattering mud across the carts beside it. Through the streets of the grocers’ district and into the northern square, hawkers pushed loads of vegetables, cart-wheels rattling over cobbled stone, making a jolting progress through the capital. Lysande took in the drooping heads of their cabbages and the leafy tops of their carrots without really seeing them at all; she was thinking of the places she would walk in the palace grounds, tomorrow, when all this was over.

“You must be tired, my lady,” Derset said, from the opposite seat.

“It is you who should be tired, my lord. You work so industriously.”

“Not as industriously as your maid, I fear.” He pointed at the window. “But I have had good news. The other advisors sent their apologies, last night, and promised to report to you. Lady Bowbray wished me to deliver some flowers to your chamber.”

“Flowers? I see.” If Bowbray was sending roses, there was a good chance she had dipped the petals in poison.

But she let that thought go. The horses had stopped, and as they climbed out of the carriage, she was waylaid by Litany fussing over her hair and smoothing down her doublet while warning her about crumpling the velvet. She mumbled a reply: she was already staring ahead at the vast wall curving before them, so tall and wide that it dominated the very sky.

“The Arena,” she said, tilting her head back.

“Indeed, my lady.” Derset came over to her side. “This is the oldest fighting ring in Elira.”

“I heard Sarelin speak of this place many times.”

“It has seen more duels than the Plateau in Valderos. The Canduccis and the Malsantes of Rhime fought each other here, thirty years after the calendar was made.”

“— in the Pre-Classical Period.”

“I see there is no need to explain.”
Her eyes followed the form of the circular wall, stark and bone-white against the grey of the clouds; behind it would lie a ring of sand – the most famous ring of sand in Axium – in which warriors had cut each other to pieces and pierced each other with arrows. Some fought in the name of honour, others for duty, but most frequently, the prize-fighters came for gold.

“I did not expect it to look so beautiful,” she said.

“All theatres of death are beautiful, my lady.” Dersef’s smile turned wry.

“That is the tragedy of them.”

The sound of voices carried just to where they stood, muffled slightly by the stone. A wave of shouts and cries rolled over the curved wall, and with every step they took down the path, the noise grew louder. By the time they reached the base of the Arena, the clamour had built to a roar, and Lysande paused before the door.

“The audience arrived some half-hour ago.” Derset placed a hand on her shoulder. “Judging by that sound, I would say they are waiting for blood.”

She hesitated on the step, looking at the door.

“We had best go in, my lady. The crowd are not accustomed to waiting.”

Gathering her spirits, she gave the knob a push. The sound on the other side hit her so hard that she stood, gaping. Twenty tiers of white stone loomed above her, packed with so many people that it looked as if the railings might burst and spill them out onto the sand – commoners, judging by the lack of silver or pearls amongst them. They jostled and pointed, their faces flushed, most of them dressed in dilapidated cloaks and jackets; peering over the rails and down at the ring, in her direction.

*Waiting for blood.* The shouts of the women and men on her right filled her ears.

On the other side of the sand she could see the city-rulers, sitting in a kind of stone box half-way up the tiers, their followers making a patchwork behind them. The bright purple and white of the Pyrrhans was embroidered beside the blue and gold of Lyria, then the softer grey and brown of Valderos, and finally, the black and red of Rhime. A patch of silver and emerald told her that a party of Axium Guards was also waiting for her. It was a relief, in some small measure, to see the blaze of their armour.

“Did I ever tell you that I am a third child, my lady?” Derset asked, as she stood there, staring out across the sandy circle of the ring.
"I don't believe so."

"No one in my family expected much of me. Honours were bestowed upon my sister and brother – she was the mistress of the family arms, he the bearer of the crest – but I had to work my way up in the service of the crown. There was no one to teach me how to face a room full of nobles. So I taught myself.” He placed a hand upon her shoulder again, and gave her a gentle smile. “You can learn to stand before crowds, Lysande. Even to like it.”

It was the first time he had used her name. She met his gaze, and felt the squeeze of his hand.

"We must cross the ring,” he said. “The city-rulers are waiting for us.”

It was not the distance that daunted her as she stepped onto the sand, nor even the crowd baying for blood. It was the sight of the figures dotted around the arena – the steel-clad warriors as large as Dante Dalgëreth, in helms that came down to their shoulders, leaving only a slit for the eyes. Some of the helms had curved horns, or beaks of solid steel like eagles or vultures; their wearers stood with their legs apart, dangling their weapons at their sides, swords and maces and bows gleaming in the morning sun.

"These must be the prize-fighters,” she said, wrenching her eyes from a mace.

"Indeed, my lady; these soldiers will compete today.”

"I know little of fighting. Is it not considered dishonourable to cover one’s face?"

"These are mercenaries, my lady. They serve no lord or prince.” Derset smiled grimly. “Half of them will die in front of us, slain by their opponents. Their only aim is to take home the sack of gold at the end, and spend it in the leisure quarter.”

The sound of the crowd raged louder and louder around them. To Lysande it seemed to take an age before they reached the far end of the sand, but at last, she set one foot on the stairs that led up to the box and began to climb.

Half-way up, Litany turned to join the commoners, but Lysande called out: "Up here, Litany!"

"In the box, Councillor Prior?"

"Certainly, in the box. If I must have a maid to serve me, I will at least see her sit beside me and enjoy the view. And you can call me Lysande.”
Litany flushed and hastily returned to the stairs. They climbed the rest of the way together, puffing up the steep incline.

The city-rulers were gathered by the railing at the top, arrayed in just as much finery as last night: Dante Dalgëreth’s jacket was leaning forward, a mountain of grey fur, watching the fighters. Beside him, Cassia stood resplendent in a white gown with two hooked swords at the hip, fiddling with her necklace. It was hung with white leopards carved out of ivory, and she did not look pleased that light was bouncing off it from the clothes of the youngest prince on her right – Jale appeared to be glowing. As Lysande came nearer, she saw that this was due to the fact that he seemed to have put on half of the Lyrian treasury, in a long jacket of gold cloth, and a shirt studded with little sapphires in the shape of spearfish. Yet next to all this display, Luca Fontaine wore the same plain black cloak with the single ruby nestled at his collar.

Lysande was relieved to see no sign of scales glinting on his shoulder. A cobra crawling over the seats was the last thing she needed, with the thought of the traitor weighing on her mind.

As she led Derset and Litany into the box a man stepped out from behind the leaders, his doublet sparkling with jewelled pins.

“Good morning, Councillor,” he said, moving to meet her. “My name is Wilham Flocke – Master of the Arena.”

“A pleasure, sir.” He could have been Pelory’s cousin, with that unctuous smile.

“We have an even bigger crowd than usual today.” Flocke gestured out at the packed tiers. “A real throng, ready for a real fight.”

“Nothing like a bit of blood to get a good turnout,” Jale said, cheerfully.

“Indeed, Your Highness. There will be four rounds today, to honour the four gods.”

Religion and bloodshed, Lysande thought, looking down at the mercenaries in their helms. No wonder Sarelin liked tournaments so much.

“We have clear rules, in the capital,” Flocke continued. “Fighters must compete one-on-one. They must both use the same weapon – a sword against a sword, and a bow against a bow, and so on.” He turned and pointed to a woman in an emerald jacket holding an enormous timepiece with two hands fashioned out of silver – Axium’s first device to rival Rhimese invention – in the bottom tier. “You
see our timekeeper there, Councillor Prior? The fighter who kills their opponent in the quickest time today will take home the prize: some two hundred gold cadres.”

“Is there no final round?” Dante asked.

“We do not continue to play the fighters off against each other... that would risk drying up our stream.”

“And you let the crowd make such a noise?” Cassia glared at a group of commoners below them.

“Our mercenaries are veterans of many fights, Irriqi. They are accustomed to the pressure,” Flocke said.

*Pressure.* That was it. If she could put pressure on the city-rulers, somehow, the traitor might make another move. Lysande looked down at the ring, her mind working furiously.

“There will be a change of plans,” she said, cutting across Flocke.

The city-rulers turned to her. Even Derset raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to cancel the tournament, Councillor,” Dante said.

“No, the tournament will go ahead. But you will be doing the fighting.”

The silence lasted for longer than even she had anticipated. Lysande was wondering if she was about to be reproached, or even threatened, when Luca Fontaine laughed.

“What a marvellous idea,” he said, lazily. “We can put Dante in the ring. I’ve always wondered if he can swing that sword he likes so much.”

“You will be fighting too, Prince Fontaine.” She looked around the group, taking in the full range of expressions. “Whoever receives the crown of Elira should be able to defend herself – or himself – since we cannot have our next ruler killed after taking the throne. And what better way to show me your skills than by fighting in a tournament?”

If there was anywhere the city-rulers would feel pressure, it was in the middle of that sand below. Would Sarelin have agreed? With the roar of the crowd in their ears they might be driven to compete – and the traitor among them might see an opportunity to strike.

“A tournament with royalty.” Flocke looked as if he were about to rub his hands together. “There was such an event in the Triumphal Era... on the Plateau in
Valderos, if I am not mistaken. I think our crowd would relish the sight of their leaders in the ring.”

“We can’t fight each other, surely,” Jale said, glancing quickly at Dante.

“You would fight a mercenary, Your Highness.” She had thought that bit out, too. “Each of you could choose your favoured weapon, and Master Flocke would find a fighter who has trained with it, too. You would be allowed to yield, of course, if you do not wish to fight to the death.”

“Yielding is for children.” Dante’s eyes were blazing. “I will be happy to take up arms in the ring.”

The others did not protest, and even though Jale said that it sounded like a preposterous idea, he added that he was only debating the principle – he would certainly be fighting. The Irriqi smiled. Lysande turned to Luca, who only shrugged.

“Far be it from me to refuse,” he said. “I don’t often get a chance to beat Valderos, Lyria, and Pyrrha in the same morning.”

“The matter is agreed, then,” Lysande said. “Let the preparations begin.”

Flocke sent a messenger running for a bag and sticks, and they drew lots; Dante was to fight first, followed by Jale, Cassia, and finally Luca, trailing the others yet again. As the messengers ran around the tiers of seats, spreading the word of this new development, the crowd’s roar swelled ever greater.

“You should have charged them double,” Jale said, eyeing Flocke. “They’re getting royalty into the bargain.”

As Dante went over to the Valderran party to put on his armour, the rest of them made themselves comfortable for the first bout: Litany seated herself on Lysande’s left, smiling nervously; but before Derset could take the chair on her right, Luca Fontaine approached it. As he sat down beside her, she was conscious of the proximity between them; of the way that he leant back in his seat and studied her, from inches away.

“You surprise me, Prior,” he said.

“Call me Lysande, please.”

“I must confess, Prior, that when I heard that the queen’s Councillor was the palace scholar, I thought you might be...”

“Low-born?”

“Impractical. Highly intelligent, but with no notion of applying that intelligence to anything outside a book. I see that I was wrong.”
She looked out at the crowd, avoiding his stare. “You find me lacking in wits, Your Highness?”

“On the contrary. I think that you have applied your wits very well. You would have us believe that you intend to judge our fighting skills, but you really mean to put weapons in our hands and see if we turn fair or foul. It is the work of a moment to dip a sword in poison, or sneak an extra dagger in beneath an arm-guard.”

Lysande returned his gaze with all the equanimity she could muster.

“I wonder why you choose to sit beside me, Fontaine.” Two can play at that name game. “If you mean to win me over, you may find it difficult; I may be of little means, but I do not sell my allegiance for a gilded gift.”

“Have I brought a box of gold bars, perhaps? Or do I have eighty different types of sword in my armoury?” He smirked. “That would be inelegant, and more importantly, ineffective: I do not take you for the kind of orphan who is flattered by baubles and trinkets.”

“There are many kinds of orphan?”

“Oh, an infinite number, Prior. Some quite ordinary, and others layered, like a star-fruit. You have to peel back the hard skin to get to the flesh inside.”

“It is the same with princes, I suspect.”

Dante had climbed down into the arena, to thunderous applause. Lysande saw his armour glinting: a thick suit of steel plates, with a shield that could have stopped a battering ram. His powerful frame looked even bigger in the plating. Many of the audience were standing up to cheer.

“Do you know why the White Queen is so dangerous, Prior?” Luca said, quietly.

She looked back at him. A lock of his black hair had fallen over his brow, but his queer, pallid face gave nothing away.

“Because she can move one of the elements, I suppose,” she replied.

“You mean fire, or water, or wind? Those are mere physical forces. Fire can be quenched with water, and water can be stopped with stone; even wind can be held back, when a fortress is strong enough. And once you clap tempero cuffs on an elemental, those powers are trapped, as Sarelin Brey knew.” He leaned slightly closer to her. “But there are other powers, Prior. Some magical people are born with what they call powers of the mind.”

“Such as what?”
"The ability to read thoughts. The power to read dreams, or feelings. You have seen these things hinted at in the old poems, no doubt."

She nodded.

"Well, the White Queen has a rarer talent yet. She can control the minds of others – ruling their thoughts and making them do exactly as she bids. At a close range, of course, or I dare say we would all be dead by now... but nonetheless, it puts her beyond compare."

Lysande could not help thinking of a tale Sarelin had told her about a lord who slew himself in a public theatre. The man had defeated a number of the White Queen’s captains outside a little eastern town, during the war, and had survived the conflict. He had married and raised two sons after the war, with a comfortable estate and a loving wife; indeed, he had seemed to have been blessed with every possible felicity. No one had ever understood why he fell on his own sword.

"That would be power beyond measure," she said, slowly. "To control another’s wishes."

"Indeed. The mind is the most valuable thing we have. To yield your mind to another is to lose the very thing that makes you... yourself."

One of Derset’s remarks before the banquet came back to her. The prince of Rhime has a love of scholarship. They say he keeps a library of ten thousand volumes. Hadn’t Dante Dalgéreth said that Luca Fontaine spent all his time holed up in his castle, working on inventions?

"You value the mind, then," she said, slowly.

"Do you know the motto of Rhime, Prior?"

The crest of the eastern city was a red cobra on black... she had seen it on some of Sarelin’s letters and in the histories, with three words written at the bottom. "Strength without swords," she recited.

"How does one conquer without a sword? Without a weapon?"

"I could not say."

"The real leader conquers with her mind. A bow or a dagger can be useful, but only so far. To truly out-manoeuvre an opponent, you must use this." He tapped the side of his head. "If the White Queen is allowed to storm Elira, she will take that power from everyone who opposes her, and there will be no mercy for those she captures."
Below them, Dante had pulled out a longsword. His opponent was striding across the ring to join him: a mercenary in an eagle-head helm who seemed to be made of nothing but muscle.

“I cannot say how crucial it is that you choose carefully,” Luca said, his lips close to her ear. “If the crown should fall into the wrong hands... well, you can imagine the kind of realm we will have, if the White Queen returns.”

She gave the slightest of nods, her eyes fixed on the ring. The crowd roared again: Flocke had raised his hand to give the signal and was retreating from the ring.

“If you have any doubt about your choice, better to choose no one at all,” Luca added.

Dante and the eagle-helmed man faced each other and held their swords out, waiting to strike. The man in the helm lunged forward first, slashing at Dante’s ribs; but the tall Valderran brought his sword up. Steel sang against steel, echoing above the noise of the crowd.

“Lysande,” Litany cried, turning away from the railing. “Do you think the First Sword will lose?”

“I hope he will triumph.”

“He fights with honour,” Jale said.

“Oh, Dante Dalgereth is the most honourable man in the three lands, so long as you do not enrage him.” A smile curled Luca’s mouth. “But as soon as anyone attacks him in a manner he thinks dis-honourable, it’s a very different story.”

The tier below them erupted into a cheer, drowning them out. The two figures on the sand were moving again. Swinging with enough force to break a lesser shield in two, the mercenary battered his sword against Dante’s; and the ringing of the blow was enough to bring Jale to his feet and up to the rail of the box. The two men parried and thrust for a moment: Dante’s brows were knitted, the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching. Every time the mercenary moved forward, it threatened to be the last; yet somehow the Valderran leader was always pushing him back, striking with a well-aimed blow.

“Why does he not finish the man off?” Litany cried, looking across at Lysande.

“I don’t know.” She watched Dante beat the man back again.

She doubted it was a question of strength: Dante Dalgereth could kill a man with his hands alone. His doggedness seemed to be paying off, as the mercenary was
moving more boldly, thrusting loosely. The man stumbled as he tripped on a clump of sand, and Dante darted forward to slash him across his arm. An angry yell; a jab from the mercenary; and there was enough time for Dante to slip his sword under and strike the man above the breastplate; yet still he did not strike.

*He doesn't want to kill,* Lysande realised, as another song of swords rang out. *He wants the man to yield.*


“If he keeps this going much longer,” Luca said, settling back in his chair, “he may stumble and fall on his valiant face.”

Below them, the mercenary pulled something short and bright from his sword-sheath. He threw it at Dante’s chest, but missed.

“Cheat!” somebody shouted, below them. “That’s a second weapon!”

“Strike him down!”

Dante’s eyes narrowed, and a chill ran through Lysande. The Valderran circled around his opponent for an instant, then charged straight in, his longsword whipping through the air. Blow after blow rained down so hard that eagle-helm lost his footing, stumbling again in dry sand.

Just as he reached his target, Dante swerved – a perfect model of swordsmanship – his right arm arcing around towards his opponent and swinging at his neck. With a horrible ease, the blade carved cleanly through the flesh. Blood rained down on the sand. The man’s head flew through the air, spinning – encased in the helm like a boiled egg in its shell – and landed in the lap of a spectator in the bottom tier.

The man held the severed head with a stunned expression. All of the Arena seemed to hold its breath, for a moment.

Then the crowd went mad.

Lysande found herself applauding politely, falling into place with the others, as the cacophony from the tiers washed over her; she could not quite believe what she had seen. Even after stories of tournaments and grisly duels from Sarelin, this was too much. She had examined the queen’s wounds, but that was different to seeing a blade carve through a body. And she had thrown daggers into straw women, but she had not flung them into real ones. Cassia and Jale were clapping, along with Derset, and beside Lysande, Litany looked as if she might burst with excitement. The
Valderrans stomped their feet louder and began to chant "honour, duty, faith", while Dante made a bow in the direction of the box, the sun lighting up his breastplate.

Flocke had returned to the sand and was signalling with one hand – she could make out the rainbow of his jewels, far below.

"I believe that's for me," Jale said, turning to look at them. "Wish me luck, won't you, Councillor?"

The headless corpse in the Arena was still being dragged away, leaving a trail on the ground. Lysande worked to find a smile.

"Good luck, Your Highness."

"I daresay I'll be quicker than Dante." He grinned. "Clap loudly."

As Jale left, Dante rejoined them, prompting a flood of congratulations from every quarter and a detailed analysis of every move and stroke of the fight. Lysande was about to enter the conversation when a pain struck her so forcefully that she leaned forward.

It was the same, crushing force that had overwhelmed her in the Great Hall, but magnified several times. She reached out to the railing and held on. Breathing hard, she listened to the rise and fall of her chest and gritted her teeth; it took a long time for the ache to fade, and when she looked up, Luca Fontaine was watching her, his stare giving nothing away.

"Are you often troubled by headaches?" he asked.

"Not at all." Did twice count as often? "It is a fleeting pain."

"Indeed." But this time, he did not throw out a quip; only regarded her a moment longer before turning to speak with one of the Rhimese nobles.

Below them, Jale was entering the ring, his armour sending beams of gold up to the tiers. He was clad in a light golden breastplate over a pale gold shirt of mail, while on the lower half he wore a skirt-like garment and a pair of golden sandals, with sapphires in the heels. The smallsword in his hands was just over half the size of a standard blade: it looked almost comically petite, like the prince himself.

From the distance of the box, Jale could not have looked less like Dante if he had tried.

"He's no warrior," she heard one of the commoners below her mutter.

"Go back to Lyria!" a woman shouted, pointing south.

"Kill the spearfish!"
This last was presumably directed to the mercenary who was walking into the ring: a man carrying a small sword to match Jale’s, but far exceeding him in stature. He was almost twice the size of the young prince, and his horned helm gave him the aspect of a demon. Some of the crowd were applauding him as he swaggered forward, throwing tiny bronze rackets in his direction; but Jale was busy waving to someone in the box, and he did not seem concerned.

Lysande’s stomach roiled. She had considered that one of the city-rulers might lose their fight. But – perhaps foolishly – she had hoped that it would not be Jale.

“Perhaps we should call off the bout,” she said, turning to Derset. “What if Prince Montignac dies?”

“It would be a circumstance to be lamented, I am sure; but the rules cannot be changed once the tournament begins. The fighting code is – ”

“Axium law.” She nodded, glumly.

Jale gave a low bow to a group of Valderrans who were shouting at him, and twirled his hands. They jeered louder.

“If I were you, Prior, I’d be betting on Jale Montignac,” Luca Fontaine said into her ear. “He was trained in the style of his father, one of the most famous fighters in Lyrian history.”

“He looks so young.”

“Appearances can be false friends. You, of all people, should know that.”

She had no time to query his meaning. Flocke raised his arm and the roar of the crowd swept over them again, as the horned man advanced towards Jale. He was swinging his sword loosely, moving with easy steps. Lysande wanted to cover her eyes, but she forced herself to keep watching. She saw the mercenary raise his blade and swing with all his weight, and Jale leaning backwards with the top half of his body, as gracefully as if he were dancing, avoiding the man’s sword. As the man swung again, Jale’s legs wove behind each other to sidestep.

His opponent was left hacking at empty air, looking like a buffoon. Some of the crowd were shouting in anger, but a few were cheering the prince now. The mood was shifting.

“He has agility,” Derset said, shaking his head.
"Prince Montignac is one of the best fighters in the realm, in the southern style. He was trained from childhood." Dante drew himself up proudly. "No man or woman in Lyria can match him."

Jale moved with such speed that the horned man was forced to pivot dumbly, trying to keep up. The young prince circled around, almost making a perfect ring; then he changed directions, darting left and right. The mercenary's head perked up. He seemed encouraged by this display, for he charged after Jale like a bull, lumbering with his smallsword raised.

Jale stopped and waited, facing his opponent. Only when the man was almost upon him did he duck under his sword arm, weaving around and leaping into the air; a blur of gold, clinging to the man's back and wrapping his ankles around his waist. It was the work of a moment to press the tip of his sword to the big man's neck: but Jale did not drive it in between the breastplate and the helm. He was saying something to the mercenary.

Within seconds, the blonde prince climbed off, and the big man fell to his knees and grovelled in the sand.

"A yield!" Flocke declared.

Jale dusted off the sides of his armour and grinned at the crowd. A stunned silence had fallen over the whole Arena. For a few seconds, no one moved in the tiers: then Dante Dalgereth stood up and began to clap.

Behind him, the Lyrians stood up and joined the applause. The sound brought the rest of the audience to their senses, and they rose too, breaking into a roar so loud that Litany covered her ears, smiling.

"Amazing!" Lysande cried, standing up too. "That was truly amazing!"

"Well, he's beaten Dante's time, that's for sure," Luca observed. Yet Dante was clapping as loudly as any of them, beaming.

"It's so noble of the First Sword to applaud," Litany said, breathlessly, as they sat down again.

"Noble, or foolish." Cassia leaned across from her other side. "An ice-bear should eat a fish, not befriend it. But alliances have made fools of many leaders."

"What alliance do you mean, Irriqi?"

"It is said that the First Sword of Valderos saved Jale Montignac from a blizzard, on his first trip to north as prince. They have been as sworn brothers since." She sniffed, as if the idea of fraternity was ridiculous. "All pageantry."

“An act of good policy, Councillor.”

Jale returned to the box just as Cassia finished speaking, and Dante strode over to greet him, clapping him on the back. Lysande could not share the Irriqi’s judgment as she watched them: there was something genuinely warm about the bond between the two princes, expressed in that embrace; a strange friendship, surely, but a real one.

“That is my signal,” Cassia said, looking down at the ring. “You will excuse me, Lysande.”

Lysande. She beamed. “I wish you good luck, Irriqi.”

“It is bad luck, to wish a Pyrrhan good luck.” But Cassia was smiling too, as much as she seemed capable. “You saved my life, at the banquet, Councillor Prior. If you had not moved so quickly, I would have choked to death – I thank you for that. Perhaps we will share a bottle of wine when this tournament is over.”

She departed to receive her armour, and Lysande tried to keep her face impassive.

Cries of “western scum” followed the Irriqi as she descended into the ring, but Cassia did not respond, striding across to the centre. She was wearing a bronze suit of armour that fitted her like a second skin. As soon as she reached Flocke, she began talking to the master and waving something in her hand – a weapon, judging by the glimmer of the sheath.

“She can’t fight with a Pyrrhan sword,” Jale said, sounding more than a little smug. “No mercenary will know how to use one.”

As they watched, Cassia stomped over to a waiting attendant and exchanged her hooked sword for an ordinary blade.

“She’ll do something clever with it, anyway,” Luca remarked. “If you’ve usurped the Qamaras, you can fight with a lot more than just brute force.”

Flocke raised his hand, and the whole box leaned forward. The fighters were raising their swords. Cassia took a few paces to the left, watching her opponent, her blade held out. The mercenary wore a nasty-looking spiked helm, fashioned of thick bronze, its points honed so that it was practically a weapon in itself; and she advanced on Cassia with her blade high. The Irriqi met the woman’s blow without much effort; she seemed unwilling to engage her, swatting her away like a child with a fly.
The next slash came at her ribs, and Cassia Ahl-Hafir pushed back the mercenary with a short and sharp blow. The mercenary retreated, sword raised again.

“She has no stomach for a fight,” Jale declared.

“I think she’s waiting for something,” Lysande said, watching the Pyrrhan leader circle.

As the mercenary lunged at Cassia a third time, both hands on her sword, the Irriqi made her move. Her arm dropped low. With a flick of her wrist, she sent the sword slicing through the air, flying towards the woman’s legs – quick and bright in the sun.

“You can’t throw a sword!” Jale cried.

But as they watched, it landed swiftly in the mercenary’s right thigh. She bent over, screaming and clutching at her leg.

“Apparently you can,” Luca remarked.

The mercenary made a hopeless lurch at Cassia, but she did not bother to finish the woman off; only deflected her clumsy blow and shouted at her. The message seemed to achieve its aim; for the mercenary knelt down on her one unharmed leg and yielded.

The crowd exploded with noise. Some of them were applauding, others still jeering Cassia and calling out insults. “That was at least a minute faster than you, Jale,” Dante shouted above the roar, grinning.

“Oh, wonderful.” Jale sighed. “She’ll be so gracious about it, I know.”

The Pyrrhans were making a racket to rival even the Valderrans as Cassia climbed back up – they maintained such a furore of clapping and shouting that Litany’s words were thoroughly drowned out, and the maid had to resort to gestures.

“Master Flocke is signalling, my lady,” Derset shouted.

Indeed, the man was waving from the sand, trying to get their attention.

Beside her, Luca got to his feet.

“I believe that is my cue,” he said.

He had been sitting beside her for so long that she had almost forgotten he would be competing.

“Tread with care Your Highness,” she said.

“I always tread with care around men in helms.”

“You seem very confident. Are you aware that your opponent could cut your throat?”
"I grew up in the court of Rhime, Prior. Throat-cutting is commonplace before breakfast: along with back-stabbing, and shooting through the neck."

They looked at each other for a moment. The single ruby at the collar of his plain, black cloak glistened in the light, like his snake’s eyes.

"Tell me, did you really kill your brother, Fontaine, or is that just a rumour?"

He smiled, but with no mirth, this time. "The most dangerous rumours are fashioned out of truth. Or so Volerus wrote."

He left the box and made to join the Rhimese party. Lysande did not notice the movement beside her until she found Derset standing at her shoulder.

"May I join you, my lady?" he asked.

"Of course." It was a relief to have the one honest man in the box beside her again. Derset looked from side to side. The others were all occupied with chatting or pointing at people in the crowd, but he hesitated, anyway; his glance searched her face, and she had the impression that he knew exactly why she had changed their entertainment.

"What do you think of my tournament of rulers?" she asked.

"An interesting test. Has it brought you any closer to a decision?"

"Not yet."

"Whoever killed Queen Sarelin is clever... and careful. I am afraid we can count on that."

Lysande looked out at the stone tiers for a moment. If there was anyone to ask, it was her advisor, who had served her with nothing but faithful courtesy; and one problem had been weighing on her mind since that day in the royal suite. But Sarelin’s dying words had been entrusted to her alone. She had found no trace of the Resistance in any book in the library, and that only meant that she would have to search harder.

"Here comes the prince," Litany cried, leaning across to them.

Luca wore a black suit of armour with a few small, silver cobras on the arm-guards; like his robe, the dark armour set off his hair and eyes, lending him a startling aspect. Had he chosen the colour for its theatrical effect?

All around the stone tiers, the women and men had gone quiet. There were no jibes or curses this time, nor applause – but they were all watching. The prince was carrying a bow in his hands; a sleek, silver instrument; and his quiver contained
arrows with stems far longer than any Lysande had seen: their honed ends looked sharp enough to cut diamonds.

"The crowd must like him," Litany said, turning to Lysande. "They are wonderfully quiet."

She shook her head. "I think they fear him, Litany."

Luca was examining his arrows, running a finger along the edge of one shaft. He did not spare a single glance for the crowd, nor for his opponent. A hulk of a woman, bigger than all of the other three opponents so far: the mercenary's helm bore thick horns that pointed out to either side, and she was nearly bursting out of her armour; if the two ever got close enough to drop their bows and trade blows, Lysande did not like the prince of Rhime's chances.

"Do you remember why Prince Fontaine uses a bow?" Derset asked.

"Because it is the weapon of Rhime." Lysande knew that much. "Sarelin — Queen Sarelin — said that it takes a great precision in execution, to aim from a distance and hit the right spot. I think the Rhimese fight with their intellect."

"That is so, my lady."

"In Lyria, we say a bow is a coward's weapon," Jale put in, looking over at Lysande. "You just stand back at twenty paces, and — thwing!"

Twenty paces was a very attractive distance indeed — but fifty would not be too much, with an opponent like this mercenary. The woman was more a monster than a human, all muscle and no neck.

Flocke raised his hand. The two fighters nocked arrows to their bows and stood still, while the crowd gawked, waiting for a shaft to fly.

Yet Prince Fontaine did not fire at his opponent. He tilted his bow upwards, towards the sky, and sent an arrow whizzing into the clouds. Caught by surprise, the crowd raised their heads as one; and so did the mercenary, tilting her thick neck to watch the arrow soar.

The angle of the woman's chin exposed the gap between her helm and her breastplate: a tiny crack, about a half-inch wide and barely visible to the naked eye, but visible nonetheless.

Luca Fontaine did not miss.

The arrow flew from his bow, straight and impossibly fast, into the tiny sliver of flesh. Gasps of disbelief sounded around the tiers as the huge woman crashed
forward in the dust — blood dribbling from her neck — before she had even fired a shaft.

A few men in the bottom tier began to applaud, but the rest of the crowd were too stunned to move. After a moment, Flocke smiled and clapped, and slowly, the others joined in, building to a smattering of applause, while everywhere mouths were opening and fingers pointing. Lysande caught a mention of the “red prince” and a remark about bastards’ violent natures.

“Well,” said Derset, faintly, “I think we have a winning time.”

“I do not doubt it.” She was still staring at the dead mercenary. Behind the corpse, Luca Fontaine turned to face the box and made a little, ironic bow, looking at her.

“Excuse me, my lady,” Derset said, “but I think Master Flocke wants something.”

The master was hurrying up the stairs, coming all the way to the box.

“Councillor,” he called, “may I have your presence in the ring?”

“Me?” For a moment, it sounded as if she would be forced to fight — she had a vision of herself facing down one of those monstrous figures on the sand, gripping a sword feebly.

“We would be honoured if you would present the prize, Councillor.” Flocke was wearing his oily smile as he blinked up at her. “It was thanks to you that we had four such colourful bouts.”

She did not very much desire to descend into the ring, but it looked as if she had no choice. Litany was beaming, and Derset patted her on the back. “Very well,” she said, to Flocke.

Halfway down the stairs, she felt the noise of the crowd roll over her in a thundering wave, but she remembered Derset’s words: You can learn to stand before crowds. Even to like it. This was what Sarelin would have wanted from her. She put another foot down on the stair below, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the ground.

Flocke was waiting for her at the bottom, holding out a cloth sack, and taking it, she nearly dropped it. The gold inside was as heavy as solid lead. Two hundred cadres. In front of her, Luca had returned to the centre of the ring and was looking out at the crowd, composed as ever.

“You need only walk over and present this to Prince Fontaine,” Flocke said. “Make sure that you shake his right hand firmly.”
“Is it not the custom to shake with one’s weaker hand?”

“Prince Fontaine is left-handed, Councillor.”

*Like everything else about him... it is irregular.* Foot after foot, she moved slowly over the sand, keeping her eyes fixed on Luca. It helped to focus on one figure instead of the hundreds of shouting and pointing people in the tiers. The body of the horned mercenary had been removed from the ring, but a lake of red dyed the sand where he had lain, and Luca Fontaine stood behind it, having placed his bow on the ground.

She came to a stop opposite him.

“Congratulations, Your Highness,” she said, holding out the bag of gold. “You must be very proud.”

“Eminently so.” As he reached out to take the sack, his hand gripped hers. “Remember what I said to you, Prior. If you put the White Queen’s agent on the throne, we may all die. Do not mistake this for a game of tactos.” His voice had dropped to a whisper. “If you lose this game, you do not get to play again. *Nobody* gets to play.”

He stepped back and pulled the sack with him, holding up his prize. The crowd broke into applause. Luca Fontaine ignored her as if they had never spoken, and left her to make her way back to the stairs alone.

*Some courtesy.* She did not really have the inclination to reproach him, nor to linger any longer in view of the crowd. She was half-way across the sand when she heard the growl.

It came from her left: a low and ominous sound, like a rumble before a storm. The creature burst out of the bottom tier – more a mass of dark fur than an animal – pushing through a group of young men and bounding into the ring. It was a wolf, though the forest wolves Sarelin had killed had never looked this big.

It was speeding over the sand now, taking in several feet at a bound, the grey of its fur shining like liquid steel. The animal’s slavering mouth opened as it ran towards Lysande. A forest of yellow teeth greeted her.

She tried to keep calm. There was a wolf in the Arena. It was going to kill her; to rip her to shreds in front half of Axium.

*This is the end,* she thought, picturing Sarelin jerking on the ground.
But the wolf bounded past her, so close that she could see the drool on its jaw, and kept on running. It was making straight for the centre of the ring. A second too late, she realised where it was going.

"Fontaine!" she shouted.

The animal barrelled at him. The prince of Rhime snatched up his bow and loaded a shaft into the string. Rays of sun threw a sheen over his black armour as he pulled the arrow taut, lined up the target and fired.

The wolf stopped – paws scrabbling in the sand – its jaws snapping in vain.

It landed with a thump at Luca's feet. The shaft of the arrow protruded from its neck. The Arena held its breath. All around the tiers, the crowd stared, unsure whether to clap or cry out.

After a few seconds had passed, Flocke laughed nervously and began to applaud, looking around.

"Congratulations, Prince Fontaine," he called, pointing to Luca with an arm flung wide. "Our champion triumphs again!"

Relief spread slowly around the audience, until the crowd was smiling along with Flocke, clapping. Some of them even cheered. Lysande took in their jubilant faces.

The prostrate body of the wolf lay on the sand, and over the top of it, she met Luca's eyes.

"We must leave," he said, walking towards her. "Before the crowd begins to flood out."

The other city-rulers were already departing the box, too far away for her to make out their reactions. She cast a last glance at the wolf, its jaws still open in death. The image reminded her suddenly of the panther, dangling as two guards carried it through the palace.

"Whoever loosed that wolf may have another furry companion, waiting under a cloak." Luca looked around them. "We are exposed, standing here."

Slowly, she walked with him across the ring, away from the body of the dead animal and the patch of bloodied sand. Panther. Poison. Silent sword. Wolf. Each is a move in the same game. When they were nearly at the door in the stone, she turned and faced Luca, aware of the hundreds of people watching them.

"Are you all right, Fontaine?" she asked.

He studied her face for a moment.
“Quite all right, Prior,” he said. “But when my hosts set their dogs on me, I generally find it is time to leave."

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A ceiling of branches blocked the sun, sheltering her in a cool, dark world. The fruit was drooping from the branches around her, so ripe that it burdened the orange-and lemon-trees and bent the plum-bushes to the ground, and scents of bell-flowers and sacharia buds perfumed the breeze. The others were all gathered inside, but Lysande lingered in the orchard.

They had returned to the palace three hours ago, but time was already slipping away. All of the city-rulers were waiting for her in the dining room in the Pavillion, at the end of the orchard, yet here she was, still pacing, no closer to giving them an answer.

An orange plopped at her feet. She stooped to pick it up, examining the swollen exterior, the dark colour of the skin: the telltale signs of ripeness. *If only my plan had borne fruit.* The guards and the staff at the Arena had been questioned, but no answers had emerged. If the wolf had been set on Luca, then maybe the silent sword had been meant for Luca, too: in all the swapping of plates, it might have ended up in front of Cassia by accident. But if that was so, Luca could not be the traitor. It had to be Dante, or Cassia, or Jale.

Who was she to put on the throne? One of the three city-rulers who might have killed Sarelin and was now trying to murder Luca Fontaine – or the one who had murdered his brother and laughed at the idea of honour? It was the kind of choice that Fortituda, goddess of valour, gave to heroes and heroines in the ancient stories, but she had never asked for a choice, and she was on no quest. She was only a girl with a quill.

As she paced back and forth, Luca Fontaine’s words echoed in her mind. *If you have any doubt about your choice, better to choose no one at all.*

If only it were possible. She would like nothing better than to pick none of them, and pass the crown to some deserving Axiumite, like Raden.

*Better to choose no one at all.*

Leaves rustled behind her, and Litany’s skinny form emerged from the trees.

“Are you ready, Councillor – I mean, Lysande?”
"Surely the time is not up already?"

"Lord Derset sent me to bring you back, if you please. There are two minutes until the hour."

They moved through the trunks and over-hanging branches in the quiet stillness of the orchard. The last tree was laden with fruit, four apples jostling for space on a single bough. Lysande tossed the orange in her hand thoughtfully and caught it again, looking at the four ripe balls.

"If you please," Litany said, with a timid advance towards her. "Lord Derset said the city-rulers are growing impatient."

"We must not disappoint them, then."

She fell into step beside the maid. The perfume of the fruit trees drifted into her lungs, heady and thick: it seemed to waft into her mind.

The Pavillion was decorated exquisitely today, its pointed roof strung with dozens of little candles of silvery wax, flickering in rows. The mirrors on either side of the door showed Lysande’s image twice: two tall girls, red hair straggling over their shoulders, smiling rather unconvincingly. On the doorstep, she smoothed her collar and straightened her back, breathing in deeply.

Dante, Jale, Cassia and Luca were sitting around a circular table covered in silver platters piled with fruit, bread and cake. Goblets clustered around jugs of red wine, waiting to be filled. At the back of the room, Derset stood, his high-necked robe impeccable and his hands folded over his stomach; a small assortment of guards was stationed around the walls – all of them armed.

Lysande took her seat at the table. Every pair of eyes was upon her; even the guards were staring. She could hear Dante’s fingers tapping on the wood.

"I will be brief with Your Highnesses." She looked around. "I am required by the law of Elira to choose our next ruler. Last night and this morning have showed me a little of who you are, and you each have your own talents."

"Are you giving the crown to the winner, then?" Cassia was watching her closely.

"Prince Fontaine has won a tournament – and slain a stray wolf with remarkable speed – but I have seen you all fight bravely in the ring. It is clear that you all know how to defend yourselves."
"What is it to be, then, Councillor?" Jale asked. "Shall we pass the crown from person to person? One of us has it at the beginning of the week, and another at the end? Perhaps we can draw up a plan."

They all laughed – some of them a little uncomfortably – and Lysande shook her head.

"There will be no need for swapping, Your Highnesses. I have decided." She paused, and drew a deep breath. "I am appointing you all to work together as the very first Council of Elira."

She could have heard a needle fall in the silence.

"What?" Cassia said.

"You will rule together until the White Queen is dead or imprisoned, and Elira is secure." Lysande looked around the table. "You will all share the duties – managing coin and works within the realm, dealing with our neighbours and overseeing the armies. Of course, you will each need to appoint someone to take care of your city in your stead. And the court of Axium will select the capital’s new leader."

Several of the guards looked at each other, their eyes wide. *Never quaver, never yield,* Lysande thought. The words sounded in her head in Sarelin’s voice.

"This could be a good thing," Dante said, slowly. "It could be our first chance to bind the cities together, since the war."

"Sharing power means shedding blood," Cassia said. "Such an alliance will split the realm."

"Not if we rule well," Jale said.

Luca did not say a word, but she could tell from the half-smile on his lips that he was pleased. He might have been hinting at this all along when he spoke those words into her ear, she realised – but it did not matter now. The solution was the best one she had.

"What do you think of this, Lord Derset?" Dante asked.

The advisor stepped forward. "Matters of such gravity are for Your Highnesses to approve, not an advisor."

"You served Queen Sarelin, and now you serve Councillor Prior. So I ask you again – what do you think of a council?"

"I think it a bright idea, Your Highness." He gazed back. "I think our Councillor has worked to bring us the best resolution, at a time when the realm is
tied together by the thin ribbon of good intent; and we will all be the richer for a
council that joins the north with the cities of the east, west and south.”

“Spoken like a true diplomat.” Luca smiled. “But you leave one city out,
advisor.”

Glances were exchanged, and eyebrows raised.

“The capital. We cannot have a council of Elira without Axium, surely,”
Luca continued, smoothly. “If we are to represent the realm, we must have a member
from each of its fine cities.”

“You have someone in mind?” Cassia said.

“Perhaps.”

“There are many worthy ladies and lords in our court, Your Highness,”
Derset put in. “Earby I have known for years… Lyson and Tromwell I can vouch
for… Stutcliff… perhaps one of the Pumberlands…”

“Not an Earby or a Stutcliff, no. But I do have someone in mind,” Luca said.

“Who?” Lysande asked.

He turned to face her.

“You.”

She wanted to laugh, for the idea was so impossible that it was almost
ridiculous. But the others were nodding instead of scoffing. Her disbelief turned to
disquiet. After the ordeal of the last two days, she was finally meant to be rid of the
Councillor’s staff; and all the pomp that came with it.

“A commoner cannot make decisions for the realm, surely. There has never
been such an appointment,” Lysande said.

“Five minutes ago, there had never been a council, either,” Luca replied.

“You are the only Councillor among us.” Jale grinned. “So really, you’re the
most practiced for the job.”

“You jest well, Your Highness, but you cannot be serious.”

“I am quite serious,” Luca said. “Who better than a scholar to apply her
scrutiny to the realm? Your lack of breeding is immaterial, when we consider Queen
Sarelin’s esteem for your wits. For an orphan, you are better read than many lords.
And you seem to have no hesitation in dealing with royalty.”

The look he gave her was much cooler than his praise. If Luca Fontaine
wanted her to share in the rule, it was not out of charity: she was sure of that much.
“I do not often agree with the prince of Rhime, but I cannot fault him on this,” Dante put in. “I move that we add Lysande Prior to the Council of Elira.”

“I have no objection.” Jale nodded.

Cassia sighed, and laid her hands on the table. “If I must share the crown, it makes no difference if it is with three people or four. It is all dishonour in Pyrrha.”

“There we are.” Luca raised his wine, with a half-smile. “To dishonour.”

“To the Council,” Dante said, glaring at Luca.

“Indeed. To the Council.”

Lysande raised her goblet with a trembling hand, scarcely able to look at the others. A surge of something powerful was running through her. Ever since she had opened the envelope after Sarelin’s death, fear and grief had followed her – and both were still there, but joined by another emotion too. It was not just the voice of duty or the deep echo of her sorrow, but something more like a fire within her.

For Sarelin.

There could be no complacency, she knew. She would have to watch her back, and her food. It would be folly to close her eyes for a second around these rulers, or let herself believe for a moment that any of them was worthy of her trust.

She looked across the room and saw Derset behind the table, smiling at her. Once I speak the words, there will be no going back. Steadyying her hand, she brought the goblet to her lips.

“To the Council,” she said, and drank deeply.
Chapter Six

Her quill scratched across the page two days later, as the sound of steel on steel rang out in the wintry air. There was something oddly calming about copying out the proceedings of the Council of Elira’s first meeting: the tip of the feather scratching over the page, the ink wafting up to her nostrils as it dried; and a few minutes passed before she became aware that the swords had stopped.

When she had finished the line “...agreed to meet at Rhime,” she put her quill in the ink-pot and looked down to the grounds. The Valderran guards were walking back from the target range, their longswords dangling from their hands. A string of attendants trailed after them with jugs and goblets. They were followed by a group of Lyrian nobles laughing and talking, the diaphanous gowns of the women catching the light. Leaning towards the window, Lysande studied the southerners until a knock sounded at the door.

“Here we are,” Raden said, stomping in with an armful of chests. “Your maid Litany said these were all to be checked and sent down to the stable-hands. Garments, shoes, weapons, more garments, medicines, and your scholarly clobber.”

He placed them in the only space on the floor.

“Six chests?” Lysande said.

“Litany said she’d packed enough for three weeks.” He shrugged. “You can have your clothes washed at Rhime.”

Lysande did not have the heart to tell him that six chests would last her for three months, not three weeks. She had told her maid that new clothes were unnecessary and jewels out of the question, but Litany had had a shifty look on her face as she agreed. She suspected that there were several sets of emeralds and diamonds packed carefully away in lined boxes.

She was reaching for the first chest when another knock interrupted her.

“You have need of me, Councillor Prior?” a clipped voice said.

As Raden’s boots clopped down the stairwell, Pelory passed through the doorway, walking in and stepping around a pile of books.

“How nice it is to see you, my lord.” Lysande picked up the papers that had been stacked on her desk. “Thank you for delivering me the reports. The Master of
Works’ figures are clear, the envoys make summaries of the last two years, and your own report on the law is satisfying. Yet the Treasurer’s report…” She let the sentence trail off.

“I am agog to hear what you have found.”

“Lady Bowbray has omitted a few expenses. Some of her calculations seem more than a little imprecise. The matter of funding the jail appears to be the problem, Lord Pelory.”

“Well, I expected it.” Pelory pursed his lips. “Building a new jail for elementals is a complicated undertaking.”

“But we are not building one. We are restoring the Prexleys’ disused castle.”


“That is why we must make sure it is adequately funded.” She looked into those grey eyes. “I would have you go over Lady Bowbray’s books and find out exactly what she is spending the crown’s cadres on. As Master of Laws, you have the authority to examine the legality of the Treasury, do you not? Then, you will bring the results to me in Rhime.”

His mouth had opened, but the last word made him pause. “Rhime, Councillor?”

“Lord Derset tells me your wife has long wanted to purchase Rhimese perfume and rubies. Queen Sarelin would not grant you permission to travel out of Axium while she needed you here, but you made several requests, pleading your wife’s health.” *And for good reason. I’m sure a bride from the house of Montfolk sickens for the luxury of her childhood.* “The Council will be riding for Rhime tomorrow. Procure the Treasurer’s accounts for me, and your wife will have her trip.”

“She admires the eastern fashions greatly.” Pelory bowed. “I shall see you in Rhime, Councillor.”

She felt a spark of satisfaction as she watched him leave. It was only when the glow had faded that she felt the emptiness of the room: the huge, dolorous emptiness that had filled every chamber in the palace since Sarelin died. She gazed out the window, looking for a figure that would not be there, and searching for a crown that had already been stored in the palace vault.
“I have to go, Sarelin,” she said, quietly. “But first, you’ll have to forgive my intrusion.”

The royal suite had not been cleaned since the death of its occupant, but its windows had been closed. She found the bedchamber shrouded in shadow, lit only by a few small torches. She listened for the click of the lock and the footsteps of the guard returning to her place outside, before turning to Sarelin’s dining table.

The few papers scattered amongst the plates did not help her much. Treasury bills for hundreds of cadres and mettles; a draft of a letter to King Ferago of Bastillón about trade on the Cordonna; and a smattering of orders to the envoys, expressed with Sarelin’s characteristic tact (“Tell Chiamese to go jump in their lagoon, if it’s still big enough”). Nothing mentioning or even hinting at a “Resistance”. She was not sure what she had expected – a stack of papers sealed with emerald wax, or a box of letters that had been secreted away – but there was not a clue amongst the dishes and jugs.

She left the bedchamber and moved through to the study, where the sight of a tactos board made her stop and swallow. Here, where they had spent so many hours together sliding their stone guards, city-rulers, queens, kings, and dragons back and forth, it was hard not to think of the last time they had played the game: sitting by the lake with chalices of wine, on Sarelin’s birthday. It was the same game they had played more than a hundred times: Sarelin leading the attack, charging in; Lysande’s moves calculated to retreat across the board, bringing her to lose so gradually that the queen would believe it had been her own doing.

Lysande turned determinedly to the desk and began to search the drawers. Sarelin had never been a writer, and she found mostly maps of military movement; the only personal note remained unfinished.

My dear Lys,

I expect you’ll figure this out one day, being so bloody clever,
but I thought it was time I put it down in ink. You see

The page had been torn, so that the message ended there. The other half did not offer itself up anywhere amongst the papers.
Lysande gazed at the letter for a few seconds. It took her a while to absorb that she would never hear what Sarelin had been about to say: never get the remainder of the message; but at last she folded it and slipped it into her pocket.

As she surveyed the floor, a scrap of paper in the fireplace caught her eye. Whatever Sarelin had been burning was beyond salvation. Only a blank corner had survived the flames, and it gave off a curious smell of rose-oil as she picked it up.

She was still breathing in the scent when she heard footsteps, and looked up to find Derset.

"Excuse me, my lady." He bowed. "The guard let me in. I’m afraid our guests have been disturbing the peace."

"Not the Pyrrhans again. I told them they cannot keep wrestling for coin inside the towers – they broke two statues of King Georde."

"It’s not the Pyrrhans this time." Derset hesitated, looking down at his hands. "It seems some of the Valderran guards have obtained – forgive me, my lady – have obtained faeces from a horse, and used them to write a message outside the Lyrian suite. They put up a reflection on Prince Montignac’s appearance and personal qualities." A flush had spread across Derset’s cheeks.

Lysande could not tell what gave her the urge to laugh – the deed, or the fact that Derset looked mortified at having to report it – but she dropped the corner of paper back into the fireplace.

"The steward thought you might want to decide what to do," Derset said.

"Come, then. Let us restore Prince Montignac’s reputation."

As they left the suite, she could still smell the faintest hint of rose-oil. The scent lingered in her nostrils long after she had returned to her work. It was with her still when she lay down to sleep, her mind still swirling, and she chased scraps of paper and half-finished notes in her dreams.

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The Valderrans were blowing their horns so loudly that she had to wince as she brought her horse to the front of the palace. It was no borrowed horse this time, but an animal of her own – a tall mare, splotched black and white, that had stood out among the sleek, chestnut horses of the royal team the stable-mistress had offered her. It whinnied into her palm as she ran a hand over its muzzle.
"Come, now," she said, swinging up onto its back. "If I am to endure this, so are you."

The mass of Pyrrhans, Rhimese, Lyrians, Valderrans and Axiumites sprawled in front of the steps, and Cassia hailed her as she approached.

"Have you ridden the Scarlet Road before, my friend?" she asked.

"Not at all." The Scarlet Road ran from Axium to Rhime, through the hills and the outlying Rhimese towns; Lysande's only acquaintance with it had been in reading of the murders that had taken place upon it. "I have never been beyond Axium's territory."

"They are all olive-pickers and wine merchants down there. There is not a patch of jungle in the east," said Cassia. "These Rhimese claim to have the finest clime in the realm, but where is the mist? You could not stalk a tiger in the east if you tried."

"That is certainly a great disadvantage."

"Olives..." Cassia muttered, moved by some inner horror. Presently, she recovered again. "You will be welcome to share my table when we make camp, Lysande," she said. "I always travel with my cook – and my new friend must eat real food."

There were too many riders to share the road, so the Rhimese trotted out first, followed by the Pyrrhans with almost twice as many banners, the northerners with Dante's carriage at their head, and the Lyrians, dripping with jewels and gauze-like cloth. The gold-plated Lyrian carriage turned out to be real after all. Derset, Litany and Lysande set off last, surrounded by twenty guards and as many attendants. Raden came up to her as they prepared to move, the last to make his farewell.

"You really need to go all the way to Rhime, just to make a decision about the armies?" he said.

She caught the note of anxiety in his voice, but met his gaze firmly.

"You know I have no choice. We must meet the Bastillonian ambassador sometime next week. So we go to Rhime for this meeting. A half-way mark. The military planning is just a blanket to keep the Chiamese from seeing what we're up to. Anyway; the people must be satisfied we are governing for the whole realm, and we can't do that by sitting in Axium Palace."

"It sounds more like a travelling show than a Council."
“The more I learn about the business of rule, the more it does seem like a show. Only the players are not very heroic, the story changes without warning and the audience prefers the spilling of entrails to a happy end.” The faces in the crowd at the Arena were still vivid. “Let us hope the finale is a long way away.”

He rose, and pulled her into a hug. “You should let me come with you.”

“That would defeat the purpose of leaving you in charge of Axium. Did Yorke bring you that message?”

“Aye. The Prexleys’ old castle. To be a haven for elementals.” He shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure they restore it, even if I think you’re mad.”

He leaned into the carriage to hug her, and she felt the warmth of his body: a huge body, mostly sinew and muscle, but strangely comforting; the hands that brushed locks of tangled hair were familiar, like the sight of swans gliding on the lake or the smell of the cook’s rosemary bread.

The sun was breaking on the horizon and spreading fingers of pale gold over the land, and once they were out of the capital, the chill of the northern breeze receded; they could have been a hundred miles from the capital, trotting through the lanes of Axium’s outlying towns. Elsington’s thatched rooves hid shops full of silverware, riding leathers and bodices of heavy velvet, and farmers from the fields sold their grain and vegetables in the street. Lysande wished they could dismount for long enough to use the luxury of her new allowance for the first time.

At Wiltingford she was aware a glimmer of movement as she entered the town – a blur, somewhere to her right, that she could not catch. She shook her head. That was hardly proof of anything.

They rode into the middle of an autumn festival: orange and brown strips of cloth fluttered on poles along the main street, and young boys threw handfuls of dry leaves at girls who led them onward. When they reached Wiltingford Bridge, Lysande stopped to gaze at the schools of circling trout.

A pensive figure looked back at her from the water, more a woman than a girl.

“This is the furthest I have been from Axium,” she murmured.

“Your parents were from the capital, then?” Derset inquired.

“No one can be certain. A group of guards found me in a carpenter’s shop that was burning in the outskirts of Axium during the war. If the shop hadn’t been so near the orphanage, I might have been left to die.”
"Like many children of that time." Derset looked ahead, at the beginning of a swathe of green fields. "I am sorry, my lady. At least you will have a chance to see more of Elira now – you will find the ride to Rhime magnificent. Once we get through the hills and onto the Scarlet Road, the land is much more fertile than the capital, its colours more vibrant."

"Good for growing all those olives and grapes, no doubt."

"The traders say that if you could bottle up the Rhimese sun, you would make your fortune in gold."

They saw no vineyards for the first few miles: only trees whose leaves formed a queer, vertical shape, spreading slightly out at the bottom like very thin pears. Oxen in ruminating clusters, small farm-houses surrounded by bales of hay, quaint cottages with flower gardens studding the fields: these were the main features of the north-east countryside, spread between the last of Axium's towns and the first of Rhime's. No manors appeared, but they passed a smattering of commoners' houses amongst the gentle hills and dales, merging with the fields as seamlessly as if they had grown there.

At the next fork in the road, Derset pointed out a couple of dark green lumps, just distinguishable on the horizon.

"I thought you would like to savour your first glimpse of the Emeralds, my lady."

"The Emeralds?"

"That is what the Rhimese call these hills. They stretch back in lines for the best part of a mile." Derset pointed towards the first peak. "You could tame a dragon with your bare hands before you could take a carriage through – but do not worry, my lady. We can still enjoy them on horseback. We will meet the city-rulers again on the other side."

*And if that glimmer at Wiltingford was not just fancy?*

She felt a little queasy as she watched the last of the Lyrians disappearing down the westward path, moving further and further until they dissolved into the fields; yet by the time she was half-way up the first hill, the grass was so smooth that the horses struggled to find their footholds, and she stopped worrying about spies. She was forced to cling to the saddle as her piebald mare scrambled up. The sight at the top was worth the ascent: a mile of rolling green hills, so soft that the edges seemed to form a single blanket over the land.
The Emeralds were kissed by sun and studded here and there with little dark bushes. Lysande had the sudden desire to ride at full speed into them, as she had once done with Sarelin on a slope in Axium Forest; and since Derset was too dignified for racing, she set off with Litany at a gallop. Soon they were shouting and laughing into the wind, Lysande’s fingers curled into her mare’s mane, Litany forgetting her shyness around her mistress and racing higher, until they reached the top of the last hill together and gazed out on a quilt of colour.

Dark squares of vineyards and fields of little red flowers chequered the ground, bordered by lines of the conical trees and interspersed with houses, yet it was the landscape beyond the town that caught Lysande’s eye: a canvas of green and yellow fields painted in shades brighter than any she had seen. The colours shimmered, wonderfully iridescent in the sun. They had none of Axium’s northern pallor; where the capital had always been cold, stately, and ordered, this land seemed to pulse with a warm rhythm; birds, rabbits and deer moved here and there amongst the trees.

“I think we have stumbled upon some paradise,” she said. “Perhaps we dream.”

“This is no dream, my lady.” Derset brought his horse up beside hers. “This is Spelato, the first of the Rhimese towns.”

“Might we spare a half-hour to eat?”

“If it please you. Further east we will meet the others, past Ferizia, where the Scarlet Road begins.

She was just about to nudge her horse over the edge of the hilltop when she saw it: the flash of movement at the very edge of Spelato’s vineyards. A figure atop a horse flew between two trees. From behind the trunk where the horse had disappeared, a head poked out, its face obscured by the top of a hooded cloak.

“Did you see that?”

Derset looked across at her. “See what, my lady?”

The trees offered nothing but leaves and branches. There was no trace of either horse or rider. Lysande scrutinised the trunks for a half-minute more, her mind turning over images of silent swords and poison.

“It may have been a mere fancy, but I thought I saw someone watching us,” she said.
“There are many traders and messengers coming back and forth from the cities. Perhaps you caught sight of one on an errand,” Derset said.

“Do traders in the east wear hooded cloaks?”

“I should think not. Prince Fontaine does not allow any rider to hide their face in his territory – not after the Petrioglio brothers sent four hired swords after him last year. Is there something amiss, my lady?”

“No.” She gave him a weak smile. “It must have been a messenger.”

The scout rode off towards the trees, and returned with nothing to report. Yet her unease stayed with her as they cantered down the hill and made their way slowly along the vineyards, stopping in one of the powder-blue fields near Spelato to spread out their blankets. Litany had packed a basket full of cheese pies, sun-fruit quiches, hazelnut tarts and hard ginger sweets, along with several bottles of wine, and by the time they munched their way through it they were all pleasantly full. Even the attendants ate and drank to satiety, stuffing their pockets with handfuls of sweets. Lysande insisted on serving Litany herself, but when she reached out to take her goblet and brushed her hand, the girl coloured and looked away, suddenly becoming fascinated by a clump of flowers.

The road brought them out of the town, through hills and dales more gentle than the Emeralds, dotted with fig and lemon trees. They trotted along more slowly, heavy with food, and from time to time Lysande thought she caught a stir of movement on the periphery of her vision – though it was hard to say if it was a tangible presence. Had not Signor Montefizzi written in *A Manual of Rhimese Science* that the mind, once stimulated, could produce iterations of its own distress? That a fleeting fear, if left to grow, could turn into an agitation that consumed the whole brain?

She sent another scout. The result was the same.

At the next turning they found a stone town preserved since the classical period; clusters of houses surrounded a little square in which a statue of a cobra stood, reared up, as if ready to strike some invisible foe. Looking at it, Lysande thought of Tiberus, shifting on Luca Fontaine’s shoulder.

“This must be Ferizia,” she said.

“The very same.”

“Might we ride through the town, my lord?” They would be less obvious targets amongst the buildings.
“Certainly, my lady, if you wish it.” Derset looked dubiously at the cobra statue. “I am sure the east has many hidden charms.”

Few people were strolling the streets of Ferizia in the midday sun, and from high end of the square the olive groves around the town could be glimpsed through an open arch. Hundreds of little green buttons glistened in rows, down which a few farmers were moving slowly, picking the vegetables and tossing them into lined baskets. The results of all this toil glistened in the windows along the next street: jars of olive spread and olive butter, and greenish-yellow bottles of olive oil shone, along with mounds of the olives themselves on platters.

In the next street, the sound of children’s voices carried from a building with a pointed roof.

“Surely, this is not a school.” Lysande slowed her horse.

“By the sound of it, I would guess so, my lady.”

“In a town this size?” Axium only had one school for the whole of its territory. “How much gold does Luca Fontaine have in his treasury, to build them so freely?”

“I suspect it is a matter of priority. The Rhimese believe that every child should be educated, so that they will grow up to learn strategy and master mathematics.” Derset shrugged. “Rhime pays for every family to send their child to school until the age of fourteen.”

“Even the poor?”

“Even the orphans, my lady.”

How different might her childhood have been, if she had been found in Rhime’s territory instead of Axium’s? The headmistress of the orphanage had been no scholar. Ferizia’s shops brimmed with books and puzzles; tactos-boards made of black marble; paintings of famous moments in Rhimese history, and medical guides as thick as small bricks. At the end of one street they came to a shop selling rugs with maps of Elira embroidered on them, and she could not resist gawking: the designs worked in such detail that the even the tiny towns along the western border were marked out. In the glass of the window, she saw Derset staring at something.

“Perhaps we should take another route, my lady.”

“What is it?”

“Some disturbance further along. We should ride around the town’s edge.”
She pushed past him and guided her mare to the end of the street. From a distance, it looked as if a small crowd had formed around a display of some kind, where three dolls dangled from an arch – but as she came nearer, the dolls turned into men, and the thick rope of the nooses became clear. A crusting of red covered the sides of the bodies. Her stomach flipped as she caught the stench of the putrid wounds.

*Were they hung first, or stabbed to death?* The blood had gushed out onto the shirts and doublets, soaking the cloth: silk shirts and velvet doublets, for these were noblemen, beyond any doubt, and judging by their bare fingers they had already been stripped of their worldly goods. The symbol of a deer could be made out on each breast, embroidered in fine thread.

“They must have tried to take gold from Signor Riscetti’s shop,” she heard a woman say, as she dismounted. “Robbers, the lot of them.”

“Are there rocks in that fair head of yours?” Her companion, a girl in a merchant’s doublet, chuckled. “Look at their hands. These weren’t robbers.”

Lysande squinted over the heads and spotted the red mark on the back of each hand: a curved line carved into the flesh. It looked like a half-finished circle.

“It’s a letter, ain’t it? A ‘c’, for ‘conspirator’,” the merchant said.

Somewhere in Lysande’s mind, a comment Sarelin had made resounded: there had been more poisonings, stabbings, and attempts at usurpation in Rhime than in all the other four cities combined. Luca Fontaine’s father, Prince Marcio Sovrano, had hanged eight noblewomen and men for trying to sneak nightroot into the palace kitchens. The Rhimese grew conspiracies as well as they grew olives, Sarelin had said. Looking at the bodies swinging in the breeze, she thought she had a slightly better idea of how and why Luca could face the other rulers with such a cool façade.

“I think the prince’s caught himself three Canduccis this time.” The second woman spoke with relish. “There’s deer on those doublets, under all the blood.”

As the crowd edged forward to see Luca Fontaine’s punishment in closer proximity, Lysande found herself jostled and elbowed to the side. Before she knew it, she was out of reach of Derset, with hands pushing her and fingernails grazing her, and someone pressing up behind her, a stubbled cheek brushing against her neck.

“I will arrive at night, Councillor Prior,” a rough voice muttered. “Be ready.”
She whipped around: but the faces were all looking ahead, their eyes fixed on the bodies.

“My lady,” Derset cried, grabbing hold of her wrist, “you must not go off alone like that.”

“I heard a voice. Someone spoke into my ear.”

“Never mind that now. Come with me.”

“There was a voice.” Lysande looked around sharply. “They knew my – ”

But one of the bodies swung in a gust of wind, sending a bag of silver mettles tumbling out of some hidden pocket, and the word “name” was lost. The crowd surged forward, one beast with many legs, scrambling under the arch and dropping to their knees.

Lysande accepted Derset’s arm and hurried out of the throng just in time to avoid being knocked to the ground. As she hurried out of the street, the last thing she saw was some four dozen women and men scrabbling with their hands – all shoving each other as they searched for silver that had already been pocketed – knees rubbing until they were soiled by muddy stone.

*

The Scarlet Road was not scarlet in hue, nor was it really wide enough to be a road. A pale brown ribbon ran from the end of Ferizia into the eastern country, following the river down to Rhime by way of Ardua and Castelaggio; more a path than a thoroughfare. There was just room for five riders abreast, so the city-rulers’ parties stretched out in a long rainbow of banners, colouring the land as they moved. The most senior guards bordered the group on every side.

Lysande’s mind was so busy with the rough voice in the crowd that she barely noticed the countryside around her: the estates of the noble families of Rhime were scattered over the land, brown-and-white manors behind gates with family banners flying, surrounded by little groups of servants’ dwellings. Golden hedges led to vineyards, which in turn gave way to dark groves and rows of crops bursting with vegetables and grain, but she did not really see them. At an abandoned castle near Ardua, she paused to brood, while Litany climbed through the crumbling rooms, running her hands over places where vines had claimed the stone.
When they came out a Pyrrhan guard was waiting, his bronze armour gleaming in the dying light.

“The princes are making camp ahead, Councillor. Night is falling.” He looked Lysande over. “The Irriqi invites you and Lord Derset to dine with the rest of the Council in the comfort of her tent.”

“Without our guards?”

“Guards are forbidden at a Pyrrhan dinner.”

*A dinner surrounded by city-rulers, without a sword to defend me.* Still, she did not wish to refuse Cassia’s hospitality, now that she was a “friend.”

“I accept,” she said. “On the condition that I may also bring my maid.”

“The Irriqi permits it, in her good grace.”

As he galloped away, Litany smiled and twisted her sleeve, looking pleased and terrified in equal measures.

The field in which they made camp was large, though not quite large enough to keep them from stumbling over each other and hearing bits of each other’s conversations: some of the Lyrians were playing lutes and summerharps, and a few had raised their voices to sing, the high, fluty sopranos weaving in and out with the deep baritones. As the Councillors endured their rituals of dress and hair, snatches of song drifted through the camp, punctuated here and there by the sounds of clapping and laughter.

“Someone should throttle those southerners,” a man’s voice boomed, loud enough to carry through the wall of Lysande’s tent. “Crudelis’ pox upon them all.”

“I can’t hear myself pray, let alone say the vows,” another replied.

“I say the First Sword should get rid of all the fish. Slice them to pieces or let them run – I don’t care which, just get them out of my sight.”

“It’s because of Prince Montignac we can’t slice them,” a woman added.

The speakers had thick Valderran accents, and none of them were bothering to keep their voices to a whisper; Lysande heard several more remarks about Jale.

“Do you hear that racket?” another woman added. “They’re singing *The Land of Gold and Blue.*”

The Valderrans paused their conversation for a moment, and as the Lyrian song drifted through the tents, Lysande recognised the tune: a battle hymn of the south, from the Steelsong Era.
Come all you sons of the scorching sands
And desert daughters too
We'll run them through the hearts and heads
For the land of gold and blue

As the voices rose to a raucous pitch, Lysande remembered that the same song had been sung fifteen years ago, when Jale’s father, Chaléon Montignac, nearly came to blows with Dante’s mother, Raina Dalgëreth.

For the land of gold and blue – hey!
For the land of gold and blue
We'll give the north a taste of steel
For the land of gold and blue

“I’ve a good mind to show them what gold and blue look like when they’re mixed with red,” the first Valderran growled.

“Better you stay your hand.” A woman chuckled, but the warning tone in her voice came through clearly. “We’ve got a Council now, not a queen. The First Sword says we don’t gut the fish.”

A string of Old Valderran curses followed outside. Litany stopped combing and stared at the tent-flaps, still gripping a lock of Lysande’s hair.

“What’s he saying, Miss – Lysande?”

“Oh, just making an oath on his mother’s grave. They are all superstitious, in the north.”

It had involved an oath about someone’s mother, she thought, a little guiltily, as Litany began to comb again.

Cassia’s tent was not hard to spot: festooned with ribbons of purple and white cloth and guarded by more than twenty women and men, it was easily twice the size of Dante’s. Even Jale’s golden monstrosity paled in comparison. A Pyrrhan guard looked them over at the entrance.

In the centre of the floor, a low table had been draped in brocaded cloth with bronze-coloured tassels and surrounded by cushions. The Irriqi sat at the head, resplendent in a plum-like gown, and waved to Lysande as she entered. She explained that the jagged white pieces on her choker were leopard’s teeth, though
Lysande doubted the verity of that; and that the four Pyrrhan nobles who sat behind her each represented a different family, bedecked with jewels: tear-shaped pearls set in silver pendants, diadems of rose-coloured diamonds, anklets of bronze and bracelets full of precious stones.

“Good evening, Councillor,” Jale said, from her right.

“Good evening, Your Highness. Though I find it uncommonly warm, in this clime.”

“Warm for you Axiumites, maybe. In Lyria, we call this winter.” Jale grinned. “When summer arrives in the south, it takes a layer of skin off your heel.”

“Only an idiot would be stupid enough to step on the desert barefoot,” the noblewoman beside him remarked. She had the same fine cheekbones and blue eyes as Jale, but none of his natural cheer, and after making this comment she returned to the task of examining her nails.

“Put that down,” Dante’s voice boomed out, further along. “It’s not for taking, you bear-witted clout.”

Flanked by two Valderran lords, he had swapped his fur for a light coat. The woman on his right had picked up a cushion and was running her hand over the brocade with such evident fascination that Lysande had to fight down a laugh. She would not have picked any one of Dante’s guards for an aesthete. On the other side of the low table, Luca Fontaine sat with a basket nestled in front of him, engrossed in conversation with two Rhimese, a dark-haired lord and a blonde woman.

“...and you can tell that idiot Ursini to get his snakes out of my armoury,” Lysande heard him say, before a clatter of brass brought the table to attention.

Pyrrhan attendants were carrying in plates, two by two: with little green parcels of leaf-wrapped cheese, glistening rice studded with nuts, a creamy beige paste surrounded by pieces of flat bread, and dollops of coconut-cream curry.

Lysande glanced at Derset. The shadow of the banquet had not yet disappeared, though with the wolf attack in the Arena, the rider following her today and the threat of a kidnapping tonight, there was plenty for her to worry about besides silent swords.

“You may dine and drink,” Cassia announced. “Tonight, we shall make merry.”

“As merry as a doomed man can be,” Jale muttered.
Glances flew around the table, and the elegant woman beside Jale cleared her throat.

“My brother only means that his engagement is weighing on his mind,” she said. “Six months left until the wedding, but uncle Vigarot showers him doves every day.”

“You are betrothed, then, Your Highness?” Lysande asked.

“To the heir of Bastillón, Princess Ferago. You can thank your Iron Queen Sarelin for that,” Jale replied, gloomily. “She bargained me off as soon as I took the throne. Everyone wants Lyria – we’ve got the delta, all the best art, and the bank. Not that my uncle put up much protest. Apparently, I was the only chance of binding Elira to the East, and securing an alliance with Bastillón... I’m sure it was just a coincidence he got a big fat dowry and two hundred mules into the bargain.”

“If I were the heir, I should be glad to marry to preserve the family line,” his sister said, folding her hands primly. “I should consider it an honour.”

“The honour of being shackled to a ram for life, Élérie?”

“What’s wrong with Princess Ferago, anyway?” Cassia demanded. “My envoys say she has many graces.”

“Nothing’s wrong with her. From everything I hear, she breathes rainbows and sends out beams of sunlight when she smiles – she probably capers around Belaga with a band of singers, scattering petals where she walks.” Jale glowered. “But I have no desire to marry her.”

Dante proposed a round of something called Wet Crowns, and all the city-rulers raised their goblets. The game, Lysande soon learned, involved drinking a goblet of wine for each year you had been on the throne, along with a good deal of eating, stomping, and jumping up from your seat. Soon all of them were crying “down! down! down!” as the Councillors threw back goblets of wine, laughing and shouting, and although she was not obligated to drink, she was persuaded to try a few goblets of Pyrrhan red; the wine was sweet on her tongue, but the richness of the grapes weighed her head down like a sleeping potion, and she soon regretted her decision.

Dessert arrived – slices of date bread accompanied by dollops of cream that Cassia’s cook had somehow transported on the ride – and wine was replaced with song. The Lyrians produced one virtuoso after another, although the Pyrrhans managed very well with their flutes, and the Axium Guards brought out a few
balladeers. When the last chorus had been sung, Dante suggested that they turn to the ordering of the armies.

"We need to consider our borders, if the White Queen is back. We might as well begin tonight, with our best fighters around us. To prepare — " he began, before he was shouted down.

"Let's have one night without talk of defence. We've plenty of time ahead for maps and stratagems," Cassia said.

"A toast to the Council of Elira!" Jale proposed, waving his goblet.
"Elira!" they all cried, and drank again.

"The puzzle realm," Luca said, when they had put down their goblets.
"Where jungle and desert and ice are to be found within the same borders. The puzzle of many pieces — the tapestry of many colours — where five cities keep their own customs, but share a common crown."

"Well put. I had no idea you had a knack for poetry," Jale said, flashing a smile.

"Prince Fontaine is quoting." Lysande took another piece of date bread.
"From the second volume of the Silver Songs: the poet Volerus' speech about the Unification of Elira."

"Very good, Councillor Prior. And do you know why the speech is so famous?"

"Because it is the first written work to define what Elira stands for," she said, meeting his stare. "In Chiam men hold power over women, and in Bastillón those with silver hair oppress those with gold; but in Elira all are equal, Volerus argues. That is why the founders took the motto 'diversity is our strength' for our crest."

"There's some good stuff in those old poems," Cassia said, nodding.

"Sarelin Brey thought so." Luca was still looking over his chalice at Lysande. "She loved drawing on the Silver Songs when it suited her, to make herself sound like King Hue Addischild. What an idol. The first monarch who crushed elementals. It doesn't take long for people to start comparing the Iron Queen with the Conqueror King, when you beat them over the head with a metaphor. No wonder she got you to translate the Silver Songs, Councillor Prior; a copy in every household, so that everyone could understand the allusion."
"It sounds as if you find the Silver Songs distasteful, Your Highness."

Lysande raised her goblet. “Perhaps the Tale of the Drunken Soldier is more to your liking.”

The others laughed, but Luca Fontaine did not join in with them. He was not smirking, now.

“It is not the style but the substance that rankles with me. If we are the puzzle realm, why do we leave out one piece of the puzzle whenever we write poems of glory? The Silver Songs are an exercise in exclusion, where our elemental sisters and brothers are concerned.”

“You think we should liberate the elementals?” Dante said. “Let them walk freely in the streets, burning houses and flooding whole towns? It’s enough that Councillor Prior has stopped us from killing them. I suppose you’d like to let wolves loose in the villages, too, Fontaine.”

“If you’re asking whether I think every magical woman is a White Queen in the making and every elemental man a tyrant, determined to destroy us – then no, Dalgéreth, I do not. The tyrants had to die, and the White Queen had to be brought down. But what of the other elementals? The ones in hiding? You can hardly blame them for resenting us, when we chop their heads off or lock them up for the crime of existing. The way I see it, they have been extraordinarily lenient. Do you not think they could raze our cities if they wanted to? That they could not burn our palaces to the ground in minutes, and make a new empire of their own?”

“The way you see it,” Dante said, with a scowl. “Rhime has a weakness for unnatural things.”

“Come, now,” Jale said, laying a hand on his arm, “let’s all cool our heads with another drink. I believe this is a red from the Triumphal Period.”

Dante had opened his mouth to make another remark, but at Jale’s touch he looked across at his friend. After a moment, Dante patted Jale on the shoulder, uncorked a bottle of the wine and poured himself a goblet. The conversation began to flow more freely – like the Triumphal red – and Lysande moved to sit beside Luca, so that she could speak without shouting.

“Jails are being built as we speak,” she said. “New jails, while I consider new ideas. Sarelin said that if elementals were allowed freedom, they would use it to rule over the rest of us. She told me at target practice, one afternoon. To liberate them
would be to risk going back to before the Conquest, with tyrants controlling every
town.”

“Then Sarelin Brey knew as little of elementals as she did of tact.” Luca
 glanced at her. “Oh, I don’t deny our late queen had her talents. She could swing a
sword and fling a good dagger, everyone knows; but she missed the opportunity to
reach out to elementals after the White War. Instead of welcoming them throughout
the realm, she chose to continue lopping off limbs and locking them up. No, Prior,
prejudice and fear have dictated the law. And where prejudice rules, the crown
weakens.”

Somewhere in her mind, Lysande knew that there was some truth in his
point, but she was so angry at the way he had spoken of Sarelin that she ignored it.
She could feel heat running through her neck to her cheeks, and a reply was
beginning to form on her lips when Élérie Montignac leant forward and vomited into
the middle of the table.

This caused such a commotion that by the time the mess had been cleared,
everyone had quite forgotten about the conversation. They moved on to another
round of singing, and then another. The sky was black by the time they returned to
their tents, and Litany’s head was nodding; Lysande insisted that the maid go to her
own bed, and sent Derset away. Pacing by the light of the candle inside her tent, she
felt the hilts of her daggers in her belt, running her thumb over and over the gold
one.

Once her head grew heavier, she took off her boots, undressed, and put on the
thickest cotton night-shift she could find in the pile of clothes. She stared at the
dagger-belt for a few moments; then she took the blades out of the sheaths and
tucked one blade under each side of her pillow, positioning them so that they would
not pierce through the feathers. It was a precaution Sarelin had taught her; and with
the encounter at Ferizia in mind, it seemed useful.

She climbed into bed and opened up a book. With the tome on her thighs she
began to read, grappling with the Astratto Formulas, the candle flickering but never
quite guttering out; yet she found herself yawning and stretching as she ploughed
through the mathematical tract, and somewhere after the eighteenth equation she fell
asleep. The eastern countryside flew past behind her eyes: the tiny farms and the
manor houses; the mounds of olives on platters in the shops at Ferizia; the squares of
vineyards at Spelato, and the deep green lumps of the Emeralds. The colours danced
before her again, a palette of heat and light. There was a figure moving amongst
them, though, following her from somewhere always out of reach.

She woke to a pressure on her mouth, and with the wine weighing her down,
she mumbled faintly.

"I haven’t come to hurt you," a man growled, "but if you squirm, Councillor
Prior, I might change my mind."

The hand clamped over her lips was tight enough to muffle any scream.

Above her, a figure stood, clad in the same hooded cloak as the rider that had
darted between the trees, and it was obvious at once why he had hidden his face – the
whole of his countenance was criss-crossed with scars, calcified in patches and
smooth in others, so that the mess of skin resembled a monster’s visage rather than a
man’s.

Lysande’s right leg twitched, but she mastered the impulse.

"Good." The horrible face twisted into a smile. "They told me you were
smart. Now get dressed, Councillor."

He removed his hand from her mouth and stepped back. They looked at each
other for a moment.

"Who do you work for?" she whispered.

"Someone who wants to speak to you. A little chat, and you’ll be returned to
your friends."

He lifted his sword-hilt a few inches above the sheath.

She said nothing, and moving as fast as her trembling fingers would allow,
she pulled on a her shirt and trousers and threw a jacket over the top. The scarred
man walked to the tent-flaps and stood in the entrance, silhouetted against the
candle-light. If he was concerned by the sight of her fastening her daggers into her
belt, he gave no sign.

"Ready?" he asked, when she had done up the buckle.

Before she could reply a sound rang out across the camp – a guttural roar,
like an animal about to devour its prey.

"What in the three lands was that?" Lysande cried.

"A ruse." The scarred man drew his sword.

They stared at each other again, and Lysande knew as she took in his scars
that protesting would do no good.

"If I come quietly, do I have your word that I won’t be killed?"
He shrugged off his hood, exposing the whole expanse of burnt and twisted skin.

“'Aye,’” he said. “For whatever you think it’s worth.”

The night air tickled their necks as they emerged from the flaps, and Lysande saw that the guards around her tent were gone. She thought she could make out a bear running on all fours at the other end of the camp – a huge crowd of guards chasing it with swords outstretched – but her capturer twisted her arm and pulled her away.

Then they were moving through the back of the tents and into a line of trees, and there was no one to hear her footsteps; no one to see her running as they passed further and further from the torches of the camp.
Chapter Seven

The farmhouse stood in the middle of a group of fields, half-hidden by the darkness. Lysande was pulled to a stop, panting, while a woman in a cloak stepped out from the doorway. Her heels ached, but she stood firm, taking in the boots, the greaves, and the hood that hid everything but a few wisps of black hair.

“Go ahead, Welles,” the woman said, with a nod to Lysande’s abductor. “He’s waiting.”

The scarred man pushed her through the door and into a series of rooms, pushing her through a kitchen, a bedchamber and a study — all empty, and lit only by candles. The room in which they stopped was at least three times the size of the others. It was occupied by a table covered in papers and envelopes, with a candelabra mounted in the middle of the wood, and at the far end of the table Lysande could see a figure in a chair, but the sitter’s distance from the light made it impossible to discern the face. She could only make out a glint of white hair.

“Welcome, Miss Prior. Do come in and take a seat.”

The voice that carried across the table was male, with a mellifluous tone. She could just discern the shape of a brimmed hat in the gloom, perched on the speaker’s head.

“I do apologise for the nature of our lodgings — they are somewhat frugal out of necessity — and I must extend my apologies for sending Welles to fetch you. He is skilful at handling a bear, but he grew up north of Valderos, and I am afraid his idea of courtesy is cutting your throat with one stroke instead of two.”

The scarred man grunted and stepped back against the wall. Lysande walked to the end of the table, one hand reaching for the gold dagger at her hip.

“If I cannot see my captor’s face, I demand to know his name.”

“I would take my hand off that blade if I were you, my dear.” The speaker leaned forward. “Queen Sarelin may have trained you well, but my weapon does not need to be drawn.”

Wind engulfed her as the figure in the chair lifted his hand. Lysande scrabbled to grasp the corner of the table, and several sheets of paper scattered onto
the floor. She steadied herself until her host lowered his hand and the wind ceased as quickly as it had begun.

"Sit, Miss Prior," he said. "I mean for us to be friends, and there are no formalities between friends, are there?"

Lysande sat. The chair at the end of the table creaked as she moved it, scraping on the floor, but she barely heard the noise – her mind was already racing through everything she knew about elementals. Of course Welles had not been concerned by her daggers. Of course the big man had been able to subdue and transport a bear without losing a limb – he could probably move fire, or water, or air like her host. But if these are the White Queen's elementals, why am I not dead already?

"Forgive me, signor, but I do not believe I know you."

"My name is not important – to those who matter, I am simply called Three."

The man in the brimmed hat leaned back in his chair.

"How long have you been following me?"

"Welles here has been following you. I prefer to rest in the shadows, where it is easier to examine curiosities. It was curious indeed for Sarelin Brey, the Iron Queen of seven battles, to pick a scholar for her companion."

"You seem to know a lot about me." Lysande kept her face impassive. "But when it comes to you, I confess I am in the dark."

Three rose from his chair and walked to the window. "Perhaps it will help if I let in some light," he said.

He pulled the wooden boards open and streams of moonlight washed over him. The man in front of her was tall, though not monstrous like Welles; indeed, his angular face might have once been beautiful, before it had acquired its sharper, wiser aspect. Despite the brimmed hat and the embroidered doublet, there was nothing to identify him – no crest or motto anywhere, and only a triangle pendant dangling in the middle of his chest. The hair that hung down his back was a pure white, yet he could not have been much older than thirty-five.

"You need not fear that I will detain you long. Prince Fontaine, the Irriqi, the First Sword, and that charming boy-prince would miss you if you kept you here. So answer one question. Indulge me with a show of your talents, Miss Prior." He folded his hands as he sat down. "Tell me. When you look at me, what do you see?"
Lysande’s eyes passed quickly over his person, coming to rest on the pendant.

“In ancient times, the triangle was a symbol of magic. Three sides: for fire, water, and air. You’re an elemental, and you’re bold enough to carry a symbol upon you identifying you as such.”

“Very good.”

Her heart was fluttering in her throat. “You had a man lead a bear to our camp to get me away. You bring me to a farmhouse in the middle of the night, with the help of people who all wear the same cloaks… so you deal in secrecy, and you’re highly organised.”

Three regarded her, smiling.

“The last clue is your name.” She met his stare. “Since you already wear a triangle pendant, I’d say that Three does not refer to the elements. And since you have people working for you, I’d say you’re third in charge of some magical group.”

“Excellent. But you have omitted the name of our organisation.” His smile turned sly. “I should have thought it was obvious to a discerning mind.”

“Even a scholar cannot deduce a fact from thin air, signor.”

“You have heard our name before.” Three tilted his head, and moonlight struck the brim of his hat. “You simply need to remember.”

As she stared at him, the explanation that had been hiding amongst the fears and anxieties of the last twenty-four hours blazed forth, and though she knew she was guessing, this guess fit so perfectly that she did not reject it.

“You’re a member of the Resistance,” she said, slowly.

He nodded, and walking around to the side of the table, lowered himself into the chair beside her. Up close, she could see the experience written on his face – and the urge to reach for her dagger died as she looked into his eyes, taking in their quiet power.

“You will be wondering who we are, and why we have brought you here.” He leaned back in his chair. “I expect you have a multitude of questions, Miss Prior; but to understand who we are, you must understand how things began.”

He clicked his fingers at Welles and the scarred man disappeared into the house, returning a moment later with the woman who had greeted them.

“Six, my dear,” Three said, “would you be so good as to show Miss Prior your face?”
The woman dropped her hood. In the moonlight, the burn that disfigured her right cheek was painfully clear: a twisted expanse stretched from the hairline to the jaw, suffused with the angry red that could only have come from a magical flame. Lysande could not help but gasp.

“Tell me, how do you think the White Queen persuaded fifty elementals to fight in her army? Powerful people, many of whom thought her a tyrant and a threat to the land they were born in?”

“Not by asking politely.”

“Swords, knives, hot irons and flames... she took her time with those who refused her. You need only look at Welles, here.”

The scars on the big man’s face took on a different aspect as she looked at them again; it was not fear she felt, this time, but something like pity.

“And what about you, signor?”

“Some scars lie below the surface.” Three adjusted his hat, and for a while he let a silence linger between them. “In addition to being able to move the air, I have what is called a power of the mind,” he said, at last. “The White Army had to try different methods on those like me. Even a boy of eight was worth keeping alive for months, if there was hope that he might be broken. Any brutality was justified to win the prize of a power of the mind for the White Queen.”

“Yet you must have escaped her, to be sitting here today.”

“Some would call it an escape. Others who fled her clutches know better.”

He looked into her eyes.

Lysande was silent, too, reflecting on the causes of hair turning white before old age.

“I had been living in a sewer in Axium for eight months when I came across others like me: elementals who had escaped. Some more scarred than others. We formed a group to share food and a roof, and when we had lived together long enough to trust one another, one of my new friends introduced me to an organisation.” He stroked the pendant on his chest. “A group of elementals who felt that they should use their talents to hold back the White Queen. They saw the way forward for our people as peace, not tyranny, and they were neither of Sarelin Brey’s army nor the White Army. A very unusual movement. Perhaps you can guess to whom I refer.”

“The Resistance.”
He nodded. “Our goal then – as it is now – was to know things. To find out where the White Queen’s soldiers were going and what her plans were. To have hands amongst her papers. Ears on her walls.”

“An intelligence service.” If Sarelin had known about this, why had she never mentioned it until she was dying? And why had she asked Lysande to find this group of elementals – had something changed her mind?

“We gather intelligence. But as for a service, the Resistance knows too much to put its powers at the disposal of a queen or king.” Three smiled. “We serve only the realm.”

“Yet if you have a structure, you must have a leader. Above a Three, there is a Two and a One.”

“We have a system, in the way that a paper castle has a system behind its intricate construction, invisible to all but the creator. Each of us knows only the people we need to know. It would be inconvenient to have a member of the Resistance caught and tortured, and to have them pass the details of every agent into the White Queen’s hands – she can never be underestimated. Secrecy is our religion, Miss Prior. In fact, I can assure you that the name of One is not known to any but himself.”

“Then how can you be sure that it is a ‘him’?”

He regarded her closely, over the top of his folded hands. She was not sure if she had imagined the twinkle in his eyes.

“I see my dear friend Two was not wrong about you,” he said.

A clink interrupted them: Six and Welles had slipped out some time ago and now they returned with plates of cheese and baskets of bread, setting them down in front of Lysande. The bread was roughly-cut, and it gave off a tempting smell. “Please, help yourself to some bread and cheese.” Three waved a hand. “And perhaps Six will be so good as to bring us a little water... I expect you do not want wine, after all that drinking last night.”

“You are singularly well-informed of my doings, signor.”

There were no cured vegetables or honeyed cakes here, but there was enough to stave off the hunger that had woken in her since her run through the fields, and she made to reach for the cheese-platter, but paused.
"You need not fear poison here," Three said, smiling. "If I wanted to kill you I could do so with a flick of my hand. But if it sets your mind at ease, I shall eat first."

He pulled the platter nonchalantly over, and closing his eyes, chewed slowly. "Pescarran, I think. Of all the Rhimese towns, Pescarra is the one to stop in for goat’s milk cheeses – make a note of it, my dear. You never know when you will need good cheese."

The cheese was indeed good, but the bread was better, crusty on the outside and soft on the inside. Lysande’s head was drooping, but falling asleep while surrounded by elementals was not a wise move, and as she ate, she forced herself to keep her eyes open, pinching her fingers whenever she felt herself slipping away. Three left the room with Six, whispering to each other, and the pair of them did not return until she was nearly finished devouring the meal.

"The Resistance wishes to make you an offer, Miss Prior," Three said, as he sat down again. "Work with us. Take our information and our advice, and use it to defeat the White Queen."

"The White Queen is already defeated. Sarelin crushed her army in the war."

"You know as well as I do that Mea Tacitus’s return is imminent – that she uses dragonblood, and a silent sword with a dragon on it, to put the fear of magic back into the realm. Since the end of the White War, she has been waiting and biding her time. Now she has removed the greatest threat to her ascent, Sarelin Brey."

"That may be so. But I fail to see what I can do to help you defeat her."

"We need someone at the highest level of rule to work with us. If we are to defeat her in any permanent capacity, it must be with the support of the crown, as I tried to convince our late Queen Sarelin."

Lysande caught a smell wafting from one of the pages on the table, and it only took her seconds to identify the scent of rose-oil – faint and fragrant, but unmistakeable.

"Your letter was the last thing she read," she said, slowly.

"It was the last of several. I tried to warn her that an attack was being planned for a hunting trip – I wrote with increasing urgency, stressing that she should avoid riding out at all costs – but to no avail. Sarelin Brey distrusted elementals. She looked on our information as a ploy or a trap, and nothing we did would convince her that we wanted to save her life."
"So you do serve the crown."

"I serve Elira, Miss Prior." He touched his pendant again, stroking a carving of a smaller triangle within the triangle. "Sometimes, that means choosing one leader over another; but always, it means acting for the people."

As she considered her choice, she remembered Sarelin’s hacking and coughing; the queen jerking on the grass, urging her to find the Resistance and then going still – cold and still in her arms. Was Sarelin certain, as the poison ran through her, that the Resistance had been right all along? That a network of elemental spies was their best hope against the White Queen? What she would give to speak to her dearest friend now.

"Tell me what you know of the White Queen’s plans," she said, leaning forward.

Three nodded to Six. The woman rummaged amongst the papers on the table, choosing a number of letters from the mess and dropping them down in front of Three; he unfolded them one by one, revealing messages written in many different languages. Bastillonian, modern Eliran, Chiamese dialect, the wayfarer tongues of the outlands, and snatches of the ancient city-tongues of Lyria, Axium, Valderos, Pyrrha and Rhime: even Luca Fontaine would have marvelled at such a range.

"As you see, Mea Tacitus is clever enough to know that her correspondences can be intercepted. She always sends two doves, in case one of them does not make it to its target." He flattened a curling paper. "Although she does not have many followers, those she has are extremely loyal. Fanatical, some would say."

"These three letters were sent from Chiam."

"What makes you say that, my dear?"

"The rose-coloured specks in the grain come from Chiamese paper." She picked up one of the pages. "It is made out of the pinkish sakleang-tree – you will not find the like of it in Elira. And the thickness of this sheet," she reached for a letter on the right, "is slightly greater than our own. Bastillonian paper, without a doubt."

"You are correct; she has moved around in our neighbouring lands, where it is hard for even the most determined of our agents to trace her. Most of the time, she has been further north, we fear. The outlands. The rulers across the North Sea are not so scrupulous about driving out tyrants when the tyrants can pay." Three’s mouth
pursed. "We suspect she has bought up mercenary soldiers there, over the last two decades."

"But she has a spy working inside Elira, too."

"Indeed." He passed her one of the letters. "That is where you come in, Miss Prior."

As she smoothed the paper out, she saw that the first line had been written in Bastillonian, followed by a few words in Eliran, and then some in Chiamese.

"We leave Axium Palace in the morning," she read aloud, decoding the author's scrawl. "We will take the Scarlet Road. Probably to camp near Ardua." She dropped the letter as the words sank in. "This was written yesterday!"

"Only someone with an intimate knowledge of this Council’s movements could have sent such a message before the party left." Three tapped a finger against the page. "Possibly one of the city-rulers. Her servant, as you can see, is a man or woman of talent, with several languages at their command. Someone resourceful enough to send a dove unnoticed amid a crowd of guards and attendants."

"Does the White Queen mention their name?"

"She addresses them as the Umbra. That is all we have – they cover their tracks so efficiently that I suspect some magical method may be involved. The White Queen is good at protecting her servant. Even the Resistance cannot match her. But we know that the Umbra has no great love for Sarelin Brey: in one letter they refer to her as a ‘brute’, in another as a ‘bitch’."

Like my dear Lord Pelory. But Pelory could not have sent the dove, being dozens of miles behind them in Axium. It was hard to think, when her mind was flicking between Welles’ face and Three’s hand.

"If they mean to pick off the rest of the Council, they’re not doing a good job," she said. "Their silent sword did not achieve its purpose, and if that wolf in the Arena was theirs, it failed, too."

"I expect those were spur-of-the-moment attempts. Almost half-hearted. Now they have five Councillors to kill, all while surrounded by the best guards from every city.” He ran a hand along his angular jaw. "We believe the White Queen has changed tactics. She is careful to say nothing so clear; but the hints in her letters suggest she aims to take the throne with an army. It could take her months to build a big enough force... possibly years. But if she can poison our relations with our neighbours, she will find it easier to buy their soldiers."
Even Lysande knew of Elira’s chilly truce with Chiam — an isolation of the western land from Elira after the border skirmishes eight centuries ago had resulted in the Chiamese’s construction of the wall — and she knew of the jealousy from Bastillón over their varied climate and rich produce. Sarelin had sometimes spoken of the plots that she had worked to foil while she sat on the throne, like the attack King Ferago launched against her after the last trade dispute, two assassins lurking in the city square with bows. If the Sovereign of Chiam or the King of Bastillón were to join forces with the White Queen, Elira might be attacked by the kind of army that the five cities together could not defeat.

“It wouldn’t take much,” she said. “Just a spark to light the tinder.”

“Yes; we are of the same thinking. She will make a move to sow discord soon… very soon. You must be on the alert in these next weeks in Rhime, therefore. Intervene, where you think a lie has been planted; find evidence of treachery, and hold it up where all can see. Expose the truth. You will need proof — hard proof that cannot be disputed — and once you have it, you must stop the Council from doing anything hasty where our neighbours are concerned.”

“I cannot imagine telling Dante Dalgëreth to put down his sword. I may be a Councillor now, but I am still an orphan in the eyes of the world.” The Resistance might have done better to ask one of the city-rulers.

“You have read a lot of histories and poems, Miss Prior. You should know that it is often the lowest born who climbs the highest. You have been trained to think deeply, and to act quietly. And you are the only Councillor without years of ties and obligations to a court.” Three pushed a strand of white hair out of his eyes.

“You have no family name, but equally, you have no family ties.”

“So I am valuable to you.”

He said nothing; only fingered his pendant again, tracing the edges of the triangle in the middle.

“And what value do you offer me in return?”

They stared at each other for a moment.

“I cannot shower you with riches,” he said, “for we do not pay our informers in cadres, mettles or rackets, lest they begin to behave like mercenaries. But I can offer you revenge for Queen Sarelin, and for your parents.”

“I never knew my parents, signor.”

“That is my point.”
He folded his hands. The words resonated. The White War was just a vague series of events from before Lysande’s time, distant as a story in a book, and she had never thought about it in terms of blame. Yet she had spent eight years in an orphanage thanks to the same war. And she had lost her queen – the only real parent she had ever known – at the hands of the woman who had led the rebellion.

“There is one more thing.” Three’s rich voice interrupted her thoughts. “If you are loyal to us, the Resistance will put all its resources into finding the answer to one question of your choosing.”

“Any question?”

He nodded. “No matter how obscure. You need only tell us, when you have decided, and we will investigate it for you.”

“I will have to think hard, then.” There were certain things that a group of people who could create fires and floods and storms might discover, that others could not.

“And in the meantime, you shall have a token of our trust. I can offer our best horses, whenever you need them; we have plenty of stallions.”

“I prefer my mare.” The piebald creature was hardly a thoroughbred, yet she had grown attached to it, mercurial though it was. “Sarelin always rode a mare. Besides, I should have thought you flew around on dragons.”

He smiled. “Our powers stop short of resurrection, Miss Prior.”

Lysande barely heard the remark. Her mind was already sizing up the task ahead, examining where the spy might have opportunity to cause a rift with their neighbours. Three reached into his robe and drew a glass vial out of some inner pocket.

“If you ever find yourself in a situation where you are in need of permanent rest, take seven drops of this, my dear.”

He shook the vial, and the greyish liquid swirled inside. The concoction moved slowly.

“I thank you, signor, but I am a quick sleeper.”

“There is one kind of sleep that only aeturnus can produce. Sometimes, in our kind of work, you encounter a time when the future looks dark – so dark that one prefers to close one’s eyes rather than face it. Do you understand me, Miss Prior?”

Lysande nodded, taking the vial from his hand. The glass was cold in her fingers. She slipped it into her jacket pocket.
"We will do everything we can to protect you, but those who help the Resistance put their lives at risk. It is a condition of our work." Three looked closely at her. "The White Queen has her own spies, and they can be dangerous – as your friend Cassia Ahl-Hafir nearly found out. When you have something to report, send a dove at night."

"What address shall I give?" The doves of Elira might know every place in the realm, but they still needed to be told where to go.

"None." Three clicked his fingers, and Six brought over a speckled bird. "I will leave you my personal bird, Cursora; she always knows where to find me. And with her, your messages are less likely to go flapping into the wrong hands."

"I hope I have good news."

"Where the Resistance is concerned, there is no other kind." He rose, and Lysande rose with him. "Welles will see you back to your camp. He is more useful than a sword, and he has a talent for causing a distraction when one needs to slip back to a tent without a fuss."

They walked back through the farmhouse. The light was still dim, but Three’s white hair was brighter than the candles, guiding their way. His gait was even as he led them down the corridor. Before the doorway, he turned to face Lysande.

"Good luck, my dear, and remember that you go with our protection. You may not be elemental, but you have the support of magic. That counts for a great deal."

"Three." She ran a hand over the dove’s back, quelling its cooing.

"Yes, my dear?"

"The question I can ask you… it can be anything? Even if it seems impossible that you could answer it?"

His smile had more than a hint of amusement, and he regarded her for a long moment before he opened the door.

"Naturally," he said. "I make no guarantees. But in thirty-six years, I am yet to be confronted by an impossible problem."
The township of Castelaggio came right down to the river, a cascade of brown stone houses, almost twice as long as Spelato and Ferizia. Amber wine from Castelaggio flowed freely in most of the towns around Rhime, and its inhabitants had built their villas off their trade, shaping themselves into one of the richest communities in the east: well-to-do merchants promenaded down the widest main street, and the square was bustling in the morning, with women in gowns laughing and chatting around a statue of two cobras entwined.

Lysande looked around at the Rhimese villagers as they trotted through and listened to the lively song of the eastern vowels from shop doorways, but her thoughts were far away. In the light of day, the farmhouse, the letters on the table and the sight of a brimmed hat in a shadowed room seemed anything but real; only the dove that was now nestling in the cage with her others assured her that she had really met elementals, and had struck a deal with them.

By accepting Three’s offer, she had put herself in the palm of a man who might close it and crush her with ease. The rush of the wind knocking into her and those papers leaping into the air…

*I may not have an elemental power,* she thought, *but I have my wits about me.*

Her head was assaulted by the same crushing pain she had been fighting for days, now coming in spurts and bursts; she had pushed the ache down beneath the memory of last night. Although the meeting had left her uneasy, she could feel a queer stirring in her core, something different to nerves.

“You seem troubled, my lady,” Derset said, when they had passed out of the town’s southern arch.

“A panther, poison, a silent sword, a wolf and now a bear. It would be strange if I were not troubled, my lord.”

“The bear may have been nothing but bad luck. I am only glad you were taking the air when the animal came upon us – though you must not wander off like that again.” He glanced at her with concern. “There are queer and dangerous folk afoot after dark.”

*More dangerous than you know, and more queer than you imagine.* “How did the guards trap the bear, in the end?”

“They chased it into the trees, but then they couldn’t get a clear shot. The animal was fast. Prince Fontaine had the idea of laying out all the fruit in his supplies
in a trail, and leaving a star-fruit at the end. The bear took so long trying to open the skin of the star-fruit that the archers managed to sneak up behind it and get a clear shot. It was busy with its claws, and it never saw the arrows coming.”

Lysande shook her head. “He is a clever man, Prince Fontaine.”

The sleepless night she had spent had taken its toll, and she fell back into silence as they passed out of the town and back onto the Scarlet Road. Although she was looking out for any sign of subterfuge, she was diverted now and then by the vista: the fields opened up to broad expanses of grass and meadows of yellow-and-purple flowers which the Rhimese used to make perfume, and the sun grew ever more glorious as they rode. They drew near a crowd of red deer on a hillock and she stopped to inspect the markings on the back; a rare breed that Haxley wrote had never ventured beyond Rhimese territory.

By the time they began to slow, the rolling fields of the Rhimese countryside had given way to a group of gentle ridges, and the riders stopped on the last one.

Straddling the banks of a river – the same thread of blue that had run through Castelaggio – a city of white stone sprawled before them, all the way to a pair of hills. White buildings jostled with more white buildings: so many dwellings side by side that they seemed to be looking at a carpet of ivory. Rhime had none of the capital’s order, its roads forming neat intersections with ruler-sharp lanes; instead, the streets wound and wove across each other, disappearing suddenly into cul-de-sacs or forking out into paths that divided again and again.

“A city with a black flag, built of white stone,” Lysande said, halting her mare on the edge of the grass. “Is the castle hiding?”

“If you want to see Castle Cervello, you must look higher.”

“Is it the hump on the skyline; the round building by the river?”

Derset followed her finger. “No, my lady. That is the Academy. The best minds of Rhime work under that domed roof. Try higher still.”

She saw it, then, as she tilted her head and took in the tops of the hills: a cluster of white towers perched on the very top of the left peak, surrounded by a moat and sprawling grounds. The fortress was solid stone, its buildings sharp and jutting; a garden of white teeth above the city. Even from many miles away, she could see that someone had sculpted two cobras onto the front wall, so that the snakes loomed over the doors, their enormous heads staring down at where guests would enter; the size of them made them discernable from afar.
“What do you think, my lady?”

“I think it is unique.” She shook her head. “Any attacker would have to climb the slope into the arms of the waiting guards. The cobras, though, are surely a little –”

They were cut off by shouts behind them. They turned to find the group parting, and a woman in black armour pushed through, hurrying towards Luca.

“It’s riders, Your Highness,” she called. “Three of them.”

“Our people?” Luca asked.

“I think so. It looks like Lord Targia and Lord Feronna – and Lady Trastavento, perhaps.”

He rode after her, and Lysande followed him through the line of riders to the back. Three figures in the distance were galloping over the ridges. They all wore the Rhimese doublet with the red cobra on black, and she made out a woman flanked by two men, carrying bows.

Luca stared for a long moment.

“That is not Targia,” he said, slowly.

“Who is it, Your Highness?”

But his expression was changing quickly from curiosity to alarm.

“Get down!” he shouted. “Everybody, get down! Guards – to me! Now!”

The arrows came so swiftly that Lysande heard them before she saw them – the whizz of shafts in the air, so close that they almost grazed her ears. Horses reared up and shrieked around her. Two of the Rhimese women to her right toppled from their mounts, dead before they landed, their bodies trampled at once by dozens of panicked hooves; the riders came at them steadily, firing so fast that their bows seemed an extension of their arms.

A boy in fur fell from his horse with shafts lodged in his stomach, his chest and his head. Further along, a man slumped forward, the feathered end of an arrow protruding from his neck. A red flower sprouted from his wound, thickening by the second.

Lysande’s limbs seemed to have lost the ability to move. She saw Luca draw an arrow from his quiver and line it up in one smooth movement, his black hair splayed over his brow.

“Now!” he cried, as he let the arrow fly. “Shoot for their necks!”
The riders were keeping up a steady volley as they rode, but Luca’s arrow caught the man on the left straight in his heart. He swore and fell, half-entangled in the saddle, his corpse dragged along the ground until his horse was stopped by a Valderran guard.

"Fire, you snakes!" a Rhimese woman shouted. "They’re getting close!"

A steady rain of Rhimese arrows struck the remaining two riders, finding the arms and chests and eventually the necks – but not before the attackers had killed several guards, a Pyrrhan attendant, and a Lyrian noblewoman. The southern woman lay on her back in the dirt, her gold cloak daubed with blood. Everywhere, people were shouting, and someone began to sob behind Lysande, a hoarse, terrible sound that brought her back to her senses. She swung down from her horse and pushed her way to where the city-rulers were standing.

"Bring me the bodies," Luca said, pulling an arrow-head from his shoulder and wincing. "Guards, see to the wounded. Malsante, Freste – I want those dead riders over here now."

The dark-haired lord and the blonde noblewoman who had sat beside him at dinner lifted up the corpses of the attackers and carried them through. Other guards brought their fallen to join them. The friends of the Lyrian woman wept as they clustered around her body; and for the first time, the northerners and southerners were helping each other without bickering. Jale, Cassia and Dante were standing with their people, looking down at their slain followers, but they came to the front when they saw the riders’ bodies.

Luca dismounted and scrutinised the faces of the dead attackers.

"Hired killers," he said. "These dogs have seen many fights."

All three faces were marred by old wounds, and the man who had been dragged by his horse was missing a chunk of flesh under the eyebrow. Even beneath the fresh blood, the bruises on his jaw stood out.

Luca unfastened the black cloaks and checked all three for hidden flaps. Thrusting his hands into the trouser-pockets, he rummaged in the men’s without success; but on reaching into the woman’s left pocket he smiled.

The purse that he pulled out was no cheap trinket. Lysande could tell that much. The stitching gleamed a rich bronze, and the leather looked soft in his hand; and as he turned it over in his long fingers, she caught sight of an image embroidered on the side: a ram’s head, with whorl-like horns, beneath a pair of swords.
“What emblem is that, Your Highness?” she said.

“A ram, under two crossed swords.” Luca’s face had settled back into a cold, unreadable façade. “This is the crest of Bastillón.”

The looks on the faces of the others were grave. Even Jale did not venture a remark – it seemed that the death of the Lyrian woman had put a stop to his usual cheer.

“See that all the wounds are bandaged, and take the group through to Rhime,” Luca said, to Malsante. “Ravelli,” he said to a slender lord, “with me. Bring ten of our best guards.”

“You’re riding ahead?” Jale asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

You must stop the Council from doing anything hasty where our neighbours are concerned. Three’s words were still fresh. “You won’t do anything without the Council, will you?” Lysande said.

Luca Fontaine climbed onto his horse, and looked down at her.

“I only mean to invite the Bastillonian ambassador to dinner,” he said, with the little half-smile that made his mouth so dangerous. “We owe him a proper welcome, at Castle Cervello, do we not?”

He rode on without waiting for a reply, a party of guards falling into place behind him, their doublets turning to specks of black as they flew down the slope and towards the city: faster and faster, until the horses entered the gates, and disappeared into the tangle of streets.

END OF CREATIVE COMPONENT

(See Appendix for Chapters 7-15, the remainder of The Councillor.)
Dissertation component of the thesis:

The Machiavellian Political Influence in Epic Fantasy
Introduction

Fantasy is imagination. Since the Middle Ages, the word “fantasy” has been synonymous with imagining, creating, and seeing in the mind’s eye what cannot be seen in real life (Oxford English Dictionary Online n.p.). It is the opposite of mundane; the beginning of the journey to a place that can only be dreamed. The field of fantasy literature offers writers a chance to invent the extraordinary: as fantasy scholar Dieter Petzold puts it, “to express a conscious departure from, even rebellion against, the principle of mimesis.” (15) Amongst the different forms of fantasy fiction, the genre of “epic fantasy” allows for the construction of an entire world with its own landscapes, people, creatures, cultures and customs.

Every part of an epic fantasy world can be imagined by the author, right down to the food on the table. Yet despite the scope offered by the genre to re-imagine social structures and even to bend the rules of reality, patriarchal principles still dominate politics and culture in most examples of epic fantasy fiction, as critics such as Jane Tolmie have noted (148-149). Within these patriarchal societies, female characters can challenge norms and succeed against the odds, as with the female warrior Éowyn in Tolkien’s famous trilogy The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955) who participates in the climactic final battle of the story, killing the fearsome Witch-king of Angmar despite great physical risk and helping bring about victory. The female seafarers of Robin Hobb’s Liveship Traders Trilogy (1998-2000) drive the novels’ narratives through conflicts and their encounters with magic. In Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness series (1983-1988), female protagonist Alanna disguises herself as a man in order to become a knight, training and fighting to defend royalty.

All of these novels feature women in important roles, yet at the same time, they are set in worlds dominated by men. The genre thus exhibits a tendency to reproduce a particular social structure whilst inventing and re-inventing many other elements of its fictitious worlds. The epic fantasy paradigm also tends to feature protagonists from a Western land, with an Eastern land constructed as “other” (Balfe 76). Patriarchy and Eurocentrism, it appears, often shape epic fantasy’s worlds. To a new author, however, such genre norms can provide a challenge and be viewed as
opportunities: aspiring authors can alter the gender and race dynamics of the predominant epic fantasy paradigm to create new works.

My own interest in epic fantasy grew over many years. I was drawn to the freedom of the genre to imagine not only dragons, warriors and battles, but female leaders taking part in political conflict. It is perhaps not surprising that as a student with an interest in Renaissance literature and politics, I chose to write in a genre known for recreating the feudal world, where power was concentrated in dynasties but alliances were constantly changing. I found that the feudal courts, swordfights, conspiracies and shifting leadership in epic fantasy narratives echoed the drama of Italy under the Borgias and the intrigues of the Sengoku period in Japan. But it was the opportunity to create as well as recreate history that drew me to the genre. When writing epic fantasy, I could invent powerful and ambitious characters of my own, including female leaders and rulers, and give them a unique political world in which to play out their conflict. In the imaginary realm I created, women could rule, command armies, and fill any social role I chose, provided that I could convince readers that the society functioned as a gender-equalised system.

Choosing the epic fantasy genre for a feminist exploration of dynastic politics might seem surprising to some. The portrayal of gender in epic fantasy has long been controversial. In 1978, Hans Joachim Alpers gave an excoriating assessment of the genre’s treatment of women in imaginary feudal realms, claiming that sexuality in fantasy literature is “hardly liberating. It stems from the pasha mentality and the rape fantasies of frustrated petty-bourgeois. Women are used as consumer good to be thrown away after service, which here often means turning them over to slavery or prostitution” (25). Rape, along with violence, was a necessary “ritual of the genre”, Alpers claimed; violence against women was to epic fantasy “like the showdown in the Western” (28), an essential part of the genre that had helped to define it.

Alpers’ critique flattens the complexity and diversity of epic fantasy. The founding works of modern epic fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien’s quest novels *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) do not include rape or any kind of sexual violence; their “rituals” are high romance and heroic battle. Female characters in patriarchal stories can also take a central position in the narrative, as Hobb and
Pierce’s series demonstrate with their active women. Yet Alpers nonetheless touches upon an uncomfortable reality: that the genre frequently depicts women as sex slaves and victims of violence, systematising women’s oppression in brutally patriarchal worlds, and replicating many gendered tropes. R.E. Howard’s Conan stories (1932-1936), deplored by Alpers for their violence and misogyny (29-30), are early examples of this trend. The popular series The Wheel of Time (1990-2013) by Robert Jordan incorporates more powerful female characters into its story, including a magical female group called the Aes Sedai; yet Jordan has been accused of sexism in his depiction of women. Fantasy author Helen Lowe argues (in an assessment of misogyny in epic fantasy) that the main female characters in The Wheel of Time are “more concerned about their clothes” than about action, and points out that they “seem to spend a lot of time either imagining themselves being stripped naked, or being actually stripped naked, or subjugated physically in some other way, when they are taken prisoner” (Lowe n.p.). Lowe also notes that women are excluded from participating in fighting by the “chauvinist” male protagonist (Lowe n.p.).

This critique must be balanced against the novels of Hobb, Pierce, and others such as Robin McKinley, whose The Blue Sword (1982) and The Hero and the Crown (1984) feature female characters participating in conflict and even coming to rule their lands. The titular hero of The Hero and the Crown is, in fact, a heroine, who uses leadership skills and magic to defeat a threat to the realm. The title is thus a nod to the centrality of a woman in conflict and political struggle. In the works of the female authors mentioned here, the oppression of women serves as a condition against which exceptional female characters succeed. Therefore, although epic fantasy novels are predominately patriarchal, the role and treatment of women in fantasy stories varies. More recently, George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire (ASOIAF) novel series, begun in 1995, and now brought to a wider audience by its adaptation into the HBO TV series Game of Thrones, has reignited the discussion of rape and the oppression of women in epic fantasy, due to its descriptions and discussions of sexual violence.¹

Certainly, *ASOIAF*’s imaginary world of Westeros is not exempt from misogyny. If anything, it goes further in its depiction of sexual violence and slavery than many other epic fantasy series, as Martin endeavours to depict a frequently unjust world. This entails the description of violence against women (as in the horrific violence against Ramsay Bolton’s bride, Jeyne Poole, in *A Dance With Dragons (ADWD)*), ritualised humiliation (as in Cersei’s walk of shame in *ADWD*), gang rape (as in Lollys’ rape in the sack of King’s Landing in *A Clash of Kings (ACOK)*), and many other forms of abuse. Yet through the use of female character perspectives, Martin’s series simultaneously questions and deconstructs patriarchal dynastic structures. For instance, when the character Asha Greyjoy considers the verbal abuse she is enduring from her captors, she identifies the hypocrisy inherent in the use of the insult “cunt”, reflecting: “Cunt again? It was odd how men like Suggs used that word to demean women when it was the only part of a woman they valued” (*ADWD* 958). This kind of internal commentary challenges the misogynistic behaviour that is widely accepted in Westeros.

Asha and other female characters are nonetheless degraded by the patriarchal society they live in; they must be disempowered in *ASOIAF* before they can challenge or overcome their oppression. This is one kind of feminist story – that of an individual woman overcoming difficulty, which is identified by Jane Tolmie as the “female exceptionalism” narrative (Tolmie 145). As Tolmie points out, oppressive structures must exist in medieval fantasy fiction in order for women to subvert them. The “expectations must still be there in order to be reversed” (Tolmie 147). This is evident in Hobb’s *Royal Assassin* (1996), where the princess Kettricken endures a forced marriage, displacement, pressure to satisfy her husband sexually and the prejudices of a foreign culture, before coming into her own as a leader and rallying her besieged kingdom. Having settled into her role supporting her husband, Prince Verity, she finds the courage to rouse her people with a fiery speech and leads them in battle against the brutal “Forged” enemies who besiege the realm’s coast. In *ASOIAF*, Daenerys Targaryen’s journey from chattel to leader exemplifies this kind of narrative, as Daenerys seduces the warlord Khal Drogo, marries him, and after his death, remarries in her newly-conquered city of Meereen to maintain her power in the feudal society. Daenerys must prove herself as a desirable woman within male-dominated power structures, and that involves demonstrating her worth as a bride.
and a sexual prize, even after she has acquired an army. The trend of the exceptional female character in a patriarchal world thus rests upon "a condition of the disenfranchisement of women" which can in time be "overturned by the heroine or heroines" (Tolmie 150), as illustrated in Daenerys’ journey. However, this overturning cannot extend to all women in the imaginary realm: the individual heroine excels within the system, while the world itself remains ruled and dominated by men.

There are several limitations to female exceptionalism narratives set in patriarchal societies, in regards to representing women’s political experience. First, when women’s roles centre on marriage, reproduction or sexuality, female power is constrained in the story’s world, and female characters attempting to gain power must behave within these social limits. Women who do not adopt the conventional model of femininity typically reject normative gender traits and are written as masculine figures, such as the tomboy or the androgynous female knight (for example, tomboy Arya Stark and knight Brienne of Tarth in Martin’s ASOIAF, and the knight Alanna in Pierce’s Song of the Lioness). Another limitation of the “female exceptionalism” narrative is that capable female leaders in a patriarchal world rarely interact with each other or even have female peers; they remain surrounded by men throughout their narratives, relying on their ties to patriarchal power for success. Tolmie sums up the limitations of exploring women’s political experience in such a paradigm: “One possible problem with [the message of] we shall overcome is that it can be set up in a manner that posits an oppression that endures into the foreseeable future and thus continues to provide the basis for meaning and representation” (Tolmie 151). This critique raises an interesting issue. While the female exceptionalism narrative is a valid form of literary exploration, and while there are rich depictions of human thinking and feeling to be gained from women’s difficult solo journeys through the halls of power, in such narratives, we rarely see the equally rich experiences of female leaders collaborating. There are few stories that feature female intellectuals teaming up to manipulate others, and female military commanders taking charge together on field. Martin’s Cersei, Daenerys and Catelyn do not work together; likewise, Hobb’s Kettricken rallies her people alone, having occasionally consulted with the male protagonist Fitz; and in Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, the few main female characters are separated from each other and work in
close collaboration with men: Arwen, Éowyn and Galadriel have no collaborative venture.

When I began writing my novel, *The Councillor*, I was not thinking in such formal or analytical terms about gender. The way in which I constructed female experience in the narrative sprang from my personal reaction as a reader to epic fantasy. I had loved reading about battles, clashes of individual leaders and mythology in fantasy novels such as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series (1968-2001) and Martin’s *ASOIAF*, but I always dreamed of finding a fantasy novel with a female character who could shape the narrative without being hampered by gendered limitations and norms or defined by her resistance to conventional gender roles. Why couldn’t there be a woman leading an army whose success was predicated upon military skill? Why couldn’t there be a female leader whose power did not derive from physical appearance and marital status? These questions emerged in my mind, and although they were not the only factors that led to me writing fantasy, they influenced my decision. I began to sketch out female characters who had become leaders based on their personal qualities. I attempted to design a female enemy who was a dangerous opponent, without stereotypical gender traits; a female protagonist who found her way through difficulties by employing her skills, much like the men thrown into political struggles, solving problems with her wits and persistence; and a knowledgeable and powerful female mentor who did not need to seduce a man, serve his sexual needs, or bear his children.

Thanks to the freedom of the epic fantasy genre, I was able to construct a realm in which women and men played equal roles. Characters of either gender could be placed in any social position, since in my society women performed the same jobs as men. While sketching out this world, I was helped and encouraged by the success of Martin’s *ASOIAF*, which, whilst still set in a patriarchal system, brought female perspectives to the forefront of fantasy. Its success showed that fantasy novels featuring female characters’ viewpoints could make an impact in the genre. The adaptation of Martin’s work for television sparked conversations about women’s roles and representation in fantasy, in scholarly publications and in the broader media too: see, for example, Eliana Dockterman’s piece “*Game of Thrones*’ Woman Problem Is About More Than Sexual Assault” (Dockterman, *Time*, 2015).
The way in which I wrote female characters was also influenced by a recent development in epic fantasy's political themes, exemplified in Martin's work but also evident in the works of Joe Abercrombie, Steven Erikson and Hobb amongst others. What I will call the "Machiavellian shift" is the tendency of some recent epic fantasy novels to echo Niccolò Machiavelli's representation of politics as brutal and unheroic, an arena where the most strategic rather than the most virtuous succeed. This sits in contrast to the heroic politics of the Tolkienian quest narrative. This conception of power is manifest in another inspiration for my writing: Shakespeare's Roman plays, English history plays, and other tragedies. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, the idealistic Brutus is overthrown by the more practical triumvirs, and in the *Henriad* (the tetralogy comprised of *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*) Prince Hal follows a deceptive strategy to win the favour of the court and the populace. The political realism in both Shakespearean drama and fantasy fiction contributed to the way in which I shaped my fantasy narrative.

The similarity between Machiavellian themes in modern fiction and the treatment of politics in Shakespeare's plays is hardly coincidental. An increasing body of scholarship suggests that this political realism in Shakespearean drama reflects Machiavellian thought – particularly the ideas expressed in Machiavelli's most famous work, *The Prince*. Written in the early sixteenth century and published in 1532 after the author's death, *The Prince* remains a powerful and scandalous political treatise today. The treatise, structured as a series of political lessons, incorporates examples from history and Machiavelli's Italy. In providing advice to a ruler, it falls into the "mirrors-for-princes" genre, composed of documents in which authors describe the qualities a prince should possess and the ways in which he should behave, usually for the benefit of a ruler. (See Chapter One for more on mirrors-for-princes.) Although *The Prince* certainly aims to advise and

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2 See page 172-173 of this dissertation for an explanation of the use of the term "Machiavellian."
4 Mirrors-for-princes were usually addressed to men and refer to the ruler throughout as male. However, the term "prince" could be understood to mean an absolute ruler of any title or gender.
benefit a ruler, it differs from other Renaissance treatises – Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), for example – in openly recommending brutal methods and deception. In some situations, Machiavelli judges, pragmatic tactics rather than virtuous deeds are necessary for a prince, since “some things that seem like virtue will lead you to ruin if you follow them” whilst others that seem to be vices “will, if followed, result in your safety and well-being” (60).

This emphasis on practicality rather than idealism led to international notoriety for Machiavelli. After his death, *The Prince* and *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (1531) began to circulate abroad, and Machiavelli’s name became widely slandered in Europe. 5 Barbara Riebling notes that “demonic portrayals of [Machiavelli]… had percolated through European political communities”, causing his reception to be “complicated by an involved process of transmission” (573). During this time, English Renaissance plays began to feature the “Machiavel” figure, a scheming and plotting character on the stage that reflected “cultural and theatrical stereotypes related to the Florentine” (Redmond 80). The misinterpretation of *The Prince* as a document advocating cruelty and justifying unscrupulous behaviour in any circumstance has been increasingly contested by scholars: critics have drawn attention to the context of military crises and political intrigue in Italy at the time when Machiavelli was writing (Pesman 50) and the fact that Machiavelli’s assumed reader was a leader who would have been raised to be virtuous and needed to be convinced of the pragmatic approach (Cox 184-185). In the Florentine’s own words, a prince “must learn to be not always good, but to be so or not as necessity may require” (Machiavelli 59).

My interest in Machiavellian ideas was fuelled by Shakespearean drama as well as by *The Prince*, thanks to the plays’ embodiment of Machiavellian thought in characters such as a disgraced knight, a vengeful Roman senator and a young king. Shakespeare’s dramatises Machiavellian political pragmatism through many characters’ stories. Characters such as Marc Antony, Henry V, Iago and Cassius all

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5 As its title suggests, the *Discourses* discusses the first ten books of Livy’s expansive history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita* (c.25 BC). Throughout his analysis Machiavelli draws political lessons from the ancient world.
employ Machiavellian strategies to defeat their enemies. Shakespeare’s use of Machiavellian strategies is notably nuanced. While, as Sukanta Chaudhuri argues, the English history plays demonstrate a "serious and sustained Machiavellianism" (Chaudhuri 124) by which the most strategic characters succeed, they also present the perspectives of those adversely affected by Machiavellian politics. Falstaff, for example, is a subaltern figure in the Henriad, and his voice lends the plays a poignant undercurrent; while Hal’s eventual rejection of Falstaff is an excellent public image manoeuvre, an extraordinary act in the Machiavellian sense (Chaudhuri, 128), it nonetheless renders Falstaff sympathetic, through the knight’s dejected remarks. For this reason, Hugh Grady argues, Falstaff loses in the narrative but paradoxically has a “triumph with the audience” (“Falstaff” 617). Likewise, Princess Katherine, bargained off for marriage in Henry V, is given a voice in the play to resist the patriarchal transaction: after Henry proposes, Katherine’s cold and stiff reply – “Dat is as it shall please de Roi mon père” (5.2.257) – demonstrates her displeasure with her powerless situation and forced marriage. Shakespeare’s depiction of Machiavellian politics thus involves not only presenting the inevitable success of the ruthless, but showing the adverse impact of Machiavellian strategies on the marginalised. The drama is imbued with a realistic view of the political world, but the plays also scrutinise the human impact of ruthless political tactics, challenging the imposition of power.

While the complex depiction of Machiavellian politics in Shakespearean drama provided some stimulus for my work, the simultaneous portrayal and questioning of Machiavellian politics also surfaced in epic fantasy fiction as a new trend, gaining prominence in recent years due to the popularity of Martin’s ASOIAF. The turn towards depicting political pragmatism is thematically distinct from the Tolkienian trend in early fantasy. As scholar George Clark points out, Tolkien “could not rid himself of his desire for the glorious heroes of old” (39) and mimicks the heroic narrative of the Medieval epic. In The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, good forces overcome evil after great trials, while the world is patriarchal, the heroic battles are orchestrated by men and political order is ultimately returned when male heroes defeat their enemies. The influence of Tolkien’s heroic novels pervaded epic fantasy from the mid-twentieth century onwards through a proliferation of narratives that are fundamentally masculine-heroic in style. Yet a new crop of novels at the end of the
twentieth century and into the twenty-first have turned away from Tolkienian themes, questioning the idea of a prevailing moral force in politics, and indeed, often leaning away from romantic depictions of heroic characters to the point of making anti-heroic characters central. These novels emulate the political realism of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* rather than the heroic conflict of poems like *Beowulf*. They present Machiavellian political worlds full of changeable allegiances rather than enduring fellowships, where a struggle for power ensures the survival of the canny, instead of the success of the virtuous.

There are several novelists whose works form part of this trend: Joe Abercrombie’s *First Law* trilogy (2006-2008) notably presents a world where political corruption is rife, armies are inefficient, and heroic individual action is parodied and inverted. Abercrombie’s nation of the Union, full of cynical and self-serving characters, is far from the Tolkienian heroic world of Middle Earth where individuals band together in a fellowship. It features several female characters, such as the vengeful fighter Ferro Maljinn. Robin Hobb’s *Farseer* trilogy shows the ruthlessness of politics through the first-person perspective of Fitz, an illegitimate son of an absent prince who works as an assassin in order to protect the realm. Hobb questions heroic myths through her epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, which both present and challenge information about the world’s political system. For example, in the epigraph to the first chapter of *Assassin’s Apprentice* (1995), Hobb describes the ritual of naming royal children, but remarks that “history shows us this was not always sufficient to bind a child to the virtue that named it” (1). This comment casts doubt upon the ideals of honourable regal conduct suggested by names of royal characters such as Chivalry, Regal, Verity and Patience. Steven Erikson’s *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series (1996-2011) also contains anti-heroic elements, and Erikson has been explicit about distinguishing himself from Tolkien. When Edward James, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, wrote that the influence of Tolkien still hung over the entire fantasy genre, Erikson responded that “epic fantasy has moved on, something critics have failed to notice… In my youth, I sidestepped Tolkien entirely, finding my inspiration and pleasure in the genre through Howard, Burroughs, and Leiber” (1). These remarks indicate that Erikson’s departure from the Tolkienian narrative is neither accidental nor unconscious of influence.
Abercrombie, Hobb and Erikson thus explore pragmatic politics and shift away from Tolkien, as does Martin in his grim series about feudal struggle. *ASOIAF* and its television adaptation have already been noted for their Machiavellian themes. Legal scholar William P. MacNeil’s article on Machiavellian politics in *ASOIAF*, for example, claims that “For all its high fantasy flourishes... the series [*Game of Thrones*] is a work driven by power politics of a particularly amoral, even immoral kind.” (34) Susan Johnston identifies in Martin’s *ASOIAF* novels a difference in the balance between eucatastrophe (the joy of deliverance, which Tolkien identified as the function of fairy tale) and dyscatastrophe (sorrow, failure and death) (133). Whereas Tolkien’s narratives emphasise eucatastrophe, Johnston argues, Martin’s are weighted more towards dyscatastrophe: they do not obliterate joy but provide an “inversion of the Tolkienian consolation” (141). We might rephrase this in political terms to say that while Tolkien favours the triumph of good in the political arena, Martin depicts the success of highly practical agents who make amoral choices in a Machiavellian political world.

Yet Martin’s *ASOIAF* series not only depicts Machiavellian politics, but challenges the very feudal political structure it presents through the use of subaltern character perspectives. By exploring the underbelly of high politics – examining the impact of political decisions upon minorities, and the brutality of conflict – Martin’s novels question the justice and morality of the system. *ASOIAF*’s range of characters demonstrate an acceptance of the reality of Machiavellian politics while considering its impact and after-effects. The series therefore exhibits certain parallels with Shakespeare’s exploration of pragmatic politics which are not only broadly thematic, but extend to specific elements of Shakespearean drama. In addition to the use of subaltern perspectives, the parallels with Shakespeare’s plays include similarities in rhetorical strategies and the use of contemplation in *ASOIAF*. I therefore argue that there is congruence between what I term the pragmatic politics of Shakespeare’s history plays and *ASOIAF*. This is not necessarily a conscious influence of Shakespeare upon Martin, but a similarity that may have been transmitted through the broader Shakespearean impact. Shakespeare continues to exert cultural influence as a literary figure and his work has particularly influenced the Western perception of the Wars of the Roses. Martin has described the Wars of the Roses as partial inspiration for his novels, stating: “You look at Shakespeare, who borrowed all his
plots. In *A Song of Ice and Fire* I take stuff from the Wars of the Roses and other fantasy things, and all these things work around in my head and somehow they jell into what I hope is uniquely my own" (Gilmore, n.p.). In this comment Martin makes a link between Shakespeare borrowing from and reshaping history and his own writing process. His use of research and reading about the famous medieval wars between English families is evident throughout *ASOIAF*'s story of the warring dynasties of Stark and Lannister, where the tussles of the two families cause consequences for their children and supporters. The very names of the families echo those of York and Lancaster, the two main houses involved in the Wars of the Roses. In addition to similarities with the subject matter of Shakespeare’s English history plays, however, there are similarities in the way that the Machiavellian deeds of clashing characters are presented.

Through a multi-vocal narrative style and through the portrayal of a series of political rises and falls, Martin shows the manipulation behind the pomp and ceremony of royalty. Specifically, three distinctive features of the presentation of pragmatic politics in Shakespearean drama are present in *ASOIAF*. First, the series balances its depiction of the success of ruthless tactics with a portrayal of the negative consequences of ruthlessness, framing the triumph of the political manipulators as tragedy. Martin shows that while the more cunning characters win their battles and oppress their enemies, those on the other side of the struggle are equally worthy of our interest. Alternating between a number of different viewpoints presented in the third-person, the novels explore the effects of political turbulence through a range of characters that expands with each book: thus, while the first book (*A Game of Thrones*) culminates with the success of the Lannister family, it is presented largely through the perspectives of the Starks who suffer at their hands, and several other characters outside the power enclave. This multiplicity of perspectives provides a similar effect to the polyphonic form of Shakespeare’s plays, as when Shakespeare includes the voices of common soldiers, lower-class tavern-dwellers, and the betrothed princess Katherine alongside those of the English nobility in his *Henriad*. Over the course of *ASOIAF*, female characters such as Arya, Sansa, Catelyn, Dany, Cersei, Asha and Brienne are given a voice, just as in Shakespearean drama we hear the voices of women such as Cleopatra, who appeals to Octavius Caesar even in her most desperate moments in *Antony and Cleopatra*.
(5.2.159-175), and Portia in *Julius Caesar*, who implores her husband Brutus to share his political secret (2.1.290-301). Martin also provides the perspectives of “cripples, bastards and broken things” (206), subaltern characters who are stigmatised or excluded from the highest levels of rule such as Bran, Theon and Jon – similar to Shakespeare’s inclusion of characters such as Iago and Falstaff who revolve around rulers but do not share their rank. The balance of perspectives mirrors that maintained in Shakespeare’s plays, where the success of Bolingbroke is balanced by the tragedy of Richard II, and the rise of Octavius Caesar is presented alongside the tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra. In affirming the inevitability of the success of the ruthless whilst examining its tragic consequences, Martin duplicates a feature of Shakespeare’s complex presentation of Machiavellian politics.

The second element of Shakespeare’s exploration of political realism present in *ASOIAF* is the use of rhetoric. Persuasive speech is highly significant in Shakespeare’s Machiavellian politics. Although rhetoric had political power and influence since its inception, as evident in the historical popularity of rhetorical manuals such as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* dating from the 90s BC, Renaissance scholar Wayne Rebhom argues that this power was transformed during the Renaissance period when Shakespeare was writing. The art of rhetoric, Rebhorn contends, changed from a tool for classical orators competing as equals to a new weapon for the orator who was “bound to rule” (29). Rebhorn makes a compelling case that “Renaissance rhetoricians conceive their art in political terms as a matter of power and control, not debate and dialogue” (xii), and his translations of many Renaissance treatises and essays on rhetoric convey the revived interest in rhetorical structure, content and delivery. Shakespeare’s plays demonstrate this political shift, peppered with scenes in which characters use oratory to gain power such as Henry V’s rhetorical threat at Harfleur, Iago’s subtle rhetorical manipulation of Othello in private, and Marc Antony’s funeral speech before a crowd. They include adaptive rhetoric, through which a character reacts and responds to another speaker, tailoring his or her remarks quickly and cleverly. “Adaptive rhetoric” is a modern term that I use to describe the Renaissance concept of “invention”, the practice of entering a dialogue with another speaker and choosing one’s replies for maximum persuasive impact – see, for example, *Three Books Concerning Dialectical Invention*, by Dutch humanist Rodolphus Agricola (1515). In Shakespeare’s plays, there are many
notable examples of adaptive rhetoric, such as Richard II’s responses to Bolingbroke in Richard II, where the king responds to Bolingbroke’s confiscation of the crown with emotive statements that demonstrate his “griefs” (4.1.188). Ken Jacobsen claims that Iago masters invention, improvising his speech as necessary in Othello (512). In a similar manner, Martin’s novels show the power of persuasive speech, through advisors such as Littlefinger and Varys who manipulate political affairs with their subtle rhetoric, adapting to each situation, and through characters such as Tyrion who navigate their way in and out of situations with language. “If the day ever comes when you’re tempted to sell me out, remember this,” Tyrion tells his bodyguard, Bronn. “I’ll match their price. I like living” (A Game of Thrones (AGOT) 380). Although Bronn cynically remarks that Tyrion has a “bold tongue” (AGOT 380), he is nonetheless won over by Tyrion’s offer to always reward him – even amongst men as morally bankrupt as Bronn, promises hold sway. Both Shakespeare and Martin show the power of rhetoric to appeal to fundamental human desires.

The third element of ASOIAF corresponding to the presentation of Machiavellian political realism in Shakespeare’s plays is the tendency of Martin’s characters to scrutinise, analyse, and probe the nature of power throughout the course of political struggle. The individuals in ASOIAF debate what power is, how it functions, and who can truly grasp it. Advisors such as Littlefinger and Varys participate in dialogue about power, and players in the “game of thrones” (AGOT, 408) such as Cersei and Ned express their own views on feudal politics, from the idealistic to the pragmatic. Cersei warns Ned that moderation has no place in the political reality of the court world. Her description of the deadly political struggle as a “game of thrones” in which there can be no middle ground (AGOT 408) encapsulates the harsh political reality of Martin’s Westeros. In the Eastern land of Essos, Daenerys Targaryen’s development into a leader prompts her to speculate on the ethics of battle: she wonders whether it is possible to conquer with force yet lead in a manner that is morally good, and throughout a siege, ponders the reality of warfare. This tendency to examine the business of rule and question it – rather than simply participate in it – is famously prevalent in Shakespeare’s plays, in moments such as Brutus’ serpent-and-egg soliloquy (Julius Caesar, 2.1.34) and Henry V’s contemplation of a king’s relationship and responsibility to his subjects (Henry V, 4.1.235-289). The parallels here do not necessarily result from conscious
Shakespearean influence, but as mentioned, may be transmitted through Martin’s interest in history and Shakespeare’s role in shaping cultural perceptions of history. By combining meditations on power with multiple character perspectives, a heightened importance placed upon rhetoric, and an exploration of Machiavellian politics coloured by tragedy, Martin creates a fantasy series that exhibits more Machiavellian political realism than Medieval heroism, while also featuring both thematic and stylistic similarities with Shakespearean drama. I discuss this in more detail in my study of *ASOIAF* in Chapter Two.

Petzold argues that fantasy fiction may “take up social, political, philosophical and religious themes” (19), and *ASOIAF* certainly does this in a way that incorporates political realism into an imaginary realm. The success of *ASOIAF* seems likely to influence new writers in the genre, just as the success of Tolkien’s works influenced many authors in the latter half of the twentieth century. When confronting the cultural influence of Martin’s work and what I am terming the Machiavellian shift, perhaps the challenge for epic fantasy novelists is to ensure that they do not copy *ASOIAF* but use it (and other works of epic fantasy) as a mental springboard for considering how novels might be written differently. Each author’s unique background, including their gender, sexuality, cultural heritage, philosophy or religion, and life experiences, can naturally lead them to new ways of expanding epic fantasy. A broad range of literary influences can also help to ensure that a new writer does not replicate the work of any one epic fantasy author – whether consciously or unconsciously – and instead shapes an innovative narrative and world. For my own part, my writing has been influenced by my interests in literature, Renaissance histories (particularly those on Renaissance Italy), the historical novels of Patrick O’Brian, the problem-solving narratives of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, and fantasy novels (including Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series). Renaissance plays by Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson also ignited my interest in the representation of dynastic politics. As a result of these mixed influences and my own personal background and interests, my writing both falls into the Machiavellian trend and departs from it, differing from existing epic fantasy works by Martin, Abercrombie and others in its handling of gender, culture and politics.
The Councillor shares elements of the Machiavellian approach to power and the Shakespearean rendering of Machiavellian politics—a balance of political ruthlessness and sympathy for the affected parties, an emphasis on rhetoric, and some meditations on the business of rule—but also creates its own style and themes. An important difference in the novel’s treatment of gender, in comparison to other works that fit with the Machiavellian trend, is the gender-equalised world in which the narrative is set. This world allows me to explore a young woman’s journey into political conflict without concentrating on motherhood, seduction, sexual violence, or rebellion against patriarchy. Coming from a scholarly background, Lysande Prior, the protagonist, uses her knowledge and critical thinking to navigate the challenges of rule. The non-patriarchal world of Elira allows her to interact with other female leaders over the course of the narrative, and these leaders also occupy roles in the protagonist’s life that are usually given to men in epic fantasy such as mentor (Sarelin Brey) and colleague (Cassia Ahl-Hafir). Putting women in such roles means that female characters have a significant impact on the protagonist’s journey. The most powerful antagonist of the story, Mea Tacitus, is also a woman, which means that a female character significantly shapes the main action. The novel thus allows its female characters to explore power in different situations to those they would encounter in a patriarchal world.

In addition to presenting gender differently to existing epic fantasy works in the Machiavellian trend, the novel also presents race and sexuality differently. The realm in which the story is set contains people with a variety of skin colours, and instead of taking white skin as the norm, the narrative plays out in a land where no one skin colour dominates. Additionally, the novel attempts to avoid an East/West land division that replicates European colonialist attitudes. The Easterners in the world are white, both within the realm and across the eastern border. Although some stereotypes about foreigners exist in Elira, Lysande’s observations suggest that these stereotypes are misguided. The novel’s treatment of race means that people of colour are part of the realm and hence part of its political story. ⁶ As well as handling race

⁶ Although “people of colour” is not an ideal term, taking in all non-white people under the same umbrella and thus positioning whiteness as a point of definition, it is used by necessity: the ethnicities
differently to existing work, the novel treats sexuality in a different manner. While in Martin's Westeros, heterosexuality is the accepted sexual norm and homosexuality is stigmatised in almost all parts of the realm, in Elira heterosexuality is not culturally hegemonic. Male leaders Dante and Jale struggle to hide their attraction to each other, not because they are homosexual, but rather because Dante is the leader of the north and Jale the prince of the south and their cities' enmity places them in difficulty. I was interested in creating queer characters whose storylines did not have to centre on struggling against discrimination, and non-white characters whose narratives did not have to be about a struggle against racism. Although such struggles can provide powerful subject matter for stories, they can also channel character development into well-worn paths. I decided to depict non-white and non-heterosexual people within the mainstream culture of my imaginary world, and to allow any relevant narrative choices to flow from that.

Although The Councillor presents a gender-equalised, multicultural world in which queerness is not stigmatised, it does not ignore issues of prejudice and bigotry that typically arise in a hierarchical society. The story explores the condition of the disenfranchised in the feudal world by creating a magical minority who are oppressed, and by depicting their experiences. Lysande and her colleague Luca are both “elementals” — magical people who must hide their identities or risk death. Lysande's realisation that she is elemental provides a crisis of identity, and an internal conflict that affects her confidence. In wrangling with her identity, Lysande struggles with broader issues of social inequality, and comes to better understand the experiences of the “elemental” minority. The story also deals with issues of class, wealth and inheritance: as an orphan, Lysande lacks the social status derived from noble blood, as does Luca, an illegitimate son of a prince. The two characters are conscious of their position as outsiders in the court world even as they share in ruling the realm. The novel's political narrative is thus shaped by an interest in the subaltern, similar to the emphasis on voices from non-dominant groups in Martin's novels and Shakespeare's plays. At the same time, it portrays women, queer people and people of colour as part of the mainstream culture rather than as minorities. This

in the novel are fictional, and since epic fantasy has often positioned whiteness as the norm, it is useful to mention the combined role of “people of colour” in the novel in altering this norm.
allows new opportunities for character development for characters whose storylines might otherwise revolve around the definition of their identity as minorities. I discuss the novel's use of these opportunities in more depth in Chapter Three.

This dissertation will analyse the presentation of Machiavellian politics in Shakespearean drama, then elucidate the similarities to Shakespeare's exploration of Machiavelli that are present in Martin's *ASOIAF*. By discussing Shakespeare, Machiavelli and epic fantasy, I will use influences from Renaissance literature and fantasy literature as a framework for presenting the context of my novel. The structure proceeds from setting up this framework to an analysis of my own work. In Chapter One, I will identify three features of Shakespeare's presentation of politics — touched on briefly in this introduction — as important elements that help to define Shakespeare's handling of Machiavellian politics. I will examine examples from the *Henriad* to illustrate these features. In Chapter Two I will discuss Martin's *ASOIAF* as an example of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy with particular relevance for my work due to its Shakespearean elements, analysing the parallels between Machiavellian political realism in Shakespeare's plays and in *ASOIAF*. In the third chapter, I will explore *The Councillor*'s similarities and differences to existing work in the Machiavellian trend, expanding on the aspects of gender, race and sexuality in my own work raised in this introduction. The aims of this study are to illuminate Shakespeare's handling of Machiavellian politics, to identify and analyse the shift in epic fantasy and the Shakespearean-Machiavellian elements of Martin's novels, and to locate my own work within this context: as influenced by Shakespeare's political realism, as a part of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy, and also as different to existing work.

If fantasy is imagination, as the etymology of the word suggests, then epic fantasy has certainly lived up to its name. Novels in the epic fantasy genre have brought readers richly-imagined worlds full of vivid places, dramatic conflict, magic, powerful people and extraordinary creatures. Epic fantasy narratives have recreated feudal politics in a variety of different forms. Yet amongst this heady mix of imaginary dynastic societies, few novelists have imagined a world without patriarchy, or a world where queer people and people of colour form part of
mainstream culture. Such equalised worlds may not necessarily constitute a "better" model for epic fantasy than patriarchal worlds, but they can allow for different ways of exploring political experience. For the new writer, this might just lead to a less-trodden creative path.

As Tolmie notes, there is at present a lack of gender-equalised epic fantasy novels (Tolmie 155). For notable examples of epic fantasy novels set in a non-white world, see Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea novels (1968-2001). Outside of the epic fantasy genre, notable examples of fantasy novels featuring characters of colour include Nnedi Okorafor's Who Fears Death (2010), set in a post-apocalyptic Sudan, which won the 2011 World Fantasy Award; Neil Gaiman’s Anansi Boys (2005), about the sons of a West African god, which won the British Fantasy Society award. Cindy Pon’s Kingdom of Xia books (2009-2011) are recent young adult fantasy novels with Asian protagonists. Examples of fantasy novels set in a world where queer people are not marginalised (be it epic fantasy or otherwise) are scarce. However, some epic fantasy novels feature a queer protagonist: Mercedes Lackey’s The Last Herald Mage trilogy (1989-1991) is perhaps the best-known example, with its gay male protagonist.
Chapter One: Political realism in Shakespeare’s *Henriad* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*

So when this loose behaviour I throw off
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

-Prince Hal, *1 Henry IV* (1.2.212-219)

Here, in Prince Hal’s first soliloquy in *1 Henry IV*, the young prince suggests that his revelry has a hidden purpose: when he has become a responsible ruler, his youthful “loose” behaviour will make his transformation appear more remarkable and win him more support. As this candid confession of strategy demonstrates, Shakespeare’s exploration of power delves into the area of political tactics. The connection between Machiavellian politics and Shakespearean drama is evident upon examination of the realistic view of dynastic politics common to both. Political realism is defined in this dissertation as the exploration of such pragmatic strategies rather than the presentation of an idyllic political world.

My interest in Shakespeare informed my writing: particularly, the dramatisation of Machiavellian politics in Shakespeare’s colourful and complex scenes influenced the development of some elements of my fantasy novel. The Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy has seen political realism feature in a number of novels, but in Martin’s *ASOIAF*, there are also specific parallels with Shakespeare’s handling of Machiavellian themes. This need not necessarily be ascribed to conscious influence, given that strong echoes of the Wars of the Roses are present in Martin’s work.
Martin has stated that “although I’ve drawn on many parts of history, the War of the Roses is probably the one my story is closest to” (*Empire*, n.p.). A Ted-Ed video by Alex Gendler pairs characters from the *Game of Thrones* TV adaptation with historical personages from the Wars of the Roses, attempting to educate viewers and simultaneously demonstrating the popular interest in the depth of Martin’s engagement with the historic wars.

Since Shakespeare’s famous plays about the English conflict have influenced centuries of thinking about the conflict, with plays such as *Richard III* and *Henry V* shaping the widespread perception of the Medieval dynastic struggle as tumultuous, a dynamic series of wars where victory slips back and forth between both sides, it is not surprising that a fantasy series influenced by the Wars of the Roses might echo Shakespeare in its presentation of politics. To understand the Shakespearean rendering of Machiavellian politics in *ASOIAF*, it is therefore useful to make a brief study of the political realism of Shakespearean drama, discussing the Machiavellian facets of the plays and the way in which they are presented. This chapter will outline the elements of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* that are manifest in Shakespeare’s plays, drawing on relevant scholarship and using the *Henriad* as a case study.

*The Prince* and Shakespearean drama

A strong current of political realism runs through Shakespeare’s history plays and tragedies, where high political drama unfolds in a multiplicity of settings, such as ancient Egypt, medieval England, Cyprus and Rome. In each context the struggle for power dominates the stage. For the characters ensnared within these conflicts, a pragmatic strategy is necessary. As noted in the Introduction, the tactics employed by these pragmatic characters are similar to those recommended by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. A significant body of scholarship points out that Shakespeare’s exploration of Machiavelli goes beyond the simplistic “stage Machiavel” figure, a scheming and plotting character on the English stage whose “threatening” political behaviour included murder (Redmond 82). Although we can see touches of the stage Machiavel in Richard III, Iago, and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare nonetheless transcends the Elizabethan misinterpretation of Machiavelli’s thought by
exploring the intricacies of political strategy. His plays demonstrate the necessity for a prince to construct a public image, win the support of allies and deceive his enemies. As John Roe notes in *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*, Machiavelli writes from the perspective of political “survival” and “condemns” rulers who act out of cruelty (15), and Shakespearean characters such as Henry V and Aufidius are similarly striving for survival in a world of shifting alliances.

The parallels between the tactics Machiavelli recommends in *The Prince* and the political strategies in Shakespearean drama have long attracted scholarly notice. Irving Ribner, for example, points out in his 1948 article that Bolingbroke employs a number of Machiavellian tactics in *Richard II*, from promise-breaking to disposing of the ruler he has deposed (179-183). Similarly, in the mid-twentieth century, Norman Holland argues in “Measure for Measure: The Duke and The Prince” (1959) that the Duke’s tactics are Machiavellian, and that readers should take into account the character’s “probable descent from Cesare Borgia” (20) – Machiavelli’s example of a near-ideal prince. These early studies are significant, as they demonstrate the precedent for analysing Machiavellian politics in English Renaissance drama. With New Historicist readings becoming prominent throughout the 1990s, the analysis of Shakespeare and Machiavelli has burgeoned to develop what Michael J. Redmond describes as a focus on “subtle thematic parallels regarding the issue of kingship” (80). Hugh Grady and John Roe both observe Machiavellian parallels in Shakespeare’s plays, and Sukanta Chaudhuri points out that as Shakespeare is working within the same political paradigm as Machiavelli, it is “often hard to distinguish between conscious adherence to Machiavelli and a mere course of conduct to which his tenets are applicable” (124). As Chaudhuri argues, this is really the point: Machiavelli “was describing and systematizing timeless patterns of political conduct” (124).

In order to set up the framework for this thesis’ discussion of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy and the particular parallels with the Shakespearean exploration of Machiavellian politics in Martin’s *ASOIAF*, it is useful to distinguish the connection between Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Shakespeare’s plays from the broader parallels with Machiavelli. Scholars have observed other elements of Machiavelli’s works present in Shakespeare’s plays beyond the pragmatic strategies of *The Prince*: 
for instance, Grady argues that the plays include ideas from Machiavelli’s *Discourses (SMM 42-43)*; Roe discusses Machiavelli’s opinions on conspiracy in relation to *Julius Caesar* (153-169); and Andrew Hadfield raises Machiavelli’s republicanism in relation to Shakespeare’s work (467). A revised conception of Machiavelli as a republican has become increasingly common amongst scholars, arguably caused by J.G.A Pocock, whose history *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) draws attention to Machiavelli’s political and philosophical ideas about the classical republic. Due to this re-assessment, the term “Machiavellian” has come to have a variety of possible meanings. However, despite the shift to a broader view of Machiavelli’s opus, the word remains in popular use to describe the ideas in *The Prince* rather than Machiavelli’s broader republican views – as Dragica Vujdinovic notes, Machiavelli’s “best-known treatise of *The Prince* has long associated [his] name and work with the unscrupulous struggle for political power, giving rise to the term ‘Machiavellianism’ used in this respect” (44). Since this is how the word “Machiavellian” is commonly understood, this is also how I use the term in this thesis: to refer to the thought and behaviour recommended for an ideal prince in *The Prince*. A Machiavellian individual takes a realistic view of politics and employs strategies as necessary to gain or maintain power.

It is important to understand the context of the fraught and turbulent political climate in which *The Prince* was written in order to understand the Machiavellian themes in both Shakespearean drama and epic fantasy. G. H. R. Parkinson explains the turmoil of Italian politics in Machiavelli’s time, an era in which Italy was “divided and weak, the prey of foreign armies of intervention” and overrun by hired “mercenaries”. Under these conditions, Parkinson suggests, it was natural “that Machiavelli should think it of prime importance to discover, and then to teach, the ways in which a strong and lasting state could be established” (38). Shakespeare’s political realms mirror the conflict-ridden world of Machiavelli’s Italy, where a strong leader must also be a ruthless leader in order to succeed and unify the realm. Promises are broken and enemies are disposed of throughout the plays, and rulers must act without strict

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8 Pocock’s book sparked an interest in the subject that has continued to expand. In a recent example of scholarship on Machiavelli’s republicanism, the anthology *Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy* (ed. Paul A. Rahe, 2006) covers a wide variety of topics.
adherence to religious principles in order to survive. Robin Headlam Wells agrees that Shakespeare turned away from the more moralistic view of political history towards the humanist philosophy of the Renaissance, which emphasised the value and agency of human beings (as opposed to predetermined fate), and hence engaged with the “immediate problem of [man’s] political survival” (133). Headlam Wells gives the example of Hamlet’s court as a “Machiavellian world” (157) in which pragmatic methods are adopted. Similarly, in the courts in the Henriad, the Roman plays, Othello and Macbeth, leaders rise and fall. Donald Wineke notes the similarity between the cyclic view of history in Shakespeare’s work and in Machiavelli’s (20); John Velz describes the structure of Julius Caesar as a “sequence of rises to prominence and of declines from it” (21). A similar flux is found in the Henriad, the focus of this chapter, where Bolingbroke’s act of usurpation sets off more conflict in which his son must distinguish himself as the next king. On this kind of ruthless playing field, a prince must employ a careful strategy, and it is therefore logical that Shakespeare’s characters use a number of tactics suggested by Machiavelli – which, as discussed later in this dissertation, are rendered in a similar manner in George R. R. Martin’s epic fantasy novels.

This chapter will use examples from the Henriad to elucidate the principal parallels with The Prince. The continuity of a storyline through these plays – and specifically, a storyline with strong Machiavellian themes – makes it convenient to take them as a group. The first Machiavellian tactic of note in Shakespearean drama is the construction of a clean public image: Machiavelli stipulates that a prince should appear virtuous – in particular, he should “seem merciful, faithful, humane, forthright, religious”, paying attention to his speech in order “never to let anything slip from his lips which is not full of [these] five qualities” (135). Shakespeare’s most successful politicians behave in accordance with this advice. In Richard II, we see Bolingbroke present himself as respectful and loyal even as he comes to depose Richard:

Henry Bolingbroke
On both his knees doth kiss King Richard’s hand,
And sends allegiance and true faith of heart
To his most royal person
These words, spoken by Bolingbroke at a moment of usurpation, help to construct a virtuous image for the would-be king. Here, Bolingbroke veils his true purpose and cultivates an honourable appearance. Ribner notes that “he paints himself as a man of virtue, coming in submission to kingly authority, merely to plead a just cause” (181). Another instance of presenting a careful façade can be found in Bolingbroke’s pious declaration to atone for deposing Richard II with a “voyage to the Holy Land” (5.6.49), an act supposedly born from feelings of deep “woe” about Richard’s murder (5.6.45) but useful to create a Machiavellian public image of piety. Henry V, too, takes care to appear pious in *Henry V* even as he embarks on a war that will cost the lives of many of his people, in order to gain a throne to which he has very little legitimate claim. As Chaudhuri points out, Henry V displays the five qualities Machiavelli lists (129), showing restraint and courtesy in his speech, in contrast to the French boasting in the play (130). This is particularly evident when Henry claims to put his power “into the hand of God” (2.2.190), thus avoiding the appearance of arrogance even whilst making the assertion that his war will be “glorious” (2.2.183), “fair and lucky” (2.2.184), and without hindrance (2.2.187-188). Henry is prudent to quash any nascent criticism with a demonstration of piety; like his father, he fashions his image in line with Machiavelli’s advice.

Putting on a pious façade does not mean behaving virtuously at all times, however, and Machiavelli also states that a prince must be able to convincingly make promises which he will later break: to “manipulate the minds of men by shrewdness” in order to surpass “those who have laid their foundations upon honesty” (133). Machiavelli’s example of Pope Alexander VI breaking his promises for political purposes is illustrative: “there never was a man who had more forcefulness in his oaths, who affirmed a thing with more promises, and who honoured his word less”, Machiavelli remarks, wryly praising the Borgia pope (134). In this manner, Shakespeare’s Bolingbroke is willing to break his promises whenever convenient, going back on the vow he makes to remain loyal to Richard when he is banished. As Ribner puts it: “Honesty and trust mean nothing to Bolingbroke when his own advantage is involved” (179). This simultaneous capacity to feign with deceptive rhetoric and to take pragmatic action is employed by Henry V, who tricks the
conspirators into appearing before him as “commissioners” (2.2.61) only to sentence them to death. The strategy is entirely in line with the advice provided in *The Prince*, and Steven Marx is right to observe that Henry betrays the traitors “more craftily than they betrayed him”, and that the king’s tactics are “a recognition of the non-chivalric nature of his world” (68). Promises are not binding for Shakespeare’s pragmatic characters; they are tools to win support when needed, and are easily overturned for the purpose of gaining or maintaining power.

Inspiring supporters also forms an important part of the programme of pragmatic political behaviour. A Machiavellian prince must overcome obstacles by encouraging his subjects in a difficult situation (112), and adopting this tactic, Henry uses persuasive language in his speech before the Saint Crispian’s Day battle. He skilfully paints an image of the surviving warriors impressing others with their scars (4.3.47) and being remembered as paragons of masculine heroism (4.3.55-67). He offers both a reward and a punishment, promising fame – the soldiers’ names will be as familiar as “household words” (4.1.52) – and then contrasting it with the inglorious feeling of a “cheap” (4.3.66) manhood that must be endured by those who remain in England. In rallying his men against great odds, Henry simultaneously demonstrates another Machiavellian skill – that of adapting to the twists and turns of fortune (160-161). Presented with the negative situation of facing difficult odds in battle, he turns disadvantage into advantage by suggesting that these greater odds will lead to greater fame (4.3.51-67). Quick thinking and responsive action are crucial in both Machiavelli’s and Shakespeare’s political worlds.

Another cluster of tactics from *The Prince* concerns the making of alliances and the shoring up of power. Machiavelli states that since princes “cannot avoid being hated by somebody,” they should focus on avoiding hatred from the populace and from the most powerful group (140). Shakespeare’s political victors take this advice to heart. Bolingbroke interacts with the people directly, moving amongst them and speaking to them, both at the moment of his exile (1.4.25-36) and during his triumphant return to power (5.2.7-21). In contrast, Richard II “mouths the major objections to popularity” (Doty 193) and refuses to cultivate support amongst the public. By speaking of Bolingbroke’s tendency to “dive into their hearts / With humble and familiar courtesy” (1.4.25-26), Richard expresses scorn – the verb “dive” indicating
a sharp lowering of status. Yet his unwillingness to court the commons erodes his power base, allowing Bolingbroke to challenge him without attracting the ire of the public.

Other tactics for keeping a hold on power outlined in *The Prince* include the choice and use of advisors. A Machiavellian prince should take care to maintain an appropriate relationship with those who advise him, and Machiavelli stipulates that he must avoid flatterers, choosing only “wise men” (155) who will speak frankly to him, and seeking their advice rather than receiving it at any time (157). We see this borne out in *Henry V* where Henry calls upon the two bishops, Canterbury and Ely, to confirm his own plans – he solicits their approval in order to be seen to possess the backing of the church. By presenting them with leading questions, such as “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (1.2.96), the king demonstrates that he is more in control of the situation than the bishops. Henry also makes war his business, as Machiavelli advises (124), launching into battle against France, and in doing so shoring up his own position at home by earning a reputation as a skilled military leader. Machiavelli also suggests disposing of a deposed ruler, and Bolingbroke does so in *Richard II*, whilst maintaining his Machiavellian public image by ensuring that the most morally dubious work is done by others. As Ribner notes, his use of Pierce of Exton to get rid of Richard is in direct accordance with Machiavelli’s advice (183). Finally, *The Prince* stipulates that a ruler should give recognition to men of ability by “honouring those who excel in a particular field” (153). Bolingbroke makes sure to publically reward men of honour; he tells Fitzwater, for instance, that his efforts “shall not be forgot” (5.6.17) and lets Carlisle live because of the “sparks of honour” (5.6.29) he has shown: his actions here reflect Machiavelli’s advice that a prince should “demonstrate that he is a lover of talent” (153).

As this summary indicates, the parallels with *The Prince* are undeniable in the *Henriad*. Through the combination of his promise-breaking, virtuous image, cultivation of popularity and rewarding of men of talent, Bolingbroke amalgamates and assimilates the instructions given in *The Prince*, and this similarity has been increasingly acknowledged by scholars. John J. Joughin, for instance, describes Bolingbroke as a “Machiavellian upstart” who “ride[s] roughshod over an older
order that once stressed fealty and loyalty” (3). Chaudhuri concurs that the usurping lord employs “many Machiavellian strategies” (126). His son is arguably even more effective: Grady describes “Prince Hal’s cultivation and perfection of his father’s arts of the manipulation of image to maximize political power” (SMM, 185) and names *Henry V* the most Machiavellian play in Shakespeare’s opus (204); Roe agrees that the *Henriad* “manifests Machiavellism” (30) and Marx claims that the play “asks us to admire Henry’s effectiveness” (68). This realistic approach to power fits into the political context of Renaissance England. If we accept Paul Strohm’s argument that *politique* behavior – “a term no longer referring only to those who make generous arrangements for the good of all but also to those who make the best possible arrangements for themselves... who employ lies, deceptions, and even falsely sworn oaths as possible elements of good political practice” (5) – had been permeating England since the fifteenth century in the behaviour of political rulers and in writings on “practical statecraft and political calculation” (1), then we should not be surprised to find Machiavellianism in the *Henriad*, and indeed across the histories and tragedies.

The same emphasis on pragmatic politics prevalent in Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and present in Shakespeare’s plays is evident in a number of recent epic fantasy novels. Through the genre’s shift away from the heroic quest narrative, Machiavellian politics have come to the fore in a form of storytelling that might appear, on the surface at least, very different to Shakespearean drama. The Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy creates a connection between Renaissance political thought and modern speculative fiction. Several specific elements of Shakespeare’s presentation of Machiavellian politics are found in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and due to my interest in the presentation of Machiavellian ideas in Shakespearean drama, Martin’s novels are of particular relevance to my work. The series exhibits not only thematic parallels with Shakespearean drama, but structural and stylistic similarities too. Three features that shape Shakespeare’s presentation of Machiavellian politics are also notably present in *ASOIAF*, and thus it will be useful to outline them here.
1. The balance of pragmatism and suffering

In many of his plays, and notably in the histories and tragedies, Shakespeare balances pragmatic politics with a portrayal of the sufferings of defeated political parties and ordinary people, using the polyphonic form of the play to give multiple perspectives on the conflict. This dissertation will continue to use examples from the *Henriad* to illustrate the element of human suffering that offsets the ruthlessness of political deception and manipulation in Shakespeare’s plays. Although the most cunning and bold Machiavellian princes conquer their enemies in Shakespearean drama, their successes are framed as tragedy, with lamentations about the fate of the defeated party permeating the dialogue. This is evident in two particular instances in the *Henriad*: where Richard despairs at his defeat by Bolingbroke in *Richard II*; and where Hal casts off Falstaff in *2 Henry IV*, but not without generating sympathy for his outwitted friend. In each case the outcome involves a shift in power, through which the emotional toll becomes evident.

As a result of this balance, some scholars claim that Shakespeare is not only illustrating Machiavelli’s ideas but critiquing them. George Watson argues that the Elizabethan stage Machiavel figure is a critique of Machiavellian policy (631), and that Shakespeare shows the psychological conundrums resulting from Machiavellianism through scenes where his politicians are haunted by the guilt for their deeds (648). A similar argument is made almost thirty years later by Avery Plaw in respect to the *Henriad*. Plaw believes that Henry V’s pursuit of Machiavellian policy results in the destruction of his identity (34), burdens him with guilt (36), and places him under great “emotional strain” (37). Like Watson, Plaw sees Shakespeare’s interest in the effects of politics on people as a critique: “Shakespeare shows, *contra* Machiavelli, that [the pragmatism of] political *virtu* can in practice create political legitimacy only at an insupportable human cost” (19).

Other voices have made similar remarks; Steven Marx argues that Shakespeare moves away from a Machiavellian militarism towards a Jacobean pacifism, using history “as a vehicle for expressing a pacifist outlook” (59). Perhaps the most detailed argument is made by Jennifer Vaught, who claims in her defence of *Richard II* that Richard’s “copious lamenting and weeping throughout the play” enable him to make more of an impression on the audience than Bolingbroke; Bolingbroke’s lines
after Richard’s murder are “flat”, “brief, metrically regular, and uninspiring”, Vaught suggests, and “no acting company would give their most talented actor the role of Bolingbroke instead of Richard” (107).

This may be the most effective way for an author to challenge the ascent of the powerful: by putting equally compelling speeches into the mouths of the defeated characters. Shakespeare certainly illustrates the experiences of both victor and vanquished, alongside the voices of others who struggle and are affected by the flow of power from one group to another. Yet it is misleading to claim that Shakespeare is purely critical of Machiavelli. On one hand, the plays elicit sympathy for those who lose their political position or suffer as a result of Machiavellian methods, yet on the other they affirm the success of Machiavellian princes. What they really provide is a balance between dramatising pragmatic politics and depicting human subjectivity, not a critique of Machiavellian tactics. In Richard II, for example, Shakespeare gives us Richard’s scenes and Bolingbroke’s scenes, so that even as we observe the success of the Machiavellian usurper, we see the tragedy of Richard’s fall from grace; the story of Bolingbroke’s rise is interspersed with scenes in which Richard laments his loss of power. The contrast between his former glory and his present obscurity is one of the staples of Richard’s speeches, as in 3.3, where he declares: “I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads, / My gorgeous palace for a hermitage […] And my large kingdom for a little grave” (3.3146-153). The set of binaries here makes the juxtaposition of poverty and finery clear. In the deposition scene, too, Richard refers to his previous kingly lifestyle, speaking of the “manors, rents, revenues” (4.1.212) he must give up, and of the “followers in prosperity” (4.1.280) he has lost. These reminiscences of prior glory are made poignant by their obvious contrast with his present, ignominious state. Yet while the play concerns Richard’s tragedy, as the title Richard II suggests, it also presents a skilled Machiavellian prince’s rise to power through the narrative of Bolingbroke’s ascent. We see Bolingbroke rebound from his exile with skill and strength. In this manner, as Jeffrey Doty points out, Shakespeare “dramatizes Bolingbroke’s ascent to power while simultaneously suspending judgment on either Richard or Bolingbroke” (192).

A similar equilibrium between Machiavellian political machinations and the human face of the defeated is found over the course of 1 + 2 Henry IV, where Henry IV’s
success is balanced by the voices of his opponents. The now-crowned Bolingbroke wins the military victory in the end, suppressing the rebels, yet Shakespeare gives the rebels voices throughout the two plays and allows them to speak amongst themselves. By dramatising debates between characters such as Hotspur and Glendower, the play balances political victory with the experience of the defeated party. This balance is also found in the contrast between Prince Hal’s rise to power and what Hugh Grady calls the “Falstaffian and feminine counter-cultures” in 1 + 2 Henry IV (SMM 138). These counter-cultures centre on the tavern. From very early in the drama Hal indicates that he will “falsify men’s hopes” (1.2.215) in order to make a better impression when he claims power. However, he lingers in the tavern world for some time. Falstaff’s revelry and the gravity of the royal world provide a balance of levity and formality in 1+2 Henry IV, and Hal’s entry into what Grady calls a “reified world” (SMM 181) by repudiating Falstaff has divided critics. Chaudhuri believes it is an extraordinary act in the Machiavellian sense, a demonstration of talents (128), while Harold Bloom, ever a fan of Falstaff, sees it as the triumph of a “brutal hypocrite” (306). Yet although Hal becomes at this moment, as Grady puts it, “the Machiavellian King Harry” (SMM 197), Falstaff’s insistence that he “shall be sent for in private” (5.5.78) – his unwillingness to believe that Hal has truly cast him aside – adds a tragic note to the scene, ensuring that the balance between depicting a leader’s pragmatism with illustrating the suffering of the disenfranchised continues.

It is only in Henry V that the success of a Machiavellian prince is not offset by the tragedy of those who fall from power or are cast out: the victorious Henry V moves from triumph to triumph as a hero, employing ruthless tactics against the French, who serve largely as foils for him to overcome; the French king and the Dauphin are not given the sympathetic speeches of Richard II nor the wit and liveliness of Falstaff. Although Henry’s own men (4.1) and Katherine (5.2) voice some dissent, the imbalance in Henry V has been noted, and the play has therefore come in for severe criticism. John Palmer summarises the response in his 1962 study of politics in Shakespeare in stating that critics from Hazlitt onwards have declined to admire Henry V because they find him “positively odious” and boring, a character who conquers all (181). Palmer exonerates Henry from this charge by suggesting that Henry may not be planning a Machiavellian strategy from his first soliloquy in 1
Henry IV but may simply be finding an excuse for his faults, using “self-justification” to excuse his drinking and revelry (185). More recent critics have been interested in what the slant towards Machiavellian politics in the play signifies: Grady believes that Henry V demonstrates the incompatibility of Machiavelli and the humanist philosophy of Michel de Montaigne (SMM 199) through “the triumph of reification over subjectivity” (SMM 200). Montaigne became widely regarded as one of the most important French Renaissance thinkers due to the influence of his philosophical *Essais* (1580), which discussed and analysed a wide variety of aspects of human life, from love to warfare, and challenged traditional power structures such as empire-building, social customs and laws, and even marriage. Since Grady identifies Montaigne as one of the first advocates of secular ethics (SMM 124), his assessment of Henry V indicates that amoral politics triumphs over ethical considerations in the play. However, Henry is not an untroubled conqueror – grappling with the role of king lends him “an extra cachet of sober self-awareness” (SMM 138), as Chaudhuri observes, and, as I discuss later in the chapter, his dialogue with three of his soldiers (4.1) allows him to delve into the ethics of war and question the relationship between subject and king. Moreover, in creating one play without a tragic, human element to balance out political victory, Shakespeare gives us variety: it is characteristic that he should give us a Machiavellian hero, in addition to sophisticated Machiavellian anti-heroes.

On the whole, the Henriad demonstrates the balance of pragmatism and suffering that characterises Shakespeare’s political plays. Interestingly, even scholars writing from very different perspectives have noted this balance. Grady, writing with an interest in Renaissance political theory and focussing on power, argues that Shakespeare “complicated his Machiavellian thematics with Montaignean ones” (SMM 5). In other words, the plays show the reality of the cut-throat political world, but simultaneously show the human cost of such ruthless politics: death, suffering and alienation for the defeated party, and for the victor’s part, an erosion of identity. Andy Mousley, writing with an interest in humanism and in challenging scholarly preoccupations with power, makes the observation that Shakespeare both enchants and disenchants (25). He suggests in *Re-Humanising Shakespeare* (2007) that the plays show the “cynicism and instrumentalism” (29) of some characters yet also
demonstrate that "the destabilisation of the human" — or the destruction of human bonds and love in order to gain power — is "often violent and abusive." (59)

The contrasting affirmation of the brutality of politics and exploration of human experience in Shakespeare’s plays has therefore begun to garner some scholarly interest. Yet critics have rarely recognised the importance of rhetoric in creating this balance, and indeed, in shaping many aspects of the political drama. Persuasive speech plays a crucial role in Shakespearean-Machiavellian politics and in expressions of resistance to it, and thus is identified here as the second feature of Shakespeare’s presentation of political realism.

2. The importance of rhetoric

Since Shakespeare’s English kings, Roman senators and Italian nobles do not have real swords or armies to use on stage, they must fight with words: language, wielded for political gain, is crucial. Rhetoric was also an apt weapon for the historical moment in which Shakespeare was writing. The revival of classical works in the Renaissance led to the return of debates on rhetoric from Ancient Greek and Roman societies, as documents such as Cicero’s De Oratore (On the Orator) were in widespread circulation, and the art of persuading others through language was one of the five “humanities” in the “Studia Humanitatis” programme upon which humanist education was based: as Ann Moss points out, rhetoric was one of the “disciplines by which the Renaissance schoolboy learnt to understand and manipulate language” (99). Wayne Rebhorn writes in The Emperor of Men’s Minds that more than one thousand writings were produced on the subject of rhetoric during the Renaissance (1). This number demonstrates that the revival of the art of oratory had sparked a discussion about rhetorical methods and the role of rhetoric in society. Rhetoric was also linked to literature: Sir Philip Sidney argues in his treatise An Apology for Poetry (1595) that the poet’s capacity in “moving” (22) distinguishes the power of literature:

And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching… for who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught? And what
so much good doth that teaching bring forth – I speak still of moral doctrine – as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach? (22)

Like orators, poets must move their audience’s emotions, Sidney suggests. Although he believes that the goal of literature is to describe “that which teacheth and moveth to virtue” (35), Sidney concedes that the power of poetic emotion can also cause “more hurt than any other army of words” (38).

If literature’s imaginative content was seen to give it rhetorical power, then drama was uniquely positioned as the most suitable form for exploring this power, as the dramatic arts relied heavily on both aspects of rhetoric: language (or content) and performance (or delivery). An association between acting and deception also existed, whereby putting on a façade or feigning was synonymous with acting or “playing”. Jonathan Goldberg draws attention to the association in his book, James I and the Politics of Literature (1983), where he refers to the “duplicitous form of an actor, masking purposes” in Julius Caesar, and argues that this duplicity is “the form of power in the play” (164). Given the natural disposition for drama to explore rhetorical power, and given that the Renaissance revival of rhetoric was so expansive, it follows that rhetorical performances appear throughout English Renaissance political drama. English playwrights often show princes using rhetoric – the highest rulers wield language to establish and maintain their state, and Shakespeare’s orator-princes are foremost among them, reflecting the shift towards the use of rhetoric in the mirrors-for-princes documents of the Renaissance.

As a form of political writing, mirrors-for-princes sought to provide instruction to princes or other high-level rulers, describing the methods of rule to imitate. The genre is therefore highly significant as a means of understanding the extent to which rhetoric was being recommended to princes. Mirrors-for-princes documents held up a mirror in which the image of the ideal ruler was meant to be reflected. Their authors instructed princes in the art of governing, providing guidance on how best to manage the state. In Europe, mirrors-for-princes flourished since the early Middle Ages, although a few classical texts (such as Xenophon’s Cyropaedia) are earlier examples of the form. John of Salisbury’s Politicratus (1159) is an example of the genre, outlining the rights and principal responsibilities of princes. Salisbury was
well-experienced in the world of government; as a secretary to the Archbishop of Canterbury frequently sent on missions to Rome, he based his writing upon his experience. Works such as Thomas Aquinas’ *De Regno* (1260) and Christine de Pizan’s *Livre du corps de policie* (1407) followed, providing instructions on rule to their intended royal readers. Mirrors-for-princes typically pointed to the importance of virtuous government, the moral duties of a king and the organisation of a palace; however they could also provide more practical instruction for gaining and maintaining power. In the Renaissance, as Robin Headlam Wells notes, “the willingness to use ruthless measures to secure political advantage in a just cause” is advocated by “even the most conservative writers of the period” (87). In Renaissance mirrors-for-princes, this pragmatic aspect of politics became increasingly intertwined with rhetoric.

One document exemplifying the recommendation of oratory is Jacques Amyot’s *Projet de l’Éloquence Royale*, written in 1570-1580 for the private use of Henry III of France: an example of an instructional manual to a prince with a particular focus on rhetoric. In his treatise, Amyot explains the benefits of “éloquence” for a Renaissance prince and the best rhetorical techniques to be used in royal duties. He reproduces many of the instructions on rhetorical technique from Renaissance treatises, such as the importance of structure (35-39) stressed by Dutch humanist Rodolphus Agricola (54-55). Like Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (95), Amyot openly acknowledges that a prince cannot employ only rational argument in his rhetoric, like a philosopher, but must “imprimer certaines passions” (34) on his audience. The use of the verb “imprimer” is particularly significant here, as in order to stamp or imprint emotions upon listeners, an orator must first create a convincing image of emotion, through words and through tone of voice and body language. Other rhetorical techniques that Amyot recommends to a prince include the adaptation of the style and length of rhetoric to different situations (15-18), and drawing upon historical examples to inspire one’s supporters (in this case, the nobility) by speaking about the great feats of their ancestors (23). Like Henry Peacham (226) and Coluccio Salutati (22, 26), Amyot refers to the importance of drawing on wisdom and knowledge to produce convincing speech. The importance of Amyot’s *Projet* lies not in its originality of content – for the most part, it outlines popular rhetorical techniques – but in its recommendation of these techniques to a
prince. A similar recommendation is found in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. A Machiavellian ruler must be able to speak in such a manner that he convince others that he is a worthy leader. Nowhere is this more evident than in Machiavelli’s choice of Cesare Borgia, whom he had observed first-hand, as an example of an ideal prince. Borgia’s “charm and conviviality” (93), historian Sarah Bradford notes, allowed him to succeed in the French court, to keep the citizens of his towns on side through courteous promises (111), to impress other nobles (136) and to win over diplomats such as Machiavelli’s fellow envoy Soderini (179). This kind of Machiavellian rhetorical persuasion is found in the *Henriad*, where Prince Hal wins over his father and members of his court, gaining their support for his leadership. Here, there is potential for further study, as the power of Machiavellian rhetoric is evident across a broad spectrum of Shakespeare’s plays (see Ken Jacobsen’s article “Iago’s Art of War: The ‘Machiavellian Moment’ in *Othello*” (2009) for a discussion of Machiavellian rhetoric in *Othello*). In the English history plays, it is undoubtedly manifest, as examples from the *Henriad* reflect.

Throughout the *Henriad*, the Machiavellian princes who succeed employ oratory, and their opponents also launch rhetorical campaigns in resistance. In *Richard II*, Bolingbroke uses language on several occasions to secure a political advantage. During the opening scene, for instance, he defends himself against Mowbray and attempts to paint a picture of himself as the wronged party in their quarrel (1.187-108). His use of language here has been pointed to as an example of political rhetoric rather than honest defence: Ribner claims that Bolingbroke’s speeches with Mowbray are “merely the rhetoric of a politician assuming a pose” (179) and Grady believes that the scene features Machiavellian rhetoric (*SMM* 72) since the audience cannot tell whether Bolingbroke and Mowbray are lying (*SMM* 68). Bolingbroke also employs persuasive speech when he arrives at Flint Castle, as mentioned previously, describing himself as the “yielding water” (3.3.57) to Richard’s fire, creating an image of humble complicity and thus suggesting to his followers that he is not power-hungry. He addresses Richard courteously and promises that his “true service shall deserve [the king’s] love” (3.3.197). This is a clever use of language to persuade, as the promise is later broken. Yet the most powerful rhetoric in the play comes from Richard himself, whose emotive appeals win him sympathy that eventually undermines Bolingbroke’s rule.
As Rebhorn points out, the art of rhetoric is an art of persuasion “used to move people” (3), and Richard understands this end, displaying emotion in his speeches. Although he cannot out-manoeuvre Bolingbroke, the king takes every opportunity to point out his powerful distress in the presence of others: he speaks of tasting grief (3.2.176) and drinking his griefs (4.1.189); of the size of his grief (3.3.135-136), the hidden nature of his grief (4.1.295); and of his possession of grief after losing all else (4.1.191). The word grief runs throughout Richard II like a thread, ensuring that Richard impresses the force of his emotion upon his listeners. In addition to direct references to grief, the king makes allusions to the corporal signs of emotion, suggesting that he is physically moved by sorrow. For example, he describes himself as “full of tears” (4.1.188) during the deposition scene. Taking into account Gail Kern Paster’s work on the ontological conception of emotion in the English Renaissance, a “psychophysiology” of the emotions in which emotions were understood as physical forces, a “material embodiment of the passions” (22), Richard’s references to the physical effects of his emotions strongly reinforce his emotive appeals – they signify that emotion has been expressed, so that even if tears are not actually present his listeners receive the impression that they are.

Another rhetorical technique employed to great effect by Richard is that of “invention”, or “adaptive rhetoric”, as I term it – the tactic of adapting quickly to an opponent’s remarks and responding with skilful rhetoric. Amyot states that quickness, liveliness and agility are of key significance (13) in a prince’s rhetoric, and Agricola even titles his work on rhetoric “Three Books Concerning Dialectical Invention”, highlighting the prominence of adaptive ability. Richard’s skill in seizing upon Bolingbroke’s remarks and turning them to his own advantage is evident throughout the whole of the exchange in 4.1. From the very beginning, when Bolingbroke clumsily attempts to suggest that he is relieving Richard’s burden through deposition – “Part of your cares you give me with your crown” (4.1.194) – his comment is easily twisted by Richard into a digression on the depth of his sorrow, through the repetition of the word “care”. Bolingbroke is unable to verbally outmanoeuvre Richard, and seems to realise his rhetorical inadequacy, for he abstains from commenting on Richard’s grief again until almost a hundred lines later when he remarks that Richard’s grief is only the “shadow” of sorrow (4.1.292).
Again, however, Richard’s skill with adaptive rhetoric allows him to turn the remark to his advantage, pointing out (in a remark similar to Hamlet’s) that his real sorrow lies much deeper than its external signs. Even when Bolingbroke attempts to speak gently, Richard is able to deftly point out the insincerity in his remark – he immediately questions Bolingbroke’s phrase “fair cousin” (4.1.304), casting Bolingbroke as a “flatterer” (4.1.308). In the face of Richard’s invention, Bolingbroke is incapable of responding in kind: unable to reply with words, he can only opt for action, taking Richard away to the tower.

Richard thus invents and adapts in order to outwit his opponent in a rhetorical exchange, effectively gaining sympathy through the use of language. Jennifer Vaught, who has made a feminist study arguing for the power of emotional appeals in English Renaissance literature, argues that such appeals “function as sources of power for men in early modern English literature” (1) and that Richard’s “histrionic displays of emotion” (17) illustrate this political power. Certainly, while Richard is unable to stop Bolingbroke with actions, his words have an impact upon others, and his cultivation of a pitiable image through language and body language is cited later in the Henriad – Bolingbroke is haunted in 2 Henry IV by “Richard, with his eye brimful of tears” (3.1.67). Vaught is right to argue that Richard’s “copious lamenting and weeping” throughout Richard II forms a sharp contrast to Bolingbroke’s “sparse emotional displays” and Bolingbroke therefore makes less of an impression on the audience (107).

Of course, without Machiavellian action to back up his rhetoric, Richard is ultimately overthrown and executed, but his oratory is highly effective in bringing about the balance between pragmatic politics and suffering for the audience that is evident in Shakespearean political drama. We might point to a similar contrast between Octavius Caesar’s pragmatic manoeuvres and Antony and Cleopatra’s powerful speeches in Antony and Cleopatra, or between Falstaff’s sympathetic appeals to Hal in 1+2 Henry IV and Hal’s icy rejection speech. Equally, we might observe the power of persuasive speech as a political tool in Antony’s funeral oration scene in Julius Caesar, or Henry V’s use of “martial rhetoric” (Headlam Wells 73) at Harfleur in Henry V. Rhetoric is an important feature of Shakespeare’s presentation of political struggles, bringing about the balance of ruthless politics and human
experience, even if such rhetoric does not always have the desired effect on the powerful within the world of the play.

3. Meditations on power

Alongside the use of rhetoric and the depiction of pragmatism and human suffering, the third notable feature of Shakespeare’s presentation of political realism is a series of meditations on power, whereby characters in the histories and tragedies scrutinise the business of rule, debate the art of war or the right to kingship, and probe the meaning of honour. The plays are distinctive for examining political struggle as well as presenting it. In the Henriad, again, there are a number of examples of this feature.

The “hollow crown” speech in Richard II (3.2.144-177) is a meditation on power as well as a lament about Richard’s change in fortune. Richard’s crown is figured as a false protection by which he allows himself to believe he is powerful – to “monarchize” (3.2.165) and think his body “impregnable” (3.2.168). Yet in the same breath, he considers that kings are frequently murdered (156-160). After examining kingship, Richard concludes that he has no real station above others, as despite his lofty title he goes through the same experiences:

I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends – subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?
(3.2.175-177)

The list-like effect of the first two lines demonstrates the difficulties that Richard feels he endures, with the flow of one thing after another compounding the sense of hardship. By following this list with a question, Richard invites us to reconsider the very nature of his office. Shakespeare thus allows Richard to reflect upon the position he has held and to consider what (if anything) it really means. This meditation continues in the deposition scene, where Richard riffs on whether kingship can be determined by any means but divine right: “God save the King, although I be not he; / And yet amen, if heaven to think him me” (4.1.174-175). The
use of rhyme at the end of each line perfectly balances the statement, reflecting the balance between Richard’s external loss of kingship and what he believes to be his innate right to rule. Evidently, the business of rule is not only the driving force of the action, but something to be stepped back from and examined during the play’s turbulent political scenes.

Across the *Henriad*, other characters display a similar scrutiny of power and a self-referential consciousness of the political concepts at work. Hal’s soliloquy about his image transformation in *1 Henry IV* (1.2.199-221) is a reflection upon political strategy. Equally, the fretful Bolingbroke’s promise to behave in a more kingly manner is as much an assessment of the behaviour befitting a ruler as it is of his own character. Bolingbroke draws a distinction between his imperial self, a mighty nature “to be feared” (1.3.6), and his own human “condition” (1.3.6). Other observations are teased out: in the same meditation, he reflects that respect is something “the proud soul ne’er pays but to the proud” (1.3.9), and later in the play he considers his tactics against Richard (3.2.39-84). This scrutiny of power is taken up in *Henry V*, where Bolingbroke’s son finds himself examining the ethics of war. As Hal, the young Henry pondered strategy, and now as king he ponders the effects of conflict, debating whether a war can be justified with three of his soldiers. Henry’s exchange with Bates and Williams in scene 4.1 raises several issues: does war come at too great a price “if the cause be not good” (4.1.136)? Is there a discrepancy between the noble image of the soldier dying a Christian death and the reality of battle, in which men die ignobly, swearing, in pain, and often leave families and debts behind (4.1.140-143)? Is the king responsible for how his subjects die (4.1.146-162)? Can, indeed, the soldiers trust that the king will do as he says (4.1.106-198)? These considerations give rise to a second meditation, where Henry, in isolation, reflects on the burden of kingship, lamenting his responsibility (“O hard condition”; 4.1.238) and the pressure upon him to be all outward image and no inner substance (“Art thou aught else but place, degree and form?”; 4.1.251). Even on the eve of battle, when Henry should be at his most confident and triumphant, the audience is invited to question along with him how a war should be fought and led.

Perhaps most remarkably, Shakespeare also puts these meditations on power in the mouths of characters who are not kings or victors. In *Richard II* this takes the form
of counsel: after one of Richard’s emotional laments, Carlisle advises Richard that “wise men ne’er sit and wail their woes/But presently prevent the ways to wail” (3.2.178-180). This remark contrasts action and speech as separate options that a leader might choose, suggesting that self-expression is not a means of empowerment. Yet Richard’s rhetoric does grant him posthumous political power. As Vaught points out, Richard creates a “woeful legend of Richard II” (20), presenting himself in a flattering light to audiences (112) and simultaneously presenting Bolingbroke as a wrongful aggressor. Cora Fox also defends Richard, arguing that in the Renaissance “even excessive emotions like grief and rage both have their place in moments of political engagement” (7). Whether we agree or not with Carlisle, however, his intervention gives us cause to reflect on power; it is not only a direction to Richard, but an observation on politics. In 1 Henry IV, Falstaff also provides a cynical and darkly humorous meditation on power (5.1.127-141). Through a Socratic dialogue with himself, he examines the efficacy of honourable behaviour. His conclusion that he’ll have “none of” honour (5.1.140) encapsulates the play’s political realism. Through these meditations on power, Shakespearean drama acquires a self-reflexive quality.

To conclude, the three major features of Shakespeare’s dramatisation of the ascent of Machiavellian princes – a balance of the depiction of pragmatism and suffering; a heightened use of rhetoric; and a series of characters’ meditations on power – work together to create expressions and investigations of political pragmatism. The Machiavellian politics of Shakespearean drama are never simple, and an examination of the consequences of political actions permeates even the most triumphant plays. To some degree the same approach is evident in ASOIAF – considerable parallels with Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies run through Martin’s series, characterising its exploration of a divided and dangerous realm. The similarities between Shakespeare’s plays and Martin’s novels are both broadly thematic and specific, making ASOIAF not only an exemplar of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy but also of particular relevance to my work. For this reason, I use the series for my study of the political realism of epic fantasy in Chapter Two. Identifying and analysing the Shakespearean elements of ASOIAF while also recognising it as a part of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy, I provide a basis from which to locate and discuss my own work within the genre.
Chapter Two: Machiavelli in Westeros: 
Pragmatic Politics and Shakespearean Parallels 
in A Song of Ice and Fire

"Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar fought honourably. And Rhaegar died."


With these words in George R. R. Martin’s A Storm of Swords, exiled knight Jorah Mormont reflects on the famous prince Rhaegar Targaryen, who failed in his aims due to his unwillingness to compromise his ideals. Jorah recounts that Rhaegar’s “blood swirled downriver” as his enemy Robert Baratheon triumphed in battle. All Rhaegar’s courage and honourable intentions could not secure a victory, and Jorah implies that princes who act in accordance with a chivalric code ultimately pay with their lives. His remark captures the Machiavellian political dynamics of A Song of Ice and Fire.

As in Shakespeare’s works, the pragmatism of Machiavelli’s The Prince is evident in Martin’s epic fantasy series. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the dust-jacket of the first novel quotes a Guardian review that describes the series’ characters as “so venomous they could eat the Borgias” (AGOT) – Machiavelli famously praises the daring manoeuvres of Cesare Borgia in The Prince. The BBC even interviewed Martin for a featurette to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Machiavelli’s The Prince, and during the discussion, Martin mentioned being inspired by the “machinations of the Italian Renaissance” (Yentob n.p.) as well as English and Scottish history. The success achieved by characters through employing stratagems and manoeuvres is a recurring theme in A Song of Ice and Fire, whilst characters who attempt heroic acts frequently fail in their attempts. Perhaps the most notorious examples of the failure of heroism in the series are the death of central character Ned Stark in the first novel A Game of Thrones, after several idealistic decisions, and the
massacre of his son Robb, wife Catelyn and their followers in the infamous "Red Wedding" (in the third novel, *A Storm of Swords*). However, the political pragmatism of Martin's world runs beyond these well-known incidents, encompassing a variety of smaller struggles as characters play the "game of thrones" (*AGOT* 408) at any cost.

This political pragmatism in *A Song of Ice and Fire* subverts critical expectations of epic fantasy. Despite its diverse range of political narratives, the genre has long been described by scholars as a form of escapist heroism. Alpers, for instance, defines epic fantasy as "heroic" fantasy (22) and criticises the genre for a naivety (25) resulting from "shucking as much as feasible all details suspect of having any truck with reality or reason" (29). Although Alpers’ article was published in 1978, stereotypes have endured well into the twenty-first century. In 2005, Marxist critic Fredric Jameson described epic fantasy as an indulgence in "the essentially infantile spirit of an opposition between heroes and villains" (58), and a Christian nostalgia leading to "fantasies of power" (59). These charges ring false when applied to *A Song of Ice and Fire*, however. The political intrigue and changing power structure in the series defies criticisms of easy heroic victory and escapism: Ned Stark fails to overcome the ruthless Cersei Lannister by sticking to an ethical code, and is defeated at her hands; Cersei, in turn, loses her grip on power and is eclipsed by other parties aiming for political might, such as the Tyrells and the Holy Faith.

Other examples of the theme of anti-heroism abound, such as Quentyn Martell’s death, which is almost a parody of chivalry, as Quentyn tries to tame a dragon in an attempt to prove his strength and win princess Daenerys Targaryen’s favour only to die of horrific burns. Gary Hoppenstand sums up the novels’ anti-heroic presentation of politics when he states that Martin’s fantasy series is "not an escape from reality, but an escape into reality" due to its "intricate politics and relationships" (909). In other words, whilst the novels are set in an imagined medieval world, they examine contemporary issues of power and social structure. Martin’s peers observe this theme in their reviews of his work: for instance, fantasy author James Lowder claims that the *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels are not a "casual" and escapist read (xv) but confound expectations, "particularly if your experience with fantasy is dominated by the widely known, consolatory works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, where the
rightful king is the one who ends up on the throne because the world is, in the end, rational and moral.” (xvi) Since Martin draws upon medieval history including the Wars of the Roses to shape his political world, with the rise and fall of the Starks and Lannisters playing out similarly to the struggles of the Yorks and Lancasters (Anders n.p.), it seems logical that a strong element of political realism is manifest in his series. Rather than lifting readers out of reality altogether, the fantastic setting in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is used to scrutinise shifts in power, and to show the complications of any attempt at heroism in a pragmatic world.

The same pragmatism characterises Shakespeare’s history plays, which dramatise the brutality and power struggles of the Wars of the Roses throughout the *Henriad*. Yet the parallels between the dynastic struggles in Shakespeare’s plays and those in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are more than broadly thematic. The exploration of Machiavellian politics in *A Song of Ice and Fire* exhibits three major features of Shakespeare’s dramatisation of the ascent of Machiavellian rulers: a balance of pragmatic politics and human subjectivity, an emphasis on rhetoric, and a series of meditations on power (although the boundaries between these stylistic elements are porous). All of these features are present in Jorah Mormont’s remark quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Jorah’s recollection of Rhaegar’s failure demonstrates that the more pragmatic leader won, but by pointing out that Rhaegar fought “valiantly”, “nobly” and “honourably”, Jorah recognises Rhaegar’s morals and positive qualities.

Jorah’s reflection is also an example of political rhetoric, since he makes the remark to the queen he is advising (Daenerys), ensuring his own safety by maintaining his role as a political counsellor. It employs the rhetorical technique of the tricolon, placing three terms together for emphasis. The remark further provides a meditation on politics, demonstrating the tendency of Martin’s characters to probe and scrutinise the business of rule. It is not only pragmatism that defines high politics in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but a considerably Shakespearean rendering of Machiavellian pragmatism through the use of a strong element of tragedy, an emphasis on rhetoric, and a series of reflections on power.

By analysing the Machiavellian and Shakespearean elements of Martin’s politics, I aim to illuminate these parallels, and more broadly demonstrate a meaningful connection between fantasy literature and what is often referred to as canonical
literature. The latter is typically given symbolic value, as cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu notes (37), but fantasy remains a stigmatised genre, with works such as Martin's rarely placed alongside the Medieval or Renaissance literature with which they intersect. If this kind of analysis is viewed as an opportunity for scholarship on fantasy and Early Modern literature to combine, there is great potential to produce a better understanding of the thematic and stylistic features of fantasy novels. The Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy demonstrates a connection between epic fantasy and *The Prince*, but there is also potential to explore parallels with other literary representations of Machiavellian thought. This chapter will therefore identify and analyse the elements of Shakespeare's depiction of Machiavellian politics present in Martin's series, drawing on the three-part framework discussed above. Through this discussion, I will also establish a means by which to discuss my own novel's relationship to the genre in Chapter Three, given my own influences of Shakespeare and Machiavelli.

1. The balance of pragmatism and human suffering

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as in Shakespeare's plays, the ruthless often succeed politically, yet we hear the voices of those who suffer at their hands. Powerful characters such as the Lannister family patriarch Tywin Lannister and the cruel boy-king Joffrey Lannister triumph frequently, killing some of their enemies and inflicting pain on others. However, the story of their victories is told from the perspectives of Sansa Stark, Arya Stark and Tyrion Lannister – all characters who have suffered injustices and who see the deeds of the ruling patriarchs as tragedies rather than triumphs. The result is a vivid picture of a Machiavellian realm rendered with sympathy for the defeated and abused parties. This balance of pragmatism and human suffering is further evident in the narratives of characters who learn the rules of the political game and come to balance pragmatic measures with their own ethical code: the exiled queen Daenerys Targaryen, for instance, navigates the realities of war and command whilst attempting to deliver justice, buying slaves in order to liberate them (*ASOS: I* 367) and casting out with painful reluctance the advisor who has guided her through struggle and conquest (*A Storm of Swords, Part 2* (*ASOS: II*), 416).
As in the polyphonic scenes of Shakespearean drama, a multi-perspective form is important in achieving this balance. Although Martin’s works are novels, they are written from the narrative perspectives of a variety of different characters; just as Shakespeare’s plays give us the voices of many characters, Martin’s chapters alternate between various characters’ points of view, presented in the third person but focalised through each individual and imbued with their consciousness. MacNeil observes this when he writes of the TV adaptation that “the story is ‘said’ from a series of very limited, even unreliable points of view, each with its own vocal inflection upon and reflection of the event recorded” (n.p.). The character perspectives in the novels include men and women, young and old, exiles and members of the ruling class, a dwarf, an illegitimate son, and a female knight, amongst others. Brienne of Tarth, a muscular female knight, embodies Martin’s fascination with the subaltern and his predisposition for contradictions. She challenges stereotypes as a woman stigmatised for her lack of beauty and her transcendence of typical gender codes, demonstrated in her encounter with the jester Shagwell who calls her a “big horse” and threatens to rape her (AFFC 330). Yet at the same time, she gains some power from her roots in a noble family, and her physical strength gives her mobility in the realm. Jon Snow provides another set of contrasts, represented metaphorically in the black cloak which gives him a certain nobility even as it marks him as an outcast. As he completes gruelling work amongst the collection of misfits that serve in the Night’s Watch, he is simultaneously conscious of his illegitimate birth and influenced by his upbringing as a son of the Stark family (AGOT 552-554). Susan Johnston argues that Jon has a kind of honour, but not a chivalric honour, more a “tattered honor” (143) born from defending the realm without glory or recognition. The contrast between the rough reality of the Night’s Watch and the ceremonies of high politics at King’s Landing is not dissimilar to the juxtaposition of the tavern world and the formal court world in 1 + 2 Henry IV. The inclusion of subaltern voices such as Brienne’s and Jon’s enables Martin to depict the experiences of those excluded from the power enclave alongside the rise and fall of different claimants to power.

A Song of Ice and Fire most explicitly demonstrates the balance of political expediency and human emotive experience through the tragedy of the Stark family. Just as Shakespeare allows his defeated characters to speak compellingly, Martin
gives us the voices of the vanquished, adding a human face to political battles. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the series’ story reflects Shakespeare’s dramatisation of the rise and fall of competing families during the Wars of the Roses. The attempts of Ned and Robb Stark to adhere to a code of honour result in their downfall at the hands of the pragmatic Lannisters, Boltons and Freys, yet this downfall is presented tragically. At Ned’s sentencing and execution, “taunts and obscenities” fill the air (AGOT 607), but it is through his daughter Arya’s perspective that the story of his death is told. We are given her visceral reaction as she tries to reach her father. Martin writes that Arya “bowled past, shoving people aside, squirming between them, slamming into anyone in her way. A hand fumbled at her leg and she hacked at it, kicked at shins” (AGOT 608). The rhythm of the sentence echoes Arya’s movement through the crowd, adding urgency to the moment, whilst the strength of the very active verbs create a picture of desperate movement. Her anger and tears – “Her tears streamed down her face, blinding her” (608) – heighten our awareness of the injustice of the execution because they provide tangible emotive signs, like Richard II’s weeping in Shakespeare’s Richard II. Just as Richard’s tears signal his grief at a moment when his Machiavellian opponent Bolingbroke is wrestling power from him, Arya’s crying demonstrates her pain as a member of the Stark family, as the Lannisters seize power. Similarly, Martin describes the “Red Wedding” massacre through the point of view of Catelyn Stark, who is murdered at the end of the chapter. Although the Red Wedding is a triumph for the Lannisters, brought about with the help of the Freys and the Boltons, a member of the Stark family again makes us aware of the horror of the situation; Catelyn’s dying remarks to her dead husband summarise the utter destruction of the family dynasty: “It hurts so much, she thought. Our children, Ned, all our sweet babes...” (ASOS:2 133). Her direct address to Ned at the moment of the massacre is positioned for emotional impact, and coupled with a description of physical horror that reveals her psychological disintegration. Catelyn shreds her face, then watches the blood “run down her long fingers, over her wrists, beneath the sleeves of her gown. Slow red worms crawled along her arms and under her clothes” (ASOS:2 133). Here, her self-destruction mirrors the destruction of the Stark family itself, and

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9 In ASOIAF, Martin uses italics to indicate characters’ thoughts. I maintain this formatting when quoting these passages in this dissertation.
the horror of the incident is heightened by her hysteria: “It tickles. That made her laugh until she screamed” (ASOS:2 133). As with Arya’s reaction to Ned’s death, Catelyn’s response registers the political drama on a personal and emotive level, and by filtering both the execution and massacre through the raw and immediate perspectives of the victims, Martin frames these brutal events as tragedy.

Other examples of the perspectives of victims and subaltern characters on Machiavellian political events are manifest throughout the series. Tyrion Lannister’s narrative viewpoint on his nephew King Joffrey’s wedding emphasises the king’s arrogance and tactlessness. Tyrion’s thoughts on Joffrey’s character heighten our awareness that the king is unfit to wield power, as when Tyrion reflects “In three years that cruel boy will be a man, ruling in his own right” (ASOS:2 241). The description of Tyrion’s physical response to Joffrey’s taunting builds upon this: “The laughter crashed over him like a wave. Tyrion Lannister did not remember rising, nor climbing on his chair, but he found himself standing on the table. The hall was torchlit by a blur of leering faces” (ASOS:2 253). Here, the simile “crashed... like a wave” demonstrates the power Joffrey wields over his uncle, the might of a king who can force the crowd to laugh along with him. With the “blur of leering faces”, the wedding guests seem to merge into one person, overwhelming Tyrion. The necessity for Tyrion to climb onto a chair is indicative of his impotence against Joffrey; as a dwarf, his physical stature also symbolises his place in the Lannister family. Yet later, his response as he witnesses Joffrey’s poisoning suggests that he is stunned, rather than relieved: “He is going to die, Tyrion realized. He felt curiously calm, though pandemonium raged all about him. They were pounding Joff on the back again, but his face was only growing darker. Dogs were barking, children were wailing, men were shouting useless advice at each other” (ASOS:2 257). This description can be considered a counterpart to Arya’s reaction to Ned Stark’s death – whereas Arya expresses herself actively, kicking and squirming her way forward, Tyrion remains still, his shock embodied by his immobility whilst others move around him. Despite all the reasons Tyrion has to hate Joffrey, he is still affected by his nephew’s death, and thus we see Joffrey’s poisoning through the viewpoint of a horrified relative, providing a pathway for emotional connection with both Tyrion and Joffrey. Tyrion reminds us even as he watches Joffrey die that “The boy’s only thirteen” (ASOS:2 257) – Joffrey is, after all, a child elevated to a position for which
he lacks the emotional maturity. Lauren S. Mayer points out that “the tragedy of Martin’s Tyrion” is that while he recognises that the political structure around him is created by wealth and not love, he “cannot help thinking and acting as if whores are lovers and his biological relatives are actually a family in the social sense” (58). This gives the political circumstances in which he finds himself entangled a poignancy, and emphasises the impact of both Joffrey’s deeds and death.

Sometimes, Martin balances pragmatism and human suffering within a single character’s story, where individual characters transform from sympathetic to ruthless, or conversely from dishonourable to heroic. Nowhere is this more evident than in the “complicated conversion” (Johnston 148) of Jaime Lannister, who initially appears to be a brutal individual, pushing a child from a window to protect the privacy of his tryst with the queen. His nickname of “Kingslayer”, given for his act of treachery in assassinating the late King Aerys, who he was sworn to serve, seems to confirm this impression. Martin gradually reveals across the course of several books that Jaime’s behaviour is not all it seems; King Aerys had prepared to burn the capital, and Jaime’s act of assassination had in fact saved the lives of the populace (ASOS: 1 505-507). Jaime’s life and personality cannot be contained by the rigid code of honour society attempts to ensnare him in, as Jaime points out by exposing the contradictions in a knight’s vows: “So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It’s too much. No matter what you do, you’re forsaking one vow or the other” (ACOK 720). The repetition of the sentence format, with the verb followed by the noun, creates a rhythm that demonstrates the bombardment of societal expectations upon Jaime. The succinct length of each statement also reflects the simplistic and unyielding nature of the instructions: there is no room in the sentence for elaboration or contradiction, just as there is no room for Jaime to challenge his vows. Over the course of the series, the gradual redemption of Jaime’s character indicates that Machiavellian politics can be contested by compassion.

Martin further renders the balance of pragmatism and human difficulty in the Machiavellian realm of Westeros by showing the damage to identity that may be
done through incessant political conflict. In the case of the political tussle between Queen Regent Cersei Lannister and the new queen Margaery Tyrell, Cersei’s identity is eroded through her relentless pursuit of political intrigue. Although Cersei’s chapters show her slandering, manipulating, and even torturing others in an attempt to bring down Margaery, these events are told through her own perspective, illustrating the paranoia and delusion that drives her behaviour. Rather than flatly condemning her actions, Martin shows Cersei’s fear of her brother Tyrion, and her insecurity about her late father Tywin’s approval. “If Father could only see me now, he would not be so quick to speak of marrying me again” *(A Feast For Crows (AFFC 284)),* Cersei tells herself, while setting up a plot to trap Margaery. Her thoughts suggest that her attempts to bring down her rival are motivated by a duty to assume the burden of the Lannister dynasty and, as with the use of the female voices of Shakespeare’s Queen (who tells her husband he should be more angry (5.1.26-34)) and Duchess of York (who upbraids her husband for supporting their son’s death (5.3.99-108)) in *Richard II,* and the princess Katherine in *Henry V,* Cersei’s perspective demonstrates the effects of patriarchy. Her concerns about paternal approval are not without reason, as her uncle has told her that “Tywin did not intend that you continue [as queen regent]” *(AFFC 127).* The inclusion of Cersei’s increasingly paranoid thoughts about her own power illustrates a crisis of identity and insecurity about her place in the family dynasty that accompanies her political manoeuvres. This echoes Grady’s comments about Shakespearean drama demonstrating “an encounter between the discourses of Machiavelli and Montaigne” *(SMM 53)*, specifically, that Shakespeare’s Machiavellian political dynamics are complemented by Montaigne’s exploration of identity crisis and human subjectivity *(SMM 53).* Martin’s use of female character perspectives to explore human responses to political events illustrates the effects of ruthless politics on women in particular, using the multi-vocal form to provide subaltern voices. It presents Cersei as a troubled leader. Cersei’s intrigues with the Tyrell family have worn her down, just as the extended political campaign against the French results in the instability of Henry V’s identity.

A balance between pragmatic politics and human suffering is thus achieved through the multi-narrative form in *A Song of Ice and Fire,* as it is in the polyphonic form of Shakespearean drama. By providing the perspectives of victims of conflict and
affected parties, Martin frames the success of the more ruthless politicians as tragedy. In particular, the variety of narrative perspectives expands the depiction of human experience by giving voice to individuals like Tyrion who may appear to be part of the powerful elite but are truly “bastards in their father’s eyes” (*AGOT* 47). At times, pragmatism and human suffering are embodied within a single character’s narrative arc. Martin also examines the reality of Machiavellian politics, describing the fears and insecurities that drive an individual to pursue a pragmatic political agenda. *A Song of Ice and Fire* echoes Shakespearean drama’s use of *The Prince* not only in the themes of its feudal narratives, but in the finer handling of its political scenes.

2. The importance of rhetoric

The prevalence of rhetoric is a second feature of the Shakespearean rendering of Machiavellian politics in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Characters in the series must couple action with persuasive speech to gain or maintain power. This rhetorical skill requires not only the ability to create a compelling argument, but also the capacity to deliver it well: characters must achieve the marriage of content and delivery stressed by many Renaissance writers. As in Shakespeare’s plays, carefully-chosen words can help to create a lasting victory, but gestures, tone of voice and body language also contribute to an orator’s skill. The emotive impact of rhetorical manipulation is crucial for some characters, who choose to “imprimer” or “stamp” their passions upon the audience, in Amyot’s words (34). Flexibility and the ability to adapt one’s rhetoric are also important, as is the correlation of rhetoric to context: as in Shakespearean drama, public incidents require a different kind of political oratory to private ones, and persuasive speech may be directed at enemies, allies or neutral parties in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This section will examine three types of rhetoric in the series’ politics. Rhetoric used by leaders to extend their power, rhetoric used to attack an enemy’s reputation, and the oratory of aspirants, used to manipulate others while climbing the political ladder, are all significant for Martin’s characters.

Rhetoric comes to the fore in the novels during times of war, serving as a means of establishing and expanding a leader’s reputation. When Daenerys Targaryen conquers the city of Astapor, the young queen is aware of the need for bold action in
order to bring down the slave-city’s ruling class, as power is centralised in the hands of the slave-masters. Yet Daenerys also makes sure to commemorate her victory through language. When she converses with the slave-owners, she demonstrates her power as a leader through fiery speech to one of her own number: “You must not presume to instruct me. Ser Jorah, remove Whitebeard from my presence” (*ASOS* 1370). This command is as much a warning to the slave-owners as it is a reprimand to Whitebeard. With her imperious language (“presume”, “remove”, “my presence”), she warns her enemies that she is a powerful woman who will not be easily overcome; her rhetorical strength is not unlike that of Shakespeare’s Henry V, who at Harfleur threatens the town with death and destruction if they will not yield. At the moment of attack, Daenerys speaks even more potently, urging the slaves to kill their masters and memorialising her deeds by shouting out “Freedom!” and “Dracarys! Dracarys!” (*ASOS* 381) – since *dracarys* is the word for dragon in the old tongue, and a dragon is the symbol of Daenerys’ family dynasty, this declaration links her victory to her name and ensures that the city knows who has liberated it, similar to Henry V’s exhortation to his soldiers to cry “God for Harry, England and Saint George!” in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (3.1.34). The queen further commemorates her victory with the visual rhetoric of throwing the slaver’s whip away: “She raised the harpy [whip]’s fingers in the air... and then she flung the scourge aside” (*ASOS* 381). This gesture communicates more than any extended speech could, with its elegant symbolism. As Daenerys’ use of both language and gesture demonstrates, rhetoric is important in warfare in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

The Iron Islanders, or “ironborn”, also employ rhetoric in their tussle for leadership in the fourth novel, *A Feast For Crows*. After the death of her father, Asha Greyjoy stakes her place as a claimant to the islanders’ throne, using adaptive rhetoric to rebut those who cast doubt upon her. She quickly crushes her uncle Victarion’s suggestion that she lacks experience: “I was fighting battles when you were sucking mother’s milk”, Victarion declares, but Asha responds: “And losing battles too” (*AFFC* 292). Her rejoinder succinctly implies that Victarion’s own experience is dubious. Repeatedly, Asha quashes criticisms based on gender, outwitting her uncle:

Victarion’s frown grew deeper. “You cannot hope to rule. You are a woman.”
“Is that why I always lose the pissing contests?” Asha laughed.

(AFFC 296)

Here, Asha rebuts Victarion’s criticism by using humour to simultaneously poke fun at her male relatives and make them appear petty. She throws back Victarion’s gender-based protest with her own gender-based slur, suggesting that the men engage in “pissing contests” rather than serious warfare. Paradoxically, she uses jovial delivery to give her words weight, demonstrating her confidence by laughing in the face of Victarion’s objection. Asha’s ability to respond quickly and cleverly with adaptive rhetoric is sustained throughout the lead-up to the leadership contest:

“This girl forgets herself,” snarled Pinchface Jon Myre. “Balon let her believe she was a man.”

“Your father made the same mistake with you,” said Asha.

(AFFC 295)

Notably, in this exchange, Asha does not attempt to refute the importance placed upon masculine strength in ironborn politics, but uses that very patriarchal system as a form of attack, challenging her opponent’s masculinity. Again, too, she maintains her confident delivery, not losing her emotional control and snarling like her critic.

Rhetoric is also useful for characters wishing to attack their enemies’ reputation. In the court, the Lannisters use language to slander the Starks and present themselves as legitimate rulers. The purpose of their rhetoric is not to win the throne but to consolidate their victory by denigrating their opponents. Cersei Lannister and her son Joffrey Lannister ensure that Grand Maester Pycelle, a man with authoritative legal knowledge, proclaims their enemies to be treacherous by referring to “the traitor Eddard Stark” and “the traitor Stannis Baratheon” in front of the court (AGOT 518). This declaration is hardly truthful, since Cersei herself has acted treacherously in throwing Eddard into prison and putting Joffrey on the throne instead of Stannis, but its purpose is to rewrite history in the Lannisters’ favour and to send a public message that they have retained the throne. Swords may have helped the Lannisters
to take power, but words are necessary to legitimise their acts. Clear parallels exist with Machiavellian scenes from Shakespearean drama, such as Aufidius’ denunciation of Coriolanus in *Coriolanus*, Henry V’s public sentencing of those who conspired against him in *Henry V*, and Mowbray and Bolingbroke’s attempts to slander each other in the opening scene of *Richard II*; in each case, leaders make public statements for the purpose of attacking their opponents. Rhetoric also proves to be a political weapon for Prince Oberyn Martell, who brings the wrongs inflicted upon his family to public attention by stating Gregor Clegane’s crimes aloud. During his duel with the vicious Clegane, Prince Oberyn repeats before a watching crowd “You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her children” (*ASOS*:2 397), referring to Clegane’s brutal treatment of his sister Elia during the sack of King’s Landing.

The tricolon provides repetition and rhythm, ensuring that Oberyn’s words have resonance, and illustrating that Clegane’s crimes are manifold. Although these reminders serve an immediate tactical purpose, provoking Clegane to fight angrily and make mistakes, they also serve a broader political aim by impressing the horror of Clegane’s abuse of Elia upon the crowd, making sure that the large group of watchers understands who was responsible for Elia Martell’s murder and rape. Thus Oberyn achieves an important goal through his rhetoric by spreading knowledge of the injustice against his family, even though he loses the fight and dies by Clegane’s mailed fist. The rhythm and repetition of his speech are key factors behind its influence. Although Oberyn is a much more martial figure, we might compare his use of rhetoric here with Richard II’s use of language to smear his opponent in the deposition scene in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*: both men are aware they may die, and use rhetorical techniques to ensure that their enemy’s image suffers.

The use of Machiavellian oratory in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not confined to princes, kings and queens. Persuasive speech is also employed by those of lower station, behind the royal scenes, to climb the political ladder. The social aspirant Lord Petyr Baelish, known as Littlefinger, weaves a web of elaborate deceit. In particular, Littlefinger employs rhetoric to convince those of high birth to do his bidding. An extended example of his rhetoric is found in the scene where he covers up his wife’s murder in front of the lords of the Vale, employing emotive language and body language: Sansa Stark notes that he “spoke so tenderly” to the lords that she “would have believed he’d loved his wife” (*AFFC* 171). Littlefinger laments his
wife’s death and praises her as “too trusting for this world” (*AFFC* 171). Blaming himself for not being by her side, he uses emotive delivery: we are told that he “sighed” and paused to compose his emotions (*AFFC* 172). This deceptive use of rhetoric corresponds to Machiavelli’s advice in *The Prince* that a prince should appear virtuous whilst acting strategically. In particular, there are notable parallels between Iago’s Machiavellian oratory in *Othello* and Littlefinger’s use of rhetoric in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Littlefinger uses the adaptive rhetoric or “invention” of which Amyot speaks, and which Jacobsen identifies in Iago’s “thinking several moves ahead, evolving a master strategy” (513) and capitalising “on sudden developments” (514). Like Iago, Littlefinger manipulates his social superiors in private with language: he chooses his words carefully to obtain the loyalty of Lord Nestor Royce, telling Royce that his wife “valued you above all her other bannermen. You were her rock, she told me” (*AFFC* 174). By figuring Royce as a “rock”, Littlefinger creates an image of solidity that suits Royce’s belief that he has worked hard and deserves a reward. When Royce agrees to serve Littlefinger as Keeper of the Gates, his remark that he has “earned it” (*AFFC* 175) prompts Littlefinger to further tailor his appeal to Royce’s ego, describing Royce as a “staunch friend at the foot of [the] mountain” (*AFFC* 175). The constancy implied in “staunch” plays upon Royce’s doubts about his standing in the region, soothing his concerns. Littlefinger’s cunning use of language is also similar to Richard II’s use of rhetoric in the deposition scene in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, as like Richard, Littlefinger uses adaptive rhetoric: he responds and reacts to Royce with the remarks quoted above, demonstrating a capacity to think on his feet. While Shakespeare’s Richard employs emotive language to manipulate a listening crowd, and Littlefinger uses it to coax an individual, both men adapt their remarks based on another individual’s comments, tailoring their rhetorical appeals as dialogue continues.

Persuasive speech is integral to the novels of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as it pervades all of Shakespeare’s political plays. Like Machiavellian princes in Shakespearean drama, the most successful characters in Martin’s political sphere combine oratory with pragmatic action in order to gain power or defeat their enemies. Synthesising these examples, we could argue that action must be coupled with rhetorical ability in order for politicians to succeed in Westeros. The political events in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are certainly coloured by the same emphasis on language that runs through
Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies. Just as Shakespeare shows the canny Bolingbroke using Machiavellian rhetoric at Flint Castle in *Richard II* and the brash Henry V using a rhetorical threat at Harfleur in *Henry V*, Martin places emphasis on oratory as a political tool that can make and unmake leaders and shape the future of a state.

3. Meditations on power

In addition to the balance of pragmatic politics and human suffering, and the use of rhetoric, *ASOIAF* also features Shakespearean meditations on power. As the title of the first book suggests, Martin’s characters explore and discuss how to play the “game of thrones”, or dynastic politics, in a dangerous feudal realm. Meditations on power are widespread in the series, and as in Shakespeare’s *Henriad* and other political plays, these meditations are not limited to tactics but extend to scrutiny of the very business of politics: what does it mean to have power? How should a good king or queen behave? Who is affected by the decisions of the powerful, and can acts borne of good intentions bring about adverse consequences? The continual exploration of Machiavellian politics through questions such as these in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, delivered through dialogue and through characters’ inner reflections, echoes some of the speeches of Shakespearean drama.

Some of the meditations upon politics in *A Song of Ice and Fire* concern conflicted loyalty. When a character’s duty fails to line up with what they believe to be the right course of action, they contemplate the reasons for their dilemma. Davos Seaworth, for instance, examines the issue of his loyalty whilst serving Stannis Baratheon. Questioning the morality of assassinating Stannis’ brother Renly, he asks himself “Would a good man be doing this?” (*ACOK* 560) even as he helps row the priestess Melisandre ashore to bring the murder about. His inner monologue provides us with a reflection not available in an externally focalised narrative. Since Davos still follows through with his orders and allows Melisandre to safely reach dry land, his actions support Stannis, but his reflection shows the difficulty of his decision – not unlike Shakespeare’s inclusion of Henry IV’s tortured thoughts in *2 Henry IV* (3.1.1-31). Jon Snow also encounters an inner conflict whilst serving in the Night’s Watch: since his brother has been named a king, he has a personal interest in
the shifting politics of the realm, yet he remains bound to serve literally and
figuratively at its border. As Commander Mormont points out, Jon will never be able
to enjoy the privileges of his brother's royal life if he stays in the Night's Watch:
"Robb will rule, you will serve. Men will call you a crow. Him they'll call Your
Grace. Singers will praise every little thing he does, while your greatest deeds go all
unsung" (ACOK 96). Mormont's remarks make the inequality between a king and
other men painfully clear, through the sets of comparisons, leaving Jon "troubled"
(ACOK 96) by his inability to wield power and engage in the central conflict like his
brother. For Jon, as for Davos, fulfilling one's duty sometimes means going against
one's emotions, and Mormont's meditative remark shows us the emotive tussle
involved in this duty.

Martin also scatters meditations on power that relate directly to the business of rule
throughout A Song of Ice and Fire. At times, the series examines practical methods
of rule, and at other times it examines questions of honour, cruelty and morality in
high politics. Daenerys Targaryen's storyline includes many incidents where the
young queen pauses for thought, considering the best political techniques. Although
Daenerys is capable of making her own judgments, she typically does so after
examining the correct way for a ruler to behave: "It seems to me that a queen who
trusts no one is as foolish as a queen who trusts everyone. Every man I take into my
service is a risk, I understand that, but how am I to win the Seven Kingdoms without
such risks?" (ASOS: I 116), she tells her advisor, Jorah Mormont, after he counsels
her to be wary. The balance of the first sentence - "a queen who trusts no one... a
queen who trusts everyone" - demonstrates authority and control. Additionally, the
question is rhetorical, indicating that she is justifying a course of action. Like
Shakespeare's Henry reflecting in Henry V, however, she comes to a decision by
scrutinising her own position. The contrast between Daenerys' headstrong nature and
Jorah's caution often yields meditations on Machiavellian politics, articulated in the
dialogue between the two characters. When Daenerys protests that she is the
"rightful queen" (ACOK 529) of Westeros, Jorah warns her that she is in reality a
stranger with a foreign army who needs to win the trust of her homeland (ACOK
530). With direct address - "You are a stranger" (ACOK 529) - he raises the issue
bluntly, reflecting the stark nature of the problem. That Daenerys frequently ignores
the more cautious methods proposed by Jorah indicates much about her style of
leadership. Her fiery methods of attack sit at odds with the more apprehensive suggestions of her companion, but through their exchanges both Daenerys and Jorah consider what it means to rule morally and efficiently.

Also exploring the problems of leadership style is Theon Greyjoy, whose internal musing on methods of rule appear throughout the second book, *A Clash of Kings*. Whilst refusing to grant mercy to children due to a desire to avoid appearing weak, Theon reflects that “It is better to be feared than laughed at” (*ACOK* 664). His meditation on power here demonstrates his flaws as a leader, for whilst Machiavelli concedes that it may be safer for a prince to be feared than to be loved when he is forced to choose between the two (131), Theon violates Machiavelli’s principle that a prince should “avoid hatred, even if he does not acquire love” (132). The young islander acts with needless cruelty towards the residents of Winterfell when he takes the castle and fails to restore a happy peace – Machiavelli notes that “Cesare Borgia was considered cruel”, but “his cruelty had brought order to Romagna, united it, restored it to peace and obedience” (130); Theon, on the other hand, fails to bring order or safety to the north. His tenuous hold on Winterfell leaves him plagued with insecurities, as whilst he openly defies his sister’s request to leave the castle (*ACOK* 729), his thoughts indicate that he is aware of his own folly. Considering what he has conquered, he reflects that he is surrounded by “Stark’s wood, Stark’s castle, Stark’s sword, Stark’s gods” (*ACOK* 732). The repetition highlights the extent to which Ned Stark’s leadership still envelops Winterfell. As his grip on power grows ever more tenuous Theon feels “as though he were drowning” (*ACOK* 829), yet after a flirtation with the idea of escaping, he is quick to revert to his previous stance, reflecting “To think how close I came to yielding” (*ACOK* 837). His commitment to a hard line approach, demonstrated through his meditation on power as well as his actions, proves to be his downfall.

The consequences of leaders’ decisions provide further fuel for the examination of power in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. One prominent example is the discussion between Ned Stark and Varys, the spy-master, after Ned’s imprisonment. As Varys reminds Ned, his refusal to submit to the Lannisters has led to the capture of Ned’s daughter Sansa, and Cersei Lannister “most certainly” (*AGOT* 531) can use Sansa as a political tool. Varys further points out that although Ned has made what he believes
to be a moral choice, he places Sansa in a perilous predicament by sticking to his
principles. Varys elucidates the threat posed to Sansa in a historical comparison:
“Rhaenys was a child too. Prince Rhaegar’s daughter. A precious little thing,
younger than your girls” (AGOT 531). Here the spy-master recalls another noble
daughter who was abused during dynastic struggle. His description of Rhaenys as
“precious” suggests delicacy, and therefore vulnerability. The crux of the issue is
illuminated in Varys’ next question: “why is it always the innocents who suffer
most, when you high lords play your game of thrones?” (AGOT 531). The use of the
verb “play” suggests flippancy, implying that those with power show little regard for
those without it. Through this reflection, Martin suggests that actions which appear
noble can have ignoble consequences for those affected by them, an observation of
the effects of Machiavellian politics. Varys’ remarks prove significant, as the
conflict between the Starks and the Lannisters, re-ignited by Ned’s execution,
triggers a turbulent struggle for power with families such as the Baratheons,
Greyjoys, Martells and Tyrells entering the fray, and the clash of families leads to
horrific war crimes such as the massacre and rape at Saltpants by Gregor Clegane and
others. The title of the fourth book, A Feast for Crows, encapsulates the devastation
that the “game of thrones” has unleashed upon the land, with the “smallfolk” who
suffer most through rape, abduction or robbery (AFFC 421). Through scrutiny of
leaders’ behaviour from characters such as Varys, Martin draws attention to the
consequences of political decisions on ordinary people in A Song of Ice and Fire.

As these examples demonstrate, characters’ musings on power tackle a range of
different subjects and continue to punctuate the political action over the course of A
Song of Ice and Fire. As in Shakespeare’s Richard II, where Richard II reflects on
the dangerous nature of kingship in his Machiavellian political world and laments
that “within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps
Death his court” (3.2.160-162), Martin’s characters contemplate what it means to
lead, how best to rule, and how to make difficult decisions in the midst of conflict
and political wrangling. The combination of this reflective quality, the balance of
pragmatism and human suffering, and the emphasis on rhetoric in A Song of Ice and
Fire indicates that the series has a considerable connection with Shakespeare’s
portrayal of Machiavellian politics. It is not only the link with the subject matter of
the Wars of the Roses but also the particular similarities with Shakespeare’s
representation of those wars, from the use of language to the effects of Machiavellian power, that is manifest in Martin’s work, whether consciously or unconsciously. If epic fantasy fiction is analysed alongside Renaissance literature, it is possible to explore the depth of political thought in epic fantasy novels, and in particular, the style used in depicting power struggles with complexity. Observing the parallels between epic fantasy novels and relevant literary works from a time when dynastic politics were the norm, we can enrich our understanding of fantasy’s unique capacity to explore political realism in entirely “unreal” worlds.

10 As this dissertation discusses literature and creative writing and therefore takes written works as its subject, and as there is not space for additional material, I do not discuss the television adaptation of ASOIAF, HBO’s Game of Thrones, in much depth (see mentions of Game of Thrones on pages 153, 156, 161, 171, 211 of this dissertation). However, comparing Game of Thrones with historical television series could be an interesting parallel investigation to comparing the ASOIAF book series with Renaissance literature, particularly given the recent Machiavellian trend in historical television series that has accompanied the rise of Game of Thrones and ASOIAF. Examples of historical television series with an emphasis on pragmatic political tactics and Machiavellian manoeuvres include Rome (BBC/HBO, 2005-2007), The Tudors (Showtime, 2007-2010), The Borgias (Showtime, 2011-2013), Vikings (History, 2013-2015; ongoing), Marco Polo (Netflix, 2014-2015; ongoing), and Wolf Hall (BBC, 2015; based on Hilary Mantel’s novels Wolf Hall, 2009, and Bring up the Bodies, 2012).
Chapter Three: Machiavellian and Shakespearean Politics in my Novel

“No honourable soldier would strike at you while you’re recovering,” [Lysande] said.

Sarelin laughed. “The three lands aren’t full of honourable soldiers.”

-The Councillor, 18.

For new writers, the Machiavellian shift is both important context and a place from which to diverge and seek out new modes of representation. As the above quote suggests, politics can be a treacherous business in my novel, The Councillor, as it is in most works that form part of the Machiavellian shift. This chapter will discuss my own work’s similarities and differences to the Machiavellian politics of epic fantasy, describing the ways in which my novel draws upon the Shakespearean rendering of Machiavelli, and examining the ways in which it differs from many works of epic fantasy in its depiction of female and non-white characters. In doing so, I aim to analyse how the novel attempts to represent a different kind of human experience to that produced through epic fantasy narratives set in patriarchal, Western-centric realms. By exploring the effects of the gender-equalised and racially-diverse world in my novel, I also identify and explore new directions that epic fantasy might take to expand its depiction of human political experience.

What I have identified as the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy is likely to extend its cultural impact beyond scholarship and media commentary to other novels, boosted by the success of ASOIAF. Martin’s most recent novel sold more than a million copies on Kindle upon publication (Kellogg n.p.), and the series’ adaptation, the HBO television series Game of Thrones, has been immensely popular, boasting over 18 million viewers in 2014 (Wyatt n.p.) and record viewing numbers for its season five finale in 2015 (Kissell n.p.), and leading to a surge in sales for the earlier novels (USA Today n.p.). As a result of this success, Martin’s style and subject matter seem likely to remain influential in the genre for years to come. But whether
writers replicate or diverge from the politics of ASOIAF is a question that merits consideration: if writers choose to explore different ways of imagining feudal politics, the scope of epic fantasy continues to open up.

This chapter will discuss The Councillor as epic fantasy with similarities to the Machiavellian shift in the genre, delving specifically into its sources of inspiration by discussing its parallels with the representation of Machiavellian politics in Shakespearean drama. The chapter will give examples of the three Shakespearean features discussed in Chapter One and observed in Martin’s ASOIAF in Chapter Two — the balance of pragmatism and human suffering, the importance of rhetoric, and the meditations on power — as they are manifest in The Councillor. It will then analyse the ways in which the novel’s gender-equalised world allows women’s political experience to be represented differently, in comparison to narratives set in a patriarchal realm. Finally, it will examine the representation of race and culture in The Councillor. Although the novel also presents a world where non-heterosexual people are not stigmatised, there is not space to discuss this in the dissertation. This analysis aims to show how the use of a non-patriarchal, non-Western-centric setting created narrative possibilities for female and non-white characters in The Councillor’s pragmatic political world.

My novel as Machiavellian epic fantasy

The term “epic fantasy” — sometimes abbreviated to “fantasy” for those without a familiarity with the different sub-genres — conjures up images of soldiers waving swords in pseudo-Medieval worlds, surrounded by castles, magical people and magical creatures, and fighting each other in heroic battles. Although my novel does not reproduce every pattern in the epic fantasy genre (in fact, this would probably be impossible for any novel, given the variety of themes and styles in the genre), some elements of epic fantasy shape the narrative.

As mentioned in the Introduction, epic fantasy narratives take place in invented worlds with their own geographies and cultures, like Tolkien’s Middle-earth or Martin’s Westeros. My novel is set in a land called Elira: a pre-technological, dynastic, feudal realm. It is an entirely fictional setting, and thus the novel is
distinguishable as epic fantasy, as distinct from fantasy stories set at least partially in the real world, such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter series* (1997-2007). *The Councillor’s* Renaissance-inspired setting means that characters fight with swords, bows and crossbows, and military strategies centre on these older forms of combat. Under the dynastic system in the novel, the monarchy and nobility hold sway over common people, and political power consequently shifts as different individuals take over the leadership. As in most epic fantasy, there is also a magical element, with dragons involved in the realm’s history and eventually making an appearance in the narrative, adding an element of aerial warfare to the main battle. Magic also pervades the story through the presence of “elementals”, a magical minority people with the power to move one of the elements – fire, water, or air. Although the novel includes a magical aspect, it does not dwell in great depth upon the process or physiology of magic; it is more concerned with how magic affects people, changing the way they interact by creating both opportunities and barriers.

In addition to the broad characteristics of epic fantasy, however, *The Councillor* also features elements of the Machiavellian shift in its depiction of feudal politics. As with the novels of Abercrombie, Erikson and Martin, there is an element of anti-heroism in the narrative. The city-rulers of Elira compete against each other, and although they must work together, both the protagonist (Lysande) and her rival (the prince of Rhime, Luca Fontaine) view the ritual of collaboration with scepticism. For instance, at the moment of the council’s formation, Luca toasts “to dishonour” instead of to honour, mocking the ceremonial ritual. Assassination attempts and betrayals run throughout the narrative; peers are untrustworthy, alliances unstable, and leaders employ Machiavellian strategies to outwit their enemies. Luca’s strategy to deceive the Bastillonian ambassador by planting archers behind tapestries in a room which appears unguarded – “No swords are permitted in the Room of Accord” (*The Councillor* 261), he tells the ambassador, forcing his guests to disarm whilst keeping his own weapons hidden – is modelled on Cesare Borgia’s deception of his enemies, described by Bradford as “a master-stroke, a supreme example of intelligence and subtlety.” (Bradford 207) This kind of political manoeuvre links the

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11 All citations from *The Councillor* are from the thesis novel. The page numbers therefore refer to the pages in this thesis. (Citations from *The Councillor* with page numbers from 244 to 417 refer to the portion of the novel presented in the Appendix.)
novel to Machiavelli’s *The Prince* – Machiavelli witnessed Borgia’s deeds whilst working for the Florentine government and went on to write about Borgias as an example of a successful prince. As Lysande enters the ruthless world of high politics, she too becomes more pragmatic, arranging for guards to be sent “in secret” (*The Councillor* 287) to ambush attackers at the Sapphire Ball. Yet the presence of deception, ruthless strategies and distrust is balanced by the depiction of the difficulties of human experience in times of political turmoil in the novel.

Even as Lysande embarks upon a journey into political strategy, she grapples with the grief of losing her friend and mentor, Queen Sarelin, and questions her own ability to succeed in politics, providing a human element to what might otherwise be a purely strategic situation. At a moment of decision-making, she asks herself: “What place has a girl with a quill in the business of war?” (*The Councillor* 288). This self-scrutiny is more akin to Shakespearean drama’s exploration of a non-heroic political world than to the heroic assurance of the Tolkienian quest narrative.

Additionally, both Lysande and Luca both reflect with emotion on their positions as subaltern figures: Lysande is an orphan and Luca a bastard son, and thus, like some of Shakespeare’s characters, both experience the difficulties of being outsiders in a world where noble blood counts above all. Both are intellectuals, departing from the mainstream expectations of leaders, and unbeknownst to most other characters they are also members of the magical minority. Luca sums up their precarious position as elementals who have to hide their magical powers or risk death in the final chapter, when he compares hiding his identity to walking on a pond in winter:

> “The ice has frozen just enough to venture out. At any moment, it might crack, and send you plunging down below. So you walk carefully; you take ginger steps; and if you reach out to hold another’s hand, your fate becomes bound up with theirs. If they fall, you fall. If they make it across, you do too.”

(*The Councillor* 412)

As this description suggests, Luca and Lysande are metaphorically walking on thin ice. Even though both characters are leaders, they navigate the world of high politics with difficulty, and their strategic façade is shown to be a necessary but fragile
veneer. While the novel does not use multiple narrative perspectives, it does give voice to different subaltern characters throughout the novel, including Lysande, Luca, and Three (the leader of a magical minority resistance movement), through conversations, speeches and dialogue.

Rhetorical strategies also prove important in my novel’s world, as they do in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and particularly in Shakespearean drama’s representation of Machiavellian politics. The rhetoric used by Henrey Derset, the advisor who eventually betrays Lysande, was influenced by my study of Iago’s use of rhetoric in *Othello*. Like Iago, Derset creates the facade of the dutiful servant whilst betraying his social superiors, carefully tailoring his appeals to play upon his employer’s insecurities. He recognises Lysande’s insecurity about her position as an orphan and commoner amongst the nobility, referring to her consistently as “my lady” throughout the narrative to appeal to her need for reassurance. Using his knowledge of Lysande’s loyalty to the late Queen Sarelin, he stresses his own fidelity to Sarelin in order to earn her trust, as evident in his promise after Lysande’s problem-solving efforts in the Room of Accord that “Queen Sarelin’s fire lives on in you. You are her Councillor, appointed on her authority” (*The Councillor* 270). In this manner, Derset uses language to strike at Lysande’s emotions in a moment of vulnerability. At the same time that he reinforces his own bond with her, he attenuates her bond with Luca, subtly implying over a course of staged events that Luca might be the traitor. Language, body language (such as placing a hand on Lysande’s shoulder) and gesture (such as pretending to save Lysande from bandits on the river) demonstrate Derset’s rhetorical capabilities. His combination of rhetorical tactics is so successful that, as he observes in his final confrontation with Lysande, he has manipulated her to trust him “in any crisis.”

Aside from Derset, other characters employ rhetoric as a weapon throughout the novel. For example, Queen Sarelin has distributed the poetic works of the Silver Songs so that the poems can create a historical comparison to portray her leadership favourably. This is an indirect rhetoric of might. Additionally, she uses the visual rhetoric of paintings to create an allusion to “a warrior who had helped defeat elementals at the Conquest, called the First Victor” (*The Councillor* 45). This use of painted image allows Sarelin to compare herself to the First Victor, impressing her
success upon her court. Furthermore, the royal advisors argue their merits to Lysande, duelling verbally, as evident when Pelory dismisses Derset’s reticence, arguing that:

“...an advisor’s job is to advise.” Pelory smiled his mirthless smile. “Councillor Prior, I can offer an understanding of the laws of Valderos, Lyria, Pyrrha and Rhime, as well as our fine capital. I think you may find that some of the cities have very different practices to ourselves. Different, and savage practices. Do you know what the Valderrans call an execution by ice-bear mauling?” He glanced at Lysande. “Lenience. I do not wish for influence or reward, for myself: only to ensure that the crown falls to the most suitable candidate.”

(The Councillor 52)

Here, Pelory employs language to both undermine Derset and strengthen his own claim, using the word “savage” in an attempt to incite fear and hence reinforce the need for his own intervention. Towards the end of the novel, Luca and Lysande also make speeches to vie for the leadership of the Council, appealing to their fellow Councillors’ interests and fears. When Lysande ends her speech with the rhetorical question “When war draws near, the people will miss their Iron Queen. And who better to give them hope than the Councillor she chose?” (The Councillor 420), she attempts to persuade the other city-rulers with an implied argument. As in Shakespeare’s plays, and in ASOIAF, language is an important part of Machiavellian politics, and it is employed to manipulate individuals, create a public image and deceive opponents.

The third element of the Shakespearean exploration of Machiavellian politics occurs in the novel where meditations on power appear in the narrative. Some of these meditations concern the non-heroic nature of the realm’s politics, as when Sarelin tells Lysande “Never underestimate the value of the truth in this realm full of snakes and whisperers, Lys.” (The Councillor 16) Not long after this assessment of the deceptive political world, Sarelin warns Lysande that “The three lands aren’t full of honourable soldiers” (The Councillor 18). This statement, as indicated at the
beginning of this chapter, suggests that politics is a treacherous business. The wisdom of this observation is demonstrated in the climactic battle, where Lysande reflects on the lack of "chivalry" (*The Councillor* 367) in warfare, observing the difference between the idealised poetic image of warfare and the actual physicality of fighting. In a moment of reflection, Lysande notes that "all the descriptions of battles in books had made no mention of all the desperate shoving that was involved. Fighting was at least two thirds shoving, to the tune of ringing shields" (*The Councillor* 359). Characters in my novel thus reflect on the nature of warfare, creating a non-heroic picture of conflict. In Elira, the novel’s meditations also suggest, pragmatism is required in every level of political interaction, and image construction is important; Lysande remarks to Raden that the business of rule "does seem like a show" (*The Councillor* 118), and Three observes that the White Queen has mastered the art of show – she is playing "a game of image", he claims, in order not to "be cast as a villain" (*The Councillor* 276). In this manner, the strategies for succeeding in politics and the nature of warfare come under scrutiny through my novel, especially through characters’ reflections.

Further observations on power concern the use of the intellect in politics. Given that the two main characters are analytical thinkers and keen observers, the novel takes up the theme of how one might best employ the mind to rule. When Lysande and Luca discuss the Rhimese motto in Chapter 5, Luca claims that

"The real leader conquers with her mind. A bow or a dagger can be useful, but only so far. To truly out-maneuuvre an opponent, you must use this." He tapped the side of his head.

(*The Councillor* 95)

Luca’s statement suggests that the art of politics can be mastered by thinking cleverly in order to create strategies for attack. Equally, politics in the novel involves defending oneself against warfare on the mind, as Lysande learns that the White Queen’s magical powers over the mind pose a threat. Three makes this clear in his remarks to Lysande before the ball, warning her about the need to defend her mind: "Consider that if she seeks to seduce you, she may send her servant to gain your trust: few of us have a fortification against our emotions, our fears" (*The Councillor*
Although Lysande makes it her task to build this mental "fortification", Derset's successful betrayal demonstrates that she should have done it sooner. In the moment of confrontation with Derset, it is the mind that occupies Lysande's thoughts, as she fears losing control over her most valuable tool:

*My mind. What was it Sarelin had said to her, when she gave her the gold quill? "You should be proud of your own weapon, too."

*(The Councillor 382)*

This reflection shows the importance of the mind in Lysande's career, carried to its logical conclusion in the epic fantasy genre through the depiction of "powers of the mind" such as mental control. The theme of intellectual warfare runs throughout the novel, often explored through characters' observations.

Other meditations on power include the contradiction between appearance and reality, as when Derset observes in front of a fighting arena that "All theatres of death are beautiful, my lady. [...] That is the tragedy of them" *(The Councillor 89)*. Derset's remarks seem, on the surface, to merely concern a tournament ground, but they metaphorically refer to the exquisite palaces and lavish halls of power in Elira, where assassinations have been carried out and scenes of violence have often occurred. As the novel's most brutal battle is fought in the grounds of the extravagant Rayonnant Palace in Lyria, the tendency for wealth to lure danger gives a double meaning to Three's warning that the White Queen will "stage an attack" *(The Councillor 278)*. The palace is, like the Arena, a "theatre of death." Characters in the novel also consider the negative impact of discrimination on political stability, in further reflections on power. Judging the negative effects of Sarelin's rule on elemental people, Luca reflects that "where prejudice rules, the crown weakens." *(The Councillor 131)* He continues to bring Sarelin's flaws to Lysande's attention, arguing that the late queen "made no effort to understand those who were different" because she was a warrior: "Killing was easier than ruling" *(The Councillor 357)*. This evaluation of leadership gives rise to Lysande's own reflection, later, that her new identity as a magical person has attenuated her veneration for the queen. If Sarelin was formerly her idol, "the idol had been smashed, ever since she [Lysande] understood what it felt like to be one of the enemy" *(The Councillor 384)*. This
reflection on power, consideration of the merits of individual leaders, and scrutiny of different aspects of rule surfaces throughout the novel, and could be said to reflect the exploration of politics in Shakespearean drama. Thus *The Councillor* falls under the Machiavellian trend as a work of epic fantasy, but is also flavoured by Shakespearean elements such as a balance of pragmatism and human suffering, an emphasis on rhetoric, and meditations on power.

Yet the novel’s narrative also represents human political experience in different ways to much existing epic fantasy. One of the most obvious ways in which the story offers a different take on epic fantasy’s pragmatic politics is through its construction of a non-patriarchal and non-Western-centric realm, in which women and people of colour play more central parts.

**Gender in my novel**

As discussed in the Introduction, epic fantasy novels have been criticised for including rape, violence against women, the commodification of women, and other misogynistic elements in their stories. The common use of the patriarchal realm as a narrative setting in the genre means that female characters are frequently placed in dangerous situations, with limited means of gaining power. Even women of high birth may be given as prizes to warriors or married off for political purposes in epic fantasy worlds. Women’s voices are sometimes lacking in these novels, or relegated to fleeting moments in the story. However, in some fantasy novels female characters play an important role in politics, despite the overall social position of women, as in books by Robin Hobb, Tamora Pierce and Robin McKinley. These novels feature women giving speeches, wielding swords and making tactical decisions. McKinley’s use of the title *The Hero and the Crown* for a novel about a heroine, for example, demonstrates the importance of her female protagonist in the narrative. As mentioned in the Introduction, the titular hero of *The Hero and the Crown* is in fact a woman who protects the realm, suggesting that a female leader can supersede the male protagonist of the fantasy tradition.

Martin’s *ASOIAF* series notably gives female characters narrative prominence, including their perspectives alongside those of male characters over the course of the
novels; the series both reproduces and questions patriarchy by providing women’s thoughts on the difficulties and suffering they endure, and some of Martin’s female characters even succeed in triumphing over their obstacles. Characters such as Daenerys gain power by succeeding within the patriarchal political system – marrying, seducing, and eventually gaining authority and military support. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, this is the kind of journey that Jane Tolmie identifies as the “female exceptionalism” narrative (145), where a woman in an epic fantasy story succeeds against the odds. Hobb’s princess Kettricken and Pierce’s knight Alanna also have triumphs of this kind in patriarchal realms. Tolmie suggests that there is a kind of feminist pleasure in such narratives through the form of feminist critique (156), yet she adds that epic fantasy authors could challenge themselves further, asking:

“is the insertion of feminist disapproval into familiar situations in some respects a cheap alternative, in terms of narrative expense, to the much more difficult and unusual creation of alternative fantasies, or radically new and revolutionary fantasy?”

(Tolmie 155)

The female exceptionalism narrative does have certain boundaries. As described in the Introduction, the use of the patriarchal setting constrains female power for the majority of women in the story’s world, and when exceptional women rise to power, they must work within the patriarchal system to thrive. Marriage, reproduction or seduction often therefore prove crucial to women’s success. In contrast, male characters have a greater variety of political methods at their disposal. Perhaps the most significant limitation of the female exceptionalism narrative, however, is that in a patriarchal world, female leaders can rarely collaborate with other women in positions of power; since the majority of rulers, diplomats and military leaders are male, the exceptional woman who gains power in epic fantasy finds herself working and dealing with men. This is not necessarily a narrative flaw, and heroines who take on enemies in a male world can embark on complex political and personal journeys as with Hobb’s Kettricken, who withstands considerable suffering after a forced marriage and relocation and eventually makes a foray into the dangerous politics of the Farseer dynasty. Yet as Tolmie points out, there is also potential for writers to
restructure the fantasy world itself, and such restructuring might produce different kinds of opportunities for female characters in a diverse range of narratives.

My own novel takes place in a gender-equalised world, perhaps what Tolmie would refer to as an “alternative” fantasy. The world, called Elira, was not conceived of from theory, but came about from my desire to create female characters who had the same narrative opportunities that male characters typically do in epic fantasy: leading, participating in combat, and engaging in political intrigue without obeying or responding to patriarchal expectations. Thanks to the freedom of the epic fantasy genre, I was therefore able to construct a realm in which women and men played equal roles. Elira, in my novel, is not matriarchal, but neither is it patriarchal – women work alongside men as soldiers and captains, scholars, members of the court, poets, heralds, attendants and city-rulers, taking part in the full range of vocations. This is evident from the first chapter of The Councillor, where the opening scene introduces a female scholar, Lysande, interacting with a female queen, Sarelin (The Councillor 9-10). The mention of the “women and men in Axium armour” (The Councillor 11) demonstrates that men and women work together in the armed forces in this world, and the discussion of Mea Tacitus, the “White Queen”, establishes a female opponent as the main antagonist. (The Councillor 21-22)

As The Councillor progress, it becomes evident that the history and politics of the land are shaped by women as well as men. Sarelin’s impact demonstrates this, as when Lysande is reminded of the queen’s power while translating a history:
“Descriptions of battle called up images of her own queen in her armour, leading the jubilee parade” (The Councillor 30). This description positions Sarelin as a practical leader as well as a symbolic one, wearing her own armour as she completes an exercise in political image. The same combination of martial skill and majesty is reflected in the inscription on the ornate chalice in Sarelin’s royal suite:

Sarelin Brey – Unifier, Warrior, Conqueror –
the Hand that pushed back the White Tide
and restored our Great Realm to its Glory.
Long may her Reign flourish in Elira.
(The Councillor 32)
Here, Sarelin’s legacy indicates that the impact of a female leader in Elira can be powerful, and yet Sarelin is not an exception as a female ruler. In the scene where Lysande enters the royal crypt, she passes the tombs of queens alongside those of kings (The Councillor 54), literally strolling through Elira’s equalised history. This scene shows that having a woman on the throne is neither unusual nor controversial in the realm. Rather than altering the system of monarchy (by creating a different kind of succession or giving women greater authority), The Councillor refashions the patriarchal world itself, changing it into a gender-equalised model, and the royalty of Elira therefore reflects this change.

Women are also represented on the next rung down of power, as city-rulers. The city-rulers in The Councillor include Cassia Ahl-Hafir, a woman who combines military daring and intelligence, having demonstrated both in taking her city from a rival family. “If you’ve usurped the Qamaras, you can fight with a lot more than just brute force” (The Councillor 101), Luca observes of Cassia. The novel also features female advisors alongside males, such as Lady Tucheester and Lady Bowbray, and female soldiers serve alongside the men in the Axium Guards; watching them train, Lysande observes that the guards “were big women and men” (The Councillor 257), demonstrating that the women in the military have the physical strength necessary to fight. References to women are woven into the background of the story – literally woven in the description of the historical tapestries in Rhime, which display “women and men shaking hands” and famous leaders of both genders (The Councillor 259). Through these details, references and descriptions, The Councillor creates a world in which women and men are equals in society, with a diverse range of roles and positions for women in the political sphere.

This equalised world creates opportunities for the development of female characters in the narrative that are different to those for female characters in patriarchal feudal realms. Since reproduction and sexuality are not the main sources of female power in Elira, women in the realm can engage in high politics using their intelligence, political connections and fighting skills. This enables them to participate in political contests that are usually reserved for male characters in epic fantasy. For example, Cassia, the female leader of the city of Pyrrha, is as much a contender for the throne
as any of the other city-rulers at the beginning of the novel, and participates in both the pageantry of the ceremonial entrance and the fighting at the tournament. Although Cassia is confident in her own physical beauty, her appearance features only at rare moments in the narrative. The description of her bout at the tournament focusses instead on her intelligent and lethal fighting style:

The next slash came at her ribs, and Cassia Ahl-Hafir pushed back the mercenary with a short and sharp blow. The mercenary retreated, sword raised again.

“She has no stomach for a fight,” Jale declared.

“I think she’s waiting for something,” Lysande said, watching the Pyrrhan leader circle.

As the mercenary lunged at Cassia a third time, both hands on her sword, the Irriqi made her move. Her arm dropped low. With a flick of her wrist, she sent the sword slicing through the air, flying towards the woman’s legs – quick and bright in the sun.

(The Councillor 102)

Here, Cassia’s unusual technique of throwing her sword at her opponent suggests that she is clever and adaptive, traits that are more important in her capacity as a leader than her looks. Her skills provide her with the means to survive in conflict, and her leadership qualities exceed the arbitrary power of her position or the size of her armouries. This is evident in the final battle, where Cassia responds to the arrival of the dragon by assuming charge of the mixed assembly of fighters and giving commands, while others are still paralysed by shock, unable to take charge. (The Councillor 362)

Lysande, too, develops as a political leader without gendered constraints. In a patriarchal realm a woman such as Lysande might be used merely as a bargaining chip in a marital alliance or as a sexual object, but in an equalised realm, her career
as a scholar provides her with the opportunity to succeed. Through study, Lysande develops her tools to take on the challenges of politics. Using the knowledge and deductive skills she has built up, she navigates her way through political situations, often thinking on the spot, and Luca observes aptly that by making the princes compete in the tournament she has “applied [her] wits very well.” (The Councillor 94) It is logical, therefore, that when Luca comes to propose a political alliance with Lysande, he thinks not of marriage but of work. In suggesting that they make Council decisions as “colleagues” (The Councillor 282), he demonstrates that he recognises her worth as a leader and a thinker. In a patriarchal fantasy world where men typically treat women as property, reflecting the customs of the realm, female character development is directed into certain pathways, such as securing male authority by seduction or fighting against it. In contrast, in The Councillor’s world, female characters are able to be assessed as male characters in epic fantasy usually are – based on their capabilities and character.

The novel also attempts to depict women exhibiting certain characteristics that would be condemned by the cultures of patriarchal fantasy worlds. For instance, Sarelin’s boldness and enthusiasm for military combat are not “tomboy” traits in a queen, but simply constitute a certain style of leadership – one that has saved the realm at a time of crisis. Raden notes that “The Bastillonians would’ve attacked years ago, if they weren’t too scared of the Iron Queen.” (The Councillor 20) It is Sarelin’s ability to succeed in battle – regardless of her gender – that has won her people’s support. Whereas women in patriarchal realms are often expected to be docile and submissive, and those who succeed in bold military endeavours are typically figured as exceptions – the female “exceptionalism” narrative (Tolmie 145) to which Tolmie refers – Sarelin is judged by her citizens as a person and a leader, without gendered expectations to fulfil. The same is true of Lysande, who has no gendered role to fulfil or rebel against, but inspires reactions from others based on her problem-solving ability and assertiveness. The aspects of Lysande’s character that emerge over the course of the novel are neither reactions to gendered tropes in epic fantasy, nor products of them.

One of the most significant ways in which an equalised world broadens the possibilities for the representation of human political experience, however, is the
opportunities it provides for female collaboration and interaction. As noted earlier in this chapter, the “female exceptionalism” narrative, while a kind of feminist story, limits the capacity for female politicians to interact with each other, as does the paradigm of a male-dominated world. My novel attempts to create a collaborative relationship between female characters by featuring Lysande and Cassia’s alliance as a friendship that is formed in a dynamic and dangerous political world, using the equalised realm to show two women working together. Although Lysande must remain on her guard against the rest of the Council, she nonetheless bonds with Cassia, and the pair discuss military history and dragons (*The Councillor* 324). Crucially, Cassia supports Lysande’s leadership bid at the end of the novel (*The Councillor* 419-421), enabling Lysande to challenge Luca for an important role. Rather than being excluded from the narrative, this female relationship helps to drive it, contributing actively to the novel’s events.

A female collaboration of a different kind can be found in Lysande’s relationship with Sarelin – here, the collaboration is one of mentor and mentee, or the female equivalent of the father figure guiding the novice in epic fantasy. This relationship is addressed directly when Sarelin tells Lysande she has always looked on her “as a daughter” (*The Councillor* 16), and indirectly, in the memories of the formative experiences Sarelin has provided Lysande with, such as Lysande’s remembrance of the two of them “playing at cards in the royal suite, or practicing their aims in the target range” (*The Councillor* 16). Linking into the novel’s interest in rhetoric, Sarelin also imparts advice to Lysande, as when she encourages Lysande to be multifaceted:

“You might be dangerous with a Rhimese rapier, or a good shot with a dagger, like a real Axiumite… you might be a Lyrian singer, a Pyrrhan hunter, a Valderran quarrier… a merchant, or a weaver, or a diplomat… or half a dozen of those things at once. A woman should not be one thing alone. That’s what I learned over half a lifetime, in court.”

(*The Councillor* 34)
The strength of the relationship between Lysande and Sarelin is illustrated in the way that Lysande comes to embody this advice by the end of the novel, having become a fighter and a leader whilst retaining her scholarly nature. She also uses pieces of Sarelin’s advice at important moments. When Lysande warns off Luca during their confrontation at the ball, she draws upon the experience and knowledge she has gained from Sarelin, telling him:

"You’re forgetting I was raised by Sarelin Brey. She took me hunting. And she always made me wait until the deer was in my view: never trust the sound, she said, only trust what you can see with your eyes. I find that holds true for you, Fontaine."

(The Councillor 356)

Evidently, Sarelin is a mentor to Lysande, inspiring her and providing wisdom. The magnitude of Sarelin’s influence both provides guidance and creates tension for Lysande, as she comes to question some of Sarelin’s deeds later in the novel.

These female-female relationships are uncommon in epic fantasy narratives, as patriarchal worlds restrict the ways in which women can interact and the focus of their interaction. Male characters in epic fantasy, however, interact with each other in a great variety of ways that shape and drive the narrative. By including women’s collaborations in my equalised realm, I hope to open up the possibilities for representing women’s political experience with the same breadth and depth, exploring female political behaviour in a pragmatic but non-patriarchal world.

Race, skin colour and geography in my novel

In addition to the depiction of gender, the handling of race and skin colour in imagined fantasy worlds has proved to be a problematic area. Edward Said, in his seminal work of cultural scholarship, Orientalism (1978), identifies an imperial mentality that shapes Western perceptions of Eastern cultures, and building on this scholarship, Myles Balfe argues that an orientalist mentality pervades many works of epic fantasy through the invented geographies in which the stories are set. Balfe discusses the genre’s orientalism, arguing that fantasy texts, rather than being
divorced from the real world, “are located within, and inscribed by, particular social, geographical and cultural discourses” (75-76). Epic fantasy novels, Balfe claims, are often constructed around conflict between good and evil, where the inhabitants of “bad” nations are usually swarthy and those of good nations are usually white (77-78). Moreover, the characters from the Eastern lands in fantasy worlds “cannot redeem their cultures, their selves, let alone being able to protect their landscapes from outside invaders” (79). Balfe gives the example of Robert Jordan’s *Wheel of Time* novels as emblematic of this imperial mentality. Jordan’s Easterners, he points out, are “both opposite and inferior to the West, and its Westland heroes” (82-83) – where the Easterners in the *Wheel of Time* hurt women, for example, the Westerners protect them (80). These kinds of narratives allow Western characters to demonstrate both moral and tactical superiority whilst positioning Eastern characters as their inferior opposites.

Some epic fantasy series, however, reject the notion of a heroic West and an evil East, and in particular the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy often dissolves geographic lines that contain “good” and “bad” people. Joe Abercrombie’s *First Law* trilogy features a world with one part that seems derived from European history (the Union) and another part that seems inspired by Middle-Eastern history (the Gurkish Empire), whilst the Viking-inspired Northmen populate a third major part of his land. Of these regions, none appears particularly heroic. Ruthless politics including torture, violence and betrayal are present throughout all of Abercrombie’s world, including both Eastern and Western parts. It is appropriate, therefore, that the character referred to (with some humour) as a “barbarian” in the *First Law* books – Logen Ninefingers – is not an Easterner. Outside of recent Machiavellian fantasy, too, there are exceptions to the East/West divide: Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* cycle is particularly notable as a series that not only avoids the use of an inferior East but rejects the genre norm of a predominately white society. Le Guin’s novels feature an archipelago called Earthsea where the majority of people have reddish-brown skin, including the protagonist, Ged. Certain regions of Earthsea have black-skinned inhabitants, and one region is populated by white-skinned people. In an essay protesting the changes that have been made to her characters’ ethnicity in cover art and in a television adaptation, Le Guin explains her approach to race:
“My color scheme was conscious and deliberate from the start... I didn't see why everybody in heroic fantasy had to be white (and why all the leading women had ‘violet eyes’). It didn't even make sense...

The fantasy tradition I was writing in came from Northern Europe, which is why it was about white people. I'm white, but not European. My people could be any color I liked, and I like red and brown and black. I was a little wily about my color scheme. I figured some white kids (the books were published for ‘young adults’) might not identify straight off with a brown kid, so I kind of eased the information about skin color in by degrees—hoping that the reader would get ‘into Ged's skin’ and only then discover it wasn't a white one.”

(Le Guin “A Whitewashed Earthsea”, 1)

These remarks, along with the use of geography and skin colour in Le Guin’s books, prove that epic fantasy can overcome the juxtaposition of a good West and bad East (or sophisticated West and inferior East). The Earthsea series also specifies a variety of skin colours in its world rather than leaving skin colour open to interpretation. Le Guin’s comments do suggest that authors may face difficulties in the marketing of such work to a white audience, however, and this may go some way towards explaining why Le Guin’s series remains the most well-known epic fantasy without an East/West divide or a predominately white-skinned world, despite over forty-five years passing since the publication of the first Earthsea novel (A Wizard of Earthsea, 1968).

Martin’s world in ASOIAF, divided into Western and Eastern continents with the names “Westeros” and “Essos”, does seem to replicate the West/East division of much epic fantasy. Its naming systems divide the mostly European-derived world (in Westeros) from the Middle Eastern and Asian-derived world (in Essos). The Western queen Daenerys Targaryen’s conquests of Astapor and Meereen therefore have some orientalist undertones: Daenerys liberates the enslaved non-white races of the
Eastern lands. Even if Martin’s story is not generally heroic, it does feature a Westerner saving powerless people in the East. Daenerys refers to the Easterners she has liberated as her “children” (ASOS: 219), for example, and they in turn recognise her as their mother: “The freed slaves parted before her. ‘Mother,’ they called from a hundred throats, a thousand, ten thousand. ‘Mother,’ they sang, their fingers brushing her legs as she flew by. ‘Mother, Mother, Mother!’” (ASOS: 219) This mother-child relationship places the West as the source of authority and the East as an infantile party, not only tolerating the West’s control but welcoming it wholeheartedly. Daenerys finds the system of slavery repugnant. In attacking the Eastern slave cities, she also exposes the system of Eastern rule as inherently barbaric, reflecting the colonialist mentality that Balfe criticises. The Eastern customs she encounters make her despair for her inherited “children”, as when after a brutal pit-fight, she reflects: “Perhaps I cannot make my people good... but I should at least try to make them a little less bad” (ADWD 807). Again, this positions Daenerys as a mother figure, guiding the East to a path of better behaviour. That she finds the challenges of ruling the East overwhelming and eventually leaves amid chaos, however, undermines the maternal narrative somewhat. The failure of Daenerys’ white-saviour narrative calls into question the premise upon which it is built. ASOIAF thus both reproduces and questions the orientalist depiction of the East in epic fantasy.

Although it falls into the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy in some ways, my novel also differs from recent Machiavellian fantasy in certain aspects, including in its approach to geography and race. The Councillor attempts to depart from the tradition of presenting the east as foreign and the West as familiar by including people of different cultural backgrounds within the same imaginary realm. Here, a debt to Le Guin must be acknowledged, although my novel was not inspired by the Earthsea series, for Le Guin’s novels were pioneering in this regard and her interviews and statements have been some of the most vocal about race in fantasy. The land of Elira is established in the first chapter of The Councillor as a realm of diverse races, united by geography and political borders. Its motto is “diversity is our strength” (The Councillor 129), and as Captain Raden Hartleigh observes in the first chapter, it contains “Five climates. Eight different colours of skin. The white race of the desert and the black race of the jungle” (The Councillor 20). This reflects my effort to
create a fantasy world that is not monocultural, and where Western people are not
depicted as inherently superior. Additionally, the climates of Elira do not always
produce the same skin colours that they do in the real world, and hence the people of
the desert are white-skinned, and those in the frozen north are brown-skinned; this
simply allows the novel to bypass the over-used cultural trope of a dark-skinned
desert people who contrast with the white-skinned people of a colder land. By
avoiding common cultural mapping in epic fantasy I attempt to integrate different
races within the same realm without encumbering the narrative with “exotic”
stereotypes.

The novel also aims to reduce the “dialectics” of “‘West and ‘Orient’” that Balfe
identifies in fantasy texts (Balfe 79). One way it attempts this is through the way that
skin colour is described. For the purpose of avoiding racial comparisons with the real
world, it would be preferable not to describe skin colour at all, yet this would erase
the nature of the multicultural world. However, the manner of describing skin in
many other epic fantasy novels was also unsatisfactory for my purpose, as it sets up
white skin as a default or norm. For example, in *ASOIAF*, the Summer Islanders are
described as black and the Dornish as dark, yet the white characters are not identified
by skin colour. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, as previously mentioned, provides an
example of a world where whiteness is not a norm and a range of different shades of
skin is mentioned. My novel attempts to avoid setting up white skin as a norm by
describing two of the main cities, Axium and Rhime, as containing a range of
different skin colours. The regions with a uniform skin colour are also described as
such, regardless of whether they are white or black. When Lysande, from the multi-
racial city of Axium, reacts with surprise to the all-white Lyrian delegation, she
observes that the Lyrians “looked queerly uniform” (*The Councillor* 66). Without a
“default” skin colour, the novel can feature people of different colours in its primary
setting. In Elira, the Lyrians are white, the Pyrrhans dark-skinned, the Valderrans
brown, and the Rhimese and Axiumites are a mixture of many different colours –
this blend of skin types means that the novel can naturally include character
development for characters of colour as well as white characters, without positioning
darker-skinned people as foreigners or as people living with prejudice.
The Councillor’s geography further aims to avoid the trope of the barbaric dark-skinned foreign people in epic fantasy. The nature of feudal politics means that borders are drawn up and countries wary of each other, and my novel places Elira between two other lands, Chiam and Bastillón, with whom it holds an uneasy peace. Yet the white Bastillonians are the slaving country of the three lands, rather than the Westerners of Asian appearance. Silver-haired Bastillonians keep the golden-haired as slaves, as demonstrated in their ambassadorial party’s entrance, where the diplomats’ slaves “wore a collar that was fastened close against their skin, sealed with a lock that could not have been cut or broken by even the most determined hand” (The Councillor 260). In its depiction of Bastillonian customs, the novel rejects the stereotype of a dark foreign nation against whose barbarity the (typically white) main nation defines its moral superiority. In contrast to the Bastillonians, the appearance of the Chiamese to Elira’s west could be said to correspond in some respects to that of East Asian peoples. Yet the Chiamese do not fall into the stereotype of the barbaric foreigner: in the prejudicial views of some Elirans, the Chiamese are seen as backward, yet these views are exposed as inaccurate in the narrative. For example, when Raden muses aloud in the first chapter that he doubts the Chiamese could “muster an army” because they are “barbarians” (The Councillor 21), Lysande’s thoughts make us conscious that this view is factually incorrect:

A retort began to form on Lysande’s tongue about the master-works of Chiamese epic poetry – the rumoured invention of paper in the west – the evidence of mule-carts in Chiam over three thousand years before Eliran civilisation began – but she swallowed the remark.
(The Councillor 21)

Although ignorance has entrenched certain stereotypes about the Chiamese in Elira, Lysande’s attitude, developed from her studies, demonstrates that the Westerners are neither unsophisticated nor barbaric. Indeed, it is to Chiam that Lysande turns in her strategy for Elira’s political future at the story’s end. Her statement that “there is much they [the Chiamese] have that we lack” (The Councillor 420) indicates the sophistication, rather than barbarism, of their neighbours.
In order to make new pathways in epic fantasy, we can consider ways in which the representation of political experience can be altered or expanded. I have explored two of these ways in my novel, by creating a non-patriarchal world and attempting to avoid stereotypes of gender and race. Integrating people of all genders and skin colours into the story, not as exceptions in the political world but as equal parts of it, enables me to allow female and non-white characters to drive the narrative in the same way that white male characters typically do in epic fantasy. As mentioned in the Introduction, *The Councillor* also includes queer characters (Dante and Jale) and does not position heterosexuality as a norm – however, due to constraints of space, I do not discuss this in the dissertation.

Narratives are by definition stories, rather than academic exercises or lessons, and cannot be judged on their quality purely by their theme; yet in writing political stories, we may nonetheless consider the extent to which our politics explore human experience. This is particularly of interest given that the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy has put an emphasis on human voices in expansive and dynamic feudal realms, through the multi-perspective style of series such as Abercrombie’s *First Law* trilogy and Martin’s *ASOIAF*. Martin’s novels in particular have explored the perspectives of subaltern characters on politics, and now, in looking to the future of epic fantasy politics, we might explore depictions of women and non-white people that are not narratives of “exceptionalism” but different modes of political representation. This is possible thanks to the unique property of fantasy – that of imaginative freedom.
Conclusion

The novel in this thesis – *The Councillor* – presents the journey of a female protagonist, Lysande Prior, into political conflict in the gender-equalised, multicultural nation of Elira. Like the novels that form part of the Machiavellian trend in epic fantasy, *The Councillor* illustrates Machiavellian politics in an imaginary world. The balance of pragmatism and human suffering, the importance of rhetoric, and the meditations on power in *The Councillor* all have parallels with the handling of Machiavellian political conflict in Shakespearean drama. Considerable parallels with the representation of Machiavellian politics of Shakespeare’s plays are also present in Martin’s *ASOIAF*, including the three features mentioned here. However, in distinction from existing examples of the Machiavellian trend, my novel explores pragmatic political tactics in a realm that is neither patriarchal nor Western-centric, presenting the political experiences of female and non-white characters as part of mainstream politics, rather than as the struggles of minorities. Female characters in *The Councillor* participate in the full range of vocations in society, including working at the highest levels of rule. There are consequently different types of narrative roles for women in the novel, including protagonist and antagonist, and some female characters occupy positions that are typically given to male characters in epic fantasy such as mentor, colleague, and assistant to the protagonist. By eliminating sexuality and reproduction as culturally hegemonic sources of female power (and consequently, as the constraints within which most women must work), the novel’s world allows female characters to be leaders, fighters and intellectuals who draw upon a broad range of skills.

The use of a gender-equalised world has consequences for narrative innovation, character development, and the issue of female agency in fantasy fiction. Perhaps the most obvious consequence is that stories set in gender-equalised worlds, such as *The Councillor*, can provide an alternative to the “female exceptionalism” (Tolmie 145) narrative which Tolmie rightly identifies as a pattern in epic fantasy. As discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation, the female exceptionalism narrative features a female character succeeding within a patriarchal system and gaining power, and
hence becoming an exception to the condition of women in the story's world. This can produce stories of active and resilient women, as novels by Hobb, Pierce, McKinley and others show. Female exceptionalism narratives need not be poor representations of women, however they do represent a certain pattern of storytelling. By re-imagining the socio-political paradigm in which much epic fantasy is set, *The Councillor* creates a mode of political storytelling where women are part of mainstream politics. This is not necessarily a better story, but it is a different one. The gender-equalised social setting means that because female characters are not faced with stigma, held back by conservative behavioural expectations, or subjected to social restrictions based on their gender, they have different opportunities for character development. Women can proceed in their careers as individuals without needing to devote a significant amount of their time to defining themselves against such pressures or to pleasing a member of the opposite sex. Those who choose a military or intellectual career are not hampered by the need to defend a non-normative lifestyle: they can simply concentrate on navigating the challenges in their working and personal relationships.

One significant possibility opened up by the gender-equalised fantasy world is that of easier collaboration between female characters in epic fantasy politics. In a patriarchal fantasy world, women who hold power are exceptions to the norm and are usually isolated from each other. This is not a flaw, given that such female characters can overcome obstacles and embark on captivating journeys, as the novels of Hobb, Martin, McKinley and Pierce prove, but the narrative style forms a pattern where women's experiences are played out against a backdrop of prejudice and exclusion. Without this backdrop, other experiences are possible. In *The Councillor*'s equalised world, women work together at every level of politics — including court politics and military command. In the novel, Lysande works with her colleague Cassia, her employee Litany, and her mentor Sarelin. Women also come into conflict with one another in the narrative, as demonstrated in Queen Sarelin Brey's past war and ongoing enmity with the White Queen, Mea Tacitus. Female characters take part in military intelligence organisations, as evident in Six's work for the Resistance, and later, Lysande’s participation in the same organisation; they sit on advisory councils, as shown in Lady Tuchester and Lady Bowbray’s work as advisors to the crown; and they participate in the armed forces, as demonstrated by
the female soldiers fighting in the battle and defending the city-rulers. The significance of these collaborations is that they give women centrality in the narrative’s larger conflicts, which are concerned with political contests and armed warfare, as is the case in the epic fantasy genre in general. Because female characters are not sidelined from conflict, forced to work behind the scenes or to lead in isolation, they can shape the political story – thus providing a kind of “female participation in the realm of fantasy” (Tolmie 156) where the social system rests upon gender equality rather than the “disenfranchisement of women” (Tolmie 156).

In a similar manner, the racially diverse setting of the novel and the absence of racial discrimination means that people of colour take part in politics and feature in roles at all levels of society. Whilst the skin colour of most characters in The Councillor is not specified, Elira is established as a realm with cities whose inhabitants have a diverse range of appearances: three of the cities retain distinct racial characteristics, including skin colour, while two of the cities reflect a blend of such characteristics. This differentiates the story from epic fantasy narratives where non-white characters feature only as minorities, foreigners, or enemies. (The use of skin colour is perhaps more akin to that in Le Guin’s Earthsea than to Martin’s Westeros, although the novel is considerably different to Earthsea series in its style.) It thereby opens up opportunities for character development for non-white characters, allowing them to work as mainstream leaders and to influence politics and society. At the same time, the narrative explores distinct cultural customs and the tensions and challenges inherent to bringing people of distinct racial traditions and customs together. For example, the fourth chapter of the novel shows the city-rulers gathering for a banquet, demonstrating their differences in everything from weaponry to dress, and illustrating the diplomatic effort needed to keep their people from attacking each other. (The Councillor 61-87)

The Councillor also aims to avoid the orientalist trope of the barbaric, dark-skinned foreigner. In the novel’s world, the Easterners are white, and slavery is perpetuated by white against white. The narrative thus attempts to steer clear of the association between the unethical practice of slavery and people of colour that often appears in epic fantasy. Its geography eliminates the binary of the all-white “good” land and the dark-skinned enemy, identified by Balfe (78-79) and discussed in Chapter Three.
Additionally, through the contrast between Lysande’s understanding of the history of the neighbouring western nation (Chiam) and the mainstream misconception of the Chiamese, the narrative exposes the inaccuracy of racist stereotypes. When Lysande stresses the need for the Council to begin diplomatic dealings with Chiam at the end of the narrative (*The Councillor* 420), she demonstrates the pitfalls of racial prejudice in holding back countries from fruitful political negotiations.

The thematic and stylistic parallels with the Shakespearean representation of Machiavellian politics in *The Councillor* are not separate to the novel’s handling of gender and race, but intertwined with it. Since female and non-white characters are part of the highest power ranks, they grapple with the reality of the court world and military conflict, and in both arenas pragmatic political skill is required. By showing female characters using power in Machiavellian ways, *The Councillor* resists the convention of portraying women as more merciful and self-sacrificial than male leaders, and integrates them into political life. Moreover, the series that I classify as forming part of the Machiavellian shift in epic fantasy provide an important context for my work. The emphasis on pragmatism and the subversion of the heroic paradigm in recent epic fantasy novels have allowed for women’s voices to be included in these narratives. Writers such as McKinley and Pierce created heroic women in their novels in the 1980s, but more recently the female characters in ruthless Machiavellian worlds have attracted attention and shaped the direction of fantasy. In particular, George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels’ heavy use of subaltern character perspectives has been instrumental in bringing women’s perspectives to the fore in epic fantasy, with the series garnering more and more fame. Whilst *ASOIAF* is set in a patriarchal realm, it paves the way for different explorations of female power through the stories of women such as Daenerys, Catelyn, Cersei, Arya, Sansa, Brienne and Asha. My novel explores this possibility by having multiple female characters engage in politics in a gender-equalised but nonetheless Machiavellian political world.

In summarising *The Councillor*’s points of difference with novels set in patriarchal, Western-centric worlds that have dominated the recent Machiavellian trend in epic fantasy, I draw attention to the unique creative possibilities of fantastical genres. One of the wonderful things about fantasy is that it allows writers to engage with the real
even as they create the unreal. This offers an opportunity to use imagination to alter or expand normative social, political and cultural structures of both the past and present. The novel presented in this thesis, *The Councillor*, offers an intervention into the genre that is facilitated by the innovations I have pointed out in alternative world-building. It has some similarities with aspects of Martin’s work and other novels belonging to the Machiavellian trend, but in terms of gender and race, its pragmatic political world is gender-equalised, and its narrative explores the experiences of female and non-white characters in the ruthless political sphere by positioning them within the mainstream socio-political system. The novel thus makes use of some features of the Machiavellian trend and some elements of Shakespeare’s representation of Machiavellian politics, and simultaneously creates its own space to explore the political possibilities of the epic fantasy genre.
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Appendix:

Chapters 8-15 of *The Councillor*
Chapter Eight

The corridors of Castle Cervello seemed to go on forever, snaking around like the emblem of their prince and disappearing unexpectedly into sealed wings. Instead of the spires and straight lines of Axium Palace, there were arches and domed roofs; staircases with bannisters shaped like cobras; courtyards that burbled with running water and glowed with dozens of torches. The colours, too, made a stark contrast to the capital: white stone ceilings glittered with patterns of black onyx featuring the emblems of the oldest families of Rhime; a coiled adder, a bull, a double-headed wasp, an eagle perched on top of a thin tower with a forked battlement, and a deer on its hind legs.

Yet it was not the artistry that drew Lysande’s eye as she was led through the castle, but the array of curious devices: the timepiece with eight hands, three pendulums and a set of pipes that puffed out wisps of white smoke, and the rope-lift that carried baskets of food to and from the kitchens, rigged up inside a stairwell. In one tower a water-mill generated light, and she glimpsed an enormous bow in a glass case whose placard said that it could fire arrows over a mile. The western courtyard boasted a tubular object pointed at the sky which Derset said was for observing the stars’ paths. Yet even this could not compete with the fountain that flowed without any apparent source, cascading jewel-bright water over tiers of stone.

These were Luca Fontaine’s inventions, she learned. There was little time to inspect them, however. On the afternoon of their arrival they delivered their wounded to Rossio Iffizi, and Lysande was escorted up the castle steps by the blonde woman from Luca’s entourage – Carletta Freste, who had the warmth of one of the denser northern glaciers – and after a tour of the rooms in which former princes and princesses had died, she was ushered into the glass dome of the Observatory.

“The Pyrrhans will guard the western border,” she heard Cassia saying.

The city-rulers were standing around a table, poring over a map, and the Irriqi was pointing a finger at the line that separated Elira from Chiam. Lysande edged around the table until she was close enough to study the map, too. “And the Rhimese will take the eastern border.” Cassia’s finger jumped to the north. “The
Valderrans can go up to the White Circle and protect us against the outlands, while the Lyrians guard the ports of the south. The Axium Guards stay back and keep the capital secure.” Cassia looked up, catching Lysande’s eye. “If that’s all right with you, my friend.”

Lysande nodded. She saw Three, in her mind’s eye, warning her.

“Each to their own territory,” Dante said. “I like the sound of it.”

“Our enemies will like the sound of it even more.” Luca stood at the end of the table, his hands resting on the surface. “The Bastillonians are the closest wolf-pack. Their army could eat a city-army for breakfast. And let’s not forget the other problem. If the White Queen attacks, she will not bring archers alone from the east, or smallsword fighters alone from the south – not after lurking in the outlands for years – her army will have longswords, smallswords, bows and hook-swords and daggers, all in one force.”

“If we don’t want to be diced like Pyrrhan duellers, we’ll need the same,” Jale said.

Lysande let the conversation wash over her. She had never been more conscious of how ill-equipped she was for rule. The city-rulers had all grown up commanding captains and watching their armies train, while she had spent her days reading and writing in the royal library. She was sure that Sarelin had gone on tirades about military matters, but as to border defences, her mind had had a habit of drifting off, veering into forests of numbers whenever the queen turned to politics.

As the others debated the benefits of a combined army and the dangers of Lyrians and Valderrans living side by side, she studied their faces. Luca Fontaine was arguing his case with perfect clarity. Every so often she saw him glance away, beyond the group, out of the glass walls, and she observed that furtive manner to his behaviour: the look of a man churning with unvoiced thoughts, that drew her eye.

“Fine!” Cassia declared, throwing her hands up. “If you all give in so easily, a combined army it is! So long as my friend does not object.”

Lysande realised that all eyes had fixed on her.

“I have no objection to combining my guards with yours. If I may stipulate that Captain Hartleigh retains control of my army,” she said. The others nodded or shrugged their agreement. The conversation soon moved on to the ram’s-head purse, and the attack on their riding party.

“We should pay Bastillón back threefold,” Dante growled.
“Come now, Dalgëreth, where’s your sense of hospitality?” Luca smiled. “We must give our neighbours a chance to explain themselves. I have invited the Bastillonian ambassador for dinner, and I intend to serve him some excellent dishes.”

“I do not mean to be abrupt, but –”

“– a Valderran education naturally curtails eloquence. Say no more, Dalgëreth. I’m sure you will have no objection to joining me at six o’clock tomorrow in the Room of Accord.”

Dante looked across at Jale; but the blonde prince made no motion. After running his fingers over his sword, Dante sighed. “Very well.”

“Excellent.” Luca rose and walked from the room, smiling as he went. The guards at the door marched out to follow him, moving in perfect unison. Lysande noted the cheer of the whole procession, which sat in contrast to the cold fury she had glimpsed on Luca’s face in the pass.

“Well,” Jale said, “He seems in a good mood, for once.”

“Yes,” Lysande said, watching the last of the guards turn the corner at the end of the corridor. “That’s what worries me.”

*

The Councillors were kept so busy throughout the afternoon that she found herself bustled from one entertainment to another, without even a chance to see her suite. A quartet of Rhimese musicians serenaded them in the gardens; the guards put on a show of archery, shooting to split arrows in targets, and they were taken in to a dinner of cold delicacies served with sweet wine, at which Luca did not make an appearance. During the six courses, Lysande was beset by thoughts of the Resistance, but she gave up trying to strategise when the crushing pains in her head returned.

A dove landed on her shoulder, clutching a letter from Pelory in its beak, with the news that he was on his way to her. Another bird brought an envelope from Raden containing an account of the arrests, the tax collection, the farmers’ meeting, and everything else that the guards had done in Axium; she did not wish to spend all night dwelling on the capital, though, and she wrote her replies hastily. As soon as the meal was over, she rose, rubbing her head, and set off for the maze garden at the back of the grounds.
A ring of brambles shielded the maze from passers-by, and a lattice-work of hedges was laid out, green walls twisting in multiple directions and curving into nooks lit by torches; some of the enclaves had seats shaped like high-backed chairs, while others held benches or curling stone constructions. Each provided a retreat, secluded by the hedge-walls.

Lysande took one of the torches from beside the gate and wandered in. The ground was supple beneath her feet, and somewhere a bird was singing, its melody deeper than the thrushes back in the capital. Although she passed several lighted spots, she kept on going into the heart of the maze until she could see nothing but the thick hedge around her.

She walked with her head down, her thoughts growing more clouded as she considered Luca Fontaine’s demeanour, and she had nearly reached the centre when a familiar voice penetrated the wall on her left.

“You must know that you are beyond compare in the three lands.”

Squinting through a gap in the hedge, she spied Dante Dalgèreth in the nook on the other side, pacing back and forth and holding a miniature sword.

“The sun may shine brilliantly above us all, but in my heart you shine brighter. And so I ask you to do me the honour of accepting my hand, and making Valderos richer for your warmth and light. No…” he paused, running a finger over the sword’s edge, “greater for your warmth and light… more powerful for your warmth and light…”

He seemed to be addressing the air, and he was frowning as he rehearsed his speech. The urge to laugh overcame Lysande, yet she did not think that Dante would take kindly to being observed, and she had no desire to lose her head like the mercenary in the eagle helm. She hurried on, striding through the maze until she reached one of the little nooks, and sank down onto a bench.

Hard proof. That was what Three had advised her to find – but without looking for the coin-purse, how could she tell whether the riders had really been in the pay of Bastillón? If she could only get hold of the purse, she could analyse it: see if it was genuinely Bastillonian or a fake, and determine if it had been given to their attackers by the White Queen’s agent.

If there was a way of getting the purse without asking Luca Fontaine, she would feel calm.
All her ideas for confrontation seemed too direct. But why should she be afraid to see Luca? She sat there until the night grew cold, and it was dark by the time they reached her suite – the onyx cobras glittered in the corridors and the stone walls gleamed in the glow of the torches. As Carletta Freste opened the lock, the light glanced off a snake’s-head key.

“Prince Fontaine has honoured you with one of his finest chambers, Councillor.” The noblewoman nudged the door open with her foot. “The queens and kings of Elira always stayed in the Painter’s Suite – Queen Brettelin Brey said it was a lodgement fit for the gods.”

The enormous room that greeted her was furnished with dark oak cabinets, its bed curtained with silk, billowing and swelling so that the blood-red material moved in and out of the torchlight. A small fountain was burbling by the bay windows. One of Luca’s inventions, she guessed: there were no pipes apparent on either side.

“Thank you,” she said, to Freste, who was still hovering in the doorway, as if she expected a bow. “You may convey my thanks to Prince Fontaine for his hospitality.”

She stood by the black stone bowl for a moment, dipping her fingers. Three’s words were still nagging at her. She only had until dinner tomorrow to stop Luca Fontaine from doing something drastic to Bastillon’s representative. Yet as the door closed behind her, she could not help but appreciate the grandeur of her lodgings. She inspected the writing-desk and the cabinet, running her fingers over the rubies inlaid in the wood, wondering what Sarelin would have thought of it.

Through the doorway that adjoined the chamber she found a windowed bathroom. As she stepped in, notes of Rhimese flowers overwhelmed her – it was as if someone had picked a bloom from every field south of Castelaggio and compounded them into one scent; yet more extraordinary than the perfumed air were the paintings on the wall, a set of three luminous frescoes.

The pictures were unquestionably lifelike, and yet they looked more real than life. A ray of sun pierced the window and threw the colours into relief: creamy whites mingled with pastel pinks and blues against a background of midnight black, and each frame showed a youthful figure; a man on either side and a woman in the middle stared ahead with intense concentration.

All three were similarly attired in gotas, the long robes from the time before the Conquest that tied over one shoulder. They were adorned with a golden triangle
apiece; the man on the left wore one on his forehead, while the woman’s sat at her throat, and the last man’s in the middle of his chest.

Lysande bent down to read the plaque beneath the frames.

“The Maturation, by Vitelongelo,” she said. “But what kind of maturing is it?”

At least it was clear why the suite had earned its fame. Rhimese artists were rarely a match for the southern virtuosos, but Vitelongelo, whoever he was, could stand beside the best of the Lyrians for style. She stared at the frescoes for a moment, lost in the colours, until a knock sounded.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Litany was clutching a pile of towels that had been precariously stacked.

“I think I can manage adequately.” Seeing the girl’s disappointed look, she added, “But perhaps I will take a bath, if it causes you no trouble.”

Sitting still might help her to think, after all. She wrote a letter to Three while the water was being fetched, recounting the ambush and the day’s discussions; and Cursors had only just flapped away from the window sill when Litany returned. The maid’s hands were familiar on her skin by now, and she watched her clothes fall onto the tiles.

“Is something worrying you, Miss – Lysande?”

She climbed in and stretched out her legs beneath the water. “Only the cares of rule. I am beginning to learn why Sarelin used to curse so often.”

“I could help you relax.” Litany mixed a teaspoon of salts into the water.

“You should rest, yourself, Litany. Unless you can befuddle Luca Fontaine’s guards, break into his bedchamber and procure the coin-purse, there is nothing to be done.” She smiled. “Go and pour yourself a bath.”

She had thrown off the remark lightly, but Litany gave a crestfallen nod, and after bowing and offering to sing again the girl retreated from the suite. Lysande was left to soak in silence, gazing at the Maturation, her eye playing over the trinity of golden triangles.

Triangles swam through her dreams that night: the pendant hanging around Three’s neck, glinting in the half-dark of the farmhouse – three sides, for water, fire and air – the rich sound of Three’s voice echoing, offering her the answer to any question of her choosing… her thoughts eddied inside her head. The morning crept
under the curtains and into her room, and she sat up in bed while the birds were still saluting the sun. A determination spread through her.

_Sarelin said steel was good for thinking_, she thought. _And I know where I can find some._

The Axium Guards were already practising with daggers, sword and shield at the back of the grounds when she arrived, and they finished with a set of running and weaving exercises that looked positively exhausting; she was silent at first, watching them move, but after a while she grew bold enough to ask questions and to walk amongst them. All were big women and men, and they did not raise an objection when she asked them to wait near the Room of Accord during dinner. Some of them even demanded they be allowed to accompany her inside, and there was something about knowing they had offered of their own will that made her smile inside.

A small vial of pale, orange liquid was waiting for her, on her pillow. There was a note with it:

_This is a Rhimese concoction. For special maladies._

_Take one sip when you feel your headache._

_L.F._

She slipped the vial into her trousers, reminding herself to have it tasted before it went anywhere near her mouth.

The corridors began to fill with attendants as the hour drew closer to six, and the preparations were accompanied by covert looks and shielded giggles amongst the staff: tapestries were being cleaned and re-hung in the Room of Accord, and this produced an absurd amount of excitement.

Derset offered to divert Lysande’s anxieties with a walk through the castle greenhouse, yet even strolling through a panoply of rare plants categorised by region did not calm her. Focussing on the little wooden signs was impossible when her mind was plagued by the premonition that Luca Fontaine was about to do exactly what the White Queen wanted him to. She left Derset and returned to her chambers to dress for dinner, but she found the Painter’s Suite unoccupied.

“Litany?”

It was not like an Axium maid to be late, and it was even less like Litany. Her voice echoed off the walls.
The bedchamber appeared empty of everything but piles of clothes, and she picked up the gown on the bed and held it up for a moment, examining the embroidered sleeves and the intricately laced corset. There was no way she could face a room of city-rulers and dignitaries in *that*. She pulled on the best pair of dress trousers she could find, buttoned up a doublet and overlaid it with an emerald necklace; she had just finished her best attempt at tying a bow in her hair when the doors burst open.

"I’m so sorry, Miss – Lysande – I heard the attendants talking, and I followed – I could always blend into a group in the palace, you see. I’m not very noticeable."

Lysande took in the flush in the girl’s cheeks, and the gaze that was darting around. She waited. Trembling slightly, Litany drew a soft brown object from the pocket of her gown and held it out, colouring Vermillion.

"It’s this one, isn’t it? They were cleaning Prince Fontaine’s suite. He’d put it on his bedside cabinet, so I thought it had to be the right one. I checked the picture on the side."

"Sun and stars!" Lysande snatched it from the girl. The same ram under crossed swords was imprinted on the side. "Litany – you treasure – this is brilliant!"

She studied the purse for a moment, going through everything she had read about eastern materials: there had to be a clue, somewhere, if the White Queen had set this situation up. Every object told a story.

"I will need a few minutes to examine this," she said. "I wonder if the leather –"

But a knock at the door cut her off, and they both started.

"Councillor Prior," Carletta Freste called, "His Highness is ready for you now."

"I’m afraid I’m not quite ready –"

"The ambassador has arrived. We have approximately thirty seconds. Prince Fontaine requests your presence immediately, Councillor."

*

The Room of Accord could only be reached by a long and narrow hall adorned with an even longer and narrower black carpet, along whose sides Rhimese guards stood with ceremonial rapiers raised, their blades meeting in the middle to form a kind of
steel roof. Lysande, Litany and Freste passed below the crossed weapons to the door, where a dark haired man – Lord Malsante, she recalled from the ride, who had coughed all through Cassia’s dinner – stepped out to meet them. He folded his arms.

“What kept you, Freste?” he hissed.

“Councillor Prior needed several more minutes to prepare.” Freste cast an acid glance at Lysande. “How’s the sea inside?”

“Choppy. Watch out for rocks.”

With a jerk of her head, Freste motioned Lysande forward. They passed through the doorway and into a room already full – Cassia, Dante and Jale stood assembled in front of a table, flanked by various advisors, guards and attendants, while Luca Fontaine stood slightly apart from the others. He was wearing the black crown of Rhime: its three ovular rubies sent out beams of light as he looked up, cutting across the room like slashes of blood.

She walked by to where Derset was standing. Pairs of tapestries had been hung on each wall – their silver cloth showing scenes of peace and conciliation embroidered in fine thread – some displayed women and men shaking hands, while others showed Rhimese leaders enacting famous incidents: Prince Bene Benevici announcing his policy of amity, in front of a crowded room; Princess Isadonna Salla surrounded by her supporters in the capital, ending her war with Axium; Cesaro Ursini kneeling down to lay an unlit torch at the feet of a Bastillonian king, on the banks of the Cordonna, to end a border skirmish. Unlike in the paintings in Axium, there were no symbols of power over elementals inserted: no dragons cowering under the boots of princesses in these scenes, nor magical rebels bowing to the crown.

“Is anything amiss, my lady?” Derset whispered, as she and Litany took their places beside him.

“Nothing I can be certain of. Much that I fear.” She fingered the purse in her pocket.

“Be careful how you tread, especially after coming in late. Prince Fontaine has gone to every effort to receive the ambassador in style.”

Taking a closer look, she saw that the table’s silverware had been polished, its candles set in clusters of four in respect of the gods; and that all of the other Councillors were dressed to a lavish standard. “Where are the guards’ weapons?” she whispered.
“Prince Fontaine’s orders,” Derset said. “No swords are to be brought into this meeting.”

Lysande was about to ask why anyone had agreed to such a demand – but a blast of trumpets rang out and a herald entered, stopping in the doorway.

“His Excellency Gabros Merez, most honoured representative of King Ramon Horta Ferago III of Bastillón, greets the Council of Elira with the full embrace of the east,” the woman cried.

Lysande could not help thinking that if Raden were here, he would have made some remark about easterners’ embraces and the scars they left. She had heard his account of the last skirmish on the Bastillonian border.

She felt the room stiffen as the herald walked through. A party of women and men in pale blue robes filed in after the herald, flowing into two halves and leaving a corridor for their leader; their silver hair attracted a murmur of interest. Yet the part of Bastillonian attendants who followed wore their golden hair tied back, and each wore a collar that was fastened close against their skin, sealed with a lock that could not have been cut or broken by even the most determined hand.

The Elirans began to whisper to one another, and Lysande heard the word “slaves” passed around the room. Her stomach knotted.

After they had taken their places behind their superiors, the Bastillonian ambassador marched in, assessing his surroundings as he came. He stopped in front of Luca and regarded him down the length of his nose like a man inspecting a silver dish – and judging by his expression, he had found a few traces of dirt. Gabros Merez was not a formidable man in size or build, but his face had the marks of nobility: an aquiline nose, tufted brows that curved quite impressively, and a chin that seemed to have been shaped with a chisel for the sole purpose of standing in profile. He gave the rest of the Council a proud, but not unamiable glance, and smiled.

“King Ferago sends his warm regards to the Council of Elira,” he said, in a voice that lacked any warmth whatsoever. “And his heir Princess Mariana, his wife Persephora, and his sons Dion and Anton also wish you well in your new arrangement. May the three lands flourish.”

“May the three lands flourish,” Luca repeated, inclining his head. “A fine morning indeed for a meeting of two powers. Elira always rejoices to welcome the citizens of Bastillón – silver-haired or gold.”
Merez said nothing to this, but he ran a hand over the chain on his chest, stroking the ram’s head pendant at the end.

“Strength without swords. To enforce your city’s motto upon guests and friends alike seems somewhat irregular.” He glanced at the Rhimese guards. “What happened to meeting in the banquet hall?”

“You will forgive our eccentricities in Rhime. No swords are permitted in the Room of Accord. The only blades here are drawn metaphorically.” Luca’s little half-smile curled the corners of his mouth. “And since diplomacy is arduous work on an empty stomach, we invite you to take a seat at the head of our table, here.”

Merez nodded grudgingly. Staff hurried in with miniature fountains that flowed with water, red wine, and Castelaggian amber; platters of wheat noodles in a rich tomato paste; sliced olive-bread, and wheels of the colourful baked dish that had been served at the Axium banquet, along with salads of goat’s cheese and eastern basil and bowls of truffles. Lysande observed the Bastillonians whispering amongst themselves. As soon as the plates had been set down, the guests and Elirans were ushered to their seats: Gabros Merez took precedence at the head of the table, where he sat with his back upright, with Luca on his right-hand side. Lysande was pulled away from Derset to sit next to Cassia. The Bastillonian party took chairs at the far end of the table, with their slaves standing behind them.

The conversation took a while to flow, but once the ambassador’s tongue loosened, he spoke at length, even complimenting Luca on the wine as the Rhimese attendants began to serve. After a few remarks about trade, it became clear to Lysande that Merez believed he had been called there to discuss the paucity of rice, spices and starfruit in Bastillón: he made no mention of the recent attack, nor did any of his remarks hint at it. While the party began its meal, he turned his attention to the company around him.

“We have never met, I think, Princess-Ahl-Hafir,” he said, as one of the attendants cut him a slice of olive bread.

“We take the term Irriqi, in Pyrrha.”

“Oh yes, you jungle people have your own ways,” Merez said, with a chuckle. “The Ahl-Hafir family. Yes. One of the oldest noble families in Pyrrha. My king read of your defeat of the Qamaras with some interest. But you were married, were you not?” His eyes played over Cassia’s fingers.

“It has been my pleasure to take three husbands.”
This was news to Lysande; but the others did not remark upon it, and Jale conveyed an enormous spoonful of cheese to his mouth without looking up.

"Three husbands," Merez echoed. "That is quite a number."

"My first husband, Jahid, died of the plague. My second was a foolish man; he was slain in a tournament, fighting for a golden cup. Before he got himself pierced through he gave me two daughters." Cassia took a sip from her goblet. "That was his only achievement."

"And your third husband, how did he die?"

"Yuallad the Vigorous?" Cassia picked up a bunch of noodles, twirling them around her fork. "Slowly."

Merez smiled affably. "I mean, what was the cause of death?"

"Adultery."

The glares of the Pyrrhan guards seemed to convince the ambassador that the topic had been exhausted, for he turned away, and looked straight into Dante’s countenance. "Your noble blood is famous, of course, First Sword," he said. "His Majesty’s first son, Anton Ferago, thinks much of your exploits in the White War. You led an army for Queen Sarelin, I believe?"

"I had the honour of defending the north, Your Excellency."

"Strange that a man with your military glory should not have been able to find himself a wife. Why is that, pray tell?"

"I do not like to speak of intimate matters in company." Dante’s stare would have made a lesser man quail. "But I will not dishonour the gods with a lie, either – my heart has long been promised to another."

Some kind of message was being communicated between the two men – Lysande could not understand it, and it unsettled her. It did not help that that the Valderran and Lyrian guards had chosen this moment to fold their arms and gaze at each other across the room. The advisors beside her were watching with an equal degree of bafflement, and when Merez turned his gaze to Jale and produced his first true smile, the whole table relaxed.

"Now here is someone we have all heard much about in Belága, our mighty capital," he said. "We look forward to welcoming you into our bosom, Prince Montignac, and you may have no doubt that yours will be a very auspicious match. A union blessed by the gods, our priests say!"
“Oh, topping,” Jale replied, through a mouthful of olive bread. “I daresay they have the right of it.”

“Yes. Crudelis, god of love, could not have arranged it better. Princess Ferago thinks of you daily, Your Highness.”

“Does she?” Jale caught his advisor’s look and swallowed. “I mean... I think of her too. Often. When I’m at harp practice, or singing in the choir.”

The ambassador’s stare passed along the table. Lysande had been following the conversation with such interest that she had entirely forgotten she was a member of the Council.

“Councillor Prior. I shall not ask you about marriage. It is said in Bastillón that a scholar’s only wedding is to her books.”

A few of the Bastillonians chuckled, and Lysande forced herself to smile.

“Books are rewarding companions, Your Excellency,” she said. “A good poem can speak to your soul in ways that people rarely do; and every relationship with a book is a mutual one. Manuals and treatises do not turn you away. Stories are never forced into accepting your affection.”

Merez gave a shrug, but opposite her, she saw Jale smile, and she knew that her words had struck their target.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Councillor. Tell me, since I am a foreigner here, what is the origin of your name?” Merez asked.

“I am afraid there is no great history behind it.”

“Yet I should like to learn your ancestry, anyway.” The ambassador’s smile was impossible to read. Did he really not know? Derset looked as if he would like to open his mouth and save her from answering; but she did not wish to see him rebuked by Luca Fontaine.

“I was found during the White War as a child, Your Excellency. In Elira, children who are found are named after the colour of their hair, and my rescuers must have been Valderrans, for they named me after an Old Valderran word. Prior. It means fire. And as you can see, my hair is the colour of a flame.” She paused, while the Bastillonian dignitaries peered down the table at her, gazing at her hair as if it were an artefact from the outlands. “As for my first name... it is a common enough name for women in Axium, and I am told it was chosen by those who took me in.”
The whole table was listening – Councillors and advisors and Bastillonians alike – and the easterners were still peering at her.

“When you say that you were found – surely it is rare for noble children to be lost during a war?” Merez’s smile was a little too innocent, now.

“Councillor Prior is not from a noble family, Your Excellency,” Luca Fontaine said, putting down his goblet. “She is an orphan. Perhaps you are not aware that at my table, it is considered ill manners to inquire into the breeding of my guests.”

“I assure you, I meant no – ”

“But since I like to be a generous host, I shall do you the favour of finishing. Councillor Prior is an orphan, as I say; and I am a bastard son: my father was Prince Marcio Sovrano, and my mother was a Lyrian maid who scrubbed his floors. I took her name, because she was worth more than the fool who got her with child.” He smiled coldly. “So now that you have the blood of every member of the Council noted, you can give your king a full report on the niceties of pedigree. Would you like a glass of water, Your Excellency?”

Merez had been choking on a piece of bread since the word ‘bastard’, but one of the golden-haired slaves rushed from the end of the table to his side and patted him on the back. The food came shooting out.

“Yes,” he managed, wiping a tear from his eye, “I will take a glass.”

The conversation turned to safer subjects, with the help of Derset, and of Cassia’s bespectacled advisor; the heavy snows north of Valderos; the last Sapphire Ball in Lyria, where there had been an orchestra and two hundred dancers; and a tournament at which Sarelin had fought, unhorsing ten nobles, all diverted them for a while. Gabros Merez spoke rarely; Lysande saw him looking at Luca with a haughty expression from time to time, and when the subject of talk turned to Bastillón, he gave Luca a cutting smile.

Whatever praise the Council could heap upon their eastern neighbour made no matter. The ambassador was disposed to take the compliments, but not to offer one in return. The more he drank, the more he spoke of his country, and the more grandiloquent his boasts became.

“King Ferago has had a lift commissioned that carries baskets between the royal suite and the servant quarters in his palace. He turns a wheel, and the device
moves. Beyond anything you could imagine in Elira, no doubt... His Majesty had it built from the Astratto Formulas.”

Lysande thought of the night she had spent in the tent, wrestling with the equations in the tome and trying to master the logic.

“As it happens, I am acquainted with the Astrattos,” Luca said, smiling.
“In theory, I expect, though.”
“In practice, too. You see, it happens to be the case that I invented them.”

Merez floundered for a moment. One of his advisors opened his mouth, then appeared to think better of it. The room held its breath. “Well,” Merez said, at last, “I suppose sitting in a room and scribbling away at sums can bring some profit; though many would consider it an odd occupation for a prince.”

Luca waved a hand at the wall on his right. “There are eight tapestries in this room. What is eight multiplied by four?”

“Thirty-two,” Jale put in, through a mouthful of cheese.

“Precisely. And that is an equation that even you cannot fail to appreciate, Your Excellency. Thirty-two bows are very effective in a small space.”

Luca raised his arm. In a smooth motion, the tapestries on the walls fell to the floor. They had been carefully rigged up with ropes – it had taken only one pull to bring each one tumbling down, Lysande saw, thanks to the guards standing behind them: Rhimese women and men with silver bows. The soldiers were packed into the hollowed-out cavities in the walls, and there were four archers behind each tapestry, all pointing their weapons at the table.

“Sun and stars,” she breathed.

She saw Dante shaking his head, half in disbelief, half in admiration. Several of the silver-haired Bastillonians had risen to their feet and were uttering exclamations in their own tongue, staring wildly. Her own guards exchanged words with the Pyrrhans, all divisions forgotten. Two of the Valderrans had rushed to Dante’s side.

“The women and men aiming at you right now are Rhimese archers, trained from childhood,” Luca said. “They can hit a target so small that it can fit on the end of your thumb. You might take down one or two of them if you had a crossbow; but unarmed, I am afraid, you would have your heart and lungs pierced in seconds if you did anything to displease me.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Merez said, staring at the archers.
Luca rose slowly to his feet. Standing over the table, he looked straight at the ambassador, a dark fire burning behind his eyes.

"You know perfectly well why you are here," he said. "But for the sake of clarity, let me remind you. Three riders attacked our Council yesterday on the Scarlet Road. One of them had a coin purse with the Bastillonian crest upon it. Denying your involvement is like holding up a dripping sword, and saying you never used it – you just happened across it in the armoury." Luca gave a flick of one finger, and the archers tightened their bow-strings. "Confess – admit that your king tried to assassinate the leaders of the five cities – and swear your subservience to me. Promise that Ferago will never try the same trick again. Or all thirty-two of these arrows will come down upon you like spears from the clouds, and find new places to make wounds."

"There was no such attack," Merez said, looking from one Councillor to another. "No riders."

"Some of my own people died," Dante put in, in a low voice. "Are you telling me I imagined the arrows in their necks?"

"Perhaps there was an attack – I could not say – but if there was, it was not ordered by us." Merez bristled.

"Every word out of your mouth is a lie," said Cassia.

"I could say the same of you, Irriqi. Where is this purse you speak of? I have a royal craftsman among my party who can tell you if it is a genuine artefact, if it exists at all."

Luca looked across at Freste, who was standing by the door. The noblewoman shook her head slowly.

"You were told to bring it," he hissed.

"Your Highness, I looked everywhere."

"My cabinet was enough."

Lysande rose to her feet and cleared her throat. She had the feeling that this was her only chance, before the situation turned ugly; but she had not expected such a heavy silence to fall. *Never quaver, never yield.* Luca stopped mid-way to Freste and turned to face her.

"I have the purse," she said, pulling it from her pocket.

"How in the three lands – "
But the light from the candelabra fell on the stitching. A surge of relief passed through her. The clouding of her mind; the frustration of the last day, eating away at her; it was all gone, at last.

“This is a fake. I believe we have all been tricked, Your Highnesses,” she said.

“If you are stirring trouble, Councillor Prior –”

“I will prove my claim. You must observe the particular sheen of this stitching – the iridescent gleam?” She was struggling to keep her voice cool and steady, like a noble’s; the words were tumbling out.

Luca stared at it for a moment, taking it in. “Diamond thread,” he said.

“Exactly.” She lifted the purse high, so that the whole room could see.

“Named as such because it is as rare as diamonds. You only find it in the west. A blend of fibres used in Chiamese ornamental tailoring, almost impossible to obtain in Elira or Bastillón for over a century, thanks to the restrictions on western trade – what are the chances of Bastillonian assassins carrying purses stitched with a foreign thread? A foreign thread that costs eighty-five cadres a reel?”

“What are you suggesting, Councillor Prior?” Merez said.

“This purse was planted to make us accuse each other of treachery. The attack – it was set up carefully, the riders paid by someone else.” She looked at Luca, then across to Dante, Jale, and Cassia. Still, all of them. “Someone wants the King of Bastillón and the Council of Elira to come to blows. That is the only explanation.”

She saw Dante and Jale share a look, and Cassia raised a hand to her chin, stroking it and staring at the purse.

“Who would do such a thing?” Merez said. “The Chiamese have stayed out of our affairs for centuries.”

“It’s not Chiam I’d look to. The White Queen – Mea Tacitus – profits from any discord between our two lands: if she can sow enmity between us, she can persuade Bastillón to let her recruit mercenary soldiers, and perhaps even bring her army through to Elira from the east. You all know she is back again. That she comes for our throne?” She lowered her hand. “Ask yourself – when Bastillón cuts all ties with Elira, who profits? Do we? Does Chiam gain anything by it? Or is it Mea Tacitus who gains something from our discord?”
There was a pause, as they all looked at each other, and Merez’s expression wavered between realisation and indignation. He could see the truth of it, she was sure, yet he kept the same veneer up as he exchanged glances with his advisors.

“This farce of a dinner is still an insult,” he said. “His Majesty will demand an apology for your insolence, Fontaine.”

Luca fingered the rim of his goblet lazily. “Let him.”

“Do you scoff at the king of the east, signor?” Merez drew himself up, bristling again, and rose from his chair. “By Fortituda, bastard, you go too far – I will await your apology at the ambassadorial manor, and if I do not have it within a week, I will see that His Majesty knows about this little charade. Come!”

This last was addressed to the Bastillonian dignitaries, who rose and followed him out. The collared slaves trailed behind them in silence. Luca waved to his archers and the women and men around the walls lowered their bows, stepping out from the cavities. Lysande’s knees trembled, and she realised that she had been holding the tension in her body while she stood. She gripped the table, breathing deeply.

“Wonderful,” Luca said.

“Councillor Prior was trying to save us from a war,” Cassia said. “We can negotiate with Ferago, now.”

“Negotiation only works from a position of strength. You must have an advantage before you begin, or you need not bother to negotiate at all. Thanks to Councillor Prior’s help, we have just ceded the only advantage we had.”

Luca turned and walked from the room, and the Rhimese archers followed him out, leaving Freste and Malsante. Freste whispered something to Malsante and they both looked at Lysande; then Freste hurried away after Luca.

“Don’t mind Fontaine, my friend.” Cassia reached over to pat her on the back. “He’s wrong, and a fool to blame you. You saved two realms from taking up arms.”

Lysande’s smile did not fool Derset or Litany, she was sure, but it seemed to suffice for Cassia, Dante and Jale; they did not know Axiumite manners well enough to tell when she was shaken.

She left them to eat and led her party back to their suite. She refused Litany’s offers to help, hurrying into her chambers to look for any sign of Three’s dove, then sinking down into a chair.
Her hand was still trembling. Luca Fontaine was arrogant—she certainly had no reason to care for his opinion, when he lacked all courtesy. So why had that prat of a prince made her angry? It was not at all rational.

She rose and walked to the fireplace and lit a blaze, trying to keep her fingers steady—she could make a fire from a few cinders, thanks to Sarelin’s lessons on past hunts in the forest—and the sight of the flames crackling away always soothed her nerves. It was hard to say how long she sat there, watching the flames and feeling the glow of the fire, her fingers resting on the top of the rail. The heat spread through her hands and arms, melting away the chill. At last, a knock came at her door, and she heard the distinctive cough of an Axiumite trying to be discreet.

“Your advisor, Councillor.” It was Blundsor, the head of her guards, a man who could hardly be separated from his first officer, Chidney. Sure enough, when she opened the door, the two of them bowed and parted.

Derset entered with an apology.

“You did the right thing, you know,” he said, when the door had closed, and Blundsor and Chidney had left in perfect step.

The fire crackled between them for a minute, throwing a few sparks into the air.

“Of course,” she said.

“You cannot hide your feelings from me, my lady. Nobody likes to feel the sting of a rebuke, but it will not help to blame yourself, when Prince Fontaine merely wishes for a chance to humiliate Bastillon.” He smiled wryly. “That, and I suspect he does not often experience the feeling of being outsmarted.”

“You think he chafes because I solved the problem?”

“After the way he left that room, I would wager a bag of gold on it.”

“Perhaps he was right to rebuke me.” She shook her head. “The more I see of diplomacy, the more I learn how ill-suited I am to it. I should have told him about the diamond thread, first, and let him deal with Merez.”

“You have been a Councillor for all of a week. You cannot make up for years of training in the blink of an eye. I know that, and so should Prince Fontaine. In truth I suspect he does.”

Another pause; the flames burned brighter. The future beckoned her; quarrels to come, blades drawn, an army marching on Elira. No matter who the Umbra was, their silent campaign could only end in blood, and Luca Fontaine would not mind if
her blood was part of the price. Suddenly she wondered if she had been right to accept Three’s request. She was no good at politics, and she was tired of the threat of betrayal from everyone around her. She wanted nothing but to ride into Axium city with Sarelin and play at tactos in some local inn, disguised, laughing and talking until the candles were nearly out.

If only Sarelin were still alive... if only she had coughed up that dragonblood.

Glancing across at Derset, she saw that he was leaning towards her, as if he would like to reach out. She remembered how he had placed a hand on her shoulder in the Arena.

“It’s queer, but no matter how long I sit here, I feel cold,” she said.

It was the first thing that popped into her head – the easiest excuse. *He must have noticed that the fire is strong enough to melt half the White Circle.* But he did not laugh: only rose and removed the long, emerald robe he wore over his doublet, and stepped around behind her chair.

“Then you must let me warm you, my lady.”

She stood while he wrapped the garment around her, tying it under her neck, until the knot was secure. When it was done, his hands moved up to her shoulders and lingered there: a gentle pressure, just enough for her to know there was someone holding her.

“You need not endure a chill,” he said. “Queen Sarelin’s fire lives on in you. You are her Councillor, appointed on her authority. And you are the leader of Axium, too. Your staff bow their heads to you and await your command.”

They stood there in silence, watching the fire burn. When she reached up at last and removed his hands from her shoulders, she turned and smiled, softening the gesture. He hesitated; and he pulled a small black pouch from his pocket and held it out.

“I would like you to have this. Indeed, I meant to give it to you sooner, but I could never find the moment.”

The string came undone on her first attempt. Inside was a silver chain, so light and thin that it could have been liquid, a shining in a way that was not overly polished like the jewellery that merchants sold. She held it out, watching it shimmer in the light.

“It’s beautifully crafted.”
"It was given to me when I took up my post as an advisor. Queen Sarelin wanted to wish me luck on my first journey to Bastillón." He looked at the chain, and his gaze rested on it for a while, sadly, as well as fondly. "I like to think it has continued to be a light for me, even when her own light went out."

A lump rose in Lysande's throat and lodged there.

"You should not pass on such a precious gift to me," she said.

"On the contrary, my lady. It is because it is precious that I give it to you."

He bowed and walked out, leaving her holding the chain. When the door closed after him she lingered by the fire, watching the blaze in silence. She stood there for a long time before taking off Derset's robe and laying it on a chair.

After the embers had died, she drew the chain around her neck, looking at the thin silver in the glass. Sarelin's necklace was still fastened against her skin when she slept. It was a peaceful sleep for the first time since leaving Axium; the landscape of her mind was a pure black, unadulterated by dreams of triangles, until a twinge of pain woke her. The agony in her head had moved to her throat, and she ran a hand over the base of her neck.

A tapping sound drew her attention across the room. Rising from her bed, she padded to the window and took in the bruise-purple dawn that had engulfed the clouds, then opened the sill – scooping up the speckled dove that was waiting with an envelope in its beak.
Chapter Nine

The carriages and carts of Rhime seemed to come out of nowhere. One moment, the stream of traffic contained only riders and people; the next an enormous vehicle was pushing through, leaving everyone to disperse and congregate again. Men, women and children stepped out from doorways or arches, talking at a pace that might have served in an auction-house. The buildings, too, seemed to have been thrown together without the least regard for order: apartments rubbed shoulders with bakeries, and herb-sellers had set up shop beside jewellers.

As Lysande led the Axiumites through the streets, she caught the stares from doorways and alleys. The Rhimese looked at her with neither resentment nor disapproval.

*I am a spectacle,* she realised, when a father carrying a basket of eggs pointed her out to his son, nearly dropping his cargo. *And not just any spectacle – one with a dozen Axium Guards trailing her. I am the emblem of the capital.*

“Shall we keep going straight, my lady?” Derset said, beside her.

The city square was thick with people, a ring of spectators surrounding duellers in armour ahead, while food hawkers were weaving through and offering quince pies, bags of spiced almonds and pastries, some jingling bells to announce their wares. It was the first morning they had had to explore Rhime, and it would have been easy to forget her purpose – but to remind her of her escape, there was a bag of mettles tucked inside her jacket pocket.

“I have a load here, my lord. It needs to be lightened.” Two thirds of the money went to the guards, with the remaining third split between Derset and Litany. Derset tried to refuse, of course, but as master of her own newly-expansive allowance she insisted that he buy himself a new robe: it was not at all improper for a leader to bestow a present upon her advisor. Litany was less reticent, accepting the money with shining eyes and thanking her over and over.

She took Blundsor and Chidney, and set off from the centre of Rhime, moving south. Those two would not ask questions. The map she had received at dawn led her through a tangle of alleyways to a particularly narrow lane: the only
sign of a prayer-house was a series of little steps leading up to a pair of doors; yet this was the place, and this was the time.

Inside, she found a small but well-maintained hall, lit by candles. The domed building boasted a number of sculptures of princes and princesses of Rhime, dotted around on stands: yet it was the scene on the ceiling that made her stop and catch her breath.

Someone had decorated every inch of the roof to create a vista of the goddess Cognita emerging from the sea, naked before a crowd of admiring humans — and the faces were rendered in such detail that she could discern the freckles or blemishes on their cheeks. Earrings and buttons and laces were all painted in; tiny figures in the corners of the ceiling had been edged with gold, so that they seemed to stand out from the roof. She stood, gaping, until Blundsr coughed.

“Guard the doors, if you please,” Lysande said. After he had retreated with Chidney, she made her way slowly past the scattering of worshippers in the pews and stopped at the confessional at the end. Slipping into the penitent’s half of the box, she slid the door closed behind her. There was a single chair, and a grate separating her from the priest.

“Welcome, child,” a woman’s voice said.

“Thank you, gracious one.” She sat down.

“Those who enter the confessional must admit their sins. Have you murdered or stolen, child?”

“No.” It had been a long time since her only trip to confession, but she could just remember how the interview went. “I have done neither.”

“Have you eaten of animal flesh, or acted out of cruelty or greed… dishonoured your husband, wife or kinsfolk… or neglected to defend the realm in a time of need?”

“No, gracious one.”

“Then I fail to discern what brings you here today.” The woman spoke slowly; almost as if she were listening. “Confession is a serious matter, my child; the gods speak through their ministers in human shape.”

“Then I must confess… that I have nothing to confess. I have come to speak with he who is more than two and less than four.”

“Ah.” There was a clicking sound on the other side. “He is waiting for you, Councillor Prior.”
The partition between them opened and Lysande looked into the face of the woman who had greeted her at the farmhouse. Six was every inch the priest in a hooded robe, except for the twisted flesh that disfigured her cheek.

She beckoned Lysande forward. They exited through the back of the confessional, moving to the very end of the prayer-house where a triptych of enormous scenes lined a nook in the wall. The paintings showed the warrior Titanian’s journey through the desert to Lyria, rendered in the same high style as the ceiling, yet Lysande had little time to appreciate them: Six pressed the side of the frame on the right, and it swung backwards. The cavity beyond was dimly lit, with two tables. Lysande glanced behind her, back at the prayer-house: they were just out of sight of the pews, and out of Blundsor and Chidney’s view, but if someone else was watching...

“Quickly, Councillor, if you please,” Six said, pushing the painting further back.

She had to stoop to get through the gap, and the top of her head bumped the stone, sending tendrils of pain through her skull. At the far table she made out a familiar white-haired figure with a candle and a meal before him. The glasses on either side of his bottle were full of red wine, and this time, Lysande sat down straight away and took a sip.

Three pushed a bowl of herb-bread wedges across the table. “I expected you to make some kind of intervention to stop the meeting, Miss Prior. Even by our standards, you performed admirably. Though your maid played a not inconsiderable part.”

Performed admirably... aside from angering Luca Fontaine.

The bread was accompanied by a plate of pale and shining objects that looked like quail’s eggs: at Three’s insistence, she peeled the shell and bit one in half, savouring the taste of the soft and warm flesh on her tongue.

“Two was very pleased,” Three added, taking a wedge of bread himself. “To dissolve the threats without an arrow being fired: it was the resolution we had hoped for.” He chewed, his hand reaching to touch his pendant; that same movement that she had observed throughout their first encounter. “The Resistance is glad of your help; indubitably so. And personally, it has been a relief to have such regular doves; so many of our supporters lack organisation, being occupied with fleeing from cave to cave or evading a hired sword.”
He rose and walked to the second table, picked up a handful of papers and carried them back. They were letters, Lysande saw, written on different-coloured paper to those in the farmhouse: grey, ragged sheets, with dark veins running through them. The books from the outlands in Sarelin’s library had been made with paper like that. She had already discerned that Three had not risked his safety to come into Rhime merely to congratulate her, but she had not anticipated more letters from the White Queen so soon.

“Take a look at these, Miss Prior.”

He pushed three letters across the table. She set to work on the first one, translating from Old Rhimese into modern Eliran, untangling the phrases; several of the lines had been coded and required even more unpicking, yet she managed to make out the details of an exchange of mules: gold was flowing across the North Sea in covered chests, under the guise of shipments of incense.

“The White Queen is trading with merchants in the outlands,” she said, putting the letter down. “Unless she is lying to her servant.”

“She never lies to the Umbra, I am afraid. Our neighbours may have turned her away, but very large sums of money are being passed back and forth by her people on the other side of the North Sea. Unprecedented sums, some might say.”

“Enough for an army?”

“More than enough for two armies.” Three’s smile turned grim. “If you had walked through the docks of the outlands, you would understand why. There are many mercenaries in need of coin and food in the north. She has had time to rob and build up coin. It seems she moved quickly, after you stopped Bastillón from taking her bait. And you can see she is buying weapons, armour, devices for the battlefield, too... everything she will need to storm Elira.”

She looked through the remaining letters without comment, but with each page her spirits sank lower. There was no brooding over the events in the Room of Accord. If anything, Mea Tacitus’s tone was buoyant; it grew more so throughout the second letter, where a record of transactions was given in full. The last missive contained only a single line:

No more hiding. We will do this in the sunlight.
“Perhaps I am stupid, but I cannot see the advantage in coming out into the open,” she said.

“I suspect a metaphor may be lurking in that sentence.” Three tapped the page. “She may be hoping for a public event at which the Council will be present: to kill you all at once, taking advantage of the confusion of the crowd.”

“Why go take the risk of marching out an army in public, when she’s been plotting from Chiam and the outlands?” It did not seem to fit the pattern of the attacks that had plagued them for weeks.

Three smiled. “Tell me, Miss Prior,” he said, “why do you think Mea Tacitus calls herself the White Queen? Not the Black Queen, or the Iron Queen like Sarelin Brey, but the White Queen?”

She shrugged.

“It is a game of image. A Black Queen sounds like a tyrant. Anyone of that name will be cast as a villain for centuries, even by those who do not know her story; but a White Queen: she could be a saviour. Someone who restores the realm to equality and helps the magical race. An idol of goodness and justice for elementals to kneel before – perhaps even the one true queen.”

*No one who remembers the White War could believe that.* Sarelin had spoken of whole villages full of hacked-up corpses; the histories overflowed with blood, and she had seen the drawings that accompanied them.

“Twenty-two years have passed since the White War, my dear. Years in which elementals have not been treated kindly, by anyone’s measure. They are a small group, and they are broken and scattered across the realm. All Mea Tacitus needs to do is gather up the pieces, and offer to put them back together.”

The memory of the women and men hunched on the executioner’s cart, peering up at the palace, from faces more bone than flesh, resurfaced in her head. The image had not grown softer around the edges; if anything, it had sharpened in her mind. *Sarelin shouldn’t have let this happen,* she thought. *She shouldn’t have allowed the executions.*

The idea had popped up from the bottom of her mind, but she pushed it back down before it could sprout: it was disloyal to think like that.

“If she kills the whole Council in public, she serves two purposes in one stroke. Terrify the realm, and show elementals that she can restore them to power,” she said.
Three nodded.

"She really hopes to establish magical rule, then?"

"It is the appearance of magical rule that concerns her." He divided an egg into four pieces, the way nobles and city-rulers did, making even cuts. "Mea Tacitus is not accustomed to sharing with anyone, magical or not. She needs her servants, but she will dispose of them when they are no longer of use; the only power structure she believes in is one with herself at the top. Equality, justice, liberty: those are just coins with which to buy her own regime."

Lysande took another egg and sliced it open, looking at the daub of orange against the white. The glob of colour marked the place where life might once have been. Three let her chew in silence until she had finished entirely, sipping away at his wine and watching her.

"Our border defences are strong," she said, when she had reflected for a while. "The troops have been re-ordered; the last legions should be at their posts within a week. Even if the White Queen acts fast, Cassia says she wouldn't get her army past Pyrrha."

"Perhaps your friend is right. There is something else, however."

He reached inside his cloak and, from a pocket that had been sewn into the lining, produced a coin of a dark colour. The metal was bumpy under her fingers, and turning it over she saw a crown carved in the middle, but not one that she recognised: the points were rounded and the band around the bottom was decorated with a name. "Chamsak," she read.

She remembered Sarelin repeating that word, around the time of the twenty-year jubilee of her victory, when she had bought chariots, finely-wrought cages, and several exotic animals from a merchant in a western cloak.

"Signora Chamsak is the richest merchant in the three lands, and the most difficult to find. Our sources say she lives in Chiam; with a name like that she is certainly Chiamese. She has no contact except with those who would buy from her, and even then, she grants a deal to only the wealthiest few. I do not wonder that she uses a crown as her symbol, since she rules the world of trade. This," he took the coin from her palm and held it in his thumb and forefinger, "signifies a purchase of great importance."

"Of what particularity?"
“While I do not mean to alarm you... Signora Chamsak’s speciality is weaponry.”

Lysande felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cool air. “I presume you didn’t find this by chance.”

“Nine took it off a man who was trading for the White Queen in the outlands – the man had an accident, poor thing, and got swept off his horse by a gust of wind. In his saddle-bag we found all the letters and records I have showed you, and this token, along with a receipt of purchase from Signora Chamsak.”

From the same pocket he brought out a little slip. Lysande read the figure on it once. She read it again. Her lips moved silently, trying to come to terms with the amount of money written on the paper. Could so many zeros really be put together, without a joke?

“If something’s worth that much to the White Queen,” she said, “I don’t like to think what it is.”

“A weapon of great power could turn a battle. This is why Elira must not give her the chance to stage an attack. I would have you avoid a public event.” He took a long sip of wine. “While you attempt to smooth things over with Bastillón, keep your eyes and ears on alert for a ball or a festival – hold your Councillors back from crowds.”

She nodded. There was little more to say. By the time they had drunk the last of their wine and Three had thanked her for her help, Six was waiting with one hand on the back of the painting, and the frame swung forward soundlessly at her touch. She gave Three one last look before she climbed through, and she thought she saw him smile at her from under his hat.

In the prayer-house again she stared up at the elegance of Cognita’s body, bathed in yellow paint; she waited for her mind to calm. She stood for a while, looking up at the ceiling and fingering the chain around her neck, wondering if there was any way, any hope, of avoiding a war. She was still staring at the adulation on one painted face as Blundsor and Chidney came to her side, offering to escort her back into the city; and when, half-way through the doorway, she turned to look back at the triptych, the frame was in its place, as if it had never moved.

*
It was hard not to rush back to the castle and seek solitude, but the sun was shining on Rhime, and she had one more task. Her guards escorted her through streets that bustled with sound and movement, down to the shining serpent of the river: the Flavantine wound all the way through the city, bordered on each side by a bounteous green bank, and pinpointing the position of the largest building by the river, she strolled northwards with Chidney and Blundsor, watching rowers skim over the water in long boats, dipping their oars below the surface.

In a pavilion by the water, players were bent over tactos boards, staring as they slid the pieces back and forth. She watched them for a moment, then strode on.

The vast dome of the Academy greeted them at the northern end, and so many Rhimese peopled the foyer of the research institution that Lysande was overwhelmed for a moment; yet when her guards explained to a smiling attendant that Councillor Prior had come to visit, the man scuttled off at once and disappeared into the bowels of the building, re-emerging with Signora Marchettina – a woman with a forceful grip, who whirled Lysande through a tour of the building.

Reading rooms with desks, halls for building devices and corridors full of laboratories where people were mixing and testing medicines... she made her way down to an archive in the basement that stretched out like a sea, waves of books reaching back to the walls. The shelf of material on the White Queen turned up little of use. She had hoped for something that might hint at a weakness, yet there were only collections of poems composed for jubilees – tired verses condemning the “evil harpy”; and a copy of the law banning all portraits of Mea Tacitus. She resorted to borrowing the one book that predated them, a volume of military accounts from the White War, preserved with its spattering of blood.

The Council was not due to meet again until the evening, so she had the whole afternoon to read it; yet upon walking under the stone cobras and into Castle Cervello, she heard a shout and a clanging, followed by a bunch of curses. Hurrying towards the sound, she nearly ran into a group of Cassia’s guards, chasing each other around the eastern courtyard with serrated swords and scythes.

“This is good discipline.” The Irriqi emerged from the shadows, taking her by the arm and steering her away from the soldiers. “Those who lose an eye or a finger are not fit to be part of the Pyrrhan Guards. You should stay and watch the wrestling.”

“I am afraid, for all my years with the queen, I have no taste for combat.”
“Then you should develop one.” Cassia’s pat on the shoulder was light-spirited, but there was a hint of perspicacity in her glance. “I have a feeling this Council will face a war, soon, if it really wants to defeat the White Queen.”

There was nothing she would have liked more than to share Three’s information with her friend. But the Umbra might yet be Cassia. She asked instead if Cassia had been to the Academy, and the Irriqi launched into an appraisal of the archive. Lysande was somewhat surprised to find that Cassia had a taste for reading – despite her brusque manner, it seemed, her friend studied dragons with a passion, and seemed able to name every fact about them that had been transmitted to paper: Lysande’s question about the fire-power of long-tailed blacks prompted a flow of detail that she feared might never end.

She did not have to invent an excuse to leave, however; after a burst of pain tore through her throat, she winced, parted from the Irriqi’s company and retreated through the grounds.

She was not desperate enough to try Luca Fontaine’s orange medicine, and she did not wish to appear weak by complaining to Derset about yet another thing; so she headed to the castle stables and saddled her mare. At the back of the gardens lay a ramble that Luca Fontaine had designed for his personal pleasure. Perhaps the pain might be ridden out, if it could not be dissipated.

The wild patch of land covered in bracken and conical trees stretched out to the very edge of the peak behind the maze garden: ever since she had caught a glimpse of it from the Observatory, she had been hoping to see it up close, and since the expanse of green and yellow and blood-red bushes had no clear path, she set off down the middle. After half an hour she felt the pain began to melt away in the warmth of the sun. Her mare’s cantering sent larks and finches flying from the branches. She raced past several little hedges, dispersed through the bushes – she could not resist jumping over one, though her mare only just cleared it, digging in its heels on the other side.

“Come on,” she said, patting it on the neck. “If Luca Fontaine’s horse can do this, so can you.”

The horse whinnied and tossed its head. Its splotched coat had been mottled further with mud.

“I’m not above bribing you with sugar,” she said, nudging it in the direction of the next hedge.
Further into the ramble; blissfully removed from all eyes; she veered west until she found a little lane of trees, and under their interlaced branches she stopped and endured the pain. When she emerged from the shade, she caught a glimpse of blue and cantered her way into a clearing. A wonderful expanse of unbroken sky welcomed her – beyond which a drop stretched, all the way to the foot of the hill.

"Sun and stars!" she cried, struggling to rein the mare in. "Stop! Stop, there!"

"Dramatic, isn't it?" said a voice behind her. "Of course, it wouldn't be half so beautiful if it was cordoned off. The thrill arises from the danger."

She whirled around. Luca Fontaine was sitting on his black horse, regarding her from the edge of the trees. He wore trousers tucked into black leather boots, and a black cloak that flew out behind him like a cape, held together with only the single ruby at his neck. A pair of black gloves finished his outfit. She was struck again by how the shade seemed to suit him: not only for his dark hair and pale complexion, but for some other reason she could not pinpoint.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"It must have slipped your mind, Prior, but these are my grounds. I do ride through them from time to time." He dismounted and tied his horse up beside her mare. "A picturesque view, wouldn't you say? That is the best part of Rhime – from across the Flavantine, there, you can see to Pescarra. Princess Abella once executed her whole court in Pescarra, at the top of the dale. They make a good cheese." He waved a hand across to the western half of the countryside. "You ride well, by the way, but you should be bolder when you jump. A horse will never do as you bid if you ask it politely."

She took in the little smirk around his mouth.

"Boldness can lead to errors in judgement – even diplomatic mistakes, I am told," she said.

The edge to his smile told her that he had understood her meaning very well, but he made no reply. They walked to the edge of the peak and stood side by side, looking down on the sprawl of buildings and streets. A cart was meandering down one of the lanes, stopping at every house to drop off its goods; as she watched it, she was conscious of the proximity between them, of the few inches from his pale cheek to hers.

"You showed me up in front of the ambassador," he said, at last. "Diamond thread. I suppose you thought that was clever."
"It wasn't bad."

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that modesty is one of the Axium virtues, Prior?"

"I have heard that tact is one of the Rhimese talents, too. Yet you didn't exactly exude it in the Room of Accord."

As he swallowed a reply, she looked him over again. He did not seem to have a bow or a sword upon him, and she could feel the weight of her own daggers in her belt. The one that Sarelin had given her was closest to her right hand: the gold blade that she always kept with her.

"First impressions can be misleading," Luca said, turning back to the city. "So often one welcomes those who are plotting to sow discord, and conversely, one suspects the wrong person."

"Yet suspicions can be removed."

"They can." He kicked a stone, and watched it bounce down the cliffside.

"Without your interruption - tactless and clumsy though it was - the White Queen's stratagem would have succeeded. I have often thought two exceptional minds are better than one... though I have had no way to test the theory, growing up around my father and brother."

"Me and you? Working together, Fontaine?"

"The orphan and the bastard... it has a ring to it, don't you think?"

"We'd trip each other up before we'd run a race together. How is an Axiumite to trust a Rhimese? Especially with a traitor on the loose."

"We are colleagues, not friends, Prior. Trust is not a useful currency. We pay each other with more practical coins: deals, votes, information." He sent another stone skipping over the edge. "I'm going to smooth things over with Merez, as recompense for what I said back there."

"And then we will walk off together, laughing and planning our reign?"

"We will see how we proceed from there."

She looked to see if he was joking, but there was no sign of levity on his face; indeed, he was looking at her with an expression that was impossible to read. He placed a hand upon her shoulder. The touch was less a caress than a promise of collusion, and she thought of Three's new evidence: of the risk of an attack. Perhaps an alliance with Luca Fontaine would help to keep the Council safe, if it came to a vote.
“If you fix things with Merez, we may talk further,” she said, laying her fingers over his. “I have some information that may interest you.”

“Curious. I was about to say the same words to you.”

Lysande was prevented from asking what he meant by a rustling and a flash of gold in the bushes; a second later, a woman emerged from the ramble: a slender, elegant woman in a dress of feather-light links; she ran up to them, straining to catch her breath.

“Excuse me, Councillors,” she said, bowing. “I beg pardon, but it’s Prince Montignac.”

“Don’t tell me the wonder-child has come to some harm,” said Luca. “Has he collapsed under the weight of that ring at last?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Or fallen onto Dante’s sword?”

“No.” The woman heaved another breath, looking down at the ground. “It is a matter of some gravity, Your Highness. The prince has gone missing.”

*

Jale had not arrived in his suite for a prayer ceremony that morning; nor had he turned up to bathe in the afternoon. The main floors of Castle Cervello had been scoured within an hour, but there was no sign of the youngest prince in any of the chambers; even the kitchens and cleaning cupboards had been searched, their mops and brooms pulled out and shoved back in. Luca’s staff joined the Lyrians in going through the grounds, starting with the maze garden and moving on to the target range before trudging towards the stables.

The Valderrans gathered at the back steps of the castle to watch the searching-party. Lysande did not have a good feeling about the way they were standing in a knot, talking amongst themselves, yet Litany was keen to hear any news of the hunt, and she hovered near them.

“Maybe he’s run off to polish his jewels,” one of the Valderran guards suggested, watching the Lyrians cross the lawn. “They say his sword-hilt has nine sapphires in it.”

A big woman, whose voice Lysande recognised from the camp, laughed loudly.
"They all preen, southerners," another guard said. "But they’re dangerous enough with a sword in their hand. Chaléon Montignac wanted to cut down the whole north." She spat on the ground, and wiped her mouth. "The only Lyrian I like is a dead Lyrian."

"You be careful what you say," a man in rusted armour warned. "The First Sword’s still about."

"The First Sword needs protecting from their kind. Southern tricks and devilry."

A few more Valderrans joined the group at the back steps of the castle, speculating on Jale’s whereabouts and inventing uncomplimentary reasons for his flight; but the talk stopped abruptly when their leader rounded the corner. Dante cast a look at his guards that did all the talking for him, and the women and men dispersed.

Lysande offered to take Litany with her to search for Jale, but the thought of working with her seemed to fluster the girl, and she left alone. She searched the rooms fruitlessly, one by one. It occurred to her, as she passed through the castle, that there was one place the staff had not looked. She remembered from her studies that Lyrians had sought out the sun in times of distress: Princess Catherique Gaincourt had retreated to a rooftop after a bad omen about her army.

She climbed the seven flights of stairs to the Observatory and shielded her eyes as she entered. The sun was streaming through the glass onto the table and chairs. At the very far end of the room, a blonde figure sat with his legs hunched up, his back against the wall, gazing out through the glass and down at the grounds.

"Jale," she said.

He turned his face away from the wall, and she saw that he had been crying.

“Oh dear... is the whole Council looking for me? That’s exactly what I didn’t want. I didn’t want to make a spectacle."

“There’s no shame in being low. It only means you’ll take a while to rise. It’s a feeling, not a failing.”

“Dante wouldn’t cry, would he?” He wiped his cheek with the back of a hand. “Luca wouldn’t shed a tear. I don’t expect Cassia even has tears. She’s probably forgotten what they look like.”

On the floor in front of him, a prayer bowl was half-full of water, a few petals submerged beneath the surface. Lysande knelt down and took care not to knock it
over. She had learnt from dealing with Sarelin that it was often better to wait than to speak, and she sat for a few moments, watching.

“A dove came this afternoon.” Jale drew a deep breath. “It’s Merez, you see... he’s been speaking with my uncle Vigarot.”

“The ambassador of Bastilléon?” That made little sense. “What does he want with your uncle?”

“Apparently King Ferago’s made a deal with Vigarot. Bastilléon and Elira are to be friends: the whole thing’s been carried out behind our backs. A few quick doves to Lyria and the deal was struck, without the Council having a say.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Uncle Vigarot certainly seems pleased with himself.”

It was not what she had expected, certainly, but with a neat bit of manipulation, Vigarot Montignac had saved the Council from grovelling to the east. That was something the Council would be grateful for, surely.

“He says he’s letting King Ferago open a trade route to the delta,” Jale went on, “so the Bastillonians can buy spices and rice from Lyria. Everyone knows Ferago needs goods more than he needs gold.”

“I don’t see why a trade route should bother you.” She sat down beside Jale.

“It’s not just trade. Don’t you see, Lysande? The Bastillonians want proof: hard proof we won’t break our commitment.” He gazed out through the Observatory wall. “As of today, my marriage to Princess Mariana will be brought forward and conducted within the month. They’ve signed it over in ink – there’s going to be a Sapphire Ball in honour of the occasion – I can’t get out of it, now.”

“Do you really want to get out of it? I mean, is it really that bad, marrying the heir of Bastilléon?”

“Princess Mariana – pride of the east – lady of every grace. There’s nothing wrong with her at all.” He turned his face away.

Whenever she had walked in on Sarelin in a bad mood, she had opted to listen until the dust had settled from the queen’s tirade; yet as Jale gazed out the window, Lysande realised she had never learned how to comfort. She set to distracting Jale with questions about the ball, since that was the best idea she could think of, drawing him slowly into discussing the dancing and the costumes. The conversation was strained, but it managed to hold together.

“They call it the splendour of the south,” Jale said, wiping his cheek. “Lyria only holds a Sapphire Ball for a special occasion, like a wedding or a royal
anniversary. There’ll be a honey-fountain, and at least eight dances before the food – you’ll have to take part, of course.”

“Now there, I fear, I must disappoint you.” She smiled. “Being tall precludes being graceful.”

“Oh, you won’t have a choice. You’ll have to come – and the others too – my uncle will insist on the Council being there, to show the public Elira and Bastillón stand together.” He smiled, with a hint of bitterness again.

“The public?” The word hit her in the gut. “This is to be a big event, with a crowd?”

“Oh, yes. All the most important people in the realm will be there; poets and nobles and merchants of importance; artists and captains: they wouldn’t miss a Sapphire Ball.” He managed a small smile, slightly warmer this time.

Lysande stared at him for a moment. Visions of soldiers pouring into the Lyrian palace were easy to conjure. She excused herself and strode from the room, speeding down the stairs.

Even with Luca’s vote on her side, she could not see the Council deciding against a royal wedding; it would seem like the only way to ensure an alliance. The others would argue that a pact with Bastillón was their best chance to protect themselves against the White Queen. By all logic they would be in the right.

She might try to explain the situation to Luca, but Cassia and Dante would not allow an opportunity like this to be wasted. Vigarot Montignac had played his cards well, and he must know it.

Yet he could not know that the White Queen had bought a weapon that cost several fortunes in gold, and an army of mercenaries.

Litany was in the Painter’s Suite when she arrived, tidying her desk. She raised a hand to stop the girl from leaving.

“Bring me the map, if you please.”

The parchment had been commissioned for the late queen and it gave off a cloud of dust as she unfurled it, spreading it out to cover a good part of the floor. Sarelin had never done anything on a small scale. The picture unfurled in detail: from the glaciers, mountains, and the great lakes around Valderos, to the jungle that surrounded Pyrrha on the western border, the stretch of Axium Forest above the capital, and the Emeralds and other hills around Rhime… everything had been inked in, right down to the names of towns. Dotted lines separated each city’s territory.
She edged around the map. The huge stretches of land in the south made her grimace: the vast, interminable swathe of the Lyrian desert was carved by a thick line which branched out into the three prongs of the delta after it reached the city – the Grandfleuve. That would be the quickest route. It would also be full of ships and checkpoints, and for her idea, it would help little.

There might be a way... provided there was a head start, and orders were followed.

"Stay there, Litany," she said. "I would have you take a letter."

She walked to the window, composing her thoughts.

"Make it out to Captain Hartleigh, in Axium Palace." She drew a breath.

"Dear Raden. Kindly bring two hundred of the best Axium Guards together for me; equip them for a long journey, and assemble them in secret."

A bird trilled outside while Litany’s quill scratched over the paper.

"You must make no mention of this to anyone. When this is done, you are to make preparations for the group to travel through the desert. I want them to leave as soon as they have their boots fastened."

"The desert?" Litany blushed, as soon as the words had passed her lips. "I beg your pardon, Miss ~ Lysande ~ I didn’t mean to ask."

"You might well ask. And when you hear the answer, you might well ask again. We will soon be going to Lyria, for a wedding that requires a Sapphire Ball. Put that in your letter." She walked over to the girl. "Tell Captain Hartleigh he is to spare no expense. My secret guard must have whatever weapons it can carry on mule-back, so long as they can disguise themselves."

Litany nodded, her hand flying, and she waited a minute or so while the maid caught up. She had a feeling Three would approve of her plan. This was the most logical way. Luca Fontaine might be less pleased, but he had said that trust was not a useful currency: so he could not blame her for failing to trust him with this.

"When you’ve written that, ask Raden to come to me at once," she added. "Tell him I need him in Rhime."

She waited while the girl fetched a dove. As the bird winged off from the window, she watched it arc up into the sky: a white shape against clouds that were pregnant with a storm. When the first drops of rain began to fall, she turned back.

"Take my daggers, Litany, and have one of the guards sharpen them. I’m going to be using them soon."
“Is that all?”

“No.” She unfastened the sheaths from her belt and handed them over. “Get two swords, and a pair of daggers for yourself. You’re going to train with me.”

“Me? With you? But I couldn’t—”

“There’s going to be an attack, unless I am very much mistaken. And I do not mean for us to perish in it.” She folded Litany’s fingers over the daggers. “We are an ‘us’, now. You, I, and Lord Derset. We face this with solidarity. And with sharpened blades.”

The girl smiled, then dropped her gaze and hurried out.

As her footsteps died away, Lysande opened the window and stood facing the clouds. A gust of wind whipped through the frame. She dug her hands into her pockets – there was something in one of them, and she reached in and pulled it out: it was her quill, the one she had brought with her from the orphanage, fourteen years ago. Her fingers closed around the shaft. She clutched it without noticing the lines the feather was leaving on her skin, or jab of the tip against her palm, digging into her flesh.

_The girl with the quill._ It was impossible to count all the times Sarelin had called her that. _What place has a girl with a quill in the business of war?_ 

She was standing there and holding it, facing the clouds still, when the north-easterly came in and painted her cheeks with rain.
Chapter Ten

The strings of the harp and viol sang out across the stones, accompanied by the deep, warm sound of the lute, the click-click of castanets, and the unwavering thrum of the pipe and tabor. Laughter and chatter permeated the music. Above the courtyard, Lysande pulled her curtains open and peered down at the crowd of Rhimese congregating around the band.

“Did they give a reason for this refusal?” she said, turning back to the room. “Or are we simply to bow to their whims?”

“There was a reason, Councillor.” Lord Pelory was standing by the writing desk, on which a thick, hide-bound book rested. He stood with his hands folded over his stomach, his fingers intertwined in fine emerald gloves. “Lord Addischild insisted that while he has restored Prexley Castle to your wishes, the advisors cannot make it into a jail. Lady Tuchester clarified that doing so would stir up resentment from the court—a former symbol of great nobility, fitted out, only to be given over to elementals—it would bring concerns about your intentions towards the old families—perhaps there would even be a petition to remove you. Finally, Lady Bowbray announced that the court would much prefer you used the existing jails, even though they are cold and cramped.”

Lysande moved away from the window. The laughter from outside was distracting her, and she was certain that she needed all her attention for this. She walked over to the desk and looked at the book.

“And the accounts?” she said.

Pelory opened the cover and flipped through the pages, before holding one open. “It would seem that your guess was right, Councillor. I took the liberty of perusing Lady Bowbray’s private book, and found several entries that show funds are being siphoned off. From the charities. Here, you see.” He pointed to a string of numbers. “The treasurer is restoring smaller castles with the money: decorating four properties.”

The crown’s charities were being robbed to fit out castles. Why did that not surprise her? “Whose castles?”
“That is the question, Councillor Prior.” Pelory smiled mirthlessly. “They belong, it seems, to the families of Bowbray, Addischild, Chackery, and Tuchester.”

The music halted. After a moment, the castanets began again at a swifter pace, and boots began to drum on stone. Some of the nobles were dancing. Lysande blocked out the sound, pondering the pack of wolves in advisors’ robes; she was thinking far beyond the castle, to the faces in the Oval back in Axium Palace. She could picture Lady Bowbray’s mouth opening and closing, the Treasurer storming from the room.

So this was Bowbray’s revenge. A castle restored for each of the advisors, whilst Lysande was away.

“A lively tune, isn’t it?” Pelory gestured to the window. “I happened to walk past that nest of snakes on my way here, and asked Lady Freste if it was a celebration. She said it was. When I asked what they were celebrating, she said that Prince Fontaine orders a concert every time he hangs conspirators: the music begins when they die.”

Lysande said nothing, but bent over the book, studying the numbers.

“I suppose you want me to stop them from restoring the castles,” Pelory added, coming to her side.

“On the contrary.” She straightened up. “We must allow Lady Bowbray and her colleagues to fit out their spare dwellings with every luxury. Do nothing to stop them. But see that every cadre, mettle and racket comes from our restoration fund – that is my only condition.”

Pelory cleared his throat loudly.

“Perhaps Lord Addischild was right to object,” she said. “It is not compassionate to crowd women and men into one jail, with no privacy. Four smaller jails, on the other hand… that should ensure that our elementals have all the space they need. And four small castles will be handsomely comfortable.”

She was pleased to see that he could not hide his surprise.

“You want me to hide your purpose for you, Councillor?” he said.

“I ask you a favour. Alas, I have no noble blood, Lord Pelory. There are no family ties between us.” She closed the book. “So I will offer you an exchange. One favour for another. I will give you something to impress your wife, since you’ve already taken her to the royal perfumerie by the Flavantine.”

“How did you know about that?”
“Your robe has a distinct scent of lavender oil. The merchants here boast that it is a rare perfume, found only in Rhime... expensive, too, I understand. I expect your wife would like to keep travelling to the cities, buying the things she cannot buy in Axium... and attending all the balls and dinners she could not attend while you were working for Sarelin.” She smiled. “It might be hard to improve on the Rhimese perfumerie, but if you do as I ask with your colleagues, I will give you something that you could not buy, even if you had all the gold in the realm.”

“And what is that?”

“An invitation to the Sapphire Ball in Lyria.” Lysande took care to enunciate each word. “All expenses paid by the crown. And there will be another prize waiting for you, if you seize the castles once restoration is complete. Lord Derset tells me your villa has fallen into disrepair: the Pelory family needs a small castle of its own.”

Pelory’s hesitation was not long enough to constitute a pause. Lysande extended a hand, and they shook.

“To the future,” she said.

Pelory smiled mirthlessly. “To restoration.”

Two weeks remained before their departure: two weeks in which the excitement built to such a pitch that no one could go anywhere in Rhime without hearing whispers of Lyria.

The Council was to leave from Castle Cervello and take the river-road, and citizens were readiness themselves to line the streets, putting up banners with the Rhimese cobra. Lysande woke at dawn on the morning of the journey to another pain in her throat and leafed through the Astratto Formulas, grappling with the numbers until the ache dissipated. She helped Litany with the packing, sent another dove to Three about her secret guard, and when all the nervous energy in her stomach had dispersed, she was on her mare and trotting downhill before she knew it.

The archways and sidestreets of Rhime teemed with people, the dark fabrics of their jackets and cloaks shadowing them on every side; and the music of the eastern vowels rang in Lysande’s ears as they moved south-west. The sprawl of land between Rhime’s territory and the Grandfleuve belonged to the capital, and only a handful of peasants’ abodes lay scattered across the quilt of green and brown. The
palette of eastern light disappeared once they left the city: rolling countryside yielded to flat fields; flat fields to scrub; and the sun’s light turned into a glare. Chidney and Blundсор began a flow of chatter.

Chidney had just begun to condemn “the queer, gods-be-damned sun-worship they do down in Lyria” when Blundсор cut him off.

“Look!” he called, pointing to a cloud of sails on the horizon. “Those are our ships! And that’s the Grandfleuve, Councillor!”

A ramp of wooden boards ran down to water that gushed and roared, carving a deep swathe through the land and creating a noise that could be heard from half a mile away. Two vessels were anchored by the bank of the river, the first blocking their view of the second: its masts had been decked out with twenty-four sails, half with the image of the Pyrrhan flag and half with the Valderrans’, so that purple leopards billowed from the front and brown wolves fluttered at the back. The prow jutted out in the shape of a spearfish spike, while the beam at the back had been carved to resemble the fish’s tail.

Yet the most extraordinary decoration was neither painted nor sewn. Gasps and cries escaped the onlookers as they took in the cages that were positioned on either side of the main viewing deck: one contained a live leopard, and the other a grey ice-bear cub; and the animals growled and snapped.

“I thought we agreed to do this with little display,” Lysande said, turning to Cassia.

“Exactly.” The Irriqi had climbed out of her carriage and was making her way to Lysande’s side. “I told Dante to make ours a warlike ship: no extra trimmings, just the basics... what do you think, my friend?”

There was no way any bandits further down-river would fail to notice a craft decorated with four colours, an ice-bear and a leopard, yet Cassia looked so pleased that she managed a smile.

“The basics, as you say.”

A sailor was tugging on a rope, bringing the sail on the main-mast tumbling down, and the Elira crest unfurled. The hands clapped and cheered. Some of them were slender Lyrians; others were islanders with green eyes who must have joined the crew at the docks in the south; and a few she even guessed to be Bastillonians, shaved to hide their silver or gold hair.
While the Irriqi and Dante boarded their boat, Lysande walked over to Raden. She had been reunited with her captain for less than a day, but already they had exhausted the topic of the secret guard. "I still wonder if two hundred will be enough," she said, low enough for only him to hear.

"Prince Montignac’s uncle doesn’t have a reputation for welcoming Axium Guards. He tried to turn one of my officers away from Lyrian territory with her whole legion, last year – the damned cheek." At Lysande’s look, he added, "Apparently, Vigarot Montignac thinks all northerners conspire against the south – that the Axium Guards will support the Valderrans in some kind of plot."

"That’s ridiculous."

"Aye. But he won’t take kindly to our forces marching in. And there are only so many places you can hide, in Lyria. Two hundred’s about the most we can fit."

She had to be satisfied with that. The Axiumites were walking along the bank to the second vessel. When they reached it, she found herself looking into a blaze: the topsails of the craft seemed to be entirely fashioned from gold cloth; the mainsail was sapphire blue, with a spearfish embroidered on it in gold thread; strips of solid gold adorned the mainmast, and the glitter of the swirls of pearl on each prow lit the wood up handsomely. Altogether, the sight was so lavish that she could find no words.

"My lady, look," Derset said, pointing.

Beside a sail with a Rhimese cobra on it, a sail had been embroidered with the Axium crown; and below the picture, letters in silver thread proclaimed:

COUNCILLOR PRIOR,
ORPHAN PRINCESS OF AXIUM

"I’m going to kill him." She inhaled deeply. "Jale! Jale! Come here!"

The Lyrian prince looked up from where he was chatting with two women in feather-light outfits, and waved to her.

"Like our transport?" he called. "Twenty-four sails and three masts... I designed the spearfish prows myself."

"Were the sails your doing, too?"
“I know they’re a bit bland – nothing you could really call an ornament.” He tilted his head, giving the rigging an appraising look. “But I think you were right: a frugal craft is best.”

“A frugal craft,” Lysande repeated, watching the sun refract off the main-mast.

They set off within the half-hour, to the whistles and cries of the sailors in the rigging; the northern half of the Grandfleuve carved through largely uninhabited miles of scrub, and the weather, though warm, did not yet build to a southern pitch. They had the river mostly to themselves. Lysande spied no suspicious figures on the banks, only the occasional child waving – and after a while, she slipped down to her room and drew out her daggers.

She, Litany and Raden had practised with weapons last night in the ruined Montinetti Castle in Rhime. Now as she threw her blade at the board the captain had set up on the wall, she concentrated on landing it in the middle. The hardest thing about throwing daggers was not hitting the target – it was doing so quickly, flicking her wrist and sending the blade flying out of instinct, rather than calculation. She had years of Sarelin’s training, at least. Litany, to her surprise, was an excellent shot; the girl had punctured every straw soldier back at the castle.

The crew amused themselves by gambling with the Axium and Lyrian guards, and even a few of the nobles joined in, rolling dice on the deck. At the rear end of the boat, the Rhimese had set up tactos boards and were playing amongst themselves, staring each other down. Their leader was not taking part in their silent war, however, having disappeared from the deck, and Lysande was left with Jale, who looked out at the water every so often without seeming to see it at all. She diverted him with a stroll around the main-deck, and over a few cups of sweet-smelling tea, insisted that he tell her about the arts of the delta.

“The dances are the best. I mean – the paintings are incredible, and I go in for the choir, myself – but when you see the palace dancers perform the Song of Sun, well, you know you’re alive.”

“I should like to hear more of them.”

Jale was happy to oblige, although he talked a little more slowly than usual, and he still glanced out at the river occasionally. “Look,” he said, as they were taking their third turn. “Over there. Were you expecting some news?”
A dove swooped down and landed on her arm. The speckled head of Three’s messenger rubbed against her palm. She took the envelope from Cursora’s beak, and let her go. “Only of some dull Axium affairs.” Immediately, the bird soared back up into the sky.

She excused herself and made her way down into the maze of hammocks, pushing through rooms of guards clutching their stomachs, cooks chopping vegetables, and manservants fumbling their way through piles of clothes, until at last she found the box-like chamber she had been allotted. Once she was safely inside, she broke the envelope’s seal.

*My dear,*

*Congratulations on your new plan.*

A surge of relief passed through her. Three was not furious at her about the Sapphire Ball; he did not blame her for being one step behind Vigarot Montignac.

*But I am afraid we are concerned about your safety. Nothing is certain: only hints. We will be following you.*

*Keep your eyes and ears open. With warm regards from a colder clime,*

3

She folded the paper up; unfolded it and read it again. Gratitude filtered through her mind: gratitude, tempered by frustration. Would it have hurt him to explain what he was talking about?

She locked the letter in a chest and strode out. In the room at the end of the corridor she found Derset and Litany hunched over a table, and together, they shared a little port wine, while Derset recounted a few of his tales from the delta. As Derset was beginning an account of Prince Chaléon Montignac’s duel against Rodrillaud of Bijon – “the handsomest duel that ever was fought, with swords that gleamed blue with sapphires” – a roar cut him off.

“What in the three lands was that?” Lysande said.
They all raised their eyes to the roof.

"Your reception, my lady." Derset smiled.

The dice had stopped, and feet were moving about on deck. She emerged to find everyone pressed to the starboard rail, and Derset took her by the shoulders and guided her through to the front. A platform had been mounted on stilts, further down the river-bank, and it was crammed with several hundred people: men, women and children, all of them yelling and waving. There were no city colours daubed throughout the throng, only rags in drab hues.

She turned at the sound of her name. Luca was beckoning her from the rear, Tiberus coiled on his shoulder like a dark epaulette.

"How did they know we were coming?" she asked.

"Word travels fast, especially when you've little to talk about but your next meal. I expect that since the Council was formed, that lot've been hoping for a glimpse of us." He pointed.

"They are not from the cities, by the look of them."

"Villagers from the central scrub," Jale said. "Bone people, my father used to call them. They have so few possessions that they sell the bones of their dead to traders. Dashed hard existence, between Lyria and Rhime."

Looking at the crowd that they were approaching now, Lysande could well believe a history of poverty. It was the same problem that plagued the elementals she had seen brought through Axium on the back of the executioner’s cart, on their way to the city square: magical or non-magical, starvation exacted the same price from everyone. She made to return to her party at the rail, but Luca’s fingers curled around her arm.

"Aren’t you eager to greet your citizens, Prior?"

"I would sooner stand with my advisor."

"We can’t deny the people their orphan princess, can we?" He was smirking; but she was drowned out before she could reply. A storm of clapping and cheering washed over them as Cassia and Dante’s ship drew near the platform. Although they were too far away to make out the deck in front, cries of “Irriqi!” told them that Cassia must be waving; and Lysande could feel a flutter in her chest at the thought of the attention.

By the time they walked to the front of the boat, the faces in the crowd were clearer and sharper: couples barely old enough to be carrying children jostled for
space behind the rail; old men and toothless women pressed together at the front, and a smattering of youths and long-haired children were waving at the ship, their jutting collarbones making a contrast with their smiles.

Jale stepped forward to the prow, where the guards had left a gap for him. The cheers swelled to a roar as he began to wave: beaming and calling out salutations, greeting the crowd with his natural cheerfulness; and there was no hint of mockery here, as with the Valderrans; the bone people lapped up the attention, shouting so hard that their throats must have been sore, lavishing round after round of applause on the boy-prince. When Jale returned to her side, Luca walked forward.

The spectators shouted and hailed – clapping their hands excitedly, and even holding their children aloft to see the prince of Rhime. Luca did not beam but greeted the crowd in his own fashion, holding up a single hand; Tiberus had coiled around his arm, and man and snake seemed to wave together, facing the crowd.

“Surprised?” Jale said, at her side.

“He doesn’t seem an obvious choice for the people’s hero.”

“Oh, I don’t know; he’s got a dashing side to him, the dark and mysterious prince of Rhime.”

“The dark and mysterious prince who murdered his brother, you mean,” Lysande said, thinking of Dante’s remarks.

“It’s because he murdered Raolo Sovrano that they’re cheering.” Jale’s voice had dropped to a murmur. “My father told me stories about Luca’s brother. Apparently, he rode through the poorest villages from time to time, and took anything he felt like laying his hands on. When he was in a hurry, he would only steal. But sometimes he would linger. He told them he was bored, and commoners should amuse their lord. In one village made the two strongest youths fight each other to the death. In another, he demanded that a blind girl get in a pen with a bull and try to run from the animal – with the girl’s parents refused, he threw a taper on their house. Then he forced them all into the pen – the mother, the father, and the girl.”

Lysande could not find a reply. She could the blind girl tottering, stumbling, to be gored by the bull. Sarelin could not have known about this – Raolo Fontaine must have hidden it from the crown.

But Sarelin killed elementals, a voice in her head niggled.
The crowd on the platform were still cheering, and she realised with a jolt that they were waiting for her.

“It’ll only take a few minutes,” Jale said, gently. “You just have to wave.”

“Could we not sail on by?”

Her legs had frozen. Her embarrassment did not seem to be doing anything to thaw them.

“Come on,” Luca said, taking her by the arm. “The scholar needs a hand. Let me provide one.”

Before she could stop him, he had yanked her forward. They were almost level with the platform now. The ship had slowed to allow its viewers as long a glimpse as possible, and as Lysande turned to face the crowd, the sound washed over her: shouts, cheers, stomping and applause, and over the top of the cacophony, a single word.

“Council! Council! Council!”

“They like us,” Luca said. “Curious, but there you go: give them a wave, now.”

All those faces were staring at her; all those people, chanting, waiting for her response.

“I’m a commoner in royal clothes,” she said softly. “An impostor.”

“That is precisely the point, Prior. Everyone in that crowd looks at you and sees themself in a better doublet.”

The face of a boy at the front struck her as she gazed out. His cheeks had sunk so deeply that they seemed holes, the skin stretched tightly from jaw to ear like a skull wrapped in plaster; yet this skeleton was smiling. His eyes had lit up as he saw her, and he bowed, exposing the vertebrae in his neck. *Like the elementals, driven into hiding. Poverty makes fellows of them all.*

She did not pause to consider propriety. She bowed as low as she could in return, her hair falling down around her face and dangling, and she held the pose even when it began to hurt. The noise of the crowd dropped away, but when she straightened up, a storm of cheering and shouting burst out.

“Prior! Prior! Prior!”

She looked back at Luca. His gaze was fixed on her, though whether it was with irritation or admiration, she could not be sure.
The front row of the platform bent down into a bow; behind them, the next row followed, and the next: an old man at the back was the last to stoop, his withered frame just managing to bend. Lysande looked at them all, taking in the tops of their heads. She bowed again. The word “Prior” filled her ears, and she was not sure if it was the sharp movement or the sound of her name that caused the dizziness when she straightened up. Shame took over from elation quickly. If all she could offer was bows and smiles, what kind of a Councillor was she?

The chanting, the cheering and the churning of the river: it all merged into one rhythm, following her as the ship sailed on. Yet it was the boy’s face that stayed in her mind, the hollow cheeks; the neck like a notched rope, and the eyes, shining so brightly in that skull. Those eyes never left her, even after they had rounded the bend.

* 

The snarls of grass and the parched soil that had surrounded them all morning ceded, and the brown of the river-bank gave way to gold – a vista of undulating sand, stretching for miles. Lyria’s territory seemed to contain nothing but a few trees that pushed up from the desert like forks, their branches bristling with spines, and tiny pools in the sand crawling with mosquitoes. Insects slipped beneath the collars and shirt-sleeves of the passengers on deck, sinking their stingers into flesh; Litany was stung on the nose by a flying beetle and had to clap a honey-poultice to her face, and Lysande tried to slap the mosquitoes away. By the second day, a trail of little dark blots decorated her ankles, wrists, and the crooks of her elbows.

Below the decks, the atmosphere was little better, thanks to a current that surged and roared; guards and nobles alike were retching into pails. Opting for a few bites over the smell of vomit, she returned to the deck to sit with Jale. They were lurching through one of the coils of the Grandfleuve when the gap between the two ships closed: the front prow of their vessel bumped the back of Cassia and Dante’s craft, and a crowd of Valderrans turned to stare.

“Ahoy there!” Jale shouted, waving.

Dante was amongst the group in front. He waved back, but only for a few seconds. The Valderran men were shirtless in the heat, and a few of the noblewomen
around Lysande were giggling and pointing, yet Dante locked eyes with Jale and said nothing.

"Have Prince Montignac and the First Sword fallen out?" she asked, turning to Derset.

"I do not like to give tongue to rumours, my lady."

"Yet I would know them, if they exist."

"Well, it is only speculation." Derset ran a hand through his hair. "But since Prince Montignac agreed to marry Mariana Ferago, there have been whispers that Dante Dalgéreth objected to the match – that he spoke passionately against it behind doors. It is only gossip, as I say. Whispers that should be taken with a spoonful of salt."

As Dante left the prow, Lysande realised where she had seen him glare like that before: at the dinner table in the Room of Accord, when Gabros Merez had questioned him about his lack of a wife.

"Do you think that Dante might be in love with Princess Ferago, my lord?"

"I am afraid I could not say."

Lysande watched the landscape: the only hint of a flame was the plume of smoke rising from a campfire, on which a few bone people were roasting a rat, but she kept checking the sand as they moved.

The sun was lashing the boat with such an intensity that she would almost have been glad of an attack to relieve the torment. Derset had removed his jacket and boots, and Litany had stripped down to her smock, but as their leader, it seemed inappropriate for Lysande to remove her doublet, and for the first time she gazed at the flimsy gowns and gauzy shirts of the Lyrian nobles with envy. By the peak of the afternoon on the third day she was standing at the rail with Chidney and Blundsor, debating the chance of a gust of wind.

As she turned to welcome Derset to their party, a pain stung her throat again, and she clutched the rail.

"If you are seasick, my lady, I can fetch you a pail."

"Thank you, my lord. But it is only a slight – ”

The agony that ripped through her was lower this time: a stabbing in her chest, entering her lungs. She steadied herself with one hand.

"My lady, you are unwell."
“So it appears.” The deck had begun to wobble. “But I think I would rather do my retching in private. You stay here, my lord. Litany, come with me.”

In her room, she unlocked the chest where she had stowed the remedy Luca Fontaine had left on her pillow, and drew out the little glass tube. The contents swirled about in the vial; glistening the colour of ripe tangerines. She toyed with the stopper.

_I will be fine_, she told herself. _Once we reach the desert, this cold will disappear._

Yet she uncorked the vial. Taking a sip, she closed her eyes and hoped.

As the first drop of liquid slid down her throat, the pain dissolved, melting away and leaving a viscous coating in its wake; one mouthful was enough to clear her chest in an instant. She exhaled deeply.

“Sun and stars,” she breathed.

There was enough in the vial for one more swallow. The glass clinked against the wood as she locked it back in the chest.

The heat had become oppressive in the windowless room, and in her haste return to the deck, she almost ran into Lord Malsante. The Rhimese lord shifted out of her way on the stairs. “Prince Fontaine requests your company, Councillor,” he said. “The matter is urgent.”

She found Luca by the front prow, his hands folded behind his back, gazing out at the Grandfleuve. A table and chairs were set up next to him, and a tactos board laid out.

“I don’t know about you, Prior, but I find this heat brings on an unbearable boredom,” he said.

“This is your urgent matter?” She eyed the board. “A game of tactos?”

“You might indulge me for a quick bout. I’ve beaten princes and priests and nobles, but I am yet to defeat a scholar.”

He turned now, the sun catching his dark hair from behind, and the look in his eyes told her that the game was an excuse to speak. She nodded.

Tiberus was reclining on the chair closest to her, so she took the other, and Luca scooped up his cobra and sat down. After they had both studied the board, he slid one of his guards forward: two squares into the centre.

She followed with one of her own. Move by move, they began the dance of Elira’s oldest game, sliding the pieces vertically, horizontally, diagonally, or moving
them in jumps... guard, noble, princess, prince, queen, king, or dragon: each had a
different function, and a plethora of moves could be produced from a single position.
Lysande had always been able to anticipate how her opponent would play; not only
from calculation, but from years of practice in the staff kitchens: studying how the
short-tempered stable boy would make a dashing foray, and how the maids would
inch their guards back and forth.

Luca’s moves were among the best she had encountered. Bluffing and then
striking, and sometimes capturing three pieces in one go, he played without letting
his emotions show; working his guards and city-rulers and only moving his queen
and king when he needed to take an important piece. She yielded several of her
guards early in the game, taking the opportunity to note his responses; yet when her
first prince toppled over, he folded his arms.

“It won’t work on me, you know,” he said, leaning back in his chair.
“I beg your pardon?”
“I’m not Sarelin Brey, Prior. I know when someone is letting me win.”
She stroked a fallen guard on its head, considering the formations on the
board. “You do not desire my submission, then. But are you sure you wish to risk
being beaten?”

He gave his half-smile.
She shrugged, and picked up her queen. “Very well.”
Her hand skipped over the board, taking five of his pieces: mercilessly
exposing the flaws in his formation and knocking down his monarchs. She rested her
own queen in the back corner, surrounded by guards. Luca’s silence lasted for longer
than she had anticipated; he gazed down at the ruins of his army with one hand
propped against his chin.

“You’re contemplating whether to yield now, or to finish the game and be
officially decimated,” she said.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Prior?” He picked up his dragon. “A
whole army of guards... a king and a queen... they are nothing to the most powerful
piece on the board.”

After a fleeting pause, his fingers moved quickly, sliding the piece out in a
diagonal line: not to attack her own as was customary, but to place the dragon
equidistant from her queen and king. The act threatened both monarchs at once. It
was so audacious that it took her breath away – and for the first time in fourteen
years, she realised, someone had made a move in tactos that she had not foreseen. She leaned over the table.

“You were pretending all along.”

He gestured at the board, where only six pieces remained: three black and three white.

“Shall we begin the game, now?” he said.

The deck around them had gone unusually quiet, and a glance showed her a ring of guards and attendants watching – all of whom found things to do immediately upon catching her eye. *Excellent. We are the main entertainment for the voyage.* She turned back, and examined the board with a new consideration. There were only a set number of strategies that could be used at this point, and it all depended on which one Luca chose.

“I’ve never had a colleague,” he remarked, sliding his dragon to the left. “I suppose you’ve heard this from Dalgœreth – he always tries to attack my image with the subtlety of a man wielding a blunt axe – but I prefer to work alone. It’s not that I shun company. It’s just that I like to work with equals.”

“That excludes everyone else, I presume.”

“Almost everyone.”

“Your modesty is intensely charming.”

“You should be pleased, Prior.” He blocked her king and captured her last guard in a single move. “There aren’t many people I place in the category of similar intelligence.”

As she was contemplating her next move, a man in black armour approached, drawing near Luca. The prince fended him off with a few words, but he persisted.

“Your Highness, Lady Fabbriani thought she saw fire,” he whispered.

“Where?”

“Over to the east, Your Highness.”

Luca followed the man’s finger to look, and surprise spread across his face, along with concern.

“Fire,” he repeated, slowly.

Lysande turned to see a glob of flame speeding through the air towards her. Everything seemed to happen at once – the deck became a blur – guards running at her; several Rhimese soldiers shielding Luca; and Derset knocking her to the ground. His knee wedged between her thighs, pinning her against the deck. Balls
of fire rained down around them; a few struck the deck, and guards rushed to stamp 
them out, leaving black and twisted wood behind. Women and men shouted 
furiously to each other, waving away the smoke.

She saw Raden rushing through to the side of the ship, pushing Lyrians out of 
his way. “Elementals!” he cried. “Over there!”

As the archers opened fire into the desert, she glimpsed several people 
sprinting behind a dune. The deck was still smoking. She and Derset got to their feet 
and checked each other quickly before rushing to the rail: the balls of fire had 
stopped coming, but Cassia and Dante’s ship was aflame – an embroidered leopard 
was smouldering on one sail. Their own vessel was sporting a few scorched spars.

“Look, Your Highness!” Freste cried, pointing to the desert. “Something’s 
coming after them!”

The sand was speeding in a ridge along the top of one dune. It looked as if 
the desert itself was moving – chasing their attackers – but as she watched, she 
spotted four people in cloaks running behind the bandits, their cloaks flying in the 
wind. A lock of white hair sparkled in the sun.

“Full speed onward!” the sailors in the rigging called to those in the ship in 
front. “Downstream, and spread some sail, before they strike again!”

Three was holding his hand up, angling his wind towards the bandits. Several 
of the figures stumbled in the force of his gust. A ball of water arced over the top of 
the speeding dune, sent by a woman who looked like Six, and struck one of the 
bandits on the neck. Lysande watched the woman fall to her knees, screaming a cry 
that was whipped away by the wind: it happened so fast that she almost felt 
sympathy for her.

The woman’s companions did not halt to help her. They sprinted on, looking 
back every few seconds. As Three sent another blast through the desert, grains and 
dust swirled into the air, settling in a wall and blocking the fight from view. Cries of 
frustration sounded across the ship.

Lysande looked around the deck, surveying the people on the boards. A few 
guards were nursing burnt arms or fingers; Lord Malsante was holding a boot that 
had been seared through the sole, and Blundstor had taken a spike of wood to the 
arm; but no one looked to be dead. She drew a deep breath.

“Praise Cognita. You’re not hurt,” Derset said, running to her side.
"The same to you, my lord." She clasped his hand in her own. "You were quick as a leopard back there."

Raden was running towards them, his forehead riven with lines, and they embraced, tottering on the deck. Litany caught her around the stomach and held on; and all three of them hugged together.

"Elementals in the desert," Raden said, shaking his head as they drew apart. "I thought I’d seen everything, but that takes the cake... and chops it into pieces."

"I suppose they were the White Queen’s people," Jale said, coming alongside them.

"I’m not sure, Your Highness," Raden said. "Looked like two groups, to me. The first lot threw fire at us, and the second lot went after them. Like a battle."

"Protecting the Council of Elira. That would seem to shatter any notion that all elementals are scheming to destroy the crown." Luca had joined them silently. "You’ve sprung a leak. Shall we go and find you a bandage, or would you like to keep painting the deck?" he added, looking at Lysande.

She saw that her wrist was bleeding. A piece of wood had cut her, somehow, without her realising. She shook her head; Luca was still watching her.

Most of the boat was crammed up by the rail, staring at the wall of sand, yet Lysande knew that they would not find what they were searching for. If Three had blocked off the fight, there would be no more glimpses. She let Luca and Jale walk away, turning to Derset.

"I owe you my thanks again, Lord Derset," she said. "If you hadn’t grabbed me, I might not be standing here."

"I hardly deserve thanks for doing what any servant of the crown should. You are the leader of Axium. And on that note, I must warn you..." He glanced quickly around, and shook his head. "No... it will have to be later. Let us speak in our quarters at Lyria. There are too many ears, here."

She nodded, and let go of his arm.

The next hour turned into a whirl of checking sails and spars; giving orders for mending and fixing; stowing the wounded in the physician’s berth and checking their position with the helmswoman. A dove from the other ship assured them that there were no dead – Cassia and Dante were unharmed, though a pair of sailors had been unfortunate enough to be attending to the rigging and had suffered grievous
burns – and Lysande sent her own report across and went with Luca and Jale to visit the wounded, giving a few words of encouragement.

After the last hand had been shaken and the last shoulder patted, she joined the crew and the guards at the rail and turned her gaze north, peering into the desert. Sweeping the vista, she searched for a glimpse of white hair or a cloak, something to prove the Resistance had not been swallowed by the dunes: yet there was nothing except sand; miles and miles of golden grains, tapering into the distance until the mirage met the sky.

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With one sail burnt and several more looking like a dog had chewed holes in them, Cassia and Dante’s ship put in at the next stop to refit, and the other Councillors pulled in too. The first landing in Lyrian territory swarmed with traders, thanks to its position as a gateway to three towns – Bref, the shortest village in length in Elira; the sweltering Villechaud, which received more sun year-round than any other town; and Cléchefort, a supplier of wood and sailcloth. While Cassia and Dante were haggling with the merchants, Jale suggested a trip through the desert.

Lysande took Chidney and a few of her guards and joined the party for Bref. She was well aware that riding a mule was not like riding a horse, yet the memory of the fireball speeding towards her was still fresh in her mind and she wanted to be as far from the deck as possible. Somehow, she had not imagined elemental fire would shoot so quickly: she had pictured a wall of flame creeping gradually across a battlefield, at such a pace that the other army would have time to prepare.

The road meandered to its end, and Bref arose from the sand in ten rings of shining stone: the sun glancing off the walls. The Axiumites wandered between the houses, discussing the fort-like buildings. Lysande walked with Jale until the attention of a trail of agog citizens forced them to speed up and duck into a tall building in the town centre.

“This is the only thing worth seeing in Bref,” Jale said, waving around the front room. “The Raffiné Gallery. One of the richest families, the D’Argents, set it up.”

There were paintings on every side, some as large as those in the prayer-house she had visited in Rhime, though none on the ceiling. Jale whirled her through
the hall, pointing out pictures of gold-clad rulers; scenes of Lyrians slaying
elementals in the Conquest; nudes and lovers that would have surely been banned in
the rest of the realm, and a few images of the Grandfleuve that rivalled the
masterpieces in Axium Palace. The piece in the far-right corner caught Lysande’s
eye, however, most of all.

A scene from the White War: it showed the Mud Field covered with soldiers
and a familiar figure in armour, brandishing a dagger, and Lysande had to smile – for
Sarelin would never have removed her helmet in battle, making herself a target. She
could not help but admire the artist’s style, however. Sarelin’s blonde hair was
streaming around her face, her lips parted and her cheeks flushed, as if giving a
battle cry. Somehow, this defiant Sarelin seemed more real than any of the posed
portraits in Axium Palace.

Jale demonstrated a sudden interest in a portrait on the left wall and left her
in as much privacy as she could enjoy with more than twenty guards milling about;
and silently, she told the painted Sarelin everything that had happened since the
Council’s formation, explaining her alliance with Luca Fontaine and sharing her
impressions of Three and Six, leaving out only her uncertainty about the hand behind
the attack. The tension left her body for a little while. When they left the gallery, Jale
helped her back up onto her mule and they set off again, the animals plodding
through the sand, swatting clouds of flies with their tails.

It occurred to Lysande, as they moved through the desert, that Jale might
have invited her to this gallery to see the portrait of Sarelin – and when she caught
him darting a glance at her, she was sure of it. She searched around for a topic of
conversation, to cover her embarrassment.

“Do all Lyrians love art?” she ventured.

“Oh, yes. You don’t know how jealous I was when you got the Painter’s
Suite in Castle Cervello. What I’d give to look at the Maturation as I was sitting in
the bath...”

“You’ve seen those frescoes?”

“Last year, when I was in Rhime.” Jale sighed. “Vitelongelo’s a true master.
That balance of colour he manages...”

He was soon rhapsodising about the Maturation’s merits, praising the
frescoes and comparing them with the Lyrian works; and Lysande’s thoughts had
wandered to Sarelin when one remark brought them back.
“But of course, the real subject is magic.”

“Magic?” She gripped her reins tightly. “You mean to say that the Maturation is about elementals?”

“That’s right.” Jale flashed white teeth, obviously revelling in knowing something she didn’t. “Elementals aren’t born with their powers, my father told me. When they come of age, around twenty to twenty-five, their bodies change. First their brain, then their blood and their tissue: they go through a painful transformation called a maturation.” He looked at her, and then seeing that this had had no effect, repeated: “A maturation. Like a big change.”

“I’ve never heard such a thing.” It certainly hadn’t been in any book in Sarelin’s library. But then, everything about magical people was banned, from the White Queen’s survival to the anatomy of the elemental body; King Redmund had begun the practice, and every monarch after him had enforced it.

“Well, father told me about it, in case I ever had to deal with elementals. When they’ve matured, they can move one of the elements, or use their powers of the mind. Of course, talking about this is banned by law, you know. But we’re not discussing magic, are we? We’re just appreciating art.”

“The most captivating of subjects.” Lysande smiled. “I wonder where the references to the transformation are in the paintings, though?”

“It’s all in the triangles, you see.” He made the shape of a triangle with his fingers, and Lysande remembered the golden symbols on the women and men’s bodies. “They represent the different stages of magical maturation. One on the forehead, to show the head pains; the second is for the pains in the throat; and lastly, one over the chest, for the pains in the lungs.” Jale waved a hand airily. “It’s useful to know this sort of stuff. They’re supposed to be cowering in caves and sneaking around in the mountains, but they’re not all hiding – you never know when you might run into an elemental.”

Lysande feigned illness from the heat, and dropped to the back of the mule-train. She could feel herself sweating. As thoughts chased each other through her head, she knew it was not from the sun. Jale seemed quite content talking to Chidency and Blundsor. She hoped he could not see through her carefully blank expression. When they arrived at the ship, she thanked him and made her way below, grabbing Litany.
“Did you pack my books in the mahogany chest?” she asked the girl, once they were alone.

“Of course.” Litany’s gaze was curious.

“I need the book on the White War; the one I was reading last night.”

“The one from the Academy? That old collection of military accounts?”

“The same.”

When the spattered tome was in her hands, she flicked through chapter after chapter until she found the passage: a description of a capture from the White War. She read through it slowly, this time.

To check that the prisoners were indeed magical – and not merely some outlander soldiers, fighting for the White Queen – the most Honourable Prince Marcio Sovrano performed a test devised by the researchers in his Academy. He bade Captain Feronna of the second legion cut each of the prisoners’ arms. Then a sample of blood was taken, and the Captain poured it onto a silver plate.

When, after a minute’s passing, the silver turned black, there was much rejoicing in the camp: for it was declared that the prisoners must be elementals, as proven by Science. The guards sang the Serpent’s Triumph and toasted to His Highness, while Captain Feronna gave her soldiers a ration of wine.

Lysande snapped the book shut.

“Would you stand outside the door, Litany?”

Her fingers had slid a dagger from her belt before the door closed. She hunted through the jewellery box on the floor, pulling out a silver bracelet and placing it flat on the table. Trembling, she held out her left hand.

It was hard to keep still, but she knew that she would need more than a nick on the finger. She sank the tip of the dagger into her flesh. The steel bit into her palm, and she made sure the blade was wet before conveying it to the bracelet.

The minute she waited seemed more like ten. The hand on her timepiece inched around the face. When at last it had completed its rotation, she gazed at the bracelet, watching the stain.
Nothing. The blood was red – the same as when it spurted from her finger. Had she really been so mad as to think that those pains could be something so dramatic: to transpose Jale’s words onto a mere human sickness? Had she fallen victim to delusions, like the paranoia Montefizzi described in his manual, in the aftermath of the attack?

She was about to turn away when she saw the dark tinge spreading slowly across the silver.

She was not conscious of dropping the dagger. It clattered on the floor, and she felt the pains begin in her chest, but she could not bring herself to move.

Black. The silver had turned black.

She breathed out, and a hundred daggers sprouted in her lungs.
Chapter Eleven

It was the queerest sensation, being carried through the air on a raft of cushions. She peered through the curtains and saw people holding parasols that stretched five feet above them, pointing at the procession, smiling and talking; all were dressed in gauzy cloth and stood gracefully in the heat. The sun beat down upon the land so that the crowds, the parasols and the sugar-palm trees seemed to shimmer brighter than any painting she had seen: it could have been a scene from the Silver Songs, if not for the pain in her chest.

The stabbing had been coming and going, coming and going. Now, it was definitely coming. It was not only the pain that disturbed her – there was also a bubble of panic rising inside her, swelling with every minute that passed, each jolt of the palanquin. Jale had said that the maturation was a painful process. What if it happened here, in front of all these people? What if the change of blood and tissue took place on her way to the desert palace? *Will it be obvious to everyone that I'm an elemental?*

“Are you well enough for this, my lady?” Derset must have seen her clutch the corner of a cushion a little too tightly. “I could arrange for you to greet the Lyrian court later.”

“It is only the heat, my lord. This torpor is foreign to me.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “Axiumites always sweat and itch in the desert... the ones that aren’t groaning with red fever, that is. Chackery will be moaning about his trips to the south.”

A smell of spice and incense wafted from the street, and a dryness weighed down the air, pressing upon her shoulders. How could Jale be so sprightly and full of cheer, after being raised in a place like this?

Most of the Lyrians seemed happier to see their prince than their guests, running up to Jale’s palanquin and throwing handfuls of rose-petals – even coins showered into the lane, thrown by a group of elders dressed in golden robes. They were standing in front of one of the many sandstone façades – a building whose gilt letters proclaimed “B.O.L.” from a balcony.
The Bank of Lyria. The biggest monetary institution in the three lands.

Lysande had read about the bribery they had carried out during Chaléon Montignac’s reign, in a recent history of Elira. Established in the forty-first year of the calendar – the only place in the south to store your money safely, provided you can afford a rate that changes every seventh moon and an accumulation-fee every seventh tide.

Just as the cymbals and brass stopped around them, their palanquin lurched to a halt, and an attendant held the curtains open. They climbed out onto a flight of steps, squinting.

They had passed through the wall that encircled Rayonnant Palace, and they seemed to be facing a sea of gold – gold columns, holding up a gold-plated roof, and a gold reception hall waiting before them, in front of which another band was playing Flowers of Old Lyria, the tassels on their caps gleaming with gold paint. While Lysande was trying to adjust to the glare, a man in a doublet and gold chains walked out to the top of the steps. She could spot the resemblance at once – the fine bones and limpid blue eyes, and the elegant bearing – but while this man had Jale’s looks, his smile had none of the same warmth.

“Uncle!” Jale said, bounding up to embrace him. “You’ve been busy, eh?”

“I have found the time to look into a few profitable endeavours since you left.” Vigarot Montignac detached himself from his nephew and looked at the guests on his steps. “Your marriage amongst them. But you must introduce me to your friends, Jale – I fear they do not have the stomach for our sun.”

Hands were shaken, introductions given, and each of the Council made their courtesies and compliments. Vigarot Montignac gave a curt bow to Cassia, Luca and Lysande, yet he did not bow to Dante, who merely smiled and raised a hand. The Valderrans kept their fingers on their swords as Jale led them through the columns and into the reception hall, and the southerners trailed them, stepping very close to their heels.

Lysande made every effort to repress the pain in her chest. She could feel the bubble expanding and expanding inside her, threatening to burst, but it would not do to collapse on ten thousand cadres’ worth of rubies: the foyer of Rayonnant Palace was encrusted with many stones that it might have been a rainbow, with mosaics of bulls fighting and lovers riding a swan, and a school of fish swirling in an arc of sapphires; yet they were hurried through without a chance to be awed, into a corridor
and to a sealed room. A herald in blue and gold livery bowed to Jale and flung open the doors.

"His Acting Majesty Vigarot is pleased to announce the return of the jewel of the south and the true son of the desert: the most radiant Prince of all Lyria, Jale Montignac!" the man cried.

Instead of a long, vaulted ceiling, Lysande found herself walking under a dome with a hole at the top, through which rays of light streamed. Gold wreathed the dozens of people in jewels and finery who were standing up from their benches; a shower of sun fell on rings and headpieces and lit up floods of jewellery, illuminating every member of the court; and on the far side, the beams glanced off five throne-like chairs, each embellished with the letter of a city: L, V, A, P, R.

Lysande decided to concentrate on those letters. If she did, she could almost ignore the agony in her lungs.

"And with him comes the Council of Elira," the herald went on, "soon to celebrate the union of our great land with Bastillón! Your Councillors, ladies and lords!"

Thunderous applause. Jale beamed and nodded, and the rows of nobles bowed to him as he led them through: Derset pointed out the noble families of Lyria in a low voice as Lysande passed them – the Beaubons and the Gaincourts, sporting so many bracelets and necklaces that they seemed to be competing with sapphires; the De Clair sisters, holding their little dogs; Lady and Lord Tancey, beside the Valleux and Orvergnes, carrying ceremonial swords; and the members of the Prichet family who had survived the spotting-plague. These last did not seem to have dressed for the occasion, although Lysande thought that they might feel lucky to still have most of their skin.

So many more families surrounded them that even she had never heard of some: the Cachetouts, the Lavrés and the Peloises amongst them; and she only just managed to push the bubble of anxiety back down as she passed. None of these people in their elegant clothes could have guessed what she was feeling, surely. They could not know that the silver had turned black – and that she was being stabbed from the inside.

Vigarot Montignac ushered each of the Council past to the gold chairs at the end, and asked Dante to remove his outer fur before sitting down; and although the
First Sword did so without any ill grace, the Valderrans muttered and cast looks at Vigarot. Lysande was glad when Jale stood up and silenced the room.

“Ladies and lords of Lyria,” he said, “I’ve assured our guests that they will be treated with more splendour than you can shake a sword at. Let’s show them what we can do with all our gold!”

More applause; louder cheering: Jale was obviously liked. One of the Beaubons jingled a wrist enthusiastically.

“They say a ball in the north is an event you remember all your life,” Jale went on, raising a hand, “but in Lyria, we don’t call it a celebration if you can remember your name, your children’s names, or your fair spouse’s face in the morning! So let’s make this a Sapphire Ball... not to remember, but to forget!”

The court whistled and laughed.

“Before we get to the plans and preparations, however, my uncle has a proposal to make.”

Vigarot Montignac stepped out into the space in front of the chairs. From the look of polite inquiry on the young prince’s face, Lysande guessed that Jale had not been privy to the proposal.

“On the Council’s journey here, there was a heinous attack on our ships,” Vigarot announced, his handsome face composed. “It would seem that elemental scum are on the move again, and if they strike on the Grandfleuve, who is to say they will not come to strike at us here? Who is to say they will not journey downriver? To protect our Council and citizens, I move that the Lyrian guard be doubled at the Sapphire Ball. A special guard for the ballroom – to be selected from our elite ranks. And new weapons for every man and woman in armour.”

Muttering and whispering broke out in earnest. Luca leaned forward, Tiberus coiling around his neck. “Convenient timing.”

“What do you mean?” Cassia said.

Vigarot Montignac turned to face them. “I believe Prince Fontaine wishes to remind you that it is the responsibility of the crown to fund security, at an event where the royal family – or in this case, the Council – are guests of honour.”

“Of course,” Dante said, just loud enough for the Councillors to hear. “You refit your army at our expense.”

“You must see the need for the ball to be adequately defended, First Sword.” Vigarot kept the same beatific expression. “Assuming, that is, that you want it to go
ahead... I would never doubt your commitment, being sure of your constancy, but others will talk.”

There was not a hint of geniality in Dante’s eyes. He gave the slightest inclination of his head.

“Valderos supports the decision of the prince of Lyria,” he said.
“So we hope.”

The court was peering at them with interest. Vigarot Montignac flashed a particularly bright smile before turning back to face the benches.

“Let it be known,” he said, glancing at Dante, “that Lyria supports the safety of its Council at all times. And we hope that by forging a chain between my nephew and Princess Mariana Ferago, our land will be safe from elementals.” He raised a hand, with royal bearing. “The same rats who sought to filthy our land in the White War may scuttle to their leader again, but Lyria will hunt them down. Glory to the puzzle realm. And death to all elementals!”

The cheering reverberated around the circular room before any of them could speak. It pounded in Lysande’s ears like a drum; and though she saw Luca Fontaine looking unimpressed and Jale displeased, none of them rose to silence the crowd. Someone stood up and cried “death to elementals!” and family by family the court rose, drawing their smallswords and echoing the cry. Death to elementals. Death to elementals. Death to elementals.

Vigarot Montignac bowed and smiled so politely that it was tiring to watch. Lysande did not really see him, however – she saw the stain on the bracelet in her mind’s eye, the black tinge creeping across the silver; and as the cheering reached its final crescendo, she felt the daggers in her lungs begin to thrust again.

*  

Her attention was thankfully diverted by the urgent matter of defence. Raden had made a trip to a nearby town while the court was in session, and he arrived back two hours later, wearing a smile. The secret party of Axium Guards had brought weapons made of the finest capital steel, he assured her. All of them knew how to use them well, as sixteen of the twenty elite dagger-throwers had been spared from their posts: and the most dangerous women and men were assembled in Flemency, just five miles from the edge of the city.
Lysande gave orders for the guards to be dressed as pilgrims and brought to religious inns across Lyria. A careful dispersion was necessary, since two hundred Axiumites in robes might not escape notice – and they would need crown buckles, robes, and prayer-books. She implored Raden to bring her word when all was done.

"Yes, sir," he said, making a mock-salute. "You're all right, aren't you, by the way?"

"Why in the three lands shouldn't I be?"

"Don't know... I thought nearly being killed by a ball of fire falling out of the sky might've shaken you a little."

"Oh, that. Yes. Positively shaken."

Calm yourself, she thought. It's not him you have to worry about.

He gave her another mock-salute as he strode away, and she smiled. Even in a palace decorated with Lyrian gold, Raden was still Raden.

No books on magical powers could be found in the palace library, though she had not really expected to find any: the only references to magic in Axium’s collection had been records of battles that had been fought and dragons slain, as if elementals were stock figures to be moved around the stage of history. She could not quite believe that she was one of these people. If she was magical, then at least one of her parents must have been magical, too... but they had been killed in the war, the orphanage mistress had told her.

Of all the people she had met since her appointment as Councillor, only Three would understand. Perhaps he would even be able to tell her when she could expect the maturation. But he was not here: instead, she was surrounded by the group of people most likely to notice her symptoms. Jale knew about elementals, after all. Luca might have deduced her true nature, by observing her over the last few weeks.

Breathe deeply, she told herself, and do something useful.

Since there was no way to prepare for the maturation, she went back to practicing her aim, throwing daggers with Litany in the indoor target range – and she was almost feeling satisfied with her progress when a stab of pain in her lungs sent her tottering. Her dagger spun off course and landed in a potted plant.

"No more strain in this heat." Litany wrapped an arm around her. "You need a good rest, and no throwing anything sharp."

She was bustled back to her suite, which, she had discovered, contained everything that might be expected from a palace presided over by Jale: a painting
adorned every wall, and her bed had been decorated with mirrored glass, covered in blue silk and draped with a mosquito-net flecked with sapphires. A balcony hung out over the palace gardens, complete with a pool, so that if she chose to swim she could look down at swirls of pebbles and bowls of lotus-flowers. Twin summerharps rested on the stands that flanked the desk. There was an attendant to play them; one to change the water in the bathroom, and one to bring food every couple of hours whether she requested it or not; yet it was the visitor waiting on her window-sill that pleased her most.

Three’s speckled dove had winged its way back at last. She took out paper and her gold quill, but after several attempts to compose a letter, she merely wrote “come to me as soon as you can” and sealed the envelope. Anything more could lead to trouble.

Litany garbed her in a thin cotton suit for bathing and escorted her to the pool, where the water was cool and sweet-smelling, and full of some southern crystal that made it sparkle – honey-salt, she guessed. It soothed her skin and senses, and she floated, gazing down at the flowers and stones. The pain receded until it was almost possible to forget the black stain on the bracelet and the sound of the court shouting “death to elementals!” In the pool, it all seemed very far away.

“Come and join me, Litany,” she said. “I won’t have you stacking every shirt in horizontal alignment.”

“But I need to wash – ”

“No washing anything, except yourself.”

When the stars came out above them, her lungs cleared again and she could breathe in without pain. She did not mind at all that the maid had settled beside her on the ledge and rested her head upon her shoulder, half-dozing: it was nice to stroke the girl’s hair, and to feel the closeness of another human being.

*If she knew what I am,* she reminded herself, *she might not sit so near.* The thought of losing Litany pierced her, in a manner that surprised her. She could not bear to think that the maid, who had been her solace since she had accepted the burden of her office, might be terrified of her one day.

No pains of a maturation woke her in the night, even though she had feared they would. Mosquitoes butted their heads against the net and circled around her; but the city rose before she did, and the buzz of the commoners going about their business had well and truly started by the time she sat up. Lysande was finishing a
breakfast of fiery balls of rice and pickled vegetables just as a knock sounded at the door.

“Pardon the interruption, my lady,” Derset said, leading in a slim youth in gold livery, “but this gentleman insisted on seeing you.”

The boy strode in and bowed, brushing off his sparkling doublet.

“I will be your guide, Councillor,” he declared. “His Highness wishes to delight the Council with the sights of Lyria: I will take you on a tour. First, a visit to the city market, and then a trip to the three wonders: the Monument of Silver, the famous Pavilion of Songs, and of course, the Hill of Oblitara –”


The guide paused.

“Yes,” he said, after he had regained his composure, “there is only one.”

“I had no notion that we could walk upon a site dating back to the Conquest. We can really climb the thousand steps, and ascend to the place where the dragon Oblitara was slain?”

“If we leave before the sun is at is zenith; yes, Councillor.”

Derset was smiling, and she gave him a look that said she could take a hint as well as the next woman. “You may thank Prince Montignac,” she told the guide. “And we will only be a minute. Please wait for us outside.”

The boy bowed and retreated. “His Highness says you can only climb two hundred steps, not a thousand,” he added, as he walked out.

She began to gather her belt and boots, and once the door was closed, she gestured to Derset to draw near her. This might be her only chance before a day of sight-seeing.

“You have something to say to me, my lady?” Derset asked.

“We began a conversation on the ship.” She fixed her daggers in their sheaths. “I would finish it now.”

“Ah.” He looked down. “In truth, I think I may have spoken hastily, out of fear.”

“If there is any suspicion in your mind, my lord, I would rather hear it now than when I am choking on a silent sword.”

Derset looked uneasy, but he bowed. “Very well. After the rain of fire, it occurred to me – and as I say, I have since realised that it may have been no more than a fancy – that when the first ball struck the deck of the ship, it seemed to land
where you had been sitting. Right on your chair. Prince Fontaine had invited you to play tactos near the prow just before the elementals attacked."

There was a knock at the door – most likely the guide – but they both ignored it. Lysande felt her hands clench.

"Go on, my lord."

"The thought crossed my mind that his new alliance with you might be no more than an act, designed to lull you into sitting where he asked… that he might have arranged for the attack. But I have since reflected that I was wrong to think so. Prince Fontaine might have been the target himself."

"What makes you say that?"

"The magical fire was thrown from a long way off. He was sitting by that tactos board, too, when the elementals struck." Derset spread his hands. "He might as easily have chosen your chair."

Lysande remembered a shimmer of black scales, and her body recoiling; shrinking away.

"Tiberus," she said.

"My lady?"

_Tiberus was on the left seat._ The guide’s knocking on the door had grown impatient, and she finished tying a bootlace, gathering her composure, and trying to stop her mind from running with the thought.

"We will speak no more of this, for now," she said. "But I thank you, my lord, for your honesty."

Derset bowed, stepped back for her to leave, and followed her out. She tried not to imagine Luca Fontaine’s smirk.

She wondered what Derset would say if he knew what she was – if he would change his mind about Sarelin having chosen the right Councillor. Would he decline to be associated with her? Would everyone she knew turn away from her, if they found out? She had few enough people she could speak to, and listen to, without losing the ones she cared for.

Dante and Jale had left together an hour ago, she was informed by an attendant in the reception hall, for their own tour of the three wonders – whether they intended to fight or to reconcile over Princess Mariana, she could only guess, since the attendant reported that they had hurried into Dante’s palanquin and closed the
curtains. Luca Fontaine had departed alone, surprising no one. But Cassia was waiting downstairs, and they embraced, each as delighted to be reunited as the other.

There was a brief hold-up at the gates, when Cassia’s party of fourteen guards was asked to trim itself down to a party of six – in Pyrrha they might be one family, the attendant in gold armour remarked drily, but in Lyria they had to fit in the space of a palanquin – and after much wrangling and several threats from the Irriqi, they were carried through the wall. Lysande, Derset, Litany, Chidney and Blundsor and the guide took one transport, and Cassia and her parcel of guards piled into the other.

The ceremonial lane through the city had disappeared, replaced by a mish-mash of trade and bartering, and a throng engulfed them as they proceeded to the west side of Lyria. People flowed from the front, behind, to the left and the right of them, carrying baskets of chilli or rice; bankers glided past on open palanquins, with boys or girls in scant clothing keeping them company. Nobles stopped to talk and laugh without any regard for the mass of humanity moving around them. It was almost impossible to navigate without hitting someone: if Rhime had been madcap, this was pure, unadulterated chaos, without any pretence of direction.

They were forced to push and swerve their way to the Monument of Silver, and Lysande could see that Derset was trying to speak to her when they got out; but the guide drew near to hand her a stick, which, unfolded, produced a parasol that kept the sun off handsomely.

“Constructed by Princess Charine Orvergne in the year one hundred and eighty-four,” he declared, pointing to an obelisk behind a ring of rope, “the Monument of Silver remains one of Lyria’s three wonders. That a ruler of the south managed to have five tonnes of solid silver brought from the capital shows the power of our city.”

They all stared up at the enormous silver column. It dominated the street corner, reflecting the sun.

“Sarelin told me it was built with slavery,” Lysande recalled.

Cassia and the guide both turned to look at her.

“Well…” She faltered. “She said Princess Orvergne ordered her elemental prisoners to construct it. They worked all day in the sun with little water and barely any food, and if they asked for a break before nightfall, they were taken to the city
square and executed. Still, it’s never been proven that she used elementals, has it?” she added. “I’m sure it’s just a rumour...”

“I wouldn’t blame her if she made slaves of them. If you don’t keep them down, they rise up.” Cassia shrugged. “Look what happened on the Grandfleuve.”

Lysande had gone pale, despite the heat, and Cassia stared at her.

“Are you all right, my friend?”

“Yes,” Lysande said, “thank you; I find myself tired, in this climate.”

The guide said little as they climbed into the palanquins again. When they reached the city market some half-hour later he devoted his attention to showing the Pyrrhans around, leaving the Axiumites to wander, and she took the chance to separate from the group.

The rabbit-warren of stalls before them was sealed by a tin roof, and all sorts of things were dangling from hooks, swimming in jars and spilling out of bags, with the stalls so closely packed that they nearly touched: she passed herbs and spices for smoking that she suspected were illegal; chillies that had been soaked in honey and flattened; and a bowl of rice that appeared to be moving, but on closer inspection, turned out to be a mound of live ants. The stall-keeper insisted the insects were being sold for “medicinal and decorative purposes” and definitely not for eating.

It took a few minutes until she had gone far enough into the market to let herself think about what Cassia had said, and she heard the words again. I wouldn’t blame them if she made slaves of them. This was the woman who had called her a “friend” in the next breath.

Calm down, she told herself, but it did not stop her from thinking of the fate that would confront her if her nature was exposed. There was no Sarelin to save her now. No Iron Queen to back her with force. Secrecy would have to be her religion, as it was for Three.

But the full reality of the law could hit her for the first time – not some other elemental, but her. She could be stripped and forced onto her knees in a city square, to have her head cut off. She could be killed in the street, if some angry citizens gathered in a mob and came after her. No one would blame them for doing so. They would be heroes, and she the monster that deserved to die.

Somehow she had found her way into a section of the floor packed with people shouting the prices of grain, and she was surrounded by bargainers pointing
to sacks of impressive size. She had not paid attention to the crowd, and Derset came up on her left before she could evade him.

“My lady, I want to make sure that you will not place too much importance on what I said before.”

“Your scruples do you credit, my lord.”

He bowed. “I only hope that you will take your time to consider the matter... I would not want to poison your friendship with Prince Fontaine over something so tenuous.”

*What an irony,* she thought, as she patted him on the arm. *The most honest man I know, worried about implicating the least honest man I know.*

Yet seeing him had jolted her back to the fact that she was in Lyria, undergoing a tour that most people in the realm could only dream of – the bone people would not be pitying themselves, if they were being whirled around the jewel of the delta. She determined to force the panic down again, and put off thinking about the maturation until later, when she was back at Rayonnant Palace, and Three could visit her. He had survived for two decades since the White War, after all.

She left Derset marvelling at a stack of bowls painted to resemble flowers, and ambled through the lanes. Having dressed without care, she was unrecognisable as a Councillor, and several stall-keepers cast contemptuous looks at her tattered doublet: the Lyrian sense of style was considerably more pervasive than in Axium, and one man was so offended by her sleeves that he pretended not to hear when she inquired about his spitting cats; yet for every merchant who turned up their nose at her doublet, there were two more waiting to sell. She bought as many gifts as she could stuff into her pockets – a peacock quill for Derset, a jar of salted plums for Litany, a pair of sheaths with suns on them for Chidney and Blundsor, and a knife for Raden – and at the far end of the market she found a woman who professed to sell exotic goods from Chiam.

*Amongst the weapons and shields,* a vial of something black had been labelled as powdered dragon talon. She leaned closer to peer at it.

“Anyone would be delighted with such a curiosity,” the woman assured her, eyeing the stain on her sleeve. “A unique product, oh yes; but you’ll need eighty-five cadres and twenty mettles for that... no discounts, and not a piece less.”

There was one person she knew who would love that. When she pulled out her purse and counted out eighty-five gold coins and twenty silver ones, she was
thanked and shaken by the hand, begged to visit again, and promised that she would be found a bargain on griffin's tears – or blood of the leaping wolf, if she liked.

The pain had left her lungs for long enough that the thought of the maturation could be kept from giving rise to a fresh panic, and as they arrived at the beginning of the delta, she gazed out without any distraction. The Grandfleuve diverged into three paths that gushed to the sea, and on the left tributary a pavilion was floating – or at least seeming to float, for she knew that it must be supported by stilts, below the tiered structure framed by four pillars shaped like spearfish. It appeared to rest upon the water. The sight was made more magical by tiny pieces of glass on the pavilion's roof, raining droplets of gold light over the surface of the water.

"The Pavilion of Songs," the guide announced, as he led them to a galley. "The very place where the Lyrian royal choir performs every year... His Highness Prince Montignac sings the Hymn of Pleasure here."

"Of course he does," Cassia muttered. "He's never known anything but pleasure."

The only melody that reached their ears as they glided across the Grandfleuve was the scooping of the oars in the water, but it made no matter: the sunlight proved more ethereal than any song. Sitting on the chairs in the middle of the river, it really did seem like they were floating, and eating their lunch and drinking their wine took on a dreamlike quality. The parcels of papaya and banana-flower salad that the guide unwrapped proved deceptively beautiful, however: the fruit had been dipped in a blend of chilli and salt that set their mouths on fire, making the bowls of seared noodles taste mild by comparison.

Lysande produced the vial from her pocket. She had anticipated this moment for the best part of the journey from the market, and Cassia's expression did not disappoint.

"You found powdered talon? But you never told me you liked to collect dragon artefacts!"

"Not for myself. But I have a friend who, I hear, spent hours reading about dragons as a child... perhaps she would take it off my hands."

Cassia pulled Lysande into a hug that nearly crushed her ribs. After they had rowed back to the shore, they rearranged guards in the palanquins, and the two of them chatted away together on the same seat, comparing impressions of Lyria while the palanquin-bearers wove a course through the traffic.
As they approached the Hill of Oblitara, it was hard to say who was more excited. The Irriqi rattled away to her guards about the distinctive talons of Oblitara, and the villages he had destroyed; the other great dragons, Excoria, Ignis, and Eradicus, who had been ridden by elemental tyrants; while Lysande, though quiet on the outside, had allowed her thoughts had run to the Conquest and the histories she had read as a child: the formation of armies, the coordination and the great surge, when women and men rose up against their elemental rulers, driving them out of their manors.

The Hill of Oblitara rose out of a bare plain, and she saw at once why Jale had not wanted her to climb it: the peak that rose above them was naked of any vegetation, with not even the meanest date tree flourishing on its sides, and only at the top did a few daubs of green shade the earth. The steps stretched up like a ladder under the glare of the sun. She hoped that the palanquin bearers received a handsome wage, for they began the jerky ascent at a pace that must have strained their shoulders, never pausing to put down their load.

"Imagine burning your enemies with a dragon," Cassia said, when they were half-way up. "Now that’d crush any rebellion, or any jumped-up family who thinks your throne is theirs. If I had an Oblitara to roast every one of the Qamaras…"

"Even if they hadn’t been dead for four hundred years, you couldn’t possibly control one."

"All right." Cassia folded her arms. "There’s no need to go throwing facts into a fantasy."

The jolting ceased after an eternity, and they emerged onto a landing that stuck out on the side of the hill. Lysande felt her stomach give a lurch. Looking down was not a good idea: it was much easier to turn her eyes upwards.

Two hundred steps, she thought, gazing at the trees on the peak. Better than a thousand. Jale knew what he was about.

She set one foot on the first step and began to climb. Derset joined her, and the others divided into pairs, Litany and Blundsor behind her, then Cassia with the guide, and the rest trudging behind them. The last two hundred steps did not seem like a great distance, but the pain sliced into her after just a few minutes – it was different this time – an ache spreading through all of her, from her fingertips to her toes. The daggers multiplied and multiplied. Keep moving, she told herself, just keep moving, and it’ll pass.
She was nearly there, at the spot where soldiers the first armies had shot down the dragon, even if it took all the strength in her body not to wince – the pain had tripled, and she fought to put one foot in front of the other. It would be wise to ask the group to pause and sit until the pain dispersed, but she had not come this far to stop, even for a few minutes, and she kept hobbling up the stairs in the sun.

“Are you all right, my lady?” Derset said, as her foot struck the edge of one step. “You look as if you were about to faint.”

“This sun is enough to make anyone falter.” Lysande wobbled, but managed to right herself. “Only a few more stairs and we will be on the famous spot. I am determined to stand where Oblitara did.”

“So long as you don’t die, like Oblitara did.” He smiled wryly. “Heatstroke is a serious thing.”

Eight steps left. Then seven... six... five. The fourth was nearly another stumble, but she gritted her teeth hard enough to keep her body upright. Three steps to go... then only two...

She had mounted the last stair when she felt the pain cut through her. The knives sliced into her flesh; into her lungs, her throat and her head: it was as if they had entered every part of her body, even her veins.

She reached for Derset’s arm, and she nearly grabbed hold of him, but her legs gave way. Her body toppled backward.

Somebody caught her, but not in time for her head to avoid the ground. She could hear Litany’s shriek, and Derset’s cry of “my lady”, and Cassia shouting at someone to get water.

The last thing she saw was the pure, vibrating blue of the Lyrian sky, before everything faded to black.

Blackness. Blackness for hours, or was it days? She tried to open her eyes, but the pain was so excruciating that even moving an eyelid was agony. The only choice was sleep. In the blackness she still felt the daggers in her veins, but when she was dreaming, their points receded and she could breathe again.

She was walking in Axium Forest, on the first morning Sarelin had taken her there. The queen had sent the guards away, so they could talk alone. Sarelin put a finger to her lips and pointed, and she followed to where a brown shape moved between two trunks. The bear walked towards the queen on its hind legs, bellowing, its jaws wet. Sarelin stepped forward to meet it. The animal slowed to watch her,
bear opposite human: ten feet of muscle and dark, lustrous fur, facing down a figure in silver armour.

The two gazed at each other, and Sarelin drew a dagger from her sheath.

She steadied her aim and threw. A straight hit. Three more. The bear opened its mouth – tottered – and crashed onto wet soil, leaving the forest reeling, so that Lysande could feel the earth shaking; could see the sweat on Sarelin’s brow as she sheathed her dagger again.

“Powerful bastard.” The queen shook her head and walked over to the huge body. “I saw him on the last hunt, too, but I let him get away. Suppose I sort of got attached to him.”

“Why kill him, then?”

Sarelin’s smile, as she turned to Lysande, was both sad and amused. “Any soldier can kill something he hates. You don’t feel pain when you destroy an enemy. It’s the natural thing to do. It’s only when you kill something you’ve come to love that you learn how to lead.” She walked back to Lysande and clapped her on the shoulder. “One day, you’ll understand that, Lys.”

The pain in her veins returned, and the blackness shrouded her again. She drifted down a river where there was no light: only waves of pain, lapping at a shore she could never reach.

The next time she was with Sarelin, it was not through sight, but through touch: a pair of familiar hands lifted her up and placed her into a carriage. She could feel the warm presence of a body on the seat beside her, and hear a ringing voice. “There she is, the girl with the quill.” Laughter – the scent of thick perfume, of the kind that royals and nobles wore – and Sarelin’s hand wrapped around her shoulders.

There were other hands, too. Cool hands that pressed against her forehead and went away again. Hands that pushed her lips apart and gave her water. They were on her when the pain finally stopped, and when she swam back into the real world: pushing up through the blackness to break the surface.

“There you are at last,” a mellifluous voice said, beside her. “Try to lie still. You’ve had a frightful ordeal; the physicians think it was heatstroke, the poor souls.”

She opened her eyes. A drowsiness hung upon her, but there were no pains threatening to pierce her; she was lying on dozens of silk cushions in the suite in Lyria, with the mosquito net rolled up above her, and the sun gushing in.
Relief swamped her, so entirely that it took her a moment to see who had spoken.

"I thought you’d forgotten about me," she said.

Three’s smile was enigmatic, as always. He pressed a hand to her forehead again and held it there for a few seconds. He looked somewhat out of place on the gilt chair beside her bed, attired in a brown outfit and the same triangle pendant he always wore.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to arrive,” he said. “I had to clear up a little altercation in the desert. But I made it here in time to keep you from prying eyes.”

She was not in prison. Nor were her hands shackled in tempero. “How did you sneak in here?”

“Along with a Lyrian family and a physician’s robe, Seven has the power of inducing extreme good will. The guards on the door were pleased to see her. The physician was thrilled to let her take over, too.” He smiled.

She tried to sit up, but her head weighed her down like a ball of lead fixed to a twig, and she was forced to settle back on the pillows.

“You will feel weak for a few hours.” Three patted her forehead again. “The symptoms of this condition include an intelligence more advanced than the average citizen; heightened senses, so acute that they will occasionally drive you to distraction, and the ability to kill with a flick of your hands. Of course, you’ll have to hide these symptoms for the rest of your life, so the scales even out – in a manner of speaking.”

“You knew I was an elemental.”

“I guessed.” He pulled his chair closer to the bed. “There were certain clues, but I did not expect my suspicion to be confirmed before the Sapphire Ball. Least of all two days before. Lie back, my dear, and allow me to offer you some of this honeyed gateau: I cannot recommend the papaya salad.”

After she had swallowed the piece of cake, she flexed her arms; tested her toes and fingers; breathed in and out and measured the exhalation. Nothing seemed unusual. It might be obvious on the outside, though – she might look like an elemental – what if everyone knew what had happened to her? As she was considering this horrible possibility, Three’s words sank in at last.

Two days until the ball, she thought. That means I’ve been asleep for...
"You have been sprawled on that bed for over a week." He seemed to have read her mind. "It takes time for one's body to transform into a weapon of mortifying force."

"I don't feel like a weapon of mortifying force. My arms feel like limp lettuce."

Even if there was a weapon hidden inside her, it could hardly be strong enough to protect her against everyone in the realm who would detest her. She had no idea how to move an element.

"It would be unnaturally convenient, if there were no gap between maturation and the emergence of your powers. This is what we call the transition," Three said. "Two days before the ball, and you are at the height of volatility: a jet of water or a ball of fire might burst out of you at any moment. You are dangerous, not only to others, but to yourself. We have infiltrated Rayonnant Palace and some of my colleagues can take you through the methods to control your powers, but it is a practical lesson. It cannot be taught until you have your element."

A jet of water might just burst out of her? Had Three really spotted clues that she was elemental, or was he only referring to her pains? Might someone else have noticed these clues, too? As the questions arrived, one upon the other, she noticed that he was fumbling under the brim of his hat and pulling out a piece of paper.

"You are different now — and yet you are the same — but we must leave that till after the ball. There is something we must deal with first." He handed her the page. "Perhaps you might be so kind as to cast your eye over this."

The grey veins in the paper told her that the White Queen had inked this note from the outlands, like the last few. Yet this sheet was creased many times, as if it had been scrunched and balled up.

"We have tried many times. Yet our efforts to translate it have proved fruitless." He almost managed to suppress the hopeful note in his voice. "We need your not inconsiderable abilities."

It was time to take her thoughts off her own body. She forced herself to concentrate on the problem. The runes that covered the page were not any alphabet identified by the crown: the shapes were curving yet jagged at the ends, a hybrid of two kinds of ancient glyphs, so rare that she had only come across them in one poetry book in Sarelin's library. She had stored away the meaning of each in her
mind, however, and it took less than five minutes to translate the message, with a quill brought over from the desk.

"It's a key," she said, looking across at Three. "Ascending numbers, followed by a question mark: that's the ancient way to signal a code."

"No hope of cracking it, I suppose?"

"The numbers will correspond to certain letters in a passage." A postscript hid in the bottom-right corner of the page: \textit{L, 12}. "I'd say it comes from the Legilium."

"The book of laws." Three nodded. "A good choice; most city-rulers and nobles keep it nearby, in case they are suddenly required to evade their taxes. They are scrupulous, when it comes to acting without scruple. You have a copy to hand, I presume?"

At Lysande's direction, he rummaged through the manuals and histories and poetry-books that she had convinced Litany to pack, to find the dog-eared Legilium in the chest on her desk. She opened the law-book up to the twelfth page: a chapter on the crime of using a magical power, she noted, with a little smile. Skimming through the passage, she had only just enough strength to hold the book side by side with the creased piece of paper, but matching the key to the message was no problem: she counted the letters in her head and jotted down the right ones.

"Might you share your findings with me?" Three inquired, as soon as her hand had stopped moving.

Lysande held the paper up and looked over what she had written. Concentrating, she broke the string of letters into words.

"Make sure you have seduced Prior at the ball," she read. "All will be ready."

Three said nothing in reply. He stood up and walked to the window, and Lysande grappled with the message.

"Seduce \textit{me}? Why in the three lands would the White Queen want her servant to seduce \textit{me}? I mean – I'm the least important member of the Council."

Three was gazing at the lotus-pond below. She had the impression that his thoughts were far away from the flowers.

"Perhaps she has guessed that the 'heatstroke' that laid you up in bed was not quite what it seemed. Or perhaps she has found out that you are working with the Resistance." He walked back to the chair and sat down. "Perhaps she thinks that because you are new and inexperienced in your position, you can be killed in some
manner that will shock Elira. Whatever scheme she has in mind for the Sapphire Ball, it will revolve around you.”

A wave of disbelieving laughter rose in Lysande’s chest and subsided again. She had just discovered that she was elemental, and the Council would be within their rights to have her killed as an enemy – and now their very enemy, the White Queen, wanted to kill her too.

“Well, I may not be Dante Dalgereth, but I am not a middling fighter. And I will have two hundred elite guards waiting for my word: even if the Umbra leaks the positions of the Lyrian guards to the White Queen, they cannot know about my troops.”

“I expect you are right. Pray give me those papers, Miss Prior.”

Lysande handed him the letter and the translation, and he folded up them up and tucked them back under the brim of his hat. He pushed a hair out of his face, and as the Lyrian sun streamed in and fell on the strand, she saw the pure white shade of it against his cheek: the tress starved of colour. It took her a second longer to notice his frown.

“You’re not telling me something,” she said. “Do you think two hundred of the best Axium soldiers will not enough to defend us?”

“What is defence, after all, but putting up walls? You use an army to put a wall between yourself and another army; or a shield as a barrier against a sword. Mail, weapons, bodyguards: they all provide walls, with which we hope to keep out death. But can you put up a wall around your own mind, Miss Prior?”

She was silent.

“Consider that if she seeks to seduce you, she may send her servant to gain your trust: few of us have a fortification against our emotions, our fears; and the Umbra may have been working on yours already. What the White Queen means to achieve, I cannot say. I do know that no chain-mail or armour plating can protect you against what she will do to you if she breaks into your head.”

“So I have your assistance?”

“The Resistance will do what it can from the shadows. I make no promises, but if things look grim, Six and I may even step into the light. But in the end, we rely on you.”
“Then I must not disappoint you. I must set about with putting up the best wall I can.” Dante, Luca, Jale, even Cassia: none of them could be trusted until the ball was over. “I will be impermeable.”

“Impermeable.” Three straightened his hat. “I thought I was impermeable, too, until she shattered me. Very well: sleep, my dear, and you should be recovered enough to go over your defences tomorrow. Send word if you feel a stirring – I will endeavour to join you at once.”

He bowed and rose. As he stood up, Cursora came flying back through the window, landing on his wrist as naturally as if she were a part of him: her feathers shone the same bright, unnatural white as his hair. He placed the dove on the desk and left her to peck amongst the papers. Lysande watched him walk across the room.

She thought she caught a hint of consternation as he regarded her, like a man weighing up his odds and finding them longer than he had hoped. But he turned the handle and walked out. The pendant had disappeared beneath his cloak.

Only when the door had clicked shut did she realise that, in the shock of everything else, she had quite forgotten to tell him about her alliance with Luca Fontaine.
Chapter Twelve

The pleasure district of Lyria covered more than a third of the city, unlike the leisure quarter in Axium, which could be traversed in a few minutes. It took nearly a half-hour for Lysande’s palanquin to navigate through, even with another conveyance stuffed full of guards in front, clearing the way. The northern half of the district encompassed theatres, salons for musical concerts and dance academies, all decorated with gold statues that resembled spearfish and seeming to take up far more space than was necessary, while the western area offered a less refined range of establishments: signs promised “prize fights”, “exotic dancers and masseurs”, and even “honest prostitutes” (the dishonest ones, presumably, did not merit a placard).

Women and men alike winked at them and beckoned from doorways, dressed in shimmering cloth that revealed more than it covered. Lysande could not help blushing. The Axiumite in her was too strong for her to stare, but she allowed herself an occasional glance: it was hard to tell whether there was any point in observing propriety in a city where prayers were conducted naked – just minutes ago, they had passed a congregation standing with palms upturned and bodies unclothed, to better connect the flesh with the divine power of the sun.

In the quarter marked “pleasure district south”, the buildings gave way to a wide open area for gathering, and crowds of Lyrians and visitors covered the ground. The palanquins jerked to a stop.

Luca was sitting on the edge of a fountain, reading a book. He was dressed quite plainly in a shirt and trousers, and if not for the shimmering coil of Tiberus on his knee, he might have not have attracted any notice from the great many people chatting and laughing around him. He shut his book as Lysande walked up to him.

“At last,” he said. “I was beginning to think you’d never find time to converse with your colleague.”

“That was no excuse to bombard me with doves. Why are we meeting here, of all places?”

“Why else but to delight in the fountain of southern cheer?” He gestured to the bubbling water behind him. “Of course, that’s not its real name... like so many
ancient terms, the meaning has been modified. In the ancient Lyrian, it was *fontaine de vire*. The water of life."

"Throw a coin into it, and it brings you glory. Dip a hand in the water, and it heals the illnesses that plague you." Lysande had copied out the section on Lyrian myths in the Silver Songs several times, when Sarelin had wanted to present Chaléon Montignac with a copy for each of his mistresses, hoping to secure his cooperation on dissolving a debt to the Bank of Lyria.

"Perhaps you should dip a hand in it, Prior. A heatstroke that lasts for ten days – that must have been a very tenacious ailment, indeed."

She ignored the remark and led her guards past, and he followed her, lifting Tiberus up onto his arm. At the rail around the circular area they stopped and rested, and she waited a few seconds before darting a glance at him. There was nothing on his face to suggest he knew what had really kept her abed – no half-amused smile or satisfied look – and she turned back to the fountain.

A group of girls were tossing coins into the water, giggling, and an old man stooped down to tip a bag full of brass shavings in: he shook his offering out bit by bit, peering at each sliver as it plopped into the bowl.

"The coins don’t just stay there, of course," Luca said, as a mother lifted her baby up to see in. "At night, a member of the royal staff comes out and trawls through the water, with a net to catch coins and smaller pieces that may not look valuable: chips of gold, gems, brass shavings. The mesh is so fine that it catches everything."

"I sense a metaphor in the air. What is the net, Fontaine? Justice? Power?"

"We Rhimese are different to you, Prior." He regarded her with his piercing stare. "In other cities, rulers learn to gather news when their backside touches the throne; in Rhime, we do it to survive. I’ve been marshalling spies since I was eight. I caught two of the Ursinis plotting to slit my throat on my sixteenth birthday. Now, like that net, nothing slips past me. I move in the low places as well as the high. Even when I’m sitting in Lady Pandolfacco’s courtyard, I catch every whisper over a glass of ale on the other side of the city, where the Canduccis plot new ways to break my neck. And if pilgrims are lodged in inns across Lyria by the woman who calls herself my colleague: well, I catch that, too." He ran a hand over Tiberus’ head.

Lysande looked away. She pretended to be very interested in the fountain.
“You may be surprised to hear it, but we Rhimese are a religious lot, too. Although our reputation may be otherwise, we can be as pious as King Redmund when we choose to. It happens I have pilgrims of my own in the city.”

“How many?”

“One hundred and fifty. Specialist pilgrims, you might say. They have a very good aim with their… blessings.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a long time. Lysande weighed the great desire she had to avoid disclosing a secret plan against the risk of crossing Luca Fontaine. Something always held her back from walking away whenever she was near him.

“I have a hundred pilgrims,” she said.

“Good. Perhaps we could arrange a gathering, to coordinate our hymn selection.”

“Perhaps we could.”

A gentleman with a pierced ear in the style of one of the outland fashions wandered past the fountain, and she caught something odd about the man’s garb; but her mind was still reeling from the fact that Luca had known what she was doing. Had he followed her to her meetings with the Resistance, too? What else did he know about her plans? Could he tell she was lying about the number of guards?

Something cold on her wrist prompted her to look down. Tiberus had wriggled his way off Luca’s arm, and now he was wrapping himself at a leisurely pace around her own, taking up residence on her. She tilted her arm, but instead of slithering off, the cobra rested his head and closed his eyes.

“Fontaine,” she said, through gritted teeth. “I am not a pillow for a snake.”

“Some would consider his attentions an honour.” He reached over and patted Tiberus on the head. “No? Very well, then.” He lifted up Tiberus, who gave Lysande a reproachful look as he was settled back onto a more familiar arm, darting his tongue in and out.

The outlander walked past them again, and she realised at once what had nagged at her: the man’s outfit was too heavy by far, hanging down to his boots in a thick cloth. It was like an advisor’s robe, except that this man did not have a learned look. His shoulders exhibited the bulk of a soldier.

As she watched, he shot a glance at them, and reached for something in an inner pocket.
“As a matter of fact,” Luca was saying, “I was wondering – ”

Lysande’s mouth opened, but before a warning could form on her lips, the outlander lunged at Luca, a smallsword flashing in the sun. The blade went through his shirtsleeve and drew blood. Luca moved so fast that she saw a blur, a whirl of white, pulling its rapier free of the sheath even as he turned – and the thin sword pierced the attacker’s breast.

Blood leaked from the man’s chest. He tottered, a stunned look in his eyes, and clutched Luca’s arm. Luca only pulled the rapier out and let him fall.

“Not a bad effort,” he said, looking down at the man. “But too hasty, for an assassin.”

He stepped back from the body, ignoring the shrieks around them – people were running, some fleeing back into the street, others hurrying over to them to gawk at the dead man. The volume of fluid that had burst from the man’s heart was extraordinary. Luca ripped a strip of cloth from his sleeve and bound his wound without any sign of distress.

“Let’s see if our friend wears his allegiance under that ugly collar,” he said.

He bent down and ripped the man’s robe upwards, exposing a mark just below the collar-bone. An image was set into the flesh, the skin tainted black as if from the discolouration of some disease, but this could only be a brand: the shape was unmistakeably a dragon.

At Luca’s whistle, two Rhimese guards appeared beside them – they must have been hovering nearby all along, Lysande realised, feeling rather stupid – and the soldiers dragged the dead man through the group of spectators, a smear of red following the body along the ground.

With brisk strokes, Luca wiped his hands on his shirt.

Lysande watched the Rhimese hefting the body up when they reached the street, disappearing into the traffic. Just a second ago, a man had come out of nowhere with a sword; Luca’s sleeve had been slashed, his arm bloodied; and yet he did not seem troubled by it all: if anything, he looked amused.

“It’s a late request, Prior but I have to ask…” He wiped his hands on his shirt again, daubing more red onto the white. “May I have the first dance with you at the Sapphire Ball?”
Possibilities, probabilities and likelihoods ran through her mind as the palanquin jerked its way back to Rayonnant Palace. Turning the matter over with her own reason was not enough: she needed a foil, another voice to supplement her own, to help her break the matter down.

She found the upper dining room nearly empty, its open windows allowing the sun to pour over the table, illuminating bowls of blush-melon and plates of spiced noodles. The court of Lyria was putting on a comedy in the grounds, she remembered. She had turned to head back to her suite when a familiar voice spoke.

“My lady.”

She spun around. Somehow, she had quite missed Derset sitting in a chair by the wall. He made to rise. It was him that she had come looking for, yet now that he was here, she was quite nervous about how to begin.

“Better to sit, for what I have to tell you, my lord.” She raised a hand. “In fact, better have a drink, too.”

She took a jug from the table and two glasses, and poured them each some wine. Over the Lyrian white, she recounted her organisation of the secret guard, beginning with the day that she had learned of the possibility of an attack at the Sapphire Ball (though leaving out the meeting with the Resistance, and putting it down to spies). She detailed the selection of two hundred special fighters, the disguise and dispersion through inns with Raden’s help, and the plan to bring them to the palace for the ball. Derset listened in silence, nodding.

“I could hardly blame you if you were angry,” she said, when she had finished her speech.

“Angry? No. Though I will admit, you astonish me, my lady. All this organisation on your own.”

“You do not feel I should have consulted your advice?”

“Chackery or Tuchester or Pelory would have felt so, I am sure. They have always made it clear to me that an advisor’s role is to direct their ruler. But I am of the opinion that the best leader is one who knows how to direct herself.” He smiled. “Of course, I am a little taken aback that you worked so industriously in secret, yet the situation would seem to demand it, would it not?”

Whether his years as a foreign envoy had made him so patient, or whether it was from his love of Sarelin, Lysande could not say; but she had scarcely been so
relieved. Now, she hastened to tell him about her meeting with Luca and his request to merge guards. As she talked, his smile faded; and by the time she had finished her description of the dragon brand, he looked increasingly troubled.

"It may have been that the White Queen’s spy was trying to kill Prince Fontaine, just as it appeared," he said. "If Prince Fontaine is truly your ally, the timing of the strike on the Grandfleuve may have been a coincidence, and he may have been defending himself against an assassin today. I think it not impossible."

"Not impossible. A glowing vote of confidence in Prince Fontaine, then."

"My lady, I would not wish to suggest —"

"Speak plainly, Lord Derset. I value your opinion."

He put down his glass of wine. "Then I think we should also consider the possibility that Prince Fontaine is tricking you into yielding information, my lady. If he arranged for one of the White Queen’s soldiers to run at him, he might be seeking to gain your trust by slaughtering the man in your presence. We cannot ignore that he is a master of stratagems."

She nodded. "I knew you would strike the nail on the head."

"By merging with you, he gains the precise details of your plans, for some purpose or other. I do not say that it is an ill purpose — perhaps he merely wishes to make sure of your loyalty." He gave a polite, but rather unconvincing smile.

"Perhaps." She rose and paced to the window. The White Queen had used the expression *seduce Prior*... and was it unreasonable to suppose that a request for a dance was the first step of a seduction? She pictured Luca’s face again, after killing the assassin: hardly a flicker of emotion.

"I think we should attempt to protect ourselves against him," she said, sitting down. "Give him the guards’ locations in the inns, to pacify him, but give him false details of their positions at the Sapphire Ball. We can move them at the last moment to a new location."

"A good plan." Derset considered. "A risky plan, too, but I suppose so long as you act with great care…" He trailed off. "If I may speak frankly —"

"You may."

"— if we could find a way to mislead Prince Fontaine about the number of guards, it would cut down our work."

"I may have already done so." She walked back to him, resisting the impulse to look down at the ground. "You see, I told Fontaine I only had a hundred guards."
“A bare-faced lie to a prince,” he said, smiling. “You remind me of someone, my lady.”

“And who is that?”

“Her late Majesty, Queen Sarelin.”

She laughed, but when she was back in her suite, she took out the gold quill and held it in her palm; unbuttoned her doublet, stood in front of the mirror, and looked at the chain of fluid silver around her neck.

*

Dante and Jale came to call on her at separate times that afternoon, and she sent Litany to make her excuses. Dante had drawn blood on the arm of a Lyrian guard who muttered an insult at him in the corridor, Litany reported – the maid could not seem to remember the insult, only that it had something to do with the north, and that Dante had swung his fist. Litany was certain that the guard had run off, and the Valderrans watching had clapped.

“It’s odd, though, isn’t it?” Litany said. “The First Sword’s reviled by the southerners. Yet last night, after dinner, it looked like he was heading towards Prince Montignac’s quarters.”

“Mmm,” Lysande said. She was too concerned with whether Dante or Jale would realise that she was fending them off to hear the remark.

Cassia’s attentions were harder to avoid, for she turned up in the thick of a group of armed soldiers and insisted on being let in. Litany was so berated that Lysande was forced to send her guards out with a message written in her own hand, assuring Cassia that she was really ill, not kidnapped or murdered by some assassin.

*Impermeable*, she thought, as she looked at the bouquet of purple flowers Cassia had left her. *I’m putting up the best wall I can.*

She slipped down to ground floor of the palace with Raden, and they edged their way past the Lyrian guards and through to the area where items were being carried to the back door. Tables were lugged past, sometimes in pieces, other times fully assembled and carried by groups of guards. Tanks of something covered in cloth were bustled along, and great quantities of mesh that Lysande presumed was some kind of decoration were brought to the back door; jugs of wine were hefted past; towers of plates balanced precariously: all in all, the procession was more
expensive and a lot noisier that it would have been in Axium, with many elbows bumped against walls. One thing stood out amongst the fuss, however – all of the arranging was taking place outside the palace.

“Do you see what this means?” Raden said, his eyes shining. “We don’t have to station the guards in one or two rooms. We can take our pick.”

“The back wings, the stables, or the gardens…” She peered out of a gold-edged window. “What does a captain’s eye make of the layout?”

They considered the spare rooms on the ground floor, which were easy to break into, and the possibility of stowing the guards with the horses; yet the only place that was likely to hide them all, in Raden’s opinion, was the palm garden behind Rayonnant Palace. Jale’s father, Chaleon, had attempted to gather ten of every kind of palm in Elira, and after his ambitions had expanded to twenty and then fifty of every species – the result was leafy enough to hide legions of guards.

Separating her other hundred guards from Luca’s would be more difficult, but Lysande had an idea – if Three agreed to involve the Resistance, a well-placed storm of wind, water or fire could see Luca’s troops scrambling for safety. She resolved to write to him later. As she went over the positions of the scouts with Raden, doubts kept popping up in her head.

Would Sarelin have approved of her work – or would she have sent Lysande off to be killed, if she had discovered her scholar was elemental?

“So we put half the scouts along the Grandfleuve, a quarter in the desert, and a quarter along the coast. They’ll write as soon as there’s any sign of an army. Then we – are you listening to me?” Raden said.

“I was just wondering, Raden. Would you still want me as leader of Axium, if you knew that my parents were...”

“Were what?”

“Well, not Axiumites.”

He shrugged. “I suppose I wouldn’t mind if they came from another city. So long as it’s not Rhime, of course. I’m not completely mad.”

“I was imagining that they were... something most people would see as unforgivable.”

“You don’t mean – they were Chiamese?”

“For all love, Raden – this tenacious bigotry. I’ve must’ve told you a hundred times that the Chiamese were writing while Elirans were still living in caves!” She
shook her head. “But that’s not what I meant. More... that my parents might have been different, in some fundamental part of their nature.”

“Well, the way I see it, you’re you. You’re not your parents. And whoever they were, you’ve made your own way without them. That’s a fact.”

Lysande felt a little surge of relief, and she finished running through their plans and left Raden to write to the scouts. She was almost back at the Axium rooms when she felt the itch.

It began in the middle of her palm and spread. Ducking behind a statue of pair of naked lovers, she scratched at the skin with her fingernails, raking over the spot and leaving marks. The sound of footsteps echoed down the corridor. A second later, Jale raced past, his eyes shining; he said a brief “hello” to her and kept moving.

Vigarot Montignac strode after him and halted mid-way down the corridor. “Don’t think you’ve heard the last of this!” he cried, pointing a finger at his nephew. “It’s not your decision!” Jale stopped and pivoted. “I don’t give a dragon’s eye for your debts or your investments! You can find some way to pay back the bank!”

“The treasury would beg to differ!”

“We’re swimming in gold already! I won’t marry her, uncle!”

“You are misled by your own foolish desires, Jale. And you know Chaléon would not have approved of you breaking off the match.”

This made Jale falter, but only for a second; turning again, he ignored his uncle’s stare and walked away, his footsteps ringing.

Lysande watched his figure receding. There was a huff behind her, and Vigarot swept by. The itch had gone, and once Vigarot had retreated, she snuck away down the corridor. This was a time for concentration. She should be thinking about what she had she just witnessed. There must be a way to use it. She had seen Sarelin listening, once, when two noblewomen had argued in front of her, and later the queen had plucked their words out of the air at just the right moment, and reconciled them – winning the loyalty of each.

But she was thinking of her palm. She ran a finger over it now. There was no point dwelling on the possibility of her powers breaking loose: she had five days from the maturation, and when it happened, the ball would be over – and she could retreat to a house in Ratchley or Weicester outside the capital, and remove herself from the public eye. And learn what kind of monster I am.
The night sped by. Target practice and a final check of plans with Raden made the next day speed by, too, until Cursora returned, bearing the welcome news that Three had agreed to distract Luca’s guards at the ball.

Two hours before the ball, Lysande made her way back to her suite. Her gown had arrived from the palace steward while she was away – a voluminous emerald thing with a train and little Axium crowns in silver dotting the lower half. Litany stroked the fabric.

Her books had disappeared into their chests, and the desk had been covered with an array of jewellery. There was a necklace and a set of earrings shaped like the capital crown, and twenty-four hair pins fashioned with emeralds, along with other rings and baubles that she could not possibly wear. She wondered if the bone people on the platform by the Grandfleuve would have cheered her so loudly if they could see all this show. Yet she had scarcely begun to attach the skirt to the bodice of the gown when a knock came at the door.

“The master of wardrobe of Rayonnant Palace,” Litany announced.

The master of wardrobe of Rayonnant Palace flounced in in head-to-toe gold, took one look at Lysande, and shook his head.

“Oh, dear me,” he said. “You – maid – outside.”

It took fifteen minutes for Lysande’s bodice to be tied properly; another fifteen for the sleeves to be brushed, the shoulders plumped so that the swirls of silver cloth would show to their full advantage; a half-hour for her hair to be arranged. A good deal of brushing was carried out, and Lysande began to understand why Raden said torture was worse than a swift death: by the time a few light touches of powder had been applied to her eyes, she was wondering how anyone could move about their everyday duties in a gown.

The master of wardrobe sent for two attendants, who brought in a mirror and held it up. Her gasp drew smiles from them. The person looking back at her in the rich green dress and the emeralds was not the scholar of Axium Palace – she had a clean and shining glow to her.

“There we are. You’re a proper Axium girl, now,” the master of wardrobe said, gazing at her.

Lavish the costume might be, but it did not cling to her, nor expose her skin; it exuded a quiet power. No, she thought, staring at it. Not a girl, any more. A Councillor.
Litany was allowed to come in at last, and she fell to gushing about Lysande's gown, but Lysande cut off the flow. "Show the master of wardrobe and his attendants out," she said.

When the door was closed, she turned to Litany.

"Do you think you could put this gown back exactly as it looks now, Litany? Re-attach the bodice to the skirt?"

"Of course."

It was the work of a minute. She slipped on a pair of light trousers and tied her dagger-belt on, before putting on the skirt again. The gown hid everything, with so much material, and she admired her handiwork, feeling the hilts through the fabric. Before Litany adjusted the bodice, she hitched up the skirt and tucked her gold quill into one of the trouser pockets. It gave her some comfort to feel it there. She slipped Three’s vial of aetumus into the other, trying not to look at the pale liquid inside.

"It seems gowns have a use after all," she said. "Actually, I have a gown for you, too, Litany."

In the closet on the wall hung a silver gown cut in the Axium style and overlaid with fine Lyrian cloth, so that it seemed to shimmer. Litany stared at it, saying nothing.

"This is for you. I had your measurements sent from the palace steward by dove... I hope you won't think it an impertinence." She placed it in the girl’s arms. "At least this way, we can suffer together, no?"

After laying out the gown on the bed, Litany threw her arms around her employer’s waist and, quite forgetting her place, burst into tears.

*

The preparation chamber seemed to be hidden away in the palace. Lysande followed her guide out to a staircase, and then through corridors she had not seen before, decorated ever more sumptuously with gold and jewels. Lyrian guards dotted the walls here and there. The southern soldiers eyed her with interest as she passed, but kept their silence; there were more of them, now, Vigarot Montignac having got his wish in time for the ball, and the palace had a serious air despite its glitz and gold.

_Tonight will be the making of me_, she thought. _Or my undoing._
They entered a corridor lined with portraits – beginning with Prince Claubert Tancey and running through every other Lyrian leader, from Catherique Gaincourt to Luçois Orvergne – and she felt the weight of history upon her, those royal faces looking down at her from the frames. The attendant knocked three times on a set of doors at the end and pushed them open.

“The Councillor of Axium is present.”

The shards of light emanating from a chandelier dazzled her. It took her a moment to see clearly, and when she could, she discerned Dante beside a high-backed chair. He was conversing with Jale in a low tone. Lysande noticed the axe and blade crossed behind the First Sword’s shoulders, casting shadows on a table that looked as if it might be centuries old.

“I care not for his grasping,” he was saying, as she came in.

Where Dante wore a northern warrior’s outfit of a brown cape over armour, Jale sported a blue doublet and trousers, fashioned from a silk that had to cost hundreds of cadres, and as the chandelier’s light fell on them they seemed to shimmer, like the waves of the sea. The effect of the fabric was augmented by a ring of gold set with sapphires, nestling on his brow: the Lyrian crown outshone even Axium’s. Yet the look on Jale’s face was far from glowing, and Lysande heard him whisper as she passed, “I think you rather overestimate my courage.”

They broke off to admire Lysande’s gown. She was not at all accustomed to being gawped at, and slipping out of the conversation, she edged around the table until she reached the spot where Cassia was standing. Several of the male guards on the walls were eyeing the split up the side of the Irriqi’s plum-and-white gown, though none of them had dared to make eye contact; Lysande could not blame them, given the leopard’s teeth that adorned Cassia’s neck, ears and hair, each honed to a fine point.

“I thought you might never come out of your suite. Has the heatstroke run its course?” Cassia said, slapping a mosquito on her wrist.

“Completely, I thank you.” Lysande bowed.

Cassia did not voice the suspicion that was evident in her eyes. “You won’t believe it,” she said, “but I’ve got a sword under this gown.”

“You astonish me.”

Vigarot Montignac swept through the room with a train of attendants, giving orders left and right. “Let me congratulate you on acquiring a fine style, Councillor,”
he said, walking over to Lysande. “You could be Cognita, goddess of wisdom, come up through the earth, in that gown.”

“It’s a tactic,” Luca said, and everyone turned at once, catching him coming through the door. “She dresses like an orphan most of the time, so as soon as she puts on a little silk, she can pass for a queen. Effective, but hardly original.”

The sight of him caused her to choke on her reply. Instead of his usual, unadorned doublet, he had chosen a black one slashed through the sleeves, tied with leather down the middle: with the deep red of the shirt beneath, it gave the impression of flowing blood. The effect was so dramatic that several of the guards had unconsciously reached for their swords. His ruby ring sparkled on his right hand, and in his left, he held a cane, though he gripped it several inches from the top: for Tiberus had coiled himself around the head, and did not appear to be in any hurry to move.

“This should prove an interesting wedding, don’t you think?” Luca remarked, as Vigarot ordered the Council into a single line. “The reluctant husband.” He nodded towards Jale, with a half-smile. “Have you figured that little puzzle out?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

She was spared any further conversation by the attendants moving them into place before they could protest: Jale was positioned at the front, with Dante guided effortlessly to the back. Vigarot led them forward, flinging the doors at the end open, revealing a room with a statue of Princess Charine Orvergne straddling a horse, and a table decorated with spiked melons of an alarming pink hue – they were bustled on, to another set of doors, where two heralds and a woman in a gold gown were waiting.

“Tell me the truth, Lysande,” Cassia whispered into her ear, as they began to slow down. “Were you really ill all that time?”

Lysande was thinking of the itch in her palm, and it took her a moment to respond.

“Of course I was.”

“I don’t know. You managed to meet with Luca Fontaine, yesterday, by the fountain of southern cheer.” Lysande nearly tripped, and Cassia caught her and steadied her. “He’s not the only one who has spies, you know.”
There was no chance to explain, or apologise – at a nod from Vigarot, the woman pushed the doors open, and a wave of hot air from the desert hit Lysande in the face and chest.

The space before them was covered by a mesh, a roof of gauzy gold providing the only barrier between them and a dusky sky: a little darker than afternoon but not as deep as night. Hundreds of candles flickered in bowls along the ground, lighting up the way down a long path. They had come out onto the palace steps, and at the bottom of these they passed over a stage, where a wedding pavilion was set up, decorated with enormous portraits of Jale and a demure-looking woman that Lysande guessed was Mariana Ferago. Beyond the stage lay a longish platform with two lines of palms, each with a trunk whittled down and encased in gold.

Flat pools of water flanked the platform, and as they walked between them, dozens of little jets of water sprung up on either side, giving rise to applause. The source of the clapping came from further ahead, where the platform ended, and a path led through a mass of round tables: so many tables, in fact, that Lysande faltered and nearly stumbled again.

Every notable person she had ever seen in Axium Palace seemed be sitting before her. The most famous musician in the capital, Lord Herkeley, who had been kicked out of Sarelin’s court when he vomited into his friend’s lute the morning after the royal jubilee, was watching her with a cocked eye. Several poets – Lady Langlore and Lady Banover among them, the two Axiumites as famous for their feuding as for their verse – were sharing a table, and she recognised a Pyrrhan merchant called Meddalah behind them, who had made her name selling cleverly-constructed shields. A Lyrian painter, who looked rather affronted to be sitting next to Meddalah, was adjusting his jewels. Several distinguished guards who looked too old to fight sat beside a cluster of Bastillonian dignitaries – all silver-haired, she noticed, and with all slaves standing behind them.

There seemed to be no pattern at all to the way that people were seated, except at the end of the enclosure where five tables had been reserved, each draped with a crest of an Eliran city.

On their left, a single table bore a design she recognised: the Bastillonian ram under crossed swords.

“Look,” she heard Carletta Freste say, from the table she was passing, “that old stoat Ferago’s brought his sons.”
King Ferago wore a ram’s-head crown and a great cloak trimmed with ermine that trailed along the ground. Both crown and cloak seemed to envelop him, leaving very little of his person to see out. His wife sat at his side, her hand clasping that of a young woman in a pink dress who was struggling to smile.

In her confection of silk and fabric, Mariana Ferago had the air of a skittish foal who might bolt at any moment. Her face was even more demure in the flesh than in the portrait on the stage. At her right were two young men who could only be her brothers. Both wore the Bastillonian white and blue, but while the bigger man laughed so loudly that Lysande could hear it across the enclosure, the other remained silent, looking around with a circumspect expression, and pushing his spectacles up his nose.

“That Anton Ferago laughs like a horse braying,” Lord Herkeley remarked, as she passed his table. “I suppose that’s why his father made him captain of the Bastillonian army – so the guards can hear him across a field.”

“That poor brother Dion won’t have much luck with the ladies. Not next to him.” Herkeley’s wife grinned.

The Axium table brimmed with the people Lysande liked best – Dersef, Litany, Chidney and Blundsor, amongst them – Blundsor’s sleeve had scraped something oily on the way, and Chidney was cleaning it with a corner of the tablecloth, she saw. The pair of them sat up when she arrived, but it was her advisor she leaned over to first.

“Is there any sign of an army yet?” she whispered.

“Your captain says there’s been no word from the scouts.” Dersef squeezed her hand under the table: just the slightest pressure, barely enough to be felt.

“There must have been a sighting further out, though.”

“Nothing from the border or any of the western towns. And Captain Hartleigh’s just had a dove from one of our scouts by the Grandfleuve saying the centre of Elira’s clear.” Looking at her, Dersef leaned closer. “Aren’t you pleased, my lady?”

“I wish I could say I was.”

They watched the rest of the Council take their seats, and Lysande sank into thought. She did not even hear the clashing noise of an attendant dropping a tray of charsticks, or the curse that followed. A small army would have pleased her. A large army would have disquieted her; but no army at all meant that something was wrong.
“Perhaps the White Queen hasn’t brought an army,” Derset said. She could see the string of attacks, from the panther that had clawed Sarelin, to the dragonblood, the silent sword at the banquet, the wolf bounding across the Arena, and the coin-purse that had nearly brought them to war. Panther, poison, wolf. Each is a move in the same game. Then there was the flash of a sword as the assassin charged at Luca, just yesterday. This was not a woman who gave up easily.

“I don’t think she’s been deterred,” she said, slowly. “If her legions aren’t in the desert by now, I believe Mea Tacitus is planning something else.”

“We haven’t prepared for something else,” Derset said.

Before she could respond, Vigarot Montignac ushered Jale to the front of the seating and coughed, and the crowd fell silent.

“Ladies and lords,” Vigarot said, “King and Queen Ferago; Mariana, Anton, Dion; Councillors, distinguished guests, and guards who defend us so bravely: let me welcome you all to the Sapphire Ball!”

She saw Luca Fontaine looking at her across the room as applause broke out. He raised his glass. The red of the shirt under his doublet flashed in the candle-light, and for a moment it looked like an open wound; but he turned away, and it was merely silk again.

“In Lyria, our motto is art, wine, song, and tonight we plan to give you all three. But first, a taste of our history,” Jale announced, spreading his hands. “I give you the illustrious tales of our ancient poets. Here for you, tonight: the Song of Sun!”

He had no sooner sat down again than a troupe of dancers ran in: eight women in costume gathered on the stage and bowed, followed by a band of flute-players. At a clap of Jale’s hands, a lilting melody began, and the dancers moved back and forth: Lysande recognised the crocodile who had emerged from the river to give birth to Lyria; the bird that laid a golden egg out of which the spirit of art hatched and blessed the city; and of course, the fountain that poured forth southern cheer, created by a pyramid of dancers scattering glitter onto the ground, their blue costumes mimicking water. Each of the desert myths received cheers.

Lysande’s gaze drifted away after a while, searching the crowd. She found Raden amongst a group of Axium Guards. Four entrances fed into the enclosure, and the one on the back wall was closest to the palm garden: he had stationed himself in front of that. But if the White Queen sprang a surprise upon them, would he be able to make it to her guards in time?
The White Queen's not here, she told herself. She saw Cassia amongst a group of Pyrrhan nobles, yawning. A lock of long white hair made Lysande sit up; but it was only an elderly woman in a captain's uniform. There had been no glimpse of Three, nor Six, yet surely there would be at least one member of the Resistance in the enclosure?

The performance had grown more vigorous: a woman dressed as Prince Arle Raquefort began striking another dressed as a dragon on the head, using a wooden sword.

"Did Arle really kill a beast like that?" an Axium Guard behind Lysande asked.

"No, you idiot," his neighbour muttered, shaking her head. "Prince Arle's arse didn't touch the throne for half a century after the Conquest. He killed elementals, not dragons."

"Why's he hacking at a dragon, then?"

"It's symbolic. I think."

The dancers received a warm reception, and they were followed by the even more welcome sight of Lyrian attendants bearing dishes and jugs, which they carried to the back of the path and placed on the Councillors' tables, working their way forward.

"The songs start in a moment, my lady," Derset said, offering her a plate of stuffed chillies. "At a Lyrian wedding, they weave music and food together, to delight both senses."

As the band marched onto the stage and struck up the first tune, hands picked up charsticks across the enclosure. Lysande nibbled at fragrant jasmine-cakes and balls of friend banana. After the first two courses, the musicians tripled their volume. "Ah: here comes the dancing," Blundsor said, cheerfully.

Vigarot Montignac rose, and headed in the direction of the Lyrian table – but Dante had drawn Jale from his seat and was speaking with him. After a few words had been exchanged, the young prince turned on his heel and hurried over the platform between the pools of water, up the stage and the steps and back into the palace. Chairs scraped across the enclosure. The ladies and lords of Lyria knew how long to wait before joining the first dance, but none of them knew what to do if the bride and groom did not begin it, and they gathered at one of the tables and fell to whispering.
Lysande felt a hand on her arm, and turned to her side.

“Lord Pelory,” she said.

Those cold eyes stared down at her. “May I present my wife, Councillor Prior? Councillor, Lady Bethel Pelory.”

Lysande nodded her greeting. A young woman in a small ruff bowed back, her hands folded, and her eyes merry. Lysande noticed that as she stepped back beside her husband, her hand closed over Pelory’s, and Pelory could not resist a smile – the first genuine smile Lysande had seen him give.

“I hope you are enjoying the Sapphire Ball, Lady Pelory. Those jewels are most handsome. And yourself, my lord – I am sure you have been working hard. Perhaps you would entertain me with some tales of your endeavours.”

Bethel Pelory was not slow to take a hint. She bowed, adjusted her emeralds, and was half-way to the wine-fountain by the time Pelory had found a chair and dragged it over to Lysande. “I announced that the four castles would be used as jails, just before I left. My colleagues were not pleased,” he said, as he sat down.

“But they yielded?”

“Remarkably quickly. It may have been because I brought fifty Axium Guards with me, as your letter suggested.”

“Very good.” Lysande smiled. “We understand each other, Lord Pelory. I should like us to keep doing so. I have not forgotten my gift to you.”

“You are too kind.”

“A small castle, I said, did I not? A modest dwelling? But I am afraid I have checked, and there are none to spare.”

Pelory opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say.

“That is why I have decided to give you a large castle, instead. The Prexley Castle should do nicely. It is newly restored, after all... and as Lady Tuchester insisted, we cannot use it as a jail. I should like to be a symbol of my reliance on you, and of your support to me.”

“Councillor – this is beyond all expectation – I cannot thank you enough –”

“Your ongoing support, Lord Pelory. These are such treacherous times. It is good to know that I have eyes and ears in the Oval, or in the ballrooms of Axium; and since Prexley Castle belongs to the crown by law, we shall be close for years to come, shall we not?”
He leaned back in his seat, and nodded slowly. His face did not reassume its cold mask, this time. “Just so,” he said, at last. “I see a relationship of great profit. Very great profit. I hope you will excuse my liberty in forgetting my other news until now, Councillor, but King Ferago’s son Dion is looking for you. Apparently he wants to ask you to dance.”

The Master of Laws bowed, and walked away, to where Bethel Pelory was admiring a statue of Princess Charine Orvergne. The young woman’s hand closed over his, and Lysande saw her lean in and begin speaking to her husband at once.

From the other side of the enclosure, Dion Ferago was heading through the guests, excusing himself as he came and making a path towards her table. The motion of his elbows sent several ladies scuttling out of his vicinity. Lysande saw him pause to push up his glasses, which had slipped to the bottom of his nose.

“While I hesitate to discourage anything so joyful as dancing,” Derset whispered, leaning towards her, “I suspect your Bastillonian suitor has more than one motive. King Ferago would like the idea of a son married to a Councillor as well as a daughter.”

“An Eliran bride to make a pair with his Eliran groom?”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

She rose from her chair. If she moved about, she might spot any trick the White Queen was planning. She hurried away, cutting between two tables. It would be impossible to avoid notice in a dress this particular shade, never mind with her red hair; yet there was a great jug on the left side of the enclosure where guests could dip a spoon into honey. The pavilion around it was large enough to duck behind.

She had nearly reached it when a woman swept past her and blocked her way, arm in arm with a tall Bastillonian.

“Prince Fontaine designed the fountains in the pools. He loves to invent things.” By the paucity of emotion in her voice, Lysande recognised Carletta Freste, the noblewoman who had shown her around Castle Cervello.

“Indeed.” Gabros Merez – for it was he – looked down his long nose, regarding her. “And the spearfish amongst the fountains – were they his idea, too?”

“Oh, no. Those are all Lyria’s.” Freste laughed.

The pair of them moved towards the sculpture of Chaléon Montignac that decorated the eastern side, and Lysande crept behind the pavilion. Dion Ferago had reached her table and was leaning over to ask Derset something. She had scarcely
begun to examine the rest of the crowd when she heard someone on the other side of the pavilion, speaking in impassioned tones.

“What in the three lands makes you think you have the right to bring this here?”

She peeked around the edge of the pavilion. Vigarot Montignac was holding a miniature sword in his hand. It was the same sword she had seen Dante rehearsing with in the maze garden at Castle Cervello, and as Vigarot pointed it, the engraving on the hilt caught the candle-light.

“It’s merely an ornamental sword,” Dante’s voice replied. “I see no slight in that.”

“Don’t act smart with me, Dalgēreth. I know the northern ways as well as you do. This is a proposal. You mean to wrap your grubby hands around your beloved.”

“My hands are clean. Like my honour.”

There was a pause – in which Vigarot brandished the sword – but upon seeing Dante’s hand upon his own sword-hilt, he appeared to think better of using it. “Slipping this under a platter won’t do a thing to stop this wedding,” he hissed. “Bastillón and Elira are joined now. The dowry’s been paid – the trade deal’s signed.”

“Don’t think I can’t see you looking up the ladder.” Dante moved closer to him. “You tried to wheedle your way into Chaléon’s favour, and when that didn’t work, you urged him to invade the north. Do you think I don’t remember you pouring lies about my mother into his ear, telling him to march on Raina: urging him to make war on the north, or the delta would be attacked?”

“I did what I did for the sake of Lyria.” Vigarot drew himself up. “As I do now.”

“Only if Lyria means yourself. You’d do anything to make yourself popular – even sell off your nephew like a slave, bartering him for power like a merchant at a market. But tell me, Vigarot, can you sell a heart? Even you might find that hard.” Dante stepped closer still. “The heart, at least, remains my property.”

Whose heart? It had sounded as if Dante meant Jale’s, from the way he had made the remark, but that was a slip of the tongue, surely – he must have meant Mariana’s.
"This marriage will go ahead," Vigarot snapped. "And Valderos will keep its
distance from the parties involved."

"Tell me, once Chaléon's son realises he's your puppet, how long do you
think it'll take him to cut the strings?"

Vigarot looked at Dante, his blue eyes gleaming. His smile had gone. He put
a hand to his sword, but again, he hesitated. "Threaten me once more," he said, "and
I'll have you taken out to the stable-yard and whipped. I make the rules in this
palace."

Dante looked back at him without a hint of fear.

"For now," he said.

Lysande did not like the tone of those words, but before either man could
move, a great wave of applause rolled through the enclosure. Everybody turned to
stare at the platform.

Jale was guiding Mariana onto it: he waved a hand, as if to say that they
could all relax now, and the band struck up another tune while Jale led Mariana
through the first steps of the lyrianesque. The prince put on a smile that would have
been convincing to a stranger. Soon other couples flowed onto the platform to join
them, falling into the movements.

Vigarot smiled triumphantly, and turned; but Dante was already gone.

Lysande slipped out from behind the fountain, hurrying along and glancing at
the crowd, yet not finding any glimpse of an attacker. She cut through two tables to
the path that led back to her own, and her feet carried her so rapidly that she swerved
around a candle on the floor and tripped – only to land in the arms of someone
coming the other way.

"Councillor Prior!" Dion Ferago was standing there, without his elbows
jabbing anyone.

"Thank you, my lord." She extricated herself and dusted her gown off. "I had
not quite hoped to embrace the east so literally. I hope you will forgive me."

"My father – that is, I thought –" He looked down at his feet, "I was
wondering if you would do me the honour of a dance?"

Lysande glanced at the platform. The couples were performing the sensual
Lyrian passedanse, and several of them had drawn so close that there was scarcely
any space between them.

"Well..."
She glanced around behind the tables, and her eye fell on the Rhimese crest on a soldier’s breastplate. “I’m terribly sorry,” she said, “but the fact is, I’ve already promised the first dance to Prince Fontaine.”

“And here I am. Ready and at liberty, Lysande.”

Luca had crept up without making a sound, and now he was standing at her side.

*He used my first name.*

She opened her mouth, but no words came out: there was no possible excuse that could get her out of this without admitting that she had lied to Dion Ferago, and Luca took her by the arm and steered her away, towards the platform, his hand slipping into hers.

The pressure was firm, but she squeezed back, making sure she matched the strength of his grip.

“Don’t think of running off to lord protector over there,” Luca said, jerking his head in the direction of Derset.

“Whatever makes you think I’d try to run away from you?”

“Good. That should make this a lot easier.”

And steering her through the last two tables, he led her onto the platform and into the dance.
The band switched from a fast tune to a slow one as they walked down the middle of the platform. Luca placed his hands on Lysande’s hip and shoulders, in the style of the passedanse. It did not feel as uncomfortable as she had expected. Indeed, it was not so bad at all, once she forced herself to move in time, step after step, swerve after swerve. For the first few minutes she concentrated only on going through the motions, but once she had mastered them, she looked up and met Luca’s stare.

She had observed him many times before, over a table or across a room, but as they moved together she realised that they were the same height; he did not look down at her, but straight into her eyes.

“This is the only place we can talk without being overheard,” he said. “We don’t have much time, so I’ll get to the point: I think it’s better to do away with pretences, now.” He led her in a circle by the arm.

“I don’t follow you.”

He let go of her as they passed down the line of couples, and they rejoined when they had reached the end. She could feel the eyes of the crowd upon her.

“I know exactly what you are. I guessed the day Malsante came into my suite, in Castle Cervello, and told me Sarelin Brey had chosen someone called Lysande Prior as councillor. I speak Old Valderran too, you know,” he said, steering her around. “Did you know that while ordinary bastards and orphans are named after the colour of their hair, elemental children are named after an element?”

“What?”

“Prior. Fire. Just like you told those silver-haired fools in the Room of Accord… only I expect none of them had heard of magical customs.”

Lysande was silent. He’s lying, she told herself, her legs moving automatically as her mind swirled. It can’t be true. She couldn’t have missed something that obvious, all this time.

“Whoever found you knew more about you than you gave them credit for,” Luca continued. “When I saw you wincing in the Arena, I guessed my suspicion was probably true; pains in the head are hard to hide. But it was your stay in your suite
that confirmed it. Heatstroke for nine days, Prior? I’m not a physician, but that’s stretching belief.”

It was a good thing that the dance separated them again, because she did not trust herself to speak. This must have been why Three suspected she was elemental. A fury filled her veins – why was it that she had no mother or father to explain this? Why couldn’t she have been raised with at least one elemental friend to tell her what she needed to know?

*Keep your cool,* she thought, exhaling hard. *Be composed, like Three.*

“I’m afraid you’ve let your imagination run away with you,” she said, when they were close again, their palms pressed together. “I was stricken with red fever as well as heatstroke. That’s why I was confined so long.”

“Don’t worry, Prior.” He laughed. “If I wanted to expose you, I could’ve turned you in to the others straight away – the thought of Sarelin Brey picking an elemental to choose her successor is pretty funny, since she beheaded half their number. But I want to work with you, not kill you.”

“Why do you want an alliance?”

The words burst out of her in a sharp jab.

“I’m of the opinion no one can rule Elira securely while they’re wasting the talents of the most dangerous people in the realm, by locking them up or chopping their heads off. This is a difficult game, Prior. Until we find a way to get elementals on our side, no prince can win against the White Queen – and I mean to win.” He lifted her into the air and down again. “Why else do you think I put you on the Council?”

*I knew it wasn’t out of charity.* As a strategy, it made sense. She was the bait, to bring the rest of the elementals over. Yet she forced herself to remember the ball of fire rushing at her on the Grandfleuve – and the way he had wiped the blood off his hands after killing that outlander. Logic was not the only way to assess a man.

*Never trust a snake.* How many times had Sarelin said that?

And yet dancing with him was so easy... like breathing.

The song was winding to a close. In front of them, Jale led Mariana down from the platform, smiling brightly.

Luca steered Lysande from the back of the platform and onto the palace steps. She reached to her hip, but the mass of green fabric between her and her dagger-belt frustrated her attempt, and he laid a hand on her arm.
“Is that wise, Prior?”

He accompanied her onto the final stair, guiding her by the forearm, and nodded and smiled to the Lyrian guard at the top. The other couples were beginning the next dance.

They moved quickly into Rayonnant Palace and turned left down the corridor. Luca pulled her into the first room that was open: it seemed to be little more than a cupboard, yet instead of linen it was lined with bookcases, like an overflow-room for a library. He let go of her hand. If she undid the top of the skirt now, she might be able to slip it off in time to draw a dagger – but would he kill her before she could throw it?

“Listen to me. This is our last chance to talk.” The space between them seemed tiny. “You’re elemental: that means you’re a big danger to the White Queen. A magical woman in power who isn’t her creature... who knows what you might achieve? You might even fiddle around with the laws and liberate elementals. And then who would be angry enough to help her?” There was a serious note in his voice. “You’re likely to be targeted if there’s an attack tonight.”

“The thought had occurred to me, too.”

“Don’t go off alone with anyone, Prior.” He looked into her eyes. “Whatever you do, you mustn’t let one of the city-rulers lead you away during the ball – I can only protect you if you’re in my sight.”

“And what makes you think I desire your protection?

_The White Queen told the Umbra to seduce me. And here we are, alone, after a dance._ If she asked Luca outright where his allegiance lay, perhaps she could catch him off-guard, and learn the truth. She had to be sure, if she was going to kill him.

“Forgive me for the imposition.” He shrugged. “I thought you might take kindly to some help.”

“You’re forgetting I was raised by Sarelin Brey. She took me hunting. And she always made me wait until the deer was in my view: never trust the sound, she said, only trust what you can see with your eyes. I find that holds true for you, Fontaine.”

“Ah, Sarelin Brey.” Luca shook his head; there was colour in his cheeks. “She was an exceptional warrior – which is why she was such a middling queen. She had no interest in reform, or any of those pesky legal tasks that better the realm.
Killing was easier than ruling. And she made no effort to understand those who were different – certainly not when it required any change.”

“She had more valour in her little finger than you do in your whole body.”

“Valour. I have heard it spoken of. Was valour the part where she allowed magical citizens to have their hands chopped off? Or the part where she let the elementals who refused the White Queen be lumped in with those who helped her – locked away like criminals?”

“She stopped a tyrant from taking over Elira.” Lysande could feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

“And let tyranny flourish on her own soil. You ignore her weaknesses and praise her strengths. But I’d expect nothing less of someone who was raised by the Iron Queen.” His half-smile had crept back. “She did a good job of self-glorification – I’ll give her that.”

It was hard to say whether her mind controlled her hand, or the other way around. All she knew was that she was slapping Luca across the face. He stopped, inches from her, and rubbed the spot where she had hit him.

There was a red patch marking the place on his cheek. She felt a little jab of guilt, but not enough to apologise. There was surprise in his eyes, yet he was smiling, almost as if he were pleased.

“That’s not very friendly, Prior. You know, I like you very much, whatever you may think,” he said. “You have wits, and a good deal of vigour, and a mind that I find very – very interesting.” He hesitated. “But you need to let go of your loyalty to your precious Iron Queen. It holds you back from the truth.”

“Clearly, you hated Sarelin a lot.” It was crucial to choose her words carefully. “You must have wanted to kill her.”

“Kill her? No. I was disappointed with her, and her hypocrisy annoyed me. But if I killed everyone who annoyed me, you’d have been sailing up the Grandfleuve on a red tide.” He was closing the space between them with an easy assurance. This was it. This was the moment to demand the truth: she waited until he was nearly upon her before hitching up her skirt at the back and drawing a dagger from her belt, holding it quite still.

When he moved again, Lysande rushed close to him, just like Sarelin had taught her, and thrust it under his jaw. The blade pressed against his skin.

Luca’s smile disappeared, yet his eyes stayed trained on hers.
“Go on,” he said. “Do it.”

“Do you admit to betraying the Council?”

“I admit to having one parent with a burnished name, and one who was cast out with nothing. I admit to reading and writing and building things, instead of riding about the countryside and flashing my fortune. And I admit to being a bastard.” He placed his hand over her own: the hand that was holding the dagger. “Those are my crimes. If you think them bad enough, use that dagger. Later, when you’re telling the others, you can say it was valour.”

She held the weapon still for a long moment. Too long, it proved; for he pushed her hand back.

Lysande darted to the side and grabbed his collar, and with all her strength, whirled him around and slammed him against the wall of the little library, into the bookcase. Volumes rained down over their heads. Some of the books hit the floor and fell open, splayed; others landed shut and made a heavier thunk, like bricks; the sight of so many poetry collections being damaged made her pause for a second, giving Luca the chance to grab at her dagger.

He managed to pry it loose. Lysande kneed him in the stomach, and he staggered, winded; and while she was wrestling the weapon back, he took hold of her arm. They both went down together: arms locked, they toppled onto the books and rolled across them; the corners poked into their backs, sharp and hard; and by the time she could make another pass for her dagger, his rapier was at her throat.

There was a curious look in his eyes, and as Lysande’s fingers pushed the tip of the sword away from her neck, he did not stop her. One of his hands wrapped around her back and rested between her shoulder-blades. She pressed a hand under his jaw. This might be the last opportunity she had to make him confess; yet her hands would not move, and as they lay there, on top of the books, she dug her left hand into his hair.

His rapier clattered to the floor. Her own dagger fell, too. If she needed to kill him, it was right there, within reach.

“Your Highness,” a man’s voice said, behind them, “King Ferago – ”

Lysande had one hand to Luca’s throat, and he had one to hers, their lips almost touching. They looked up.

Lord Malsante was standing in the doorway. He stared from one to the other of them, his mouth open.
“Excuse me, Your Highness,” he said, “but King Ferago asked me to tell you that they’re readying the pavilion. The bride and groom are about to say the vows.”

Lysande pulled herself off Luca, leapt up and hurried out, brushing Malsante on the way. She made her exit down the corridor and burst through the door, murmurs following her as she ran onto the palace steps, across the stage and past the attendants scattering petals on the pavilion, and over to her table. Panting, she made a quick check of the back of her skirt to ensure it was fastened, and slipped into her seat.

“My lady…”

“I’m all right.” She squeezed Derset’s hand. “So is Fontaine, worst luck.”

Luca Fontaine had offered to protect her. He had urged her not to go out of sight with any of the city-rulers. If he had been trying to seduce her, why did he bother with a warning, or try to help? She was just aware that the guests around her were staring, some furtively, others without bothering to conceal their interest.

There was a flare of trumpets. All the Lyrians rose from their chairs and stood to attention, and the rest of the guests followed suit.

“The Council has to be on stage for the vows,” Derset whispered. “My lady, are you sure you’re all right?”

She nodded. Within seconds, an attendant was waiting beside her, offering an arm. Gathering her composure and trying to look as if she had not just been rolling about with a dagger in her hand, she followed Cassia and Dante up onto the stage, to the left of the pavilion; Vigarot and Élérie Montignac were waiting for them, along with a man in a hooded robe who could only be a priest, and on the right side, King Ferago, Persephora, Anton and Dion made a line of silver-haired royalty.

A flash of blood-red drew Lysande’s attention. Luca was walking down the steps. Whispers ran through the crowd, gaining volume as he slipped onto the end of the line beside Dante and shot her a glance – in that dark stare, she saw anger and frustration. Good, she thought. He’s failed in his mission. He can’t seduce me now.

Jale and Mariana made a slow path onto the platform, between the lines of gold-encased palms and up to the stage: a slow path, because Mariana’s dress required a Bastillonian slave to walk behind it, holding the train off the ground. None of the Council looked comfortable with the arrangement. It did not seem to have an effect on the Bastillonians, who beamed at their princess.
Jale stopped side by side with Mariana on the stage. The priest mounted the pavilion and beckoned the bride and groom to come up. Jale entered from the right side and Mariana from the left, blue and pink fabric framing the woman in the centre.

“it was a good idea of yours to hold the ball out here,” Cassia whispered.

“Much less stuffy, with netting instead of walls.”

Lysande glanced up. There was still a hint of distrust in Cassia’s expression.

“Me? But I had nothing to do with it.”

“Vigarot said –”

“It is my very great privilege,” the priest said, “to announce the vows of Jale Montignac, Prince of Lyria, and Mariana Ferago, Princess of Bastillón.”

The group fell silent. Lysande spotted Raden making his way back along the wall at last. He caught her gaze and shook his head, mouthing the word ‘nothing.’

“If the bride would step forward…”

A glance around the enclosure showed Lysande that every side was guarded by Lyrians and city troops, and she tried to dispel the unease that had curled up and nested in her stomach.

Mariana took her place and gazed down at the floor. She raised her eyes for a second to glance at her father. Throughout the priest’s deluge of questions, she promised to take the prince of Lyria as her husband, to honour her vows, to be true to her heart and loyal to her family… the list went on and on, and Mariana nodded dutifully, uttering her “yes” every time the woman paused for breath. She darted a couple of glances at Jale, however, veering away towards Dante when her vows ended.

“And you, Prince Montignac,” the priest said.

“Er, yes?”

“Do you take this woman as your own wife?”

Jale opened his mouth. He looked at his uncle.

“Prince Montignac,” the priest repeated, “do you take this woman –”

“Yes,” Jale said, “that is – as my wife – yes, I do.”

The priest folded her hands, interlacing her fingers.

“Do you vow to be true to your heart –”

“Actually, no,” Jale said. “Sorry.”
Gasps made a chorus in the desert air. Vigarot stepped forward. Jale raised a hand and ran it through his locks. "I mean — yes, I want to be true to my heart," he said. "But that's why I can't marry her. I'm sorry, uncle, we're going to have to call the wedding off."

Vigarot leaned forward. "Jale," he hissed, "take a moment. You are dizzied by the crowd. Pause, recollect your duty, and concentrate on your vows."

"I didn't mean for it to happen like this. And I'm frightfully sorry to Mariana, and to all of you who came so far south... but the problem is, I'm already in love with someone else." Jale took a deep breath. "There's not a thing I can do about it."

King Ferago was gripping the edges of his ermine coat with a furious intensity, and Persephora's eyebrows had narrowed so much that they threatened to permanently freeze. Yet it was Dante's reaction that sent the tables into an ecstasy of pointing. He had risen from his seat, and was staring across at the stage. Several of the Valderran guards stepped out from their posts and stepped towards him; one woman, a captain with a crooked nose, came very near to her leader, while Dante hesitated, looking up at the stage.

"Don't talk nonsense, Jale," Vigarot snapped.

"I'm afraid it's true. You see, I've always known, since the moment when — "

Lysande heard the sound of boots well before she saw the guards gathering at the back gate of the enclosure. Raden had joined them. After a hurried conversation, he broke away, running through the tables and up to the platform.

"Your Highnesses, take cover!" he shouted. "Get back into the palace!"

The crowd turned as one.

"Vigarot," King Ferago said, "restrain that man. He has forgotten his place."

"With pleasure."

"Look up, all of you!" Raden cried, dodging from the Lyrian guards who were edging towards him, and raising his hand to point. "Fortituda's fist, look up there!"

There was a shadow over the moon. It was moving, and within seconds it had come down from its height, where the moonlight bathed it and turned it from a smudge to a winged shape. The slick, dark surfaces of its scales shone like cobbles on a wet street; they were almost mirrors, but the huge wings resembled skin more than glass or stone. They stretched out and beat the air, sending birds fleeing. Once the body was low enough to be visible, there was no mistaking the profile of the
creature: the horned head, long neck and the tail that hung out like a spiked mace behind it.

“That’s…” King Ferago’s mouth had fallen open.

“Everyone, get back!” Cassia cried.

“But that’s impossible!”

Guards rushed towards the platform. Cassia pulled several of the Feragos by the arm, out of the path of the dragon. Raden made a dash to the Eliran side, and he had almost reached the Council when the fire came down: a great blast that burned through the roof and brought the mesh crashing onto the guests. Lysande leapt clear of a chunk of mesh, with a speed she could only credit Sarelin for.

Scalding sheets fell, followed by fire. The palms on the platform ignited just as the Bastillonians ran, and fell around Mariana: the flaming fronds caught her gown and the whole train went up, the fire moving higher and higher as the material burnt, her screams cutting across the crackle of the fires. Her brothers came running. Anton Ferago fell to his knees and smothered the flames with his arms; but by the time he had snuffed them out, Mariana was lying still.

With the rapidity of one practised in the art, Cassia gave directions, dividing up the guards. Lysande ripped her skirt off as quickly as she could and sprinted from the stage to her section at the back. She passed over the platform, drawing a dagger from her belt, even as she realised it would not help – they would need arrows, and plenty of them, to kill a dragon.

*Of course there was no army,* she told herself furiously, as she dodged a piece of mesh. *Of course the White Queen was moving so much money about in the outlands.*

Most of the crowd was attempting to flee into the gardens; the back entrance of the enclosure was not big enough to let them all through. As they pushed to get out, another sheet of burning mesh fell from the roof and landed on top of them. It enveloped the Bastillonian dignitaries like a net; the guards ran to save them, but the dragon sent a ball of fire down, covering the whole group, and within seconds, the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

By now the Rhimese archers were scattered amongst the other guards, black amid silver, gold and brass. She could not see Luca anywhere. Her Axium Guards poured in, some clearing the mesh from the ground, others flinging their daggers at the dragon. A slave came screaming, running down the path between the tables,
aflame: his collar had melted, fastening to his skin like a molten choker. He ran at Lysande, arms flailing. Her feet had frozen on the spot, but Cassia stepped forward and drew her sword: it went through the man, and the burning slave heaved a breath that turned into a sigh, almost like a thanks.

“Archers!” Cassia cried, scanning the enclosure even as she pushed forward. “Anyone with a bow or crossbow, aim for the underbelly! Where in Cognita’s wisdom is Fontaine?”

A blast of air shot through the enclosure so suddenly that her next words were whipped away: the tables flipped and the chairs scattered; Lysande was thrown to the ground, while the gust struck the dragon in the side. The animal roared and huffed more flame. It could not fight the blast, however, and it flapped upwards and away from the crowd, around the side of the palace, shrieking.

Lysande thought she could glimpse a tall, angular figure with white hair, where the air had come from, behind the group of statues in the back-right corner.

The wind had barely stopped when jets of water came from another direction – fountains arced up over the guards and Councillors and landed on the flaming tables, quenching all the places that were afire. Even in the chaos of the smoking enclosure, she could not help but admire the Resistance’s skill.

“Dante!” she heard Jale cry.

The Valderran banner had ceased to burn, giving off a thick smoke; and within seconds, the scene was still. The palms on the platform dropped pieces of smouldering leaf. Between the upturned tables, those who had been struck by the mesh lay wrapped in their golden shrouds. Only the Council and their guards remained, with the bodies of the dead Bastillonians littering the ground. Lysande had just time to embrace Litany and Derset and thank her guards before Cassia called her over.

“Quickly, my friend.”

The Irriqi, Dante and Jale formed a knot with her in the middle of the enclosure, and began talking. The Feragos had been seen hurrying into the palace after Mariana’s death, Dante reported – Anton Ferago was the last to be seen, carrying his sister up the steps, her body hefted on his shoulders – and no one seemed in a rush to chase after them. They looked to one another, breathing hard.

“What just happened?” Jale cried.
“A dragon,” Vigarot Montignac said, stumbling out from behind the honey-jug pavilion. “A dragon happened.” He was holding out a sword in front of him, as if it might explain the phenomenon.

“How in the name of Vindictus did it get here? They’re meant to be dead.” Dante’s voice would have made a legion cower. “And there were elementals out here, too – her people did magic – water and wind – you saw it. We should hunt them down.”

“Never mind that. We have to alert the city. Get everyone under cover.” Cassia looked around grimly. “The first thing you do after an attack is prepare for a second one – learnt that from the Qamaras.”

“For once, you speak sense,” Jale said.

“We need armour. Before we go out there.” Cassia bent over a dead soldier and removed the woman’s plating. The others did the same. For a moment, there was no sound but the clanking of metal.

“Where’s Fontaine?” Dante growled, looking around.

They glanced from wall to wall, but there was not a glimpse of that slashed doublet, and none of the Rhimese seemed to know where their leader had gone. Lysande suspected that if they did, they would not say. Dante advanced the theory that Luca had run off out of fear of the dragon, and they had agreed to split up and move out into the city when a cool, half-amused voice interrupted them.

“If you thought I’d run, you’re painfully mistaken.”

They turned. Luca was crossing the ruined enclosure. His guards and nobles rushed to him, one of them handing him a bow, another attempting to embrace him; he took the weapon from the first and waved off the second. “Your voice carries further than a Lyrian rumour. Perhaps you should be thanking those elementals for forcing a dragon back into the sky, Dalgereth,” he added. “To say nothing of putting out the fires. They saved your life, whoever they were.”

“Where were you?” Lysande demanded, as he stopped opposite Dante.

“I was defending us strategically.”

“From outside where we were being attacked?”

“Never mind that.” Dante folded his arms. “This is the White Queen’s doing. A massacre. And her helper is somewhere among us, I’d bet. What were the two of you doing before, in the palace?” He turned to Lysande and Luca.
In the silence that followed, Lysande considered the explanation ‘trying to kill each other in a small library’, but abandoned it when her eyes fell upon Litany’s face.

The girl was looking upwards with an expression of such horror that she followed her gaze. There, high up in the sky but coming closer by the second, was a white shape with a long tail and wings. She could not mistake the creature. It was swooping fast enough for her to make out the golden dots of its eyes, and it was not the spikes on the tail nor the extraordinary power of the dragon – at least twice the size of the first animal that had attacked them – that made her breath come faster. It was the dozens and dozens of women and men in armour, strapped to its back and wings. Some were even crouching on the tail, held in place by a complicated rig of ropes.

The others had tilted their heads back.

“It’s an army with wings!” Jale shouted.

“Rally to me!” Cassia called out.

There were indeed so many soldiers that they scarcely fit on the dragon: the ropes had been fashioned into harnesses, connected to stirrups, and tied with knots that would require hours to untangle, and the rigging enabled the whole group to keep in place with a degree of skill that staggered Lysande. The Councillors, guards of five cities, and all the advisors and other staff who had been foolish or brave enough to remain closed around the Irriqi. They all retreated to the back of the enclosure, and Lysande was jostled in amongst the guards. She managed to find Derset, Litany and Raden and draw them together. They had barely moved to the back wall when the dragon turned into a dive and plummeted, snorting fire as it came.

It landed in front of the platform without a single rope breaking. The mercenaries cut themselves free and poured off its back, shouting and brandishing swords. All Lysande saw was spiked helmets and skirt-like armour coming at her, the outlanders’ eyes bright as the dragon’s scales: shining with fervour. At last she understood why Sarelin had prayed before battle; the thought of being protected by the gods would have made her feel courageous, even heroic. Instead, she felt like turning and vomiting onto the ground.

“The dragon’s a Chiamese White,” Cassia managed to shout, over the noise.

“You can’t kill it through the underbelly – the arrows have to get it in the neck!”
On Lysande’s right, she saw Luca turn to Malsante and Freste.

“Go,” he said.

The word was enough. The pair of them set off through the throng, towards the rest of the archers. As she saw them striking and pushing anyone who got in their way, it occurred to Lysande that all the descriptions of battles in books had made no mention of all the desperate shoving that was involved. Fighting was at least two thirds shoving, to the tune of ringing shields.

Dante drew his axe and sword and charged forward at the left flank, shouting “Valderos”, and the Valderrans followed him, taking up the cry. Jale moved quickly after them: he took the right wing of the attackers, crying out to the Lyrians, and his people surged after him. The two parties of Elirans met the outlanders, and for a moment there was nothing but the crashing of swords against each other. A mercenary fell with a blade stuck in his neck. Another outlander – it could have been a man or woman in that armour – tottered with one arm cut off at the elbow, spurting blood. Several Lyrians and Valderrans fell, stabbed or knocked down, and some were trampled under boots.

Lysande grabbed Raden by the arm. “Go to your troops!” she shouted.

Her special guard were fighting without their captain.

“If you think I’m going to leave you, when there’s a whole legion of soldiers bearing down on us –”

“Now, Raden! Go!”

An agonised look passed over his face, but he passed her his shield and dashed off before she could refuse it.

In front of them, soldiers in spiked helmets and skirts had broken the lines and were advancing. Cassia did not need to call to her guards: they came with her as soon as she stepped forward, and massed to form a block behind Jale and Dante. The Pyrrhans took her direction, throwing swords and firing bolts into those mercenaries who made it through. Lysande looked quickly around, wondering whether she should make a charge. The Axium Guards who had reached her were waiting for her command; yet it did not make sense to charge headlong into the fray.

She might do more damage to the Pyrrhan defenders than help, when they were working so closely together.

“Not going to charge, Prior?” Luca called. He was waiting behind the mêlée.

“I’d prefer to help us win.”
“That’s not very chivalrous of you.”

“Is there chivalry out there?” She pointed towards the battle. “I must have missed it.”

Luca smiled and turned to shout something to his soldiers. They rallied behind him, and a wave of black flowed around the side of the battle: the Rhimese moved through with the same assurance they brought to everything they did, most of them spreading into the seating as they ran. They were not merging with the fight, she realised, but rising above it; Luca climbed onto a table near the front, and Lysande saw the others copy him and begin to shoot at the dragon. It was the last thing she saw before the first outlanders broke through the Pyrrhan block.

She was throwing daggers before she could think. Her first blade sunk into a woman’s eye-slit and killed her mid-stride. Although she was reeling inside, she hastened to pull it out and fling it at another mercenary. Don’t look at the blood, she told herself. Just look at the target. Litany had raced forward with Chidney and Blundsor, to bring the Axiumites beside her, and together they fought to keep the attackers at bay, using their daggers; the dragon-fire had burnt some of the Pyrrhans, and more and more outlanders were slipping through Cassia’s lines. They could scarcely kill one soldier before another was in their place.

Lysande dodged a sword, feinting to the right, and nearly impaled herself on another blade: Derset only just pulled her out of the way in time.

The tide of soldiers might have proved too much, had not a blast of air knocked several of the outlanders to the ground, the force sending their weapons flying. Lysande felt a tug at her arm, coming from a figure in a rough brown cloak. She knew who would be wearing it, even before she glimpsed his face.

She flung a dagger, almost automatically, into the legs of an approaching mercenary, and ran to him.

“You mustn’t let anyone see you!” she cried to Three.

“My dear, we might all die tonight. And if the White Queen is here, I mean to help.” He shot a jet of air at another outlander. “How many chances does one get to fight a dragon, after all?”

“It was you before, then?”

“I cast the air. Six broke her orders to come here, too.” He moved to guard her left. “How in the three lands the White Queen got two dragons... but never mind.
That white beast seems to be staying. We can’t kill it with fire, so we must keep it busy.”

“The archers need to get it in the neck.”

“They might, if Six keeps up her efforts.”

Lysande looked up to the front of the enclosure and saw balls of fire shooting up through the air, causing the dragon to screech and flap its wings. Six was nothing if not determined. Her flames widened in the air and spread so quickly that the animal could not evade them, forcing it up higher. Ahead, however, several figures were climbing onto the platform: their spiked helms and shields glinted in the light of the elemental woman’s fire, and one of them reached into a pouch at his belt to draw something out and throw it.

The object glanced off a Valderran’s breastplate and clattered to the ground. Lysande stared at it, but she did not recognise it: a jagged piece of metal, like a round knife, with a lethal edge.

“The filthy dogs!” Cassia shouted. “They’re throwing coin-knives!”

“What are those?”

“Tiny pieces of gods-be-damned death, that’s what! Get down!”

The second circular knife whizzed by Lysande and sliced into the cheek of one of Jale’s soldiers. The woman gave a guttural scream as she tried to pull it out, and staggered, falling into the path of a group of mercenaries. Figures in skirted armour fell upon her.

“Down!” Dante roared. “Everybody, get down!”

The whole group of Elirans ducked as more of the sharp pieces rained onto them. Lysande grabbed Litany and Chidney and drew them close. “Can you cover for me, here?” she shouted.

“Yes. But where are you –”

“Never mind.” She placed a hand on Litany’s shoulder. “Just keep holding them off. You’re doing brilliantly.”

“Oh, Miss – Lysande, you mustn’t risk –”

She pulled Litany tight to her and squeezed her. It was the only thing she could think of to silence the girl, and as she held her close, she kissed her on the ear.

“Derset, can you bring a shield and run alongside me?”

“Of course, my lady.”
She sprinted down the path around the side of the tables, past the statues, the honey-jug and its pavilion, Derset keeping pace on her left. At the front, she nearly ran straight into Six; changing direction, she swerved around her and stopped beside the pool, close to the platform.

The three outlanders upon it were covered in armour. It would be impossible to get a clear shot through the slits in their helmets from such an angle, yet there was one place the armour had not covered. She lined up her eye with her right hand and sent a dagger spinning into the boot of the nearest soldier. The man staggered, cried out an oath, and fell into the pool. The splash he made was nothing to the flurry of movement around his body: swords impaled him from every side – his neck, legs, arms, groin and chest sprouted red – the spikes were of a greyish hue, and with a start she remembered what else was in the water.

The spearfish leapt onto the body and tore chunks of the flesh, their teeth flashing. They worried the fat from the bones within seconds. Lysande turned her head away.

She brought down the second outlander, and the woman’s body had already been half-devoured by the time she struck the third soldier – she hoped that Sarelin was proud of her aim. Several of the spearfish turned on each other as they quarrelled over these presents, beginning to gore their rivals in the body and fins. Their blood added to the spreading pool of red. Glancing away, she saw Cassia tottering: a knife-thrower had landed one of his deadly little pieces in her face, and the Irriqi was staggering, clutching her left eye.

“No!” Lysande shouted.

Pyrrhans thronged around Cassia, shielding her. A surge of blood rushed to Lysande’s head. She aimed a dagger at the heart of the nearest mercenary, and found her mark, and ignoring the rest of the battle for a moment, she threw another, and another: even though she knew she was not meant to care about the others, her wall had crumbled – it had never been very solidly constructed when it came to Cassia.

“For Queen Sarelin!” somebody cried.

Lysande turned sharply. She could not pinpoint the speaker; the crush of bodies prevented any clear line of sight.

“For the Iron Queen!” Raden’s voice roared, louder. “Let’s send her some company!”
The Axium Guards had stormed through the middle of the mêlée, and with her captain at their head, a crest of silver was breaking over the sea of swords and shields. The mercenaries shouted in a tongue she did not recognise, then thronged to the middle of the path. Lysande ran with Derset back around the outside. Side by side with Litany, she entered the fray once more.

A fray it was, and no mistaking. One of the archers had hit the dragon just below the neck, and the animal came wheeling around in the air, shrieking and sputtering flame; fires blazed between the tables and encircled the Rhimese as they sprayed arrows into the throng.

"Can you put those out?" Lysande called, elbowing her way through to Three.

He looked up, and shook his head. "My element is air."

"Someone used water to put the flames out, before!"

"So I saw." He cast a jet of air at an oncoming attacker. "But not our someone. Only Six and I are here tonight, I'm afraid; my colleagues were not all so eager to risk their necks."

She was pushed forward before she could ask him more. The Valderrans and Lyrians were leading a surge, driving the outlanders back towards the dragon, and her elite guards were following Raden after them. Now, it was logical to charge.

Shouting over the clash of steel, she led the rest of the Axiumites forward, bringing them up behind the first wave of soldiers, and raised her dagger as she commanded them. The White Queen’s people were hemmed in, now, but they were giving as good as they got. Close by her, Élérie Montignac thrust a smallsword into a mercenary’s face, before another soldier ran her through from behind; she fell forward slowly, her eyes wide. Lysande’s heart wrenched.

On the right side of the path she glimpsed Litany aiming a dagger with Chidney and Blundsor at her side, covering her. Malsante and Freste were holding their own on the left. The blonde noblewoman was slicing and stabbing with a rapier – Malsante was bleeding from the ear, the victim of a coin-knife, or several, but he was doing well enough. Lysande stabbed a mercenary coming at her with a dagger, and led her guards on.

She had a glimpse of Blundsor going down, a sword in his neck, before she drove her blade into the next attacker. Over the sound of steel, Chidney gave a howl.
The Pyrrhans had closed ranks into a knot, Cassia at their head, her left eye a bloody mess and her left cheek streaked with red. The wound made her appear even more terrifying. As she raised a serrated sword, several mercenaries scattered.

“Look out!” Luca shouted.

Lysande turned. A group of outlanders were closing on the Lyrians, and some of them had split off to target a single fighter.

There was no way Jale could win against so many opponents. He had nowhere to run to, with the table cutting him off and a fire blazing behind him. She tried to push towards him. With all the power in her lungs, she took up Luca’s cry.

Jale did not shrink back: he stabbed one soldier between his arm-guard and shoulder-guard, and ran around to the right to dodge another. The shadow of a big outlander fell across him. Ducking, Jale sliced the man in the leg and leapt onto his back to strike him down. He wove around the soldiers like a dancer, twisting. The others moved in on him as soon as he vaulted down, and while he evaded two soldiers and killed another with a single blow, he did not notice the woman who had crept around behind him. Her sword-point found his shoulder.

Blood painted Jale’s arm. Two mercenaries closed in. Another came around on his left, in a pincer movement – and the man was about to grab hold of Jale when a brown cape whirled through their midst.

Dante roared. His axe cracked the helmet of the nearest woman like a knife splitting a walnut. It shattered the skull and cut through to the centre, brains spilling out. He let the outlander fall and wheeled around, turning on the others. He hacked like a madman, taking an arm clean off one soldier’s shoulder; gouging another in the chest; striking a third below the abdomen, roaring out a curse. The man who had come behind Jale had managed to lock his arms around the young prince’s neck, holding Jale close and nearly choking him.

Dante smiled grimly as he walked towards the outlander.

“There’s a punishment for thieves, in Valderos,” he said.

“No thief.” The man’s Eliran was broken, but the fear in his voice did not need translation. “I’m no thief.”

“You’re holding the most valuable jewel in Elira.” As Dante raised his axe, the outlander let go of Jale. It did not save him. Dante hacked the mercenary’s neck over and over until he caught Jale’s eye, and dropped his weapon, running to his friend. He wrapped his arms around him.
Lysande felt a tug at her arm, and she turned. Derset had come all the way around on the left side to reach her, and a guard was shielding him through the last group of fighters. He had borrowed a sword from someone, and his hair was askew.

“Captain Hartleigh sent me with a message for you, my lady,” he said.

In the middle of the throng, she saw Raden fighting an enormous soldier in a spiked helmet.

“What message?”

“He says we’re winning the battle, but he needs you to bring the last group of troops in from the palace.”

“We have no more troops!”

“He’s stationed fifty guards in the third floor dining room.” Derset pointed towards the palace. “They were to be a final weapon for when the fighting turned in our favour. Captain Hartleigh asks to be excused for his temerity, my lady, but he thought it was necessary to conceal them.”

Lysande frowned. “I mean to stay and fight,” she said. “Send one of our guards to bring them.”

“My lady, Captain Hartleigh said he told the guards to only take orders from you or himself.” Derset looked pained. “He felt that if he was busy trying hold back the White Queen’s people here, you should be the one to take command. Please, my lady, we must act quickly.”

_Damn Raden’s Axiumite blood. Everything in its place, now?_

None of the outlanders were paying her or Derset any attention. They were all fighting off Elirans, and the dragon was so high in the sky that its flames could not reach the fighters any more.

“Can you shield me all the way across the platform and up the steps?”

Derset moved beside her, and taking her by the hand, guided her up to the platform – past Six throwing fire, through the remains of the palms – over and up to the stairs, without looking back. They sprinted side by side. She could hear her breath in her ears as something sailed past her neck – a coin-knife, she saw, as it rolled across a step ahead, and Derset moved behind her, blocking another one with his shield.

They burst through the doors of Rayonnant Palace and into the corridor, now empty. All the Lyrian guards had rushed out into the battle. Dashing around two
corners, they raced up the staircase: there seemed to be more stairs now that Lysande was in a hurry, and she exhaled sharply: her legs were not moving fast enough.

"Why on earth did he put them on the third floor?" she cried.

"I don’t know, my lady. I suppose that dining room must have been the only place the Lyrians weren’t checking."

"I hope they can fight well." They were nearly at the top. "The battle’s turning ugly."

The second floor was just as desolate. She took a second to catch her breath, then ran with Derset up the next flight. There was not far to go once they emerged – the third floor dining room had the advantage of being not far from the stairs – but it also had a blind corner before it. No sooner had they rounded the elaborately-furnished bend than they came face-to-face with a group of women and men in armour and spiked helmets.

Lysande skidded to a halt, grabbing hold of a statue. There were ten of the outlanders.

A woman with a star on her breastplate grabbed her by the shoulders; another pinned her hands behind her back. She struggled, kicking with all the energy left in her, but the mercenaries were too strong: it would be impossible to get her hands free to reach for a dagger. Another soldier with a star on his armour stepped forward and regarded her.

If these were captains, the White Queen had not chosen her commanders for beauty. The man looked as if he had been made from the parts of soldiers mutilated in battle. There was a pause, in which all of the outlanders looked at someone behind Lysande, and as she struggled, something that Derset had said before popped into her head: Captain Hartleigh asks to be excused for his temerity, my lady.

It was not like Raden to apologise – nor to use a fancy word like ‘temerity’.

"What should we do with her?" the big woman said, baring her teeth in a smile. "Kill her, or spend a little time with her, first?"

"We’ll take her up to the roof," a voice answered. "Her Majesty wants her alive."

It was a voice she knew all too well. Yet it was not the same voice. The earnest tone, the gentle turn of phrase, the hesitation that guided every suggestion – they were all gone, as if someone had pulled off a silk cover.

Lysande twisted her neck as much as she was able.
Lord Derset met her look without a flicker of a reaction. He was standing only a foot from her. With a casual movement he unbuttoned the back of his collar and shrugged off his robe, exposing a low-collared doublet. A mark on his neck stood out above the top. It was an animal she had seen twice tonight, yet this third time was worst of all: she could recognise the same dragon brand from the assassin who had attacked Luca by the fountain. The surface had been burnt black.

*How useful a high collar must have been,* she thought.

Derset raised a hand and stilled her captor, who had begun to push her forward. "One moment," he said.

He held an arm out, and with a twist of his hand, sent a jet of flame onto his advisor's robe.

The green velvet caught fire and burned on the floor for a minute or so. Derset stood quite still, watching it. The expression on his face was like that of a man who had unshouldered a boulder that he had been carrying for a very long time and was watching it roll away.

When the garment began to smoke, he nodded to the soldiers and walked through the door.

The group followed him as one. Lysande's captor pushed her down the corridor, towards the stairs, and with a lurch of her stomach she realised that they were going up – away from the enclosure, and past the fourth floor, the fifth, and the sixth, to somewhere higher still. Luca Fontaine's entreaty not to leave the ball alone rang in her head.

*It was never Fontaine,* she thought. *And it was never one of the city-rulers.*

A door slammed below them. She felt the end of a sword-hilt in her back, and picked up her pace.
Chapter Fourteen

It was not easy to climb ten flights of stairs with her hands behind her back, least of all when she was being bumped over each step unceremoniously, her shins striking the stone. She winced a few times as she struggled up and laboured for breath, but her eyes remained on Derset: his silver-streaked hair in the torchlight, guiding them all the way to the top.

Had he grown taller after casting off his robe? No, it was just that he was no longer stooping to whisper in her ear or tucking his hands behind his back. He waved the guards forward.

They stopped at the entrance to the tenth floor. The man standing outside the door made the other captains look dainty: his biceps cast their own shadows and his neck seemed to have given up altogether on distinguishing itself from his head, giving the impression that a sack of potatoes had been squashed onto his shoulders. When he saw Derset, he raised one hand to his chest in a salute.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Hapsley?" Derset said.

The guard looked Lysande over quickly, but could not produce an answer. Derset's gaze did not soften.

"All weapons are to be confiscated and presented to Her Majesty. They're the property of the regime, now." He shook his head. "I thought your captain would've drummed it into that thick skull of yours. Take the blades, and be quick. Or I'll take an eye."

There were only a few daggers left in Lysande's sheaths after the battle, and these Hapsley took, clutching them to his chest; yet when he made to grasp the dagger that Sarelin had given her, Derset stepped forward and stretched out his hand.

"I'll take that one," he said. "You know she doesn't like to see anything that reminds her of that woman."

He slipped the dagger into the pocket of his trousers, and Lysande bit her lip as she watched it disappear. She reached up, almost unconsciously, to finger the chain around her neck. The fluid silver had been with her ever since Derset gave it to her; she had only taken it off to bathe, and even then, it had remained within her view. Was he going to snatch that from her, too?
Derset smiled.

“Oh, you can keep that,” he said. “It was never Sarelin Brey’s.”

A click of his fingers brought the outlander captains through the door and into the corridor, and Lysande was prodded in the back and knocked against the doorframe as they brought her through.

The tenth floor served as a collection of rooms in which Lyrian royalty could venerate the sun – several prayer-rooms, a dining hall with glass walls, and then, largest of all, the observatory, Prince Chaleon’s famous creation. Derset led them towards the doors at the end, but stopped short, where three people were bent over a body. The corpse had been burnt so thoroughly that only its head was untouched, and the arms, legs, and torso had turned the colour of freshly-cut meat.

The nearest elemental, a man, had his palm open, casting fire onto a patch of skin on the neck. With a scowl on his face, he had neither the silver or gold hair of a Bastillonian, nor the almond-shaped eyes of a Chiamese. His belt was of Axiumite make, Lysande realised. The buckle was curved, in the particular style of one of the capital merchants. The woman beside him was clearly Eliran, too, with features that could only be Lyrian – she was making fresh burns on the corpse’s chest, while a man with a crooked scar knelt beside her, blowing his dagger across the victim’s legs with a jet of air.

The sight made Lysande’s stomach heave, and her knees threatened to give way. She felt the outline of the vial in her trouser pocket. At least I have one weapon, she thought, looking at the chopped flesh.

The three of them were dressed in much finer clothes than ordinary citizens. She guessed that the white strips on their boots were made of elephant tusk from the west, and the embroidery that gleamed on their cuffs had the lustre of diamond thread. Yet there was no beauty in the looks on their faces.

“Get up,” Derset said, as he entered. “All of you.”

The three elementals stood.

“Torturing a dead woman, are we, Raquefort?” Derset walked over to the Lyrian. He poked the corpse with his foot. Lysande recognised Élérie Montignac's face, now slashed with many cuts: the depth of mutilation made her gasp.

“We were interrogating her,” Raquefort said, sullenly.
“Do you think she’ll yield some useful information? Perhaps another half-hour and she might give us the details of the Lyrian defences.” Derset turned to the mousy-haired man. “You should be begging me for mercy, Crake. You too, Rimini.”

Raquefort, Crake and Rimini... Lysande recognised those names, along with Hapsley on the door. She remembered that she had read them in the book from the Academy: the collection of accounts of the White War. Among the handful of Eliran elementals the White Queen had managed to recruit were two Axiumites – Hapsley and Crake; a Rhimese called Rimini; and several Lyrians, including one named Raquefort.

These people were too young to be veterans of the war. They must belong to the same families. Perhaps the White Queen had recruited them while they were young; garnered the heirs of her captains.

“In a short while, I will be speaking to Her Majesty,” Derset said. “And if you think she’ll be pleased when she hears the way you’ve spent your time, then you have failed to grasp her character.”

“My lord—”

“Go down and kill any of the Councillors left alive.” He stepped towards them, and all three flinched. “Bring me their bodies when you’re done, and I might just forget to mention your negligence to Her Majesty.”

The trio gathered up their weapons, and Lysande marvelled at the spectacle of three powerful elementals, fleeing from the man who had bowed and taken orders from her for weeks.

She was jolted through the next door along with the captains and guards, into the observatory.

Rayonnant Palace’s viewing room was even larger than reputed – in Castle Cervello, the top-floor observatory had been bounded by a glass wall, yet this room was open to the air at its far end. *Reflecting the Lyrian philosophy of connecting the soul to the sun*. It was funny how even at a time like this, the scholar in her head would not quiet. With the darkness of the night facing her, she faltered. The chandelier above her dangled crystal daggers in the torchlight, quavering in the faint breeze.

Yet perhaps it was the steel border around the room that provided the real air of menace: dozens of guards stood shoulder-to-shoulder along the left and right
walls, and as Derset strode in, they straightened to attention and raised their hands to their chests.

"At ease," Derset said.

The whole group lowered their hands again. The light showed her spiked helmets and outlander armour – thicker than that of the mercenaries who had poured off the second dragon – these soldiers were not fodder for swords. The weapons in their belts were adorned with brass and jewels: rubies, emeralds and sapphires, cut in the pear-shaped outlander style of ornamentation. One man at the end was even holding a dove in his hand. Beside him, on the floor, a vast collection of ropes and stirrups was laid out.

A dragon was coming back. Either that or a mule big enough to carry a half-hundred soldiers would be flying out of the palace walls. She remembered the intricate rig on the white beast that had brought the mercenaries into the enclosure, the ropes interlaced, made of thick western fibre just like those on the floor.

Was she up here to be roasted alive? Or were they planning to transport her to somewhere else?

Stumbling, she found herself shoved forward again. A small table with chairs whose backs were embellished to look like gold suns stood in the middle of the floor, and into one of these garish creations she was pushed. Derset strode past to the end of the room and looked out into the night, facing the blackness for a few quiet moments, then turned and walked back to take the chair opposite her.

"Has the Iron Queen’s pet anything to say?" he asked.

"I should have guessed. You’d been in the west for years – that should’ve been a warning sign," she said, quietly. "The letters to Mea Tacitus came in so many languages, and an envoy to the foreign lands would make the perfect correspondent. Diamond thread on the purse, too.” It was all so easy to see, now. “You had it made when you were dealing with Chiam, of course. The panther was from the outlands – I suppose you met someone who could train it while you were abroad.”

"You worked this out in seven flights of stairs?” His voice did not betray anger, nor amusement.

"The high collar and long sleeves – a costume for hiding a brand, of course – but you were always so austere, so modest in your behaviour. It just seemed to make sense. My suspicions were focussed on the city-rulers.”
The words came from her in a stream; she was speaking to sort through her own thoughts, not to demand a response. No flicker of reaction passed across Derset's face.

"You were so skilful, planting the seeds to make me suspect Luca," she continued. "You made me second-guess everything he did. All those hints and suggestions, which you took back as soon as they'd taken root in my head. I presume the White Queen told you he was the biggest danger, because he was the cleverest of the city-rulers?"

Derset remained impassive.

"There's that last letter, too." She looked into his eyes. "The White Queen coded it with the Legilium. A prince might've had a copy lying around, of course, but you knew it by heart - after all, you studied the law. There was no need to lug along a book."

He leaned across the table, resting his hands on the wood. "You of all people understand the importance of planning. I did what I had to do."

"And I imagine it was you who told Vigarot Montignac that I wanted the ball held outside. Here I was, thinking Cassia was just confused." She shook her head.

"As for "seducing" me, it was my trust you were after, all along. Clever. You were very clever. Everything was meticulously organised, right from the day Sarelin died."

"A glorious day," he said, softly.

It was hard not to flare up; to reach over and slap the satisfaction off his face; but this was not Luca Fontaine. Derset would not enjoy being struck.

"One thing I can't figure out, though," she went on, "is the attack on the Grandfleuve. Did you fail, there?"

He rubbed the dragon brand on his neck with one finger and closed his eyes; for a moment, he seemed in pain, and Lysande wondered if there was some magical property to the brand. "The fireballs weren't meant to kill you. They were meant to strike right when Fontaine was chatting with you. Killing two bears with one dagger - isn't that how the late bitch of Axium Palace would have put it? With one stroke I could make Fontaine look suspicious and tighten the bond between you and your dear, patient advisor: the man who always listened to your problems. Once you knew he was willing to risk his life for you, you'd trust him in any crisis."
It was humiliating to have the last piece nudged into place, by the same hand that had designed the puzzle. She fought the quaver in her voice.

“And what was it all for? Why do this to Sarelin, to the realm, to me? All those clever moves – I see it’s some kind of game, but what are we playing for, Derset?”

“Henrey.” Derset pushed his chair out – the legs screeching against the stones – and stood up. “My name is Henrey. Perhaps you’ve forgotten it; it doesn’t glitter quite like Cassia or Dante or Jale. Or Sarelin.”

He walked over to the soldier at the end of the line who was holding the dove, and took the bird. It cooed into his fingers. The pellets of dark eyes amid the dirty grey feathers peeped out and regarded Lysande with indifference, and she watched Derset trace a path down the back of its neck with his thumb, nudging it at the base.

“As soon as I send this dove,” he said, “the White Queen will come.”

“To kill me?”

Derset smiled; for the first time, her remark had prompted some emotion, even if it was only amusement. “To offer you a choice.”

A glance at the ropes laid out on the floor told her that there were enough of them to fit out the black dragon that had attacked the enclosure first. If it had flown back to its mistress, there was a good chance Derset was not bluffing.

“What kind of choice?” she said.

Derset sat down opposite her again. He stroked the dove’s head. As he did, she felt a twitching in her palm – the slightest flicker of an itch.

“Do you remember what Her Majesty was called after the war?” Derset said.

“You mean the White Queen, not the Iron Queen, I presume.”

“I mean the only true queen for people like us.” His nostrils flared slightly.

“You’re an elemental. You know who I mean. Answer the question.”

So he knows. Lysande swallowed, thinking of how he had looked at her when she winced in pain on the ship.

“Usurper,” she said, remembering a term Sarelin had used, as they discussed the war in her suite. Now that she thought of it, she had heard the word echoed in the corridors by Tuchester and Bowbray.

“It’s an oily word, usurper. Some names wash off with a little effort, like mud, but that one is pure oil. You can try to scrub it away, but once it’s on, the word
stains. Like ‘bastard’.” He patted the dove on the head. “The White Queen found that out the hard way after the war. As long as she was labelled a pretender, there was no hope of recruiting the kind of force that could take Elira – she needed someone who had advised royals and nobles to help her find her way. A thinker, who knew that names can be managed, and stains removed.”

“You.” Lysande could not keep the bitterness from her voice.

“Changes are a tricky business.” Dersef’s tone was still hard stone, but there was an edge to it; an urgency that implored her to understand. “You need to cut away all the roses in the garden if you want to make the ground your own; but it takes a long time, and you can prick your fingers on those thorns. And when you finish, all that people see is you standing there with your hands covered in blood.” He grimaced. “That’s when they start calling you usurper.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with me.”

Dersef placed the dove on the table, and as he did so, she saw his hand tremble – a movement so faint that it could almost have been in her mind; yet she knew she had not imagined it. No one shivered from the cold in the Lyrian delta.

It’s her, she realised. He’s scared of what she’ll do to him, if he fails.

The map of scars on Welles’ face, Six’s burned cheek, and Three’s white hair...

“You must have guessed the next part. If you want avoid the stain of ‘usurper’, you need someone to introduce you, to explain to all those bleating sheep across the realm that you’ve been chosen to take over. And who better than a member of the old regime to make the announcement?” Dersef said.

“You want me to be the White Queen’s spokesperson. A puppet, to give her legitimacy?”

“Think of it as an honour. You will be the herald of the new era.”

“You haven’t got the realm, yet.”

His eyes glistened. “That won’t take long. Elira has always belonged to elementals. We were the ones who ruled here before the Conquest – and Her Majesty means to take the realm back to the beginning of the calendar, Lysande.”

We all know how that turned out. But she knew better than to give Dersef a history lesson. And if the White Queen had dragons, a means of rigging and an army of mercenaries... had there even been a combination of organisation and magic like this?
“You ask me to give her my support, in public, without question,” she said, at last. “As far as I can see, that’s not much of a choice.”

“You’ve misunderstood me.” Derset stroked the dove again. “The choice is not whether you’ll do it. The choice is how you’ll do it. Will you appoint her of your own volition – or will you do so under the White Queen’s control, with your mind in her grip?”

My mind. What was it Sarelin had said to her, when she gave her the gold quill? “You should be proud of your own weapon, too.”

I won’t give it up, she thought, furiously. And nor will I aid Mea Tacitus.

There was a reason why they had chosen her, instead of Cassia, Luca, Dante or Jale, she realised. With Sarelin gone, all the White Queen would have to do was kill Raden and Litany, and no one would know if she was acting oddly; a prince might be found out if they were acting under the control of an elemental, with all those nobles observing their movements and speech; but an orphan had few people scrutinising her behaviour.

“How long do I have to choose?”

“I can allow you a few minutes.” Derset was watching her with a kind of bitter sadness. “But I suggest you think quickly. The White Queen has waited over twenty years... she is renowned for many things, Lysande, but patience is not one.”

Lysande felt the itch in her palm again. The sensation passed in less than a second. It could have been a spasm under the skin, a fleeting twitch of the muscle: but it was stronger than before.

Titarch, in the Silver Songs, had been captured in battle, once. He had kept his captors talking, until he could grab a sword and slaughter them all. Only I have no daggers. And not even a sword. Just a weapon that might burn me to death, if I can’t get it under control.

Still, stretching out the time was the best chance she had.

“Why are you doing this?” she said. “You told me you owed Sarelin everything you had.”

“Oh, I owed her what I had, all right. A job as envoy to the foreign lands,” Derset replied, his eyes narrowing. “Seven years in the cultural wasteland of Belága, bending my knee. Twelve years in an outpost by the western wall, making excuses for the exploits of drunken border guards... sweating over agreements that’d be forgotten when Sarelin Brey changed her mind. Removed from every comfort of
Axium, every friend I had. In a job I could never rise from. A third child, with no glory.” He gave a harsh laugh. “After spending my whole childhood studying law, I was pushed out to serve that barbarian envoy – and your Queen Sarelin made Pelory Master of Laws. Pelory!” The utterance of the name was almost a curse. “The man whose biggest sacrifice for the crown was giving up his gold-stitched doublet!”

_She hated Pelory_, Lysande thought, remembering the day Sarelin had agonised over the appointment in her suite, weighing up the talents and shortcomings of each candidate. After she had signed the declaration and handed it over, she grumbled to Lysande that it was like choosing which plague from the four gods you wanted first.

Derset’s lip was curling – the first sign of anger since he had burned his robe – and if she tried to defend Sarelin, he might scorch her like that cloth.

“It must have taken a lot of skill, to deceive everyone after you joined the White Queen. I have to admire you, despite everything.” She dropped her voice to a murmur. “Convincing me for so long. Most people would take years to learn that kind of skill.”

“Oh, it was simple.” He smiled. “I merely knew the two words most powerful to an orphan.”

“Which are?”

“‘My lady.’”

Now it was _her_ who was risking a flash of anger – she wanted to scream at him – and then to pinch herself for being so damned stupid; yet her palm itched again, and the feeling reminded her what she was aiming at.

*Keep talking, like Titarch.*

“You know it was ignorance that truly kept the rulers of this realm from reaching out to elementals, Henrey.”

“Of course, you would defend the crown. You were raised by an oppressor.” He laughed. “Believe me, I understand why you feel as you do, making excuses for the rulers – I’m sure you’ve spent your life being told the Iron Queen was good and the White Queen bad, and it’s made the bitch into an idol for you. But there can be no defence of her kind, Lysande.”

The itch in her palm was growing by the second. She would have given a hundred cadres to rake her nails across and claw at the flesh, yet she could not let Derset guess what was going on.
“You’re wrong,” she said. “I loved Sarelin. She was the only person who ever loved me. In a way I think she taught me how to love…” She swallowed. “But now that I know what I am, I know some things she did were wrong. She shouldn’t have let the executions go on. Elementals should have been brought into the open after the war; the law should have been altered.”

It hurt, to say the words. But if Sarelin was an idol, the idol had been smashed, ever since she understood what it felt like to be one of the enemy. “You must see, too, though, Henrey,” she said, “crushing women and men while we raise up elementals is not the answer. Diversity is our strength. Is that not the motto of Elira?” She smiled; a small smile.

He stared at her, and she caught a glimpse of the old Derset – though it was trapped under something else. He rose from his chair and walked over to her.

“I will give you one minute,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Then you must choose.”

The itch in her palm spread, strengthened, burned with a fury that surprised her. She winced, and Derset stared at her.

“It’s not possible,” he said, his eyes flicking to where she had clapped her hand to her knee. “It always takes at least five days, after…”

She winced again. The burning did not seem to be going away; unlike the pains before her transformation, it was not going to disappear. Five days. It had only been two days since her maturation – as Three had reminded her. Every soldier in the room was staring at her. Did they have tempero handcuffs here?

The sound of footsteps echoed outside. A moment later, an outlander woman burst through the door, panting and dropping to one knee.

“My lord,” she said, in Eliran, “Raquefort said to send you word. The battle’s turned.”

“What?” Derset stared.

“The Rhimese. They came out of the gardens. There were so many of them – it was like a flood of black – they must have been hiding. At least three hundred, sir. They’ve brought the white dragon down with arrows; and the Axium Guards have been carving up our force: that second group with Captain Hartleigh at the head, sir.”

“By the four below.” Derset uttered a curse Lysande had not imagined he was capable of voicing, and squeezed the dove. “I thought we had the Rhimese and the Axiumite guards trapped?”
“They moved before the ball. Looks like they were suspicious. There’s elementals in their army, too. Two of them. Every time we seem to gain some ground, they shoot fire and air.”

Lysande kept her face still; showing her pleasure at this news did not seem like the wisest course.

So Luca must have lied to her about the number of his guards. Well, she could not be angry at him, now.

“How does our force stand?” Derset said.

“We’ve lost more than half our soldiers.”

“And the Councillors? Tell me, did Crake, Raquefort and that idiot Rimini do their job?”

Lysande’s shoulders tensed.

“They’re trying, sir. But the big Valderran and the blonde boy are fighting side by side, and every time they get near one, the other one steps in to defend.” She had an image of Dante and Jale working together to fight off their enemies. It was not a pleasant one for the enemies. “And the Irriqi is surrounded by Pyrrhans; even fire can’t break their ranks. Though Raquefort’s doing her best.”

Derset put the dove down on the table. It was a lucky escape for the bird: his hand movements were becoming less and less controlled. “And Fontaine?” he asked.

The woman looked down and stammered over her answer for a moment.

“Sir,” she said, “Fontaine is –”

The next word came out in a gargle. Spit flew from the soldier’s lips; her eyes bulged; and an arrow-head protruded out of her chest. She staggered, but the cry in her throat did not find its way out.

“I believe the correct term is ‘late’,” a voice said, from behind her.

The woman toppled forward onto the floor. Luca stepped around her body and walked into the observatory, to be immediately grabbed by half a dozen guards; his arms were pulled behind his back, his bow snatched, and his quiver of arrows removed from his hand, but he did not attempt to struggle. He was marched over and shoved into the chair opposite Lysande. She saw that his doublet had been smeared with real blood, along with the swathes of silk — and smoothing down his sleeves, he winked at her.

Not for the first time, Lysande was struck by the thought that Luca Fontaine might be a little mad.
Several of the captains lumbered over to Derset and exchanged words. As they were talking, Lysande leaned across to Luca.

“Three hundred Rhimese archers?” she whispered. “Did you forget to mention those?”

“As I recall, you said you only had a hundred guards. There was at least double that number carving up the outlanders back there, before I made my valiant dash.”

The fiery itching in her palm flared up again, prompting her to wince. “Tell me you’ve got a plan to get us out of here.”

Derset was walking back now, and the captains dropped back a little to allow him to come over to the end of the table, where he folded his arms and loomed over Luca.

“Well, here he is. The clever prince of Rhime. Though perhaps you’re not feeling so clever now... you certainly don’t look it. Where’s your snake? Scampered off?”

He passed Luca’s bow to one of the captains, who dropped it on the floor and stamped on it. The woman’s boots broke the frame in two.

“That little trick of yours with the Bastillonians wasn’t bad,” Luca said. “Making them think we ambushed them, so the alliance will be poisoned — nothing says ‘we’re tearing up the agreement’ quite like a flaming bride, does it? But if you lose today, you must know, it’ll count for nothing; we can win back Ferago in a month.” Luca smiled. “One of my people’s already got her hooks into Gabros Merez.”

Lysande remembered Carletta Freste, walking arm in arm with Merez past the honey-jug.

“Talk all you like. You’re an arrogant half-breed.” Derset’s lip curled again. “You should have stayed in your castle in Rhime, or stuck to banditry like your brother. A bastard has no business in ruling.”

“Ah.” Luca leaned back in his chair. “I’m afraid you’re forgetting the difference between my brother and I. Raolo was a bastard by nature, you see; a real venomous, black-liveried, ill-natured scraping of a man; whereas I’m just a bastard by name.”

“I couldn’t care less.”
“Perhaps you should. It’s odd that you, with all your languages, your tricks, never found the time to give my name some thought. My mother was a Lyrian maid, you see. I took her name. And in ancient Lyrian, Fontaine means…”

Lysande remembered walking through the courtyard in Castle Cervello, watching the water flow with no source. She was standing in front of the water mill that had produced its own light in Luca’s castle, wondering how it worked; crouching behind the pavilion at the ball and hearing Carletta Freste say “Prince Fontaine designed the fountains in the pools”. She saw the great jets and arcs of water that had put out the dragonfire in the battle: the jets to which Three had refused all claim, splashing and gushing and quenching the flames; and last of all, she saw Luca standing by the great fountain under the Lyrian sun, giving her the clue that she had missed entirely.

In the ancient Lyrian, it was ‘fontaine de vire’.


The blast of liquid caught most of the guards and knocked them over, flooding the room. Derset’s legs slipped out from under him, and he grabbed onto the side of the table. Luca blasted the guards again, curving the jet of water around; Lysande had never seen anything like this, even in the weeks since meeting Three. In the skirmish in the desert, there had nothing of such magnitude; the power of the tide coming from his palm was felling everything in its path.

Vases jumped from their shelves. Glasses smashed on the floor, fracturing into shards, and the screams of the outlanders cut through the air as guards were washed out of the observatory. Over the edge and into the blackness, they tumbled, their arms flailing as they fell.

“Get back, Prior,” Luca shouted.

He took her by the hand and pulled her into the doorway. Pausing for less than a breath’s length, he held his arm out and sent out a fresh blast of water. The wave whipped around the edges of the room, aiming for the guards who were clutching the furniture. As he controlled it, his eyes flashed black fire. She was fascinated for a moment, watching him, until she realised that some of the outlanders were copying Derset and grabbing hold of the table.

There was an opportunity, here, if she could summon her training. She scooped up a dagger from the wet floor, wiping it on her trousers.
“Prior, I won’t tell you again! Get back! Go down to the battle, tell the others to come up here!”

But she was not listening: her eyes were assessing the position of the chandelier.

One throw would be enough, if she could hit the bolt at the top. She lined up her eye with the target, and her hand with her eye, concentrating hard. Her wrist flicked.

The dagger did not fly, however: it dropped as flames came out red from her palm. Her flesh was burning. Yet, somehow, she felt no pain.

The fire was flowing from her without her control: it shot out and sped to the top of the chandelier, and she watched it as if she were watching a spectacle put on by somebody else. It kept coming until the metal had melted through. The whole structure gave a lurch.

Prior, she thought. Fire. He was right. There was no coincidence at all.

Tiers of pointed crystal dropped onto the table and the floor, spearing whatever they landed on. The guards below the chandelier didn’t have a chance to run. Screams rose above the sounds of water and flames: a man floundered with a piece of crystal in his neck, collapsing onto another in a helmet who had been impaled three times through the back, his body spreadeagled on the floor.

Mercenaries scrambled out of the wreckage, coughing. Two were swept away at once by Luca’s tide, and only a few others managed to duck in time: a woman cowered under a half-smashed chair, holding her hands to her chest, shouting a curse.

Lysande bent over, gulping down air. The fire that had come out of her hand had drained all the energy from her, even as it had burned through the metal, and she struggled for the strength to stand. As she rose, a dagger sailed through the air towards her head and Luca moved in front of her to block it, using a shield he had snatched from a mercenary. She peeked around him and saw that it had come from an outlander captain.

The woman was advancing on her. There was only just enough energy in Lysande to run out of her path.

Something was moving on her right; a tall figure that must have fled into the corner of the room when the chandelier fell.

“Look out!” she cried. “Fontaine! On the right!”
Bloodied arms wrapped around Luca’s body as Derset tackled the prince to the ground, smacking him into the stone. The two of them rolled over and over. Lysande dodged them just in time to miss another dagger whistling past her head: looking up, she saw the outlander captain clutching a longsword, running at her, and bearing down hard.

The fire would not return – she was pathetically weak, like a fevered patient who had been bedridden for a week – and she glanced around the observatory. A blade was her only hope of defence.

In a mad rush, she ducked under the arm of the captain as the woman charged. She should have been dead in an instant, but somehow she was running to the nearest group of bodies, streaming past.

A mercenary lay next to her, a longsword by his side. She had never been as strong with the sword as the daggers, but she still remembered Sarelin forcing her to move, telling her to stop thinking. *Be the blade.* Her hands grabbed the sword, picked it up and whirled it around, just in time for it to meet the neck of the soldier coming at her. The woman gazed at her, her eyes opened wide. She pulled the blade out of her throat. It emerged red.

Watching the woman sink to her knees, gasping, she did not want to take her sword and shield – wrench the objects away from flesh. Sarelin had trained her too well. She felt the guilt hit her as she grasped the sword-hilt, and she watched the woman unfasten her armour and lie there on her back, chest heaving, the life draining from her.

The crest on her doublet gleamed in bronze thread. No – it was not a crest, but an image of the head of Fortituda, goddess of valour. The same picture that some of Elira’s soldiers had tattooed on their arms. The same goddess Sarelin had sworn by.

The outlander woman was straining to breathe.

“Prior, if you’re going to do me the indignity of rescuing me, now would be a good time,” a voice called, behind her.

She spun around. Luca and Derset had moved on from wrestling each other on the floor and were fighting rapier to rapier, so furiously that neither had a chance to cast their element – though perhaps they were drained, like herself, and could only resort to ordinary weapons. Luca was getting the upper hand, but Derset was no poor swordsman.
“Really, Prior, any time now,” Luca shouted.

She sprinted over, but before she could draw near, a sword-tip scraped her forearm: the last two survivors of her chandelier trick had sneaked around to the side. Each man held a sword.

She didn’t need Luca’s mathematical skills to assess her odds. She ran sideways and leapt over the corpses, just as the pair closed in; the breath of the bigger man behind was nearly upon her, and she could hear the other swearing in an outlander tongue. They were in armour, unlike her, and she had no sword. Trying to move the way Jale would, she feinted to the left, then sprinted to the right. The men came skidding to a halt at the open end of the observatory, yet one blocked her path, and raised his blade.

“Pray,” he said, in heavily-accented Eliran.

For all the racing of her breath, Lysande smiled, and shook her head. “I’m afraid I’ve never been the praying sort.”

“Pray now.” The soldier jerked her head towards the floor. “Last chance. For your gods and ours. Then I kill you.”

“You might wish to practice your own prayers,” a mellifluous voice replied. A blend of white hair and brown cloth streaked through the doorway, into their midst. Three knocked Luca and Derset over as he charged in, arm outstretched, racing towards the two outlanders who had cornered Lysande. With a blast of wind from his hand he sent the first man cringing backwards, while shooting a jet into the second’s stomach: the mercenary reeled and fell, landing on top of one of his dead colleagues. Three had barely paused to catch his breath when Litany came running in, daggers in her hands. She threw one. The blade punctured the last soldier’s heart like a needle jabbing into a wineskin, prompting a flow of blood; the woman tottered over and collapsed in a pool of his own fluid, hacking.

“Thank the sun and stars!” Lysande cried, putting down her sword.

“Oh, Lysande! You’re alive!” Litany rushed to her.

“And you.” She stepped forward and embraced the girl. Over her shoulder, she caught sight of Derset standing up, towering over Luca.

“Three!” she shouted. “Behind you!”

But Three did not need to intervene. Luca held his arm up, almost lazily, and a flood hit Derset in the face: knocking him backwards, throwing him across the
shards of crystal and wood and bloodied bodies to the end of the room, where he landed against the right wall, gasping.

The flash of satisfaction across Luca’s face did not escape her.

There was something beside Derset, and he sat up and scooped it into his hand. It was a ball of grey feathers, Lysande saw, staring as he whispered something to it. At once she remembered the purpose of the dove.

“Stop him!” she screamed. “He’s going to bring the White Queen here!”

Everything seemed to occur at once, across the room, in an odd and contemporaneous balance: Three and Luca winced, channelling their powers, while Litany pulled a dagger from a sheath and lined it up. Lysande could see them all reacting in a motion that had slowed to a crawl, even as something stirred inside her. It rose and sprouted, and wrapped its tendrils around her bones, this thing, and it told her that in a second she could reach the target before any of them.

Derset had tossed the bird into the air: yet it stopped, mid-flap, to dangle like a puppet on a string. She could hear its heart beating inside her head, a quick beat that sped up even faster; and the thing inside her said that she could stop that drum with her will, could make it silent once and for all.

She looked over to the dove and focussed her gaze on its body. The black eyes flickered, and the wings slowed.

All she had to do was stare, and hold it in place, and reach out with her mind.

*This is dangerous*, a voice in her head told her, and another voice replied: *Yes. I know.*

With a hand she could only feel, not see, she took the suspended bird in her grasp. The black eyes darted from side to side, and the bird shivered.

In a fraction of a second, she stopped the heartbeat.

The grey ball of feathers plummeted and hit the stone. It did not move after it landed, not even to give a last flap of its wings, though Derset rushed over and picked it up, shaking the bird with both hands. Beside Lysande, Three was staring at her as if she had just done something impossible.

Her whole body was coursing with a thrill, as if destroying the dove had given her some kind of life; yet the first person to spring into action was Luca, dashing across the floor, grabbing Derset’s hands and pinning them behind his back.

Luca wrestled Derset around to face Lysande.
“It’s the owner who handles a dog,” he said, wrapping one arm around her advisor’s neck. “Do you want to give the blow, Prior? Or shall I?”

The thrill faded. She knew that Luca could do this kind of thing without thinking – without blinking – that he could turn a weapon on someone as he had by the fountain, when the outlander nearly ran him through. And she had seen the bodies swinging at Ferizia, from the arch. But she did not have a childhood in Rhime to prepare her for this moment.

She looked down at the sword that was still in her hands. It was a heavy blade; the kind that some grim hero would use in a story to enact justice; and she could just see herself holding it up, pretending that taking a life was some kind of duty: teaching the world a lesson.

“No,” she said.

This was not a lesson for anyone but herself.

“Prior, I know you love to contradict me at every turn,” Luca said. “But now is not the time for mercy.”

“I didn’t say let him go.”

The sword clattered onto the stone. Everyone turned to her. She knew that she should be overwhelmed, yet the thrill of the power was still running through her body.

*I killed the dove.*

It was easy to focus her mind on Derset, in the same way that she had focussed on the bird, and within seconds she could hear his heartbeat. An ordinary sound: steady; a timekeeper’s rhythm. It would be so easy to snuff it out, like that little grey, feathered thing’s.

“Give me one answer,” she said, staring into his eyes. “You owe me one honest answer, for all the lies, Henrey. It was you who poisoned Sarelin, wasn’t it?”

Silence filled the observatory.

“You’re the most high-up of the White Queen’s servants. She wouldn’t trust it to anyone but the Umbra, would she? You’d planned and practiced for years... it was your hand that tipped the dragonblood into the jug.”

“I told you the day I met you, in the crypt.” Derset held her gaze. “There are assassins who know the ways of silence.”

“All this time you were working to bring us down, but did you feel any remorse? Just once, for the Council or for me?”
He nodded, as much as Luca’s arm would let him. “For you?” he said. “A great deal.”

The look on his face told her all that his words did not. It was the look of a man who had never had a wife or children; a man who had found himself pulled close when he needed to stand afar.

“And for Sarelin? When you tipped the vial into her medicine; when you unleashed the panther in the forest; did you feel any remorse for the woman who carried the realm on her shoulders?”

“That’s a much easier question to answer.” His bitter smile returned now. “Never. The bitch deserved to die.”

She was standing in the forest again with Sarelin, and the queen was sheathing her dagger.

*Any soldier can kill something he hates,* she heard Sarelin say. *It’s only when you kill something you’ve come to love that you learn how to lead. One day, you’ll understand that, Lys.*

The air was fresh on her cheeks, but Sarelin’s hands were warm around her back.

Then she was standing by the fire in the Painter’s Suite and Derset’s hands were on her – warm, too, like his words – holding her close to him. He was sitting by her side in the Great Hall as she navigated her way through the conversation; smiling when she needed a smile; offering hints about the ladies and lords. His body was against hers, holding her on the deck of the ship, as fire rained over them and struck the wood. Even with smoke around them, he kept her beneath him, shielding her from the flames.

*Yes,* she thought, *I understand.*

A ringing sound brought her back to the observatory. Litany had picked up the sword and was holding it out to her, but she shook her head. Across the wreckage, Luca was watching her with all the intensity of his stare.

“There’s a dagger in his pocket,” she said. “Take it out and throw it over here, if you please.”

Sarelin’s dagger whistled over the floor, and she picked it up and drew it from its sheath. The tip of the blade reflected her face: a determined mask that she scarcely recognised.
“This was the queen of Elira’s,” she said. “She always faced her enemy and looked them in the eye. I want to kill you the way she would’ve done, Henrey.”

There was much less chance of veering off course if she threw quickly enough. The blade spun from her fingers, landed exactly under the rib she wanted, and sank through the doublet. Red blossomed on emerald. She stood, quite still, as Derset began to choke.

She was watching him when a hand nudged her arm. Litany was holding out three daggers, their hilts pointing toward her. Wordlessly, she took them and threw them into Derset’s chest.

It was curious that her heart was pumping, and she could not feel a sting of pain: nothing but the same curious energy flowed through her.

She put a hand to her face and wiped her eyes. Her fingers came away dry.
Chapter Fifteen

The colours of Lyria encircled the hill in a variegated quilt: here, the swathes of gold sand; there, the brilliant, coruscating blue of the river, diverging into three paths as it rushed to the sea; and beside the delta, a ring of sandstone buildings teemed with a population twice the size of the capital. Smells of spice, sweat, palm oil and crushed vanilla leaves drifted up. Mosquitoes hovered in clouds, and all the way above the city on the Hill of Oblitara, the sun struck the bald peak, making a blazing crown where Lysande stood.

She unfurled her palm and let the fire sit in the air. With the help of Six, the jets of flame were becoming less sporadic – the curtains in her room had not yet been set ablaze – but she was still far from a master at producing a ball. The fire wobbled a little, a lantern bobbing in front of her. Controlling an element was harder than it looked: you had to find the flow within you and channel it using your emotions. Six had insisted she practice into the night.

This must have been where Oblitara perched. Higher than them all, on a rock that afforded no shade. She kicked a stone over the edge, and imagined the great dragon standing on the Hill, at the end of the Conquest, waiting for death to come.

Footsteps approached. She closed her fist, snuffing the fire out.

The limping tread came all the way to her side, where Cassia stopped and bent down to rub her leg.

"An eye that saw all the world, and a roar that made it shudder. Isn’t that how they described Oblitara in the Silver Songs?"

"I believe it’s ‘a roar that made it tremble’.

"It’s a good thing scholarship never made you a pedant." Cassia was smiling, and she saw that the eye that had survived the battle was gleaming: a patch of leather covered the other. The bandages that swaddled her thigh must still hide a wound from an outlander’s jab. Her friend’s smile took on a hint of sadness as she glanced around the hilltop, however; it was Cassia who had dealt the final blow to the white dragon, since she had known which two ribs framed the heart.

"Come on. They’ll be ringing the damned bells any minute," Cassia said.
The Pyrrhan palanquin was waiting next to hers. Together they walked back to the steps, where the Irriqi ordered all of her guards into Lysande’s conveyance, and the two of them climbed into the one with the leopard. The bearers bumped their way down the stairs. It was hard to avoid looking at Cassia’s eye-patch in such a small space; Lysande noticed that a bronze leopard had been embellished on it, gleaming, and drawing attention more than deflecting it.

As they made their way south, the figures she glimpsed through the gap were moving out of the street, darting into their houses; shops had been shuttered and stalls packed up, and a few street-corners had been piled with flowers.

“They make a good show of mourning,” Cassia said, as they passed a row of houses with black ribbons drooping from the door-handles. “These Lyrians. But Rusulluh tells me they’re singing about gutting the northerners in the inns.”

“I hope they forget to when they’re sober.” Lysande knew why the Lyrians were looking for a fight. Only last week, as she stood in the pews of the prayer-house, listening to Vigarot Montignac describe Lyria’s role in defending the Council at a moment of great crisis, she had noticed Dante carrying a jar, and when the speeches were over and the funeral had nearly ended, the First Sword had walked to the front of the prayer-house. Southern hands slid to their swords as he made his way to the caskets, unscrewing the lid of a jar of soil. Vigarot slipped over to him.

“We do not scatter dirt on our dead, in Lyria,” he said.

“It’s the northern way.”

“You’re a long way from the north, First Sword.” Vigarot’s eyes darted to Jale for a second. “You would do well to remember that.”

With a loud scrape of steel, several of the Valderran captains had drawn their longswords. The Valderrans advanced to the front of the prayer-house, and some of the cities’ guards their hands to the hilts of their weapons. Most of them stayed where they were, however: the Rhimese were grinning as if they were watching an excellent show.

As the northerners reached the front, several of the Lyrian guards rushed to meet them, gold plating and mail forming a wall around Vigarot. Lysande saw Svauche, the Valderran captain, surging forward, cursing. Jale began to speak, but Vigarot made some aside. The Valderrans charged at him, meeting the Lyrians with their steel and hacking: a clash of swords echoed off the walls and filled the room,
and the cries from the mourners were drowned out. It took a quarter-hour – in which five guards were killed and twenty wounded – until the mêlée stopped at last.

*How in the three lands will we defeat Mea Tacitus if we can't mourn our dead without drawing blood?*

The rest of the funeral passed more quietly. Once Vigarot had finished recalling the bravery of every man and woman in gold armour, and thanking the Bank of Lyria for the caskets, Jale had approached the corpses, to the chanting of the choir. He spent a long time looking down into his sister’s casket. Lysande wondered if he was seeing the mutilation on her body for the first time. The memory of the three elementals – Raquefort, Crake and Rimini, bending over the corpse on the floor of the observatory – sent a spurt of anger through her, and she was gladdened to see that when Jale returned to his place, Dante put an arm around him. Cassia came next. Luca’s face gave nothing away as he made his tour, but he dropped something into the first casket: a *pezzovita*, to represent the life of the deceased.

When Lysande’s turn arrived, she followed the lead of the usher to the caskets with emerald and silver handles. Blundsor was looking up from inside the first. He did not appear at all prepared for death – his eyes were wide open, and she decided it would not be prudent to let Chidney see him like this. She bowed to Blundsor’s body.

Seven Axium guards awaited her, side by side, their silver armour stained with the blood of their enemies. Yet the last Axiumite was not clad in plate. The dagger-marks on his chest had been covered by an emerald robe, which had been smoothed over, and his hair had been brushed back from his face; in death, he looked like her advisor again.

The surge of anger that she expected did not come. She took out the chain that he had given her, fingering the silver, and let it fall onto Derset’s chest.

“*I wanted to be the first to say goodbye.*”

Cassia’s voice jolted her back to the present. They were passing through the pleasure quarter, weaving through a group of men in near-transparent robes. “I know we’ll see each other in a week,” the Irriqi said, “but I wanted to check you weren’t too shaken up. You know, after what happened with –”

“I appreciate it,” Lysande said quickly. “I want to thank you, actually. For what you did, in the battle, directing everyone when the dragons came down. I imagine we’d all be dead if it wasn’t for you.” *And I’m sorry for suspecting you,* she
added, silently. *I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my hidden guards. I’m sorry about my advisor nearly killing us all—*

The pressure on her palm stopped her thoughts. Cassia had taken her hand in hers and clasped it, her fingers interlacing Lysande’s. She said nothing, but she maintained the grip. When Lysande looked across and saw the compassion in that one gleaming eye, she was sure she didn’t need to speak, either.

When the palanquin passed out of the pleasure quarter, a rotting smell wafted to Lysande’s nostrils. She looked out into a square where a crowd surrounded a pile of bodies, upturned to the sun. Commoners could ill afford a prayer-house or gilded caskets, and rotting in the open air was free. The guards carried them past the crowd, and as they made their way to one of the sandstone buildings beyond the plaza, cries of “Prior!” resounded.

“You’re as popular as ever,” Cassia remarked.

“I shouldn’t be.” *It’s thanks to my poor judgment that their husbands and wives are lying there, smelling so sweetly.*

“You can’t blame yourself.” Cassia squeezed her hand. “None of us looked within our ranks, my friend— it could have been any one of our advisors.”

Lysande did not have to reply, for they were stopping. The lords, ladies and other notable guests had been assembled by the dock. Her Axium Guards stood to attention on the right, with Litany and Raden.

“Where are the Bastillonians?” she asked, as she climbed out.

Cassia steered her down the middle, towards the dock-hands. “The news came yesterday. I tried to find you, but you were locked away with that physician—the woman with the burns on her cheek. Queer character, if you ask me.” Cassia fended off an approach from an attendant. “King Ferago took all his dead with him and left last night— took his ambassador, too. I suppose he doesn’t think he needs one, now that he’s broken off the alliance.”

Lysande barely suppressed a gasp.

“So we’d better hope your meeting in Axium turns up some good ideas,” Cassia said. “Or we’ll need to sharpen our swords. Swift sailing, my friend.”

They embraced and smiled, and Lysande made her goodbyes to Dante and Jale as quickly as she could, hugging Jale and promising she would have rooms ready for them in a week. Jale was standing as close to Dante as he could without
coming near the Valderran guards. As she made to join her party, she felt someone
grip her arm.

"You've been avoiding me."

Luca was holding a new bow, its black frame embellished with tiny silver
cobras. He handed it to Malsante and offered Lysande his arm. He was so close that
she could hear every syllable when he spoke, dropped out in that elegant voice, yet
she could not tell whether he was half-amused or serious.

"You know perfectly well I have to prepare for the meeting in the capital," she replied, ignoring the gesture. "If we stay here another week, the north and the
south will try to slit each other's throats. And it takes time, accommodating you all.
Come to Axium Palace the night before the meeting, Fontaine. We can speak then."

"Very well." He shrugged. "Where will I find you?"

She thought of his arms around her as they danced; his body under hers in the
library; his hand blasting a jet of water into Derset's chest. And the way he had
looked at her, in the observatory, with his doublet covered in blood.

"You won't," she said. "I'll find you."

* 

The voyage up the Grandfleuve was swift, thanks to a merchant who asked no
questions and a barge that was in a hurry to get its silks and spices north. They
docked at the end of the river to a bustle of movement, and Lysande had to wait for
several minutes before Litany could lead her horse off the boat: the piebald mare
scuffed the ground and pushed its muzzle into her palm, waiting until she produced
an apple.

Lysande grinned as the animal munched it down. It was an ill-bred creature,
by Axium standards, but she had come to like it.

Raden had tried to argue with her about an escort, but she had managed to
persuade him to go ahead of her with the Axium Guards: now that she could
summon fire from her palm, Litany was all the escort she needed. They bought a
second horse, and a saddle that had probably not seen polish since the White War,
and set off into the central scrub.

The road was uneven, but the horses' hooves flew over it. Villages sped past.
Lysande saw eyes peeping at her out of the window of one house, only to disappear a
moment later; no one in the countryside could be aware that the rider in the tattered Axium doublet was Councillor Prior, yet she suspected that they were on the lookout, anyway. No cluster of dwellings in the realm would have missed the news of a dragon dropping from the air.

As she rode, she tried not to look too closely at every robed man she passed. It was easy to see a familiar figure in every grey-flecked head if she stared, and there were plenty of commoners in high collars. They stopped at an inn to water the horses, and while the innkeep lectured Litany about the dangers of riding about at this time—a black beast had burned down half the palace at Lyria, it was said, and no one could tell if it had been a dragon or a demon—Lysande listened to the people drinking at the tables. There were many dark mutterings about “Chiamese barbarians” who had attacked the Council. Others claimed the White Queen herself had marched into the Sapphire Ball with ten legions of outlanders.

Only the older women and men stayed silent, shaking their heads and looking at each other with sombre faces. Lysande suspected they would not dare to tempt their gods with speculation.

A crossroads appeared within the next mile: Axium to the north, Rhime to the east; and she took the eastern turning without hesitation. They were galloping down the Scarlet Road for the best part of five minutes before her mare nearly hit a lump.

“Stop!” Litany shouted, pulling the reins tight on her horse.

The lump atop the dirt turned out to be a man. As Lysande dismounted and walked over, she saw that he had a ring in his ear, and a word in a foreign script hung on a bronze disc around his neck: an outlander word, she saw, recognising the wayfarer script from across the North Sea. Yet the only outlanders who visited Elira were sailors, who never came this far north of the Grandfleuve.

“Are you wounded, or ill? Can you understand what I’m saying?”

Rolling up the man’s sleeve, she found a dragon brand on his wrist. Her hand did not reach for a dagger. The outlander was wheezing, his chest straining to take in air—she could see he was not about to start a fight.

He cradled his stomach, but she turned him over, and Litany gasped.

A fish-hook had ripped open the bottom of his stomach. Whoever had inflicted the wound had been clever: he could lie here for days before it finished him.
It had been driven into the belly, cutting through layers of flesh without causing much blood to leak, and every exhalation had to be an agony. He moaned.

“Who could do this?” Litany said. “It’s beyond cruel.”

“I think someone’s taken justice into their own hands. He must’ve escaped after the battle, and made it this far north – we might release him from whatever strata of torment he’s trapped in, Litany.”

She stood up and took his arms, and wordlessly, Litany took hold of his feet. It required both of their strength to drag the mercenary into the shade of the closest tree, and she sent her maid away when it was done: although she knew Litany would bear any secret for her, she did not think she was ready to trust anyone with this.

The man’s breathing reminded her of a stag Sarelin had killed: a poor shot, unusual for the queen, had left it with a punctured lung, until Sarelin’s sword put it out of its misery.

“I know a way that might be swift,” she whispered.

The outlander looked up at her. He did not attempt to speak; the nod he gave was so tiny that it might have been a tremor, yet it was enough.

Lysande dropped down to her knees, not touching him. This was not like moving an element, where she could channel the fire in her veins; the power was in the head, not the body, and she had to wait. She concentrated, and reached out with her mind.

The pulse came clearly. She felt the thump-thump; saw his eyes widen, and guessed that he could feel the grip of the phantom hand around his heart. Swiftly, she squeezed.

The man gasped. Lysande compressed his heart until it burst and his lungs ceased to strain, and his body fell back against the ground. The head slumped; the pendant slid across his chest; yet as he lay still, look in his eyes was neither pained nor peaceful, but empty of everything.

Lysande stood up, the same energy coursing through her again. She had the curious feeling that if she ran out into the countryside, she could go on forever.

“Let’s go,” she said, striding back to Litany. “He’s past suffering, now.”

“Did you release him?”

_In the best way I could._ She swung onto her mare and turned to the road ahead. A nod was all she managed as she glanced across at Litany, but she felt sure that the girl understood.
The palette of Rhimese colours spread over the land again, bright, but not glaring like the desert: a harmony of reds and greens and yellows, through which the Flavantine could be glimpsed from time to time, meandering between pairs of conical trees or flowing alongside cobbled streets. Duca, the first town they passed, boasted old battlements and a castle, and Litany fell in love with the peaches being sold at Cardinala – although the fruit was so juicy that they had to wash their faces.

The closer they got to their destination, the more Lysande’s thoughts strayed to what she would say when she arrived. She was miles from the present when they cantered into a dale: the walls emerging from the sides were fashioned of soft pink stone, and the shops they passed offered hard cheese, soft curd, deep-smoked rind and platters of cheese with straggling veins. Pescarra did not feel the need to conceal its business.

Lysande passed the temptations of the street-sellers without stopping, leading Litany to an inn tucked at the end of an alley, where a fig-tree spread its branches in the front garden. She left the maid to stand guard, and made her way up the stairs.

The door on the second floor was bolted, but she knocked anyway.

“Who goes there?” a woman called.

“One who brings fire without carrying wood.”

The door creaked open and offered a sliver of a burnt face. A second later, Six pulled it open. “Your aim’s getting better, I hope,” she said, waving Lysande through.

“I can make a ball of fire without setting my trousers alight, now.” She stepped into a small room, and took in the empty chair, the papers lying on the table. “Of course, it was easier with you helping. You never miss.”

She did not need to ask where to go – there was only one door at the end, and a double-window with wide panes greeted her in the next room, letting in a deluge of light. The man at the desk sat with his back to her, his brimmed hat tilted on a slight angle, and as she came up to him, she saw the cheeses arranged like a wheel on his plate: a piece of every kind of Pescarran delicacy seemed crammed into the space.

Lysande cleared her throat.
“Ah, Miss Prior.” Three looked up, his white hair spilling across his shoulders. “Returned from her first great test.”

“You might have told me you’d rush off so soon after the battle, just to gorge yourself.”

“I regret that I could not write sooner, but I was engaged in another matter. And besides, this is Pescarran cheese.” He pulled out a chair. “Anyone who could think that it is not worth a delay must be an uncouth, untutored boor. Take a bite, and you will see what I mean.”

She sat, took a piece of smoked cheddar and bit into it. The taste was enough to prevent her from speaking. Three proceeded to summarise his exit, explaining that Welles had turned up at his door a few hours after the battle ended with the news that the Resistance had called a meeting. The glance that passed between Three and Six did not escape her. Nor did the bruise on Three’s wrist; a small mark, like a smudge of oil, became visible when he reached up to touch his pendant.

*Perhaps the Resistance has its own kind of discipline,* she thought. *Though perhaps he merely got it in the battle.*

As soon as she raised the matter of the White Queen’s whereabouts, Three’s face darkened.

“She can transport an army through the air, now. A few legions of swords can be bought again, and one dragon is still alive: that means soldiers dropping from the air wherever she wishes to put them. To say nothing of its fire-power. Signora Chamsak changed the world forever when she sold those eggs, I fear.”

“It was definitely Chamsak?”

“No other merchant has received such a sum from Mea Tacitus.” He shook his head. “We should have guessed, but we thought a weapon meant some kind of device. A dragon was never in our dreams.”

It was harder to raise the matter of Derset. Lysande cut herself off, swallowing at the sound of the name from her own lips. “She must have taken over his mind years ago. The brand was some kind of communication; I saw him wincing.”

“I suspect that she used more than just magic upon him. She controlled him to some degree, certainly, yet she also nourished his sense of injustice and sat back and let Lord Derset’s emotions do the rest of the work. Human feelings are a good
deal more potent than any external force, my dear, if you know how to mould them to your will.”

He sliced a piece of cheese into quarters, just as he had sliced the egg back in the Rhimese prayer-house. Lysande did not know how to make words come. She wished to turn the discussion away from Derset, but her head was filled with his face, looking up at her from the casket.

“You have something to celebrate, anyway. A scaly something,” Three said.

The white dragon’s corpse had been her main triumph, locked away in Rayonnant Palace, but the thought of the dragon called up memories. Pieces of burning mesh – the slave running towards her in his molten collar – the coin-knives slicing into friends and enemies alike, and Derset, taking her hand.

After picking at a piece of soft cheese, she pushed back her plate.

“Do we have any hope against a dragon, Three?”

“As things stand, no. The armies of Elira will not be enough while they are pitted against an aerial inferno – no offence to your staunch Captain Hartleigh, of course. And though we can blow back the dragon, Mea Tacitus will be expecting that, now. She learns quickly.” He folded his hands. “There is one stratagem that could help.”

“Perhaps you might share it.”

“We must procure a dragon of our own.” He quartered a morsel of cheese, as calmly if he had said that they should procure some shoes. “And rig it. Preferably within weeks.”

“You think there are more dragons?”

“I think Signora Chamsak does not sell all of her stock to one buyer. In my experience, she always retains one of her most valuable items for herself.” Three folded his hands. “But as to whether we could hatch an egg, should we come to possess one... and how we would learn to tame a dragon, if it did hatch. These are not easy questions to answer, since King Redmund’s reign. All books about magical creatures and elemental people have been banned, and priceless knowledge has been lost, or hidden away. We would need someone who has devoted a good part of their life to learning about dragons... someone who has the power and influence to procure illegal books.”

“I think I know the woman.” Lysande could already imagine what Cassia would say if she asked her to help an elemental intelligence service.
“Excellent. I may take you up on your offer. But let us come to the business of our meeting.” Three leant back in his chair, his sharp features half-lit by the sun, half in shadow, and she was conscious of Six straightening against the wall; of the gaze of both Resistance members directed upon her.

“My superior, Two, feels we should press you to keep feeding us information on the Council,” he said. “Unsurprisingly, the others think we need to make use of our sources, too, and you are so highly-placed; you can offer us diamonds where others scratch up chips of glass.” He paused. “Still, I am of the opinion that you should have a choice in the matter.”

Lysande waited. The pause lengthened.

“I was there when you killed Lord Derset, my dear. I saw the way you bent over and clutched the wall afterwards – you were breathing hard – you looked like you had taken a blow to the chest. If you get tangled up in the business of the Resistance, you may find your conscience pummelled with more such blows. I would not see the dear thing beaten until it loses its shape. That is why I feel we should release you from your commitment to the Resistance.”

Lysande could not see any sign that he was joking.

“You cannot mean that we should cease our exchange,” she said.

“For your own health, my dear, it might be advisable.”

“I appreciate that you care for me. I haven’t known many people who do. But you’ve misunderstood my sentiments. I may not wish to work with you, now, but I fully intend to work for you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Lysande folded her arms. “If I help reap the grain, I should share in the harvest.”

“You’re asking for a position in our ranks?”

“Not asking.” She held his gaze. “You could say I’m making it a condition – of my continued aid to the Resistance.”

She had said her piece, now, and she was obliged to wait; but Three knew how to make a pause last. He quartered another piece of cheese and ate it off the end of the cheese-fork. “The others won’t want it,” he said. “The Resistance takes only those well-practised with their power. You have had no time to hone your skills. You could not defend yourself in a sudden attack.”
Perhaps not yet. If she had matured in two days, maybe she could halve the training time too. “You saw what I did to that dove.”

“There are hiccups as one’s power solidifies.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Strange effects that some elementals speak of – and they are almost always sporadic. What you produced was not a power in its own right: the White Queen can control others with her mind, but no elemental has the power to kill with their mind alone.”

“And if I were to provide proof?”

Three’s pause was even longer than the first.

“Six, my dear,” he said, “go out into Pescarra and find us an animal that’s dying. Miss Prior may be a little weak from her ride.”

It did not take long. Pescarra was a town with plenty of food, and there was no shortage of scavengers: the fox Six lugged in was dripping, the head splintered into a mess of angles, the skull half-crushed. Three rose.

“Didn’t I say to find one that was dying?”

“I did.” Six deposited the fox on the table and gave him an insolent glare. “I dropped a rock on its head. Then I found it dying.”

He moved to the end of the table.

A little fluid from the head had leaked onto the wood, and the animal’s chest was barely moving; trying not to look at the smashed skull, Lysande stood up and joined him. She could focus on the breathing, on the faint rise and fall, if she really tried. The sound came more quickly this time.

Reaching out, she gripped the heart without hesitation. She squeezed until the last breath was gone. The life pushed out of the little creature, and the silence in the room overwhelmed her. Three and Six had not lifted their eyes from the animal since she began to search for the heartbeat. They were both staring at the fox now.

Sunlight fell away from the window, leaving the room in shadow, and Three’s angular features turned towards her.

“Welcome to the Resistance, Miss Prior,” he said.

He held out a hand. She took it firmly.
The journey back to Axium passed in two days. Lysande and Litany found the road into the capital strewn with silver ribbons, and the bridge across the King’s Lake garlanded with green cloth: Raden had passed through only a day earlier with the Axium Guards, and they had no doubt received cheers; yet not every token they saw was one of celebration. Roses were still piled up at the palace fence for Blundsor and the others who had given their lives, and slips of paper fluttered on the posts, giving farewells to the dead.

Lysande brought Litany around to the eastern gate, away from the guards, but no sooner had she slipped through than she was greeted by the woman on duty and shown to the front door by the steward, where eight maids and eight attendants escorted her to the Great Hall. The ladies and lords of the court formed legions in jewels and feathers, armed with questions. Had she a mind to put the court in mourning, or throw a banquet to celebrate the victory? How would Elira defend itself against the White Queen?

Four figures in robes stood at the end. Lord Chackery and Lady Tuchester did not speak, but their glares did the talking for them, and Lord Addischild congratulated Lysande on the “management of castles she had never been invited to enter.” Lady Bowbray inquired as to whether she was planning on inventing a family crest for herself, with cutting politeness. Lysande did not reply.

She fended off the last of the gilded niceties and pulled Litany with her to the end of the hall, making a bow.

The inside of Sarelin’s chambers was much quieter than the corridors. Lysande could hear her own breathing as she entered, and in the garden she lay down upon the grass and looked up, breathing slowly. Sarelin had looked up at the same sky, before her eyes closed for the last time.

There was no voice to respond to her, yet she talked, sitting at Sarelin’s desk, or perching on the edge of the bed: telling the queen about the extraordinary sight of the fire coming out of her hand, and the chaos of the battle, and the position she had just attained with a measure of impudence and a good deal of luck.

She rested one hand on the armour beside the coronation cabinet and pressed her fingers to the dent. It was still possible to feel the rough edge where the White Queen’s sword had made its mark.

Raden found her in the suite, on the second morning, touching the same place.
“Twenty-three years,” he said.
“I’m sorry?”
“That’s how many Queen Sarelin lived before she took the throne.” He nodded to the dent. “She was barely past youth when the White Army came down upon her, and bled the realm.”
“She always said she became a woman just before she went to war.” But I often wondered if war was what made her one. It filled her with iron. Lysande glanced at the box in his hands. “Have you brought me a gift, Raden?”
“Of a sort. Your maid wanted me to give this to you.”
Inside, a gold stem shone against the wood. The feather attached to it was spattered with blood, and the writing-tip had been coated, so that it was entirely covered in crimson: yet it was her quill, undoubtedly: the same one Sarelin had given her. Lysande took it out and placed it in her palm.
What were the chances? She had given up hope of ever finding it again, after it had tumbled from her pocket at the ball.
“She must’ve had the staff of Rayonnant Palace out searching for it, as soon as she knew you’d lost it.” Raden grinned. “That girl’s a little too fond of you, if you ask me.”
“She’s dutiful, certainly.”
“If that’s what you call it.” He raised an eyebrow, but she pretended not to see.
She ran a finger over the pointed end, where the blood was thickest, and felt the coat that had ossified. A red quill. There was something curiously fitting about it.
“I could get someone to polish it for you,” Raden said, “if you want to use it. The smith can clean it until it shines.”
“No.” She wrapped her fingers around the tip. “I think I prefer it this way.”
He folded his arms. It was the same pose he had adopted since she first came to the palace, whenever she said something he didn’t understand. “Honestly, Lysande,” he said. “What are you going to write, with a bloody quill?”
Lysande held it up in front of her, and eyed him over the point.
“History,” she said.

*
The palace library did not offer many books on the foreign lands, so she took out everything she could find: as Councillor, everything but the monarch’s section was open to her. Litany helped her stack up the volumes. She had only a few days until the rest of the Council arrived, and there was not half the time to find what she wanted.

When the steward arrived with a list of tasks, she was forced to throw herself into accommodating the rest of the Council. The day of the arrivals came with a storm of polishing and cooking, and Lysande did not emerge from her chamber while the staff were still working; by the time she left the tower the palace was a dark doublet, slashed here and there with the brilliant silver of moonlight.

Her feet slipped over the stone floors. The attendants in the corridors did not greet her; even the guards who had once jeered her did not dare to speak: Bletchford, a woman with a thin nose who had always thrown barbs at Lysande, kept her head down as she walked by. Oxbury and Risset did not look up from the doorway of the wing where they kept their vigil. It’s mine, Lysande realised, as she took the stairs at a brisk stride. The palace is mine. It was a queer thought.

The guards on the door to Luca’s suite were conversing with Carletta Freste, but all three looked up as she approached.

“Let her through,” Freste said.

“But His Highness said he wanted to see only Councillor Prior – ”

“That is Councillor Prior.” Freste shook her head, giving the woman an exasperated look. “Do you want to argue the point with Prince Fontaine, Taglio?”

The woman gawked at Lysande’s ink-flecked doublet as she stepped aside.

Lysande walked through. She kept her ears attuned as she entered the bedchamber; in the dim torchlight, she could make out Luca’s clothes strewn on the floor — dark fabrics, red silk, and belts of soft ox-hide — quills poking out of pots, and books piled on the desk. From pamphlets to thick tomes, some imprinted with seals, and others bound with string that glinted, there was such a variety of books that she wondered how he had brought them all here.

Several volumes gave off a perfume, and a pile on the corner of the desk offered a number of foreign works that were certainly banned in Axium: she picked up one of these up. The words on the spine read “A Short History of Long Pleasure”. Taking in the imprint of a man and woman entwined on the front cover, she dropped it hastily back on the pile.
The sound of running water caught her attention. There were no fountains in Axium Palace’s suites, so Luca must be filling a bath. She walked to the bath-chamber and knocked, but no reply came. The water was gushing. She tried the handle, which gave way at once. Somehow it did not bother her that she was intruding.

Moving in, she navigated through a wall of mist; jets of water were leaping from one end to the other of the long bath, splashing down, then arcing back up again, creating a cycle. The mass of steam was warm. She edged further in, watching where she stepped.

Torches burned in brackets on the far wall beyond the baths. Their glow was not bright enough to illuminate the whole room, however, and it took her a moment to notice that Luca was sitting in the dry pocket at the end, wearing nothing but his ruby ring.

She froze. He did not appear to have seen her; as he bent forward to mark the notebook that rested against his knees, she examined his profile, from shoulders to toes: it was not thin enough to be a commoner’s, nor muscular enough to be a soldier’s. *A scholar’s, perhaps.* On the patch of floor beside him, the shimmering coils of Tiberus’ tail were wrapped around an ink-pot.

“Don’t try to scamper off, Prior.”

The words cut through the steam just as she had turned to make her way out. She had forgotten about his elemental senses. Putting one hand on the wall, she tiptoed over the stones to join Luca.

“It seems a strange place to write,” she replied, looking everywhere but at him.

“We Rhimese are cold-blooded, in every sense. We do our best work in the heat.”

As he folded up the notebook, he leant forward again, and the marks on his back came into view: dozens of weals, scored into the flesh, and tapered, as if from the flaying end of a whip.

“Mercy.” Lysande stopped, her hand pressed to a stone. “Who made them?”

“My father. I can thank him for educating my brother and me. I don’t mean that he taught us anything – I mean that he us until we learned who we were. When someone hits you, hard, and repeatedly, you can either withdraw, and study and
create – or you can go out and hit someone else. And, you see, Raolo was never much of a scholar.”

Luca put down his quill and dropped it into the pot. After a moment, Lysande sank down onto the floor beside him. The warmth of the stone seeped into her.

“Sarelin never knew about any of it,” she said. “Not what your father did. Nor what your brother was doing to those villagers.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“I knew Sarelin. Better than anyone. And she wouldn’t have had him live, if she knew he was slaughtering the bone people. But leave that aside.” She cleared her throat. “I came to ask you something.”

He did not speak for a while, and the sound of splashing water filled the air. It was hard to keep her eyes from the lines on his back.

“I’ve been researching – various things, and I’ve been looking into what Derset told us,” she said, at last. “If Sarelin didn’t know there were dragon eggs still in the three lands, how did the White Queen know? That’s what I can’t fathom. And I need to know, Fontaine; I need to understand how she outwitted us.”

Luca leaned towards her, and she leaned back, averting her eyes; she had glimpsed the next inch of skin below his hips. “Good to know that for all her legions, we were ahead of Sarelin Brey on that one,” he said. “Rhime found out years ago that there was an elemental in the outlands who liked to show off. A rich woman. The imbecile went around bragging that her family had smuggled dragon eggs out of Elira before the Conquest and the White Queen got wind of it and captured her, and tortured her for weeks. The woman didn’t know where the eggs were: only that they had been taken back south to be sold.”

“You did better than Axium, finding this out.”

“My father was very good at using spies. It was the only sort of intelligence he had time for.” Luca’s mouth curled into its little half-smile.

She wanted to ask him many things: how he had killed his brother; how he had survived all this time as an elemental, when he was surrounded by a court; who his mother had been, and where she was now: everything she could glean would be useful. But this was not the time. The way he was looking at her told her that he had something to ask, too.

Scooping up his things, he began to stand up, and Lysande was suddenly very conscious that he was wearing nothing but his skin; she was overwhelmed with the
desire to rush out, yet she was sure he would be amused if she did – this was some sort of game to make her blush, and she was not about to lose. Rising with him, and following him, she took in the weals on his back.

"Stare all you like, Prior." He didn’t even turn. "Scars aren’t like Axiumites. They don’t embarrass easily."

Lysande was suddenly very busy with her boot-laces. By the time she came through Luca was dressed in a robe of black silk, which he fastened around the waist, knotting the cord. "Conspiracy is hungry work," he said, walking to the table.

"Are we conspiring, then?"

"I certainly hope so. Otherwise, I hate to think how we’ll explain what you’re doing here."

He lifted a domed cover from a platter. Upon the silver, layers of brown and white cake formed a block. An amorata, she realised. Sarelin had ordered one made, once, when she was in all-night meeting with a pretty young lord from the Lynson family.

Luca poured wine into the two goblets on the table and passed one to her, and they drank in unison. The cake divided smoothly under his knife. Lysande ate her piece slowly: there were so many kinds of chocolate in each mouthful that she was determined to savour them all.

As she looked up, she became aware that they were standing side by side, his eyes level with hers.

"When you’re one of us, Prior, and you have eyes upon you every day, it’s like you’re walking on a pond in winter," Luca said. "The ice has frozen just enough to venture out. At any moment, it might crack, and send you plunging down below. So you walk carefully; you take ginger steps; and if you reach out to hold another’s hand, your fate becomes bound up with theirs. If they fall, you fall. If they make it across, you do too."

"I’m sure you’re going to approach the point at any moment now."

"It can’t have escaped you that there’s never been a chance like this before, with two elementals in power." He put his goblet down. "Now that the others know the White Queen is back, with a dragon and who knows what else, they’ll look to protect their own. Dante and Jale need to control their cities, if they’re going to survive two weeks. The Pyrrhans help each other in times of crisis: Cassia will go back to the jungle and re-equip her guards from those great big armouries. That
means the rest of our Council will be trying to order its defences.” He took a forkful of cake and paused. “What Elira needs is someone to step up and take charge of the realm.”

“You mean to nominate yourself as leader of the Council.” Lysande didn’t need to phrase it as a question.

“I can stand above the cities and coordinate them, fortify against dragonfire, and win back King Ferago at the same time. With you to assist me, of course.” Luca’s stare had intensified. “We’re walking on the same ice now, Prior.”

“So you want me to support your motion to elect a leader?”

“No.” He took a sip of wine. “I want you to propose the motion. It’ll look better if it comes from you.”

Lysande had the odd feeling that they were back at the tactos board, and he was playing a double game: that he had waited, again, to reveal his best move.

“I saw you in the observatory, after you killed Derset.” Luca laid his hand on hers. “You were shaking like one of those letters tied to the gate: trembling. That’s when I thought, you deserve better than this. You don’t have to keep on living in danger, Prior; you can step out of the blood and the flames. Just put your vote behind me. I’ll make you my closest ally. Give you access to all the rare volumes in the Academy.” His words were flowing: coursing over her. “It’ll be like it was when you worked for Queen Sarelin, only you’ll have something more.”

“And what would that be?”

Luca flipped her hand over, and ran a finger across her palm. His nail traced one of the lines all the way to the end. He paused, looking into her eyes.

She put down her goblet. He was only an arm’s length away, and she could reach out and push him away; she could tell, by the way he was watching her, that he half-expected her to. It would be amusing to see what he did if she struck him across the face again, but instead, she leant across and brought her hand around behind his neck.

_This is what Cassia would do_, she thought, vaguely, _not me._

Yet she gripped him by the hair, pulled him to her and pressed her mouth to his. She had begun this in the book-lined room at Rayonnant Palace and she wanted to finish it now. His body yielded to hers; he was pliant under her grip, and as she twisted the lock of hair, her free hand ran across his back, tracing the scars beneath the robe.
It was curious, but she could not quite tell how long it lasted. Time seemed to have slipped away. Luca’s stare fixed on her as she let go.

“Should I take it that you’ve decided?” he said.

Lysande smiled.

“I think a leader of the Council is an excellent idea,” she said.

The torch-light dipped and flickered as she walked across the chamber, and she made sure to not to look back as she passed through the door: not to allow him a glimpse of her face.

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The commoners began to gather at dawn, and even the cold could not disperse them. It was hard to hide trains of horses that stretched over a mile and Cassia and Dante had not spared any expense in their journey, though Lysande suspected that word of the Council’s meeting had spread most quickly after Jale began to travel. The kind of ship the prince of Lyria sailed in was not likely to sneak up in secret. Reports had reached the capital of cages full of songbirds, unloaded from the deck, and a chalice encrusted with sapphires that the prince used for bathing his feet in milk.

She tried to breathe as slowly and evenly as she could while she stood in her chamber, listening to the buzz of noise.

“There you are,” Litany said, brushing out the last knot in her hair. “We’re all ready to go.”

“We’re not going anywhere until I’ve thanked you.” She handed the girl an open box, in which a silver dagger sat in a sheath engraved with the name LITANY. “For finding my quill. After all I put you through, from the battle to what happened with Derset, you still find time to salvage my possessions. You really are the only gem I cherish in this glittering world, Litany.”

Litany was prevented from being swallowed up entirely by embarrassment due to the arrival of a troupe of ushers; the pair of them were surrounded, bowed to, and marched down the stairs with many polite remarks about their brave efforts in Lyria. Lysande crossed the grounds to the sound of shouts and cheers. Ignoring the ushers’ remonstrations about being late, she turned and walked to a spot on the fence, and after a brief hesitation, put her arms through it; her fingers touched the palm of a girl in shabby clothing, who coloured and shrank back while her parents
pushed forward to thank Lysande. She moved along the line. In a few minutes she had covered a good portion of the crowd, shaking more hands, tapping shoulders and touching pendants or rings for luck.

The sound died away, but when she bowed at last and turned to walk back to the palace, it rose, louder than before. There was only one name the Axiumites were shouting.

“You’re their leader,” Litany said. “I mean, you were before, but you really are, now, if you know what I mean.”

She took the maid by the arm, squeezing slightly, and strode into the palace.

A rainbow of colours ringed the Oval, and everyone was already seated: the Council had agreed to bring two of their people each to witness the meeting, and almost every chair was full. Raden was waiting for her at the end, next to three empty chairs. She saw Cassia on her right, lounging with her arms folded, and she winked at the Irriqi as she passed. Ever so subtly, her friend tapped the table twice.

“Here she is at last,” Dante said, glowering at her from between two captains. “Can we begin?”

“Promptly. In Axium, when we say ‘on the hour’, we mean ‘on the hour’.” She smiled. “I trust you had a chance to grieve for your people in Lyria, First Sword?”

“Yes; thank you.” Dante’s gaze softened somewhat. “Jale and I mourned our dead together, after we broke up that farce of a brawl.”

“You two are closer than skin on a starfruit. But tell me, will we ever hear the secret?” Luca said. He was sitting between Malsante and Freste, and the ruby under his chin glittered, throwing a much-needed glow over his skin.

“And what secret is that?” Dante said.

“Who was Prince Montignac’s fair beloved?”

“Prince Montignac’s affairs are his own business. You should keep your nose out of them.”

“As I’m sure you will,” Luca said. He looked highly pleased by Dante’s blustering response. As Lysande sat down, she caught Luca’s barely-perceptible nod and returned it.

Pelory was the last to arrive, carrying the orbed staff that Lysande had requested. “Thank you, Master of Laws,” Lysande said, placing it on the table. They exchanged a glance. There was no love in it, but there was nothing hidden, either;
not now Prexley Castle had officially passed to its new owner. She had brought Raden and ten guards with her when she transferred the keys yesterday, just in case.

"Council, ladies and lords, guards, advisors, and – er – maids," Pelory said, glancing at Litany, "I welcome you to the second official gathering of the Council of Elira in Axium. If I may introduce –"

"Never mind the titles." Cassia said. "We’ve got the White Queen and a dragon to deal with."

News poured forth, but the sharing soon descended into a competition: Dante’s people in the far north had sighted the black dragon winging over the White Circle; Jale had counted the number of mercenaries and determined which outlands they had come from; Luca could explain the existence of the dragons, with his story of the eggs, while Cassia speculated on the age and strength of the dragon. Listening to them, Lysande was conscious that she was a part of the Resistance now, and it would be folly to betray what Three had told her. She kept back her information about the possibility of another dragon, and about Signora Chamsak. But wondering if there was something she might pass on, she ran her last conversation with Derset through her head.

*Her Majesty means to take this realm back to the beginning of the calendar.* The remark had remained in her mind, yet she did not feel it was the right time to share it. In fact, she was not entirely sure of what Derset had meant.

The smack of Dante’s fist hitting the table made her jump.

"We should make an example to them," the First Sword said. "Lop the heads off elementals. That dragon ought not to live, either. It’s the White Queen’s symbol: I say we cut the beast up or burn it."

Jale bit his lip. "I don’t pretend to like it, but, well. My court are rattling their swords, demanding to slaughter the dragon."

Lysande rose from her chair. It was easy, somehow, to protest about the great loss to science and the information about defence that might be gleaned from the body – possibly because she believed the words she was saying. It didn’t hurt that Cassia threw in several colourful Pyrrhan phrases to describe anyone who wanted to destroy the dragon. With Luca finally voicing his agreement the dragon was saved, three votes to two. They were forced to concede that they would display it in a triumphant parade, to be arranged next month.
Things went sharply downhill from there. The city-rulers fell into arguing over the plan to fortify the cities, Jale protesting that Lyria was too shaken to rebuild at such a pace.

"We do not have the riches of a Lyrian bank," Cassia said. "But Pyrrha can build strong walls in a day."

With another smack on the table, Dante came to Jale’s aid. Cassia’s replies grew ever more belligerent. Lysande was beginning to despair when she caught Luca’s look; she saw him nod, and standing up, she whispered a few words to Pelory.

"If you please, Your Highnesses," Pelory cried, producing a volume that no one expected.

Jale and Cassia paused in the middle of throwing insults.

"Perhaps we should address the next item. The question of a leader."

Dante leaned in. "A leader?"

"I call upon Councillor Prior to advance the motion," Pelory said.

Lysande got up from her seat. She had never seen Luca look so politely interested; he was leaning forward, his fingers resting on the table.

"Our diversity is our strength, in Elira," Lysande said, "but if we wish to win our wars, we must bind our many parts together. We need unity, not chaos, until the crisis is over."

"Sounds like a poem," Jale said.

"Is that another quote from the Silver Songs, Councillor Prior?" Dante asked.

"No." She smiled. "I quote from a speech, First Sword: the last address of Sarelin Brey, made on the Mud Field, before her legions charged against the White Army."

The advisors, captains and followers looked at one another.

"Well," said Pelory, "let us charge ahead, like the late Iron Queen. Would anyone like to —"

"Hold on," Dante said, frowning, "we can’t choose a monarch until the Council defeats the White Queen. Councillor Prior said so, in the Pavilion."

Every head in the room turned in Lysande’s direction. She wished Sarelin could have seen her now. Princes and nobles, waiting for her next move. But who knows whether it will work?
“It is our duty to see the realm through together,” she said, “and that is why I propose – not a monarch, but a leader, to bind this Council into a whole. We will all remain in our positions as Councillors, but someone must coordinate our plans; oversee five armies, and deal with the foreign lands as we face our challenges. We might call them our Consul.”

“Consul?” Jale said.

“It was what rulers called themselves in the Classical Period. Consuls were elected by their peers, based on merit.”

Silence cloaked the table.

“Would anyone like to nominate a candidate?” Pelory inquired.

Luca pushed out his chair and stood up. Backs tensed, and hands hovered over hilts.

“I nominate myself,” he said.

Another dragon crashing through the roof might have caused less pointing and quarrelling. The noblewomen beside Jale said something about a plot; several people insisted there had been an agreement made between Axium and Rhime; Dante attempted to reproach Pelory, but could not make himself heard: the Pyrrhans were arguing over the top of everyone. The sound of breaking glass brought the talk to a stop; Luca had dropped a goblet, and before anyone could say another word, he leaped up onto his chair and clapped his hands.

“Let us look boldly to the future,” he declared. “I ask only a few minutes to speak, and then you may weigh my words, sift them and judge them.”

The speech was everything Lysande had expected. It put forward Luca’s experience fending off attempts on his own throne, described the plans he had in mind for defending the cities, and hinted at the funds that were tucked away in the vaults of Castle Cervello – and most importantly, it laid out the benefits of having a leader.

“You will soon find a great advantage,” Luca declared, “in running your cities in person, as you used to. Cutting your enemies off at the stem is not easy from afar. But when you are surrounded by your own people and have your instruments in hand, it will prove simpler. And no one likes a mob breaking down their palace walls, after all.” Luca assumed an expression of concern. “With the shadow of the White Queen looming, our citizens will expect us to protect them, and they’ll be so much more grateful to a prince who does it visibly.”
She could see Dante nodding, and Jale ruminating, tapping his rings against the table. *Luca was right, last night,* she thought. *They’re worried.*

Luca sat down, and Pelory looked around.

“Are there any further nominations?”

Dante and Jale remained silent. After a moment, Cassia rose, pushing back her chair with a scrape of wood.

“I nominate Councillor Prior,” she said.

Lysande stood. Malsante and Freste erupted into protest; the Valderran captains were arguing, too, and for once, the Lyrians seemed to share their sentiments. Pelory had to raise his voice again before they accepted his order to be silent.

“Prince Fontaine has many good suggestions, and I cannot claim his experience. Yet I can claim a powerful motivation,” Lysande said, before anyone could interject. “It was my advisor, Lord Derset, who led us to this pass; and I swear to you that I will atone for what he did by guiding us through it with every ounce of determination I have. Let me prove my sincerity.” She drew a piece of parchment from her pocket and unfolded it. “Where Prince Fontaine offers broad promises, I have a specific plan.”

“Gods below,” she heard Carletta Freste mutter. “Did His Highness know about this?”

“If he did, I’m a Lyrian dancer,” said Malsante.

“First, I will use our best minds to defend us against the dragon. We already have a bow that can fire over a mile in Castle Cervello, a mill that makes light, and many other inventions in our palaces. Let us make these devices the crown’s. Put them to use.”

Luca had no reply. *He didn’t think of that.* In the corner of her vision, she caught sight of Cassia grinning.

“Second: I will improve the conditions for the poor, ensuring that they are well-fed and healthy. I expect we will gain many more soldiers in the process. Third, while I will try to win back Bastillón, I will also embark on a course of diplomacy with Chiam – ”

“Chiam?” Dante cried.

“— a realm whose people and leaders have, for the entirety of our history, been wantonly overlooked. I have compiled all the references to Chiamese warfare
from the palace library, and I think they will give you cause for consideration. There is much they have that we lack. Moreover, I will seek to recover all books on dragons, elementals and magic, and all accounts of the White War.” She looked around the room, ignoring the glares from the Rhimese. “This will prepare us against the White Queen. From my research, I estimate at least twenty books may be recovered. The private libraries of Rhime, I believe, will furnish us with most.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to tick off your list?” Luca said. “Anything else to filch from Rhime?”

“I do have one last point.” She paused, looking around the table. “I am but a scholar, and Prince Fontaine is... well, a prince. But that means I know how to marshal facts, organise legions of ideas, and wield foreign tongues. Let us not forget my close friendship with Queen Sarelin, either. When war draws near, the people will miss their Iron Queen. And who better to give them hope than the Councillor she chose?”

Amid the flurry of remarks and whispers that broke out, Pelory managed to get over to her. They were both to leave the room immediately, he insisted, since they could not be present while the rest of the Council thought upon the matter; Luca was escorted out with her, and Pelory made various gestures at the attendants who had were peering around the corner of the corridor, sending them scuttling off.

Lysande walked to the opposite wall and stood under the painting of Queen Montfolk. The crown that nestled in the queen’s hands dominated the bottom of the frame. Lysande rested on the right side of it, and after a moment, Luca joined her, standing on the left.

“How bold of you,” he said.

“A prince once told me that I should be bolder when I jump. He said a horse would never do as I bid if I asked it politely.” Lysande could still remember the moment she had stood beside him, perched on the cliff above Rhime, the city stretched out before them.

He shook his head. “I could’ve protected you, Prior.”

“Perhaps you failed to grasp why I was trembling, in the observatory. You see, I was shocked, but not because I threw my daggers into Derset.” She had wanted to say this to Three, in Pescarra, only she had not been able to find the words. They were leaping into her mouth now. “The only thing more shocking than murdering someone is discovering that you don’t feel shocked at all, or weak, or horrified. Or
any of those things you’re supposed to feel. I could have killed him again, Fontaine: sunk my blade into him again, and again, until there were no places left to pierce.” She looked into his eyes. “So you see, I have no need for protection – from you, or from anyone else.”

The door swung open, and Pelory poked his head out. “You may come back in, Councillors.”

They walked across together. In the doorway, Lysande paused. “If I’m made leader,” she said, “I’m going to bring other elementals to our side. The jails won’t be jails for long.”

“You really think they’ll risk their necks to help?”

“I mean to find out.”

She led the way back into the Oval. The talk ceased as she and Luca entered. It did not seem right to take their seats, however, with everyone staring at them, so they stood in front of the doorway. Litany was smiling nervously at Lysande from the end, and Raden was watching her.

Pelory asked the city-rulers to stand up one by one, and Dante rose slowly.

“I support Prince Fontaine as Consul,” he said. “I may not like the prince of Rhime, yet I have to choose the leader with the most experience.”

“Well, it’s an equal insult to both of us, really,” Luca murmured. Lysande nodded to Dante; but for a moment, she wondered if she might have been too bold to tilt at such a position.

Cassia rose next. “My vote is for Councillor Prior, of course.” (“There’s a surprise,” Luca remarked.) Pelory was clearing his throat, but he did not manage to prevent the Irriqi from unleashing a tirade about her faith in Lysande – her confidence in Lysande’s ability, and her gratitude for having been saved by her; all of which would have been more moving if Lysande had not read and amended the copy of her speech sent by dove that morning. They exchanged smiles.

At Pelory’s prompting, Cassia was finally persuaded to sit down, and she took a long sip of water. Jale got up.

“I’m torn,” he said. “You both have merits, and – well – other sides.” He looked from Luca to Lysande. “So I’m going to abstain.”

“You can’t abstain!” Cassia said.
"I think you’ll find I can. It’s in the law. My father abstained when he was asked to vote on a ban on city-rulers taking a lover, in the year three hundred and ninety-two. Isn’t that right, Lord Pelory?"

"Yes," Pelory said. "It appears there’s a precedent. Where all leaders of the cities are called to vote, any one may abstain, but only if he or she finds it impossible to reach a decision."

“Well, there you are. Simply impossible for me, I’m afraid.”

Luca looked across at Lysande, and she looked at him. They both glanced back at Pelory.

“Perhaps we could have two Consuls,” Pelory said, slowly. “After all, we already have a Council of five rulers. But as to how authority over the city-states would be split…” He flipped the page. “Without a precedent, the division becomes somewhat opaque, and indeed, the process might be self-determined.”

“You mean you don’t know how to do it,” Cassia said, rolling her eyes.

Pelory opened his mouth to reply, but Dante cut in first. “In Valderos, if we don’t know how to divide something, we chop it in half. Get my map, Karhane.”

One of his captains rummaged in a bag and unrolled a cloth: he held it up with Svauge for the room to see. A stitched map of Elira confronted them.

“Councillor Prior takes responsibility for the west side, with Pyrrha and Axium,” Dante said, running his finger down the middle from the northern border to the beginning of the Grandfleuve. “And Prince Fontaine takes the east, with Rhime and Valderos. They both split Lyria.”

“Split it?” Jale said.

“Lyria’s exactly in the centre of the coast, but its territory is vast,” Luca mused. “We could divide it between the two of us. Councillor Prior could take…”

“I should like the northern half,” Lysande said, quickly. “Where the bone people live.”

Luca looked at her as if she were mad. It was the last question to settle, however, and after bows had been made and hands shaken, and Lysande and Luca had agreed to have a draft of terms drawn up, Dante carved the map into two pieces. The Oval erupted into applause and comment. Pelory escorted the pair of them out, and Lysande hastened to keep up as they marched down the corridor.

She had no notion where they were going and the staff lining the walls seemed to feel similarly, peering after them. A pair of guards sprang apart at the
entrance to the fifth floor, and as they made their way along, Pelory slowed, coming to a stop at the window with the best view in the palace. The grounds spread out below them; the fence now held back a crowd clinging to every inch of the silver perimeter.

“I anticipated that after the meeting, the people would still be waiting for you. They may not know that the Council was voting on a leader, but I think they would be most excited to find out. Given last week’s devastation, we all need something to celebrate,” Pelory said, with a glance at Lysande. “I took the liberty of decorating the balcony that overhangs the western gate. I thought you might deign to appear there, after I announce your new positions.”

_Clever. Put yourself in front of the commoners, as queenmaker._ She laid a hand on his shoulder. “I think Captain Hartleigh should be the one to announce our leadership. Don’t you, Lord Pelory? He led the charge in battle, after all, so he seems an ideal emissary. You will not be disappointed to remain at my side.”

She fell into step with Luca, Pelory now following less ebulliently. Luca did not smile, but nor were his eyes flashing with their dark fire: he was looking ahead, at the portraits of poets, captains and nobles on the walls.

As they passed a family tree of the Prexleys, he stopped.

“The orphan and the bastard,” he murmured. “I did say it has a ring to it.”

“It sounds like a pair of thieves.”

“Perhaps that’s what we are.” He gazed at the family tree. “Thieves.”

“Since we’re to share power, I wish to be perfectly clear, Fontaine. Don’t think for a moment that I’m going to sit back and assist you, while you make the decisions.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t expect that, Prior. Not from a Consul of the realm like you.”

Rounding the corner of the corridor, they came out onto a balcony. Over the top of the silver and emerald ribbons tied to the rail, Lysande made out a sea of upturned faces, doublets and gowns. Malsante and Freste were waiting for Luca on the left side of the balcony, carrying his bow and his cobra. On the right side, Litany beamed, clutching Lysande’s dagger-belt in one hand.

The breeze was blowing with bitter intensity, but they did not wait long until Raden walked out below and said something to the crowd. Cheers swelled and the words “Fontaine”, “Prior”, and “Elira” drifted up over the balcony.
“Perhaps, Consuls,” Pelory said, coming up behind them, “if you were to raise your most prized weapon, the commoners might look to the future with courage.”

Luca turned to where Malsante and Freste were waiting. He made to take Tiberus from Freste, but at Pelory’s aghast cry of “Your Highness,” he smiled. “Don’t get your robe in a knot, Pelory,” he said, “I wouldn’t risk dangling Tiberus over an Axium crowd.”

He took his bow instead – the new instrument, long and black and embellished with cobras – and brandishing it, he looked out at the human sea. A wave of applause washed over him.

Litany held out the hilt of Lysande’s gold dagger. Lysande examined it for a moment, gazing at the blade Sarelin had given her. After a final glance, she slid it into its sheath.

“Not that one,” she said.

Litany proffered the dagger-belt, but Lysande shook her head and reached into her doublet pocket. Her fingers closed around something slender.

“That?” Litany asked, looking at the item sceptically as she pulled it out. “Will it do?”

The red-tipped quill gleamed in Lysande’s palm. Its coating had hardened. Yes, she thought. It will do nicely.

She lifted the quill and waved to the crowd, and the drumming of her name came back at her, louder and louder, with all the rhythmic certainty of a march to war.