

COURT OF BLOOD AND VOWS

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ENTER THE SHADOW COURT

A Court of Blood and Vows Reader Experience

ARIA NIGHTFALL

BOUND TO THE
SHADOW THRONE

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WELCOME TO THE SHADOW COURT

This reader experience is your invitation into the world of Court of Blood and Vows. It is designed to be read before Bound to the Shadow Throne, so nothing here spoils the discoveries waiting inside the novel.

You will meet Lyra before she crosses the border, learn the first rules of Shadow Court survival, and discover just enough about fire, shadow, and sovereign magic to know why every oath in this world carries a price.



THE SUMMONS

A prequel scene

The summons arrived at dusk, sealed in black wax and carried by a rider who would not cross the Ember Court's inner gate. Lyra Ashborne knew what it meant before she broke the seal. Everyone in the receiving chamber did. The guards had gone too still. Chancellor Heleyne had stopped pretending to read the treaty ledger. Even the braziers along the wall burned lower, as though the fire itself had decided to listen.

Lyra turned the letter once in her hands. Shadow wax. Silver thread pressed through the seal. A mark of truce, or of ownership, depending on which court's historian one asked. She slid a thumbnail beneath the fold and opened it.

The language was elegant enough to disguise the insult. Under the renewed terms between Ember and Shadow, a sovereign-class representative of the Ember bloodline would reside at Thaltvren's Obsidian Spire until the first season of the truce was complete. The representative would participate in court functions, submit to treaty wards, and stand as living assurance that Ember intended peace.

A living assurance. Lyra read the sentence twice. Hostage was shorter.

Heleyne crossed the chamber before anyone else found the courage to speak. 'It should not be you.' Her voice was controlled, which meant she was furious. 'There are cousins. Cadet branches. People whose presence would satisfy the language without placing the Ember succession inside a Shadow fortress.'

'The treaty says sovereign-class.' Lyra folded the letter along its original crease. 'And it says bloodline.'

'It says what they knew would force our hand.'

Lyra looked toward the high windows. Beyond them, Emberglass caught the last light and threw it back across the city in sheets of red and gold. Home looked most beautiful when someone was preparing to send you away from it.

'Who is receiving me?' she asked.

Heleyne's silence answered before the Chancellor did. 'Prince Caelan Dravensyr.'

The name had weight. Every child raised within the Ember Court knew it. Caelan, the Shadow prince with winter-gray eyes and a reputation for control so complete that diplomats described conversations with him as negotiations with a locked door. Caelan, nephew to a Regent who had never met an Ember concession he did not consider evidence of weakness. Caelan, heir to a court that still taught its children the old border wars as if the blood had dried yesterday.

Lyra set the summons on the table. A spark escaped her fingertips and burned a clean crescent into the parchment's edge.

'That,' Heleyne said, 'is precisely why I don't want you going.'

'Because I burn letters?'

'Because you burn when someone tells you not to.'

Lyra almost smiled. Almost. The humor would have been easier than admitting that fear had begun to move beneath her ribs, slow and hot and humiliating. She had negotiated with border lords. She had stood inside unstable ward arrays and repaired them while the stone shook under her

boots. She had faced men who thought her youth made her easy to corner and women who thought Ember fire made her predictable. None of that frightened her like the simple fact of being sent somewhere every instinct had been trained to call enemy.

She thought of Theron. Six years dead, and still the first voice she heard when the world became complicated. Shared power is doubled, not halved. He had said it while teaching her to hold a flame with another mage, both of them feeding the same small light until it became brighter than either could have made alone.

Shadow did not believe that. Shadow believed power held was power preserved. Ember believed power displayed was power respected. The treaty had asked both courts to pretend those philosophies could sit at the same table without setting the room on fire.

Now Lyra would be seated in the middle.

'When do I leave?' she asked.

Heleyne's expression closed. 'At first light.'

The night became preparation. Tailors arrived with traveling gowns designed to say sovereign blood without saying claimant. Archivists brought protocols. A weapons-master argued for three concealed knives and lost the argument only when Heleyne pointed out that arriving at a peace court armed like an assassin would shorten the truce considerably. Lyra packed two knives instead.

Near midnight, she escaped to the western balcony. Emberglass roofs spread below her in warm geometric lines. The braziers along the city walls were visible all the way to the river, each flame linked by old wardwork to the next, a necklace of fire around everything she knew.

She opened her palm. A small flame appeared above it, steady and bright. Fire had always answered her easily. Not because it was tame. Fire was never tame. Because it understood the honesty of appetite. It wanted fuel. It wanted air. It wanted room. Give it what it needed, and it told you exactly what it was.

Courts were harder.

A soft step sounded behind her. Heleyne joined her at the rail but did not look at the city. 'If they ask you to kneel, don't.'

'I wasn't planning to.'

'If they ask you to surrender your fire to their warders, refuse until you see the exact inscription.'

'I know.'

'If Dravensyr insults you, do not duel him.'

Lyra looked sideways. 'That one feels oddly specific.'

'Because you are oddly specific.' Heleyne finally looked at her. The Chancellor's expression had lost its political polish. What remained was older, almost maternal, and therefore more dangerous to Lyra's composure. 'You do not have to prove Ember's strength every second you are there. Surviving is not surrender.'

Lyra closed her fingers around the flame. Darkness rushed into the space it had occupied. 'And if surviving requires giving them something?'

'Then give only what you choose.'

The words stayed with her.

At first light, Lyra rode north beneath a sky the color of steel. The Ember towers disappeared behind her by midday. The road narrowed. The air cooled. By evening, black stone had begun to appear in the hills, veins of obsidian breaking through the earth like old scars.

On the third day, she saw Thälven.

The Obsidian Spire rose from the mountainside in a single dark blade, too large to be elegant and too deliberate to be called natural. Violet witchlight marked its upper windows. Black pennants snapped above walls that seemed to drink the afternoon sun instead of reflecting it. Even from miles away, Lyra could feel the wards, cold pressure against her magic, testing, measuring, asking what she was and whether she had permission to exist inside them.

Her horse slowed.

Lyra touched the summons folded inside her coat. Then she touched the knife at her hip. Neither gesture helped.

At the road's final turn, the fortress gates opened.

A single figure waited beyond them in black and silver.

Too distant for features. Close enough for posture. Still, controlled, unmistakably watching her approach.

Prince Caelan Dravensyr.

Lyra's fire rose beneath her skin.

She remembered Heleyne's warning. Give only what you choose.

Then she urged her horse forward and entered the Shadow Court.



THE TWO COURTS

SHADOW COURT	EMBER COURT
Obsidian halls, silver wardwork, disciplined shadow magic, and a political culture built around restraint.	Emberglass towers, oath-fire, visible displays of power, and a political culture that respects directness.
Strength: control, patience, secrecy	Strength: force, clarity, adaptability
Risk: silence can become manipulation	Risk: honesty can become provocation

WHO YOU NEED TO KNOW

Lyra Ashborne

Ember-born fire sorceress. Politically trained, stubbornly self-directed, and more interested in choosing her loyalties than inheriting them.

Caelan Dravensyr

Shadow prince. Controlled, strategic, and raised to believe that vulnerability is a political liability.

Seraine Voss

High Arcanist of the Shadow Court. Scholar of bonds, wards, and the dangerous places where theory becomes policy.

Heleyne Vaerys

Veteran Ember Chancellor. Protective, incisive, and never more dangerous than when she believes she is helping.

MAGIC, WITHOUT SPOILERS

Fire magic responds to will, heat, truth, and transformation. Shadow magic responds to restraint, shape, distance, and concealment. The courts have spent generations treating these forces as opposites. The story begins when that assumption becomes much harder to defend.

Sovereign-class magic is rare power strong enough to affect court wards and treaty structures. It makes a person politically valuable, magically dangerous, and almost impossible to leave out of a peace agreement.

Bindings are magical structures formed through ritual, oath, and compatible power. They can protect. They can coerce. They can also become something neither court intended.

FIVE RULES FOR SURVIVING THE SHADOW COURT

1. Never assume silence means agreement.

In Thalvren, silence is often where the real negotiation begins.

2. Ask who wrote the ward.

A magical protection is only as neutral as the person who designed its conditions.

3. Treat every seating arrangement as political.

The height of a chair can be an argument.

4. Do not confuse restraint with mercy.

The court prizes control, not softness.

5. Give only what you choose.

The most important rule, and the one every other rule is designed to make you forget.

READING ORDER

Book One: Bound to the Shadow Throne

Book Two: Crown of Burning Vows

Book Three: Throne of Ashes



THE PUBLIC ARCHIVE ENDS HERE

The Sovereign Vault contains the material the courts would rather keep restricted: bond lore, Caelan's private perspective, intelligence dossiers, bonus scenes, court etiquette, vow art, and an exclusive story available only to subscribers.

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No hostage oath required.