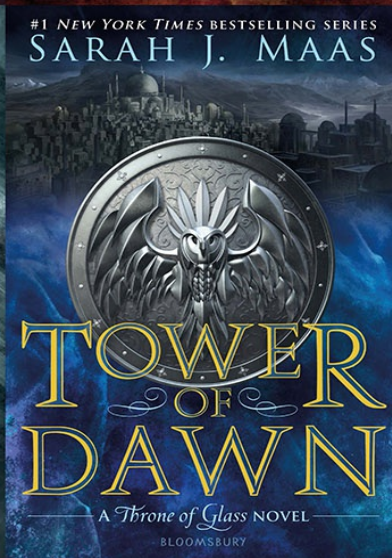
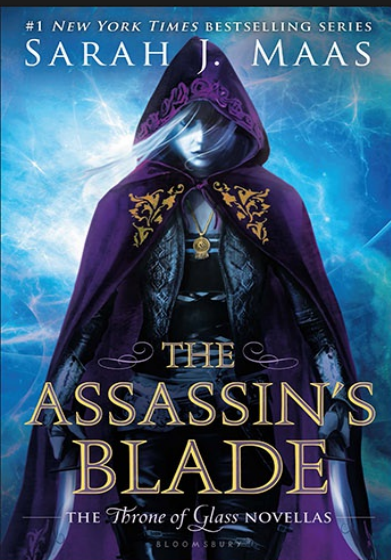


SARAH J. MAAS

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*To all my readers from FictionPress—for being with me at the beginning
and staying long after the end. Thank you for everything.*

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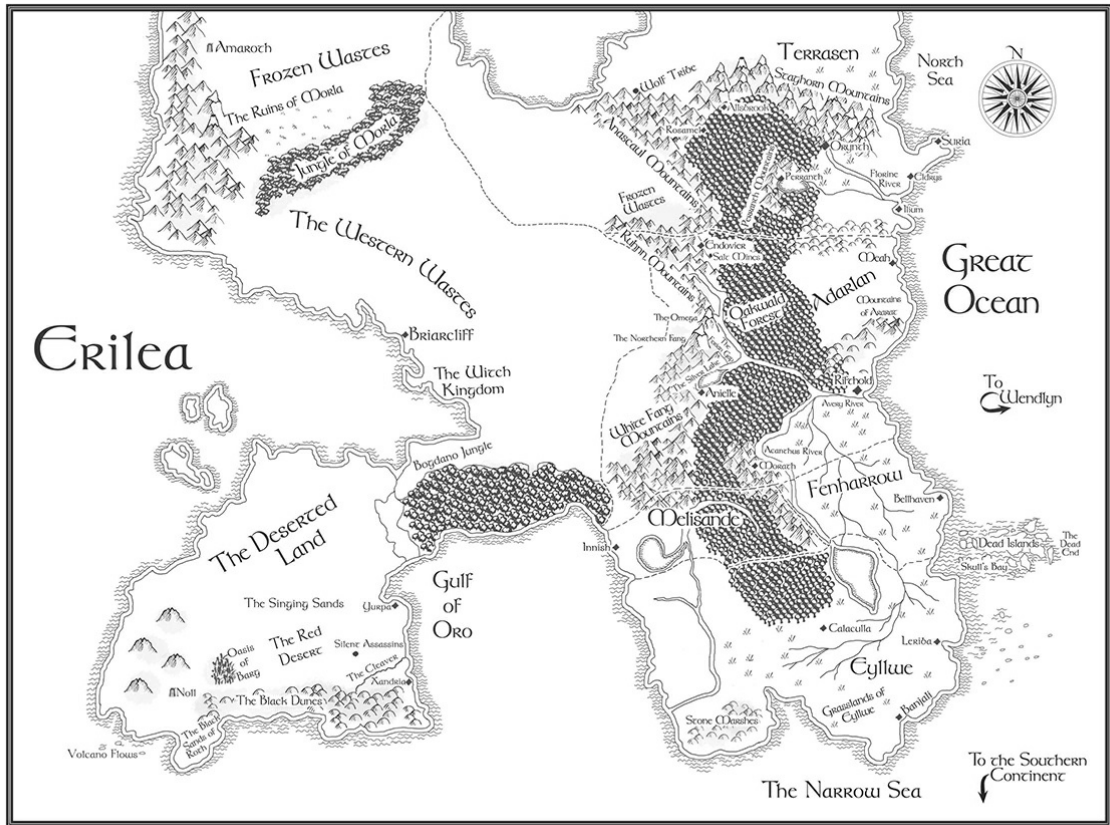
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CHAPTER 1

After a year of slavery in the Salt Mines of Endovier, Celaena Sardothien was accustomed to being escorted everywhere in shackles and at sword-point. Most of the thousands of slaves in Endovier received similar treatment—though an extra half-dozen guards always walked Celaena to and from the mines. That was expected by Adarlan’s most notorious assassin. What she did not usually expect, however, was a hooded man in black at her side—as there was now.

He gripped her arm as he led her through the shining building in which most of Endovier’s officials and overseers were housed. They strode down corridors, up flights of stairs, and around and around until she hadn’t the slightest chance of finding her way out again.

At least, that was her escort’s intention, because she hadn’t failed to notice when they went up and down the same staircase within a matter of minutes. Nor had she missed when they zigzagged between levels, even though the building was a standard grid of hallways and stairwells. As if she’d lose her bearings that easily. She might have been insulted if he wasn’t trying so hard.

They entered a particularly long hallway, silent save for their footsteps. Though the man grasping her arm was tall and fit, she could see nothing of the features concealed beneath his hood. Another tactic meant to confuse and intimidate her. The black clothes were probably a part of it, too. His head shifted in her direction, and Celaena flashed him a grin. He looked forward again, his iron grip tightening.

It was flattering, she supposed, even if she *didn’t* know what was happening, or why he’d been waiting for her outside the mine shaft. After a day of cleaving rock salt from the innards of the mountain, finding him standing there with six guards hadn’t improved her mood.

But her ears had pricked when he'd introduced himself to her overseer as Chaol Westfall, Captain of the Royal Guard, and suddenly, the sky loomed, the mountains pushed from behind, and even the earth swelled toward her knees. She hadn't tasted fear in a while—hadn't *let* herself taste fear. When she awoke every morning, she repeated the same words: *I will not be afraid*. For a year, those words had meant the difference between breaking and bending; they had kept her from shattering in the darkness of the mines. Not that she'd let the captain know any of that.

Celaena examined the gloved hand holding her arm. The dark leather almost matched the dirt on her skin.

She adjusted her torn and filthy tunic with her free hand and held in her sigh. Entering the mines before sunrise and departing after dusk, she rarely glimpsed the sun. She was frightfully pale beneath the dirt. It was true that she had been attractive once, beautiful even, but— well, it didn't matter now, did it?

They turned down another hallway, and she studied the stranger's finely crafted sword. Its shimmering pommel was shaped like an eagle midflight. Noticing her stare, his gloved hand descended to rest upon its golden head. Another smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

"You're a long way from Rifthold, Captain," she said, clearing her throat. "Did you come with the army I heard thumping around earlier?" She peered into the darkness beneath his hood but saw nothing. Still, she felt his eyes upon her face, judging, weighing, testing. She stared right back. The Captain of the Royal Guard would be an interesting opponent. Maybe even worthy of some effort on her part.

Finally, the man raised his sword hand, and the folds of his cloak fell to conceal the blade. As his cloak shifted, she spied the gold wyvern embroidered on his tunic. The royal seal.

"What do you care for the armies of Adarlan?" he replied. How lovely it was to hear a voice like her own—cool and articulate—even if he was a nasty brute!

"Nothing," she said, shrugging. He let out a low growl of annoyance.

Oh, it'd be nice to see his blood spill across the marble. She'd lost her temper once before—once, when her first overseer chose the wrong day to push her too hard. She still remembered the feeling of embedding the pickax into his gut, and the stickiness of his blood on her hands and face. She could disarm two of these guards in a heartbeat. Would the captain

fare better than her late overseer? Contemplating the potential outcomes, she grinned at him again.

“Don’t you look at me like that,” he warned, and his hand drifted back toward his sword. Celaena hid her smirk this time. They passed a series of wooden doors that she’d seen a few minutes ago. If she wanted to escape, she simply had to turn left at the next hallway and take the stairs down three flights. The only thing all the intended disorientation had accomplished was to familiarize her with the building. Idiots.

“Where are we going again?” she said sweetly, brushing a strand of her matted hair from her face. When he didn’t reply, she clenched her jaw.

The halls echoed too loudly for her to attack him without alerting the whole building. She hadn’t seen where he’d put the key to her irons, and the six guards who trailed them would be nuisances. Not to mention the shackles.

They entered a hallway hung with iron chandeliers. Outside the windows lining the wall, night had fallen; lanterns kindled so bright they offered few shadows to hide in.

From the courtyard, she could hear the other slaves shuffling toward the wooden building where they slept. The moans of agony amongst the clank of chains made a chorus as familiar as the dreary work songs they sang all day. The occasional solo of the whip added to the symphony of brutality Adarlan had created for its greatest criminals, poorest citizens, and latest conquests.

While some of the prisoners were people accused of attempting to practice magic—not that they *could*, given that magic had vanished from the kingdom—these days, more and more rebels arrived at Endovier. Most were from Eyllwe, one of the last countries still fighting Adarlan’s rule. But when she pestered them for news, many just stared at her with empty eyes. Already broken. She shuddered to consider what they’d endured at the hands of Adarlan’s forces. Some days, she wondered if they would have been better off dying on the butchering blocks instead. And if she might have been better off dying that night she’d been betrayed and captured, too.

But she had other things to think about as they continued their walk. Was she finally to be hanged? Sickness coiled in her stomach. She *was* important enough to warrant an execution from the Captain of the Royal Guard himself. But why bring her inside this building first?

At last, they stopped before a set of red-and-gold glass doors so thick that she couldn't see through them. Captain Westfall jerked his chin at the two guards standing on either side of the doors, and they stomped their spears in greeting.

The captain's grip tightened until it hurt. He yanked Celaena closer, but her feet seemed made of lead and she pulled against him. "You'd rather stay in the mines?" he asked, sounding faintly amused.

"Perhaps if I were told what this was all about, I wouldn't feel so inclined to resist."

"You'll find out soon enough." Her palms became sweaty. Yes, she was going to die. It had come at last.

The doors groaned open to reveal a throne room. A glass chandelier shaped like a grapevine occupied most of the ceiling, spitting seeds of diamond fire onto the windows along the far side of the room. Compared to the bleakness outside those windows, the opulence felt like a slap to the face. A reminder of how much they profited from her labor.

"In here," the Captain of the Guard growled, and shoved her with his free hand, finally releasing her. Celaena stumbled, her calloused feet slipping on the smooth floor as she straightened herself. She looked back to see another six guards appear.

Fourteen guards, plus the captain. The gold royal emblem embroidered on the breast of black uniforms. These were members of the Royal Family's personal guard: ruthless, lightning-swift soldiers trained from birth to protect and kill. She swallowed tightly.

Lightheaded and immensely heavy all at once, Celaena faced the room. On an ornate redwood throne sat a handsome young man. Her heart stopped as everyone bowed.

She was standing in front of the Crown Prince of Adarlan.

CHAPTER 2

“Your Highness,” said the Captain of the Guard. He straightened from a low bow and removed his hood, revealing close-cropped chestnut hair. The hood had definitely been meant to intimidate her into submission during their walk. As if that sort of trick could work on *her*. Despite her irritation, she blinked at the sight of his face. He was so young!

Captain Westfall was not excessively handsome, but she couldn't help finding the ruggedness of his face and the clarity of his golden-brown eyes rather appealing. She cocked her head, now keenly aware of her wretched dirtiness.

“This is she?” the Crown Prince of Adarlan asked, and Celaena's head whipped around as the captain nodded. Both of them stared at her, waiting for her to bow. When she remained upright, Chaol shifted on his feet, and the prince glanced at his captain before lifting his chin a bit higher.

Bow to him indeed! If she were bound for the gallows, she would most certainly *not* spend the last moments of her life in groveling submission.

Thundering steps issued from behind her, and someone grabbed her by the neck. Celaena only glimpsed crimson cheeks and a sandy mustache before being thrown to the icy marble floor. Pain slammed through her face, light splintering her vision. Her arms ached as her bound hands kept her joints from properly aligning. Though she tried to stop them, tears of pain welled.

“*That* is the proper way to greet your future king,” a red-faced man snapped at Celaena.

The assassin hissed, baring her teeth as she twisted her head to look at the kneeling bastard. He was almost as large as her overseer, clothed in reds and oranges that matched his thinning hair. His obsidian eyes glittered as his grip tightened on her neck. If she could move her right arm just a

few inches, she could throw him off balance and grab his sword ... The shackles dug into her stomach, and fizzing, boiling rage turned her face scarlet.

After a too-long moment, the Crown Prince spoke. “I don’t quite comprehend why you’d force someone to bow when the purpose of the gesture is to display allegiance and respect.” His words were coated with glorious boredom.

Celaena tried to pivot a free eye to the prince, but could only see a pair of black leather boots against the white floor.

“It’s clear that *you* respect me, Duke Perrington, but it’s a bit unnecessary to put such effort into forcing *Celaena Sardothien* to have the same opinion. You and I know very well she has no love for my family. So perhaps your intent is to humiliate her.” He paused, and she could have sworn his eyes fell on her face. “But I think she’s had enough of that.” He stopped for another moment, then asked: “Don’t you have a meeting with Endovier’s treasurer? I wouldn’t want you to be late, especially when you came all this way to meet with him.”

Understanding the dismissal, her tormentor grunted and released her. Celaena peeled her cheek from the marble but lay on the floor until he stood and left. If she managed to escape, perhaps she’d hunt down this Duke Perrington fellow and return the warmth of his greeting.

As she rose, she frowned at the imprint of grit she left behind on the otherwise spotless floor, and at the clank of her shackles echoing through the silent room. But she’d been trained to be an assassin since the age of eight, since the day the King of the Assassins found her half-dead on the banks of a frozen river and brought her to his keep. She wouldn’t be humiliated by anything, least of all being dirty. Gathering her pride, she tossed her long braid behind a shoulder and lifted her head. Her eyes met those of the prince.

Dorian Havilliard smiled at her. It was a polished smile, and reeked of court-trained charm. Sprawled across the throne, he had his chin propped by a hand, his golden crown glinting in the soft light. On his black doublet, an emblazoned gold rendering of the royal wyvern occupied the entirety of the chest. His red cloak fell gracefully around him and his throne.

Yet there was something in his eyes, strikingly blue—the color of the waters of the southern countries—and the way they contrasted with his raven-black hair that made her pause. He was achingly handsome, and

couldn't have been older than twenty.

Princes are not supposed to be handsome! They're sniveling, stupid, repulsive creatures! This one ... this ... How unfair of him to be royal and beautiful.

She shifted on her feet as he frowned, surveying her in turn. "I thought I asked you to clean her," he said to Captain Westfall, who stepped forward. She'd forgotten there was anyone else in the room. She looked at her rags and stained skin, and she couldn't suppress the twinge of shame. What a miserable state for a girl of former beauty!

At a passing glance, one might think her eyes blue or gray, perhaps even green, depending on the color of her clothing. Up close, though, these warring hues were offset by the brilliant ring of gold around her pupils. But it was her golden hair that caught the attention of most, hair that still maintained a glimmer of its glory. In short, Celaena Sardothien was blessed with a handful of attractive features that compensated for the majority of average ones; and, by early adolescence, she'd discovered that with the help of cosmetics, these average features could easily match the extraordinary assets.

But now, standing before Dorian Havilliard as little more than a gutter rat! Her face warmed as Captain Westfall spoke. "I didn't want to keep you waiting."

The Crown Prince shook his head when Chaol reached for her. "Don't bother with the bath just yet. I can see her potential." The prince straightened, keeping his attention on Celaena. "I don't believe that we've ever had the pleasure of an introduction. But, as you probably know, I'm Dorian Havilliard, Crown Prince of Adarlan, perhaps now Crown Prince of most of Erilea."

She ignored the surge and crash of bitter emotions that awoke with the name.

"And *you're* Celaena Sardothien, Adarlan's greatest assassin. Perhaps the greatest assassin in all of Erilea." He studied her tensed body before he raised his dark, well-groomed brows. "You seem a little young." He rested his elbows on his thighs. "I've heard some rather fascinating stories about you. How do you find Endovier after living in such excess in Rifthold?"

Arrogant ass.

"I couldn't be happier," she crooned as her jagged nails cut into her palms.

“After a year, you seem to be more or less alive. I wonder how that’s possible when the average life expectancy in these mines is a month.”

“Quite a mystery, I’m sure.” She batted her eyelashes and readjusted her shackles as if they were lace gloves.

The Crown Prince turned to his captain. “She has somewhat of a tongue, doesn’t she? And she doesn’t sound like a member of the rabble.”

“I should hope not!” Celaena interjected.

“Your Highness,” Chaol Westfall snapped at her.

“What?” Celaena asked.

“You will address him as ‘Your Highness.’ ”

Celaena gave him a mocking smile, and then returned her attention to the prince.

Dorian Havilliard, to her surprise, laughed. “You do *know* that you’re now a slave, don’t you? Has your sentence taught you nothing?”

Had her arms been unshackled, she would have crossed them. “I don’t see how working in a mine can teach anything beyond how to use a pickax.”

“And you never tried to escape?”

A slow, wicked smile spread across her lips. “Once.”

The prince’s brows rose, and he turned to Captain Westfall. “I wasn’t told that.”

Celaena glanced over her shoulder at Chaol, who gave his prince an apologetic look. “The Chief Overseer informed me this afternoon that there was *one* incident. Three months—”

“Four months,” she interrupted.

“Four months,” Chaol said, “after Sardothien arrived, she attempted to flee.”

She waited for the rest of the story, but he was clearly finished. “That’s not even the best part!”

“There’s a ‘best part’?” the Crown Prince said, face caught between a wince and a smile.

Chaol glared at her before speaking. “There’s no hope of escaping from Endovier. Your father made sure that each of Endovier’s sentries could shoot a squirrel from two hundred paces away. To attempt to flee is suicide.”

“But you’re alive,” the prince said to her.

Celaena’s smile faded as the memory struck her. “Yes.”

“What happened?” Dorian asked.

Her eyes turned cold and hard. “I snapped.”

“That’s all you have to offer as an explanation for what you did?” Captain Westfall demanded. “She killed her overseer and twenty-three sentries before they caught her. She was a *finger’s tip* from the wall before the guards knocked her unconscious.”

“So?” Dorian said.

Celaena seethed. “So? Do you know how far the wall is from the mines?” He gave her a blank look. She closed her eyes and sighed dramatically. “From my shaft, it was three hundred sixty-three feet. I had someone measure.”

“So?” Dorian repeated.

“Captain Westfall, how far do slaves make it from the mines when they try to escape?”

“Three feet,” he muttered. “Endovier sentries usually shoot a man down before he’s moved three feet.”

The Crown Prince’s silence was not her desired effect. “You knew it was suicide,” he said at last, the amusement gone.

Perhaps it had been a bad idea for her to bring up the wall. “Yes,” she said.

“But they didn’t kill you.”

“Your father ordered that I was to be kept alive for as long as possible—to endure the misery that Endovier gives in abundance.” A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature went through her. “I never intended to escape.” The pity in his eyes made her want to hit him.

“Do you bear many scars?” asked the prince. She shrugged and he smiled, forcing the mood to lift as he stepped from the dais. “Turn around, and let me view your back.” Celaena frowned, but obeyed as he walked to her, Chaol stepping closer. “I can’t make them out clearly through all this dirt,” the prince said, inspecting what skin showed through the scraps of her shirt. She scowled, and scowled even more when he said, “And what a terrible stench, too!”

“When one doesn’t have access to a bath and perfume, I suppose one cannot smell as finely as you, *Your Highness*.”

The Crown Prince clicked his tongue and circled her slowly. Chaol—and all the guards—watched them with hands on their swords. As they should. In less than a second, she could get her arms over the prince’s head

and have her shackles crushing his windpipe. It might be worth it just to see the expression on Chaol's face. But the prince went on, oblivious to how dangerously close he stood to her. Perhaps she should be insulted. "From what I can see," he said, "there are three large scars—and perhaps some smaller ones. Not as awful as I expected, but ... well, the dresses can cover it, I suppose."

"Dresses?" He was standing so near that she could see the fine thread detail on his jacket, and smelled not perfume, but horses and iron.

Dorian grinned. "What remarkable eyes you have! And how angry you are!"

Coming within strangling distance of the Crown Prince of Adarlan, son of the man who sentenced her to a slow, miserable death, her self-control balanced on a fragile edge—dancing along a cliff.

"I demand to know," she began, but the Captain of the Guard pulled her back from the prince with spine-snapping force. "I wasn't going to kill him, you buffoon."

"Watch your mouth before I throw you back in the mines," the brown-eyed captain said.

"Oh, I don't think you'd do that."

"And why is that?" Chaol replied.

Dorian strode to his throne and sat down, his sapphire eyes bright.

She looked from one man to another and squared her shoulders. "Because there's something you want from me, something you want badly enough to come here yourselves. I'm not an idiot, though I was foolish enough to be captured, and I can see that this is some sort of secret business. Why else would you leave the capital and venture this far? You've been testing me all this time to see if I am physically and mentally sound. Well, I know that I'm still sane, and that I'm not broken, despite what the incident at the wall might suggest. So I demand to be told why you're here, and what services you wish of me, if I'm not destined for the gallows."

The men exchanged glances. Dorian steepled his fingers. "I have a proposition for you."

Her chest tightened. Never, not in her most fanciful dreams, had she imagined that the opportunity to speak with Dorian Havilliard would arise. She could kill him so easily, tear that grin from his face ... She could destroy the king as he had destroyed her ...

But perhaps his proposition could lead to escape. If she got beyond the wall, she could make it. Run and run and disappear into the mountains and live in solitude in the dark green of the wild, with a pine-needle carpet and a blanket of stars overhead. She could do it. She just needed to clear the wall. She had come so close before ...

“I’m listening,” was all she said.

CHAPTER 3

The prince's eyes shone with amusement at her brashness but lingered a bit too long on her body. Celaena could have raked her nails down his face for staring at her like that, yet the fact that he'd even bother to *look* when she was in such a filthy state ... A slow smile spread across her face.

The prince crossed his long legs. "Leave us," he ordered the guards. "Chaol, stay where you are."

Celaena stepped closer as the guards shuffled out, shutting the door. Foolish, foolish move. But Chaol's face remained unreadable. He couldn't honestly believe he'd contain her if she tried to escape! She straightened her spine. What were they planning that would make them so irresponsible?

The prince chuckled. "Don't you think it's risky to be so bold with me when your freedom is on the line?"

Of all the things he could have said, *that* was what she had least expected. "My freedom?" At the sound of the word, she saw a land of pine and snow, of sun-bleached cliffs and white-capped seas, a land where light was swallowed in the velvety green of bumps and hollows—a land that she had forgotten.

"Yes, your freedom. So, I highly suggest, *Miss Sardothien*, that you get your arrogance in check before you end up back in the mines." The prince uncrossed his legs. "Though perhaps your attitude will be useful. I'm not going to pretend that my father's empire was built on trust and understanding. But you already know that." Her fingers curled as she waited for him to continue. His eyes met hers, probing, intent. "My father has gotten it into his head that he needs a Champion."

It took a delicious moment for her to understand.

Celaena tipped back her head and laughed. "Your father wants *me* to be

his Champion? What—don't tell me that he's managed to eliminate every noble soul out there! Surely there's *one* chivalrous knight, one lord of steadfast heart and courage."

"Mind your mouth," Chaol warned from beside her.

"What about you, hmm?" she said, raising her brows at the captain. Oh, it was too funny! *Her*—the King's Champion! "Our beloved king finds you lacking?"

The captain put a hand on his sword. "If you'd be quiet, you'd hear the rest of what His Highness has to tell you."

She faced the prince. "Well?"

Dorian leaned back in his throne. "My father needs someone to aid the empire—someone to help him maneuver around difficult people."

"You mean he needs a lackey for his dirty work."

"If you want to put it that bluntly, then, yes," the prince said. "His *Champion* would keep his opponents quiet."

"As quiet as the grave," she said sweetly.

A smile tugged on Dorian's lips, but he kept his face straight. "Yes."

To work for the King of Adarlan as his loyal servant. She raised her chin. To kill *for* him—to be a fang in the mouth of the beast that had already consumed half of Erilea ... "And if I accept?"

"Then, after six years, he'll grant you your freedom."

"Six years!" But the word "freedom" echoed through her once more.

"If you decline," Dorian said, anticipating her next question, "you'll remain in Endovier." His sapphire eyes became hard, and she swallowed. *And die here* was what he didn't need to add.

Six years as the king's crooked dagger ... or a lifetime in Endovier.

"However," the prince said, "there's a catch." She kept her face neutral as he toyed with a ring on his finger. "The position isn't being offered to you. Yet. My father thought to have a bit of fun. He's hosting a competition. He invited twenty-three members of his council to each sponsor a would-be Champion to train in the glass castle and ultimately compete in a duel. Were you to win," he said with a half smile, "you'd *officially* be Adarlan's Assassin."

She didn't return his smile. "Who, exactly, are my competitors?"

Seeing her expression, the prince's grin faded. "Thieves and assassins and warriors from across Erilea." She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. "If you win, and prove yourself both skilled and trustworthy, my

father has *sworn* to grant you your freedom. *And*, while you're his Champion, you'll receive a considerable salary."

She barely heard his last few words. A competition! Against some nobody men from the-gods-knew-where! And assassins! "What other assassins?" she demanded.

"None that I've heard of. None as famous as *you*. And that reminds me—you won't be competing as Celaena Sardothien."

"What?"

"You'll compete under an alias. I don't suppose you heard about what happened after your trial."

"News is rather hard to come by when you're slaving in a mine."

Dorian chuckled, shaking his head. "No one knows that Celaena Sardothien is just a young woman—they all thought you were far older."

"What?" she asked again, her face flushing. "How is that possible?" She should be proud that she'd kept it hidden from most of the world, but ...

"You kept your identity a secret all the years you were running around killing everyone. After your trial, my father thought it would be ... wise not to inform Erilea who you are. He wants to keep it that way. What would our enemies say if they knew we'd all been petrified of a girl?"

"So I'm slaving in this miserable place for a name and title that don't even belong to me? Who does everyone *think* Adarlan's Assassin really is?"

"I don't know, nor do I entirely care. But I *do* know that you were the best, and that people still whisper when they mention your name." He fixed her with a stare. "If you're willing to fight for me, to be *my* Champion during the months the competition will go on, I'll see to it that my father frees you after *five* years."

Though he tried to conceal it, she could see the tension in his body. He wanted her to say yes. Needed her to say yes so badly he was willing to bargain with her. Her eyes began glittering. "What do you mean, '*were* the best'?"

"You've been in Endovier for a year. Who knows what you're still capable of?"

"I'm capable of quite a lot, thank you," she said, picking at her jagged nails. She tried not to cringe at all the dirt beneath them. When was the last time her hands had been clean?

“That remains to be seen,” Dorian said. “You’ll be told the details of the competition when we arrive in Rifthold.”

“Despite the amount of *fun* you nobles will have betting on us, this competition seems unnecessary. Why not just hire me already?”

“As I just said, you must prove yourself worthy.”

She put a hand on her hip, and her chains rattled loudly through the room. “Well, I think being Adarlan’s Assassin exceeds any sort of proof you might need.”

“Yes,” Chaol said, his bronze eyes flashing. “It proves that you’re a criminal, and that we shouldn’t immediately trust you with the king’s private business.”

“I give my solemn oa—”

“I doubt that the king would take the word of *Adarlan’s Assassin* as bond.”

“Yes, but I don’t see why I have to go through the training and the competition. I mean, I’m bound to be a bit ... out of shape, but ... what else do you expect when I have to make do with rocks and pickaxes in this place?” She gave Chaol a spiteful glance.

Dorian frowned. “So, you won’t take the offer?”

“Of course I’m going to take the offer,” she snapped. Her wrists chafed against her shackles badly enough that her eyes watered. “I’ll be your absurd Champion if you agree to free me in three years, not five.”

“Four.”

“Fine,” she said. “It’s a bargain. I might be trading one form of slavery for another, but I’m not a fool.”

She could win back her freedom. *Freedom*. She felt the cold air of the wide-open world, the breeze that swept from the mountains and carried her away. She could live far from Rifthold, the capital that had once been her realm.

“Hopefully you’re right,” Dorian replied. “And hopefully, you’ll live up to your reputation. I anticipate winning, and I won’t be pleased if you make me look foolish.”

“And what if I lose?”

The gleam vanished from his eyes as he said: “You’ll be sent back here, to serve out the remainder of your sentence.”

Celaena’s lovely visions exploded like dust from a slammed book. “Then I might as well leap from the window. A year in this place has worn

me through—imagine what will happen if I return. I'd be dead by my second year." She tossed her head. "Your offer seems fair enough."

"Fair enough indeed," Dorian said, and waved a hand at Chaol. "Take her to her rooms and clean her up." He fixed her with a stare. "We depart for Rifthold in the morning. Don't disappoint me, Sardothien."

It was nonsense, of course. How difficult could it be to outshine, outsmart, and then obliterate her competitors? She didn't smile, for she knew that if she did, it would open her to a realm of hope that had long been closed. But still, she felt like seizing the prince and dancing. She tried to think of music, tried to think of a celebratory tune, but could only recall a solitary line from the mournful bellowing of the Eyllwe work songs, deep and slow like honey poured from a jar: "*And go home at last ...*"

She didn't notice when Captain Westfall led her away, nor did she notice when they walked down hall after hall.

Yes, she would go—to Rifthold, to anywhere, even through the Gates of the Wyrd and into Hell itself, if it meant freedom.

After all, you aren't Adarlan's Assassin for nothing.

CHAPTER 4

When Celaena finally collapsed onto a bed after her meeting in the throne room, she couldn't fall asleep, despite the exhaustion in every inch of her body. After being roughly bathed by brutish servants, the wounds on her back throbbed and her face felt like it had been scrubbed to the bone. Shifting to lie on her side to ease the pain in her dressed and bound back, she ran her hand down the mattress, and blinked at the freeness of movement. Before she'd gotten into the bath, Chaol had removed her shackles. She'd felt everything—the reverberations of the key turning in the lock of her irons, then again as they loosened and fell to the floor. She could still feel the ghost chains hovering just above her skin. Looking up at the ceiling, she rotated her raw, burning joints and gave a sigh of contentment.

But it was too strange to lie on a mattress, to have silk caress her skin and a pillow cradle her cheek. She had forgotten what food other than soggy oats and hard bread tasted like, what a clean body and clothes could do to a person. Now it was utterly foreign.

Though her dinner hadn't been *that* wonderful. Not only was the roast chicken unimpressive, but after a few forkfuls, she'd dashed into the bathroom to deposit the contents of her stomach. She wanted to *eat*, to put a hand to a swollen belly, to wish that she'd never eaten a morsel and swear that she'd never eat again. She'd eat well in Rifthold, wouldn't she? And, more importantly, her stomach would adjust.

She'd wasted away to nothing. Beneath her nightgown, her ribs reached out from inside of her, showing bones where flesh and meat should have been. And her breasts! Once well-formed, they were now no larger than they'd been in the midst of puberty. A lump clogged her throat, which she promptly swallowed down. The softness of the mattress smothered her,

and she shifted again, lying on her back, despite the pain it gave her.

Her face hadn't been much better when she glimpsed it in the washroom mirror. It was haggard: her cheekbones were sharp, her jaw pronounced, and her eyes slightly, but ever so disturbingly, sunken in. She took steadying breaths, savoring the hope. She'd eat. A lot. And exercise. She could be healthy again. Imagining outrageous feasts and regaining her former glory, she finally fell asleep.



When Chaol came to fetch her the next morning, he found her sleeping on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. “Sardothien,” he said. She made a mumbling noise, burying her face farther into the pillow. “Why are you sleeping on the ground?” She opened an eye. Of course, he didn't mention how different she looked now that she was *clean*.

She didn't bother concealing herself with the blanket as she stood. The yards of fabric they called a nightgown covered her enough. “The bed was uncomfortable,” she said simply, but quickly forgot the captain as she beheld the sunlight.

Pure, fresh, warm sunlight. Sunlight that she could bask in day after day if she got her freedom, sunlight to drown out the endless dark of the mines. It leaked in through the heavy drapes, smearing itself across the room in thick lines. Gingerly, Celaena stretched out a hand.

Her hand was pale, almost skeletal, but there was something about it, something beyond the bruises and cuts and scars, that seemed beautiful and new in the morning light.

She ran to the window and nearly ripped the curtains from their hangings as she opened them to the gray mountains and bleakness of Endovier. The guards positioned beneath the window didn't glance upward, and she gaped at the bluish-gray sky, at the clouds slipping on their shoes and shuffling toward the horizon.

I will not be afraid. For the first time in a while, the words felt true.

Her lips peeled into a smile. The captain raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

She was cheerful—jubilant, really—and her mood improved when the servants coiled her braided hair onto the back of her head and dressed her in a surprisingly fine riding habit that concealed her miserably thin form. She loved clothes—loved the feeling of silk, of velvet, of satin, of suede

and chiffon—and was fascinated by the grace of seams, the intricate perfection of an embossed surface. And when she won this ridiculous competition, when she was free ... she could buy all the clothes she wanted.

She laughed when Chaol, irked at how Celaena stood in front of the mirror for five minutes, admiring herself, half-dragged her out of the room. The budding sky made her want to dance and skip down the halls before they entered the main yard. However, she faltered as she beheld the mounds of bone-colored rock at the far end of the compound, and the small figures going in and out of the many mouthlike holes cut into the mountains.

Work had already begun for the day, work that would continue without her when she left them all to this miserable fate. Her stomach clenching, Celaena averted her eyes from the prisoners, keeping up with the captain as they headed to a caravan of horses near the towering wall.

Yapping filled the air, and three black dogs sprinted from the center of the caravan to greet them. They were each sleek as arrows—undoubtedly from the Crown Prince’s kennels. She knelt on one knee, her bound wounds protesting as she cupped their heads and stroked their smooth hair. They licked her fingers and face, their tails slashing the ground like whips.

A pair of ebony boots stopped before her, and the dogs immediately calmed and sat. Celaena lifted her gaze to find the sapphire eyes of the Crown Prince of Adarlan studying her face. He smiled slightly. “How unusual for them to notice you,” he said, scratching one of the dogs behind the ears. “Did you give them food?”

She shook her head as the captain stepped behind her, so close that his knees grazed the folds of her forest-green velvet cape. It would take all of two movements to disarm him.

“Are you fond of dogs?” asked the prince. She nodded. Why was it already so hot? “Am I going to be blessed with the pleasure of hearing your voice, or have you resolved to be silent for the duration of our journey?”

“I’m afraid your questions didn’t merit a verbal response.”

Dorian bowed low. “Then I apologize, my lady! How terrible it must be to condescend to answer! Next time, I’ll try to think of something more stimulating to say.” With that, he turned on his heel and strode away, his dogs trailing after him.

She scowled as she stood. Her frown deepened when she discovered the Captain of the Guard smirking as they walked into the fray of the readying company. However, the unbearable urge to splatter someone across a wall lessened when they brought her a piebald mare to ride.

She mounted. The sky came closer, and it stretched forever above her, away and away to distant lands she'd never heard of. Celaena gripped the saddle horn. She was truly leaving Endovier. All those hopeless months, those freezing nights ... gone now. She breathed in deeply. She knew—she just *knew*—that if she tried hard enough, she could fly from her saddle. That is, until she felt iron clamp around her arms.

It was Chaol, fastening her bandaged wrists into shackles. A long chain led to his horse, where it disappeared beneath the saddlebags. He mounted his black stallion, and she considered leaping from her horse and using the chain to hang him from the nearest tree.

It was a rather large company, twenty all together. Behind two imperial flag-bearing guards rode the prince and Duke Perrington. Then came a band of six royal guards, dull and bland as porridge. But still trained to protect him—from *her*. She clanked her chains against her saddle and flicked her eyes to Chaol. He didn't react.

The sun rose higher. After one last inspection of their supplies, they left. With most of the slaves working the mines, and only a few toiling inside the ramshackle refining sheds, the giant yard was almost deserted. The wall suddenly loomed, and her blood throbbed in her veins. The last time she'd been this close to the wall ...

The crack of the whip sounded, followed by a scream. Celaena looked over her shoulder, past the guards and the supplies wagon, to the near-empty yard. None of these slaves would ever leave here—even when they died. Each week, they dug new mass graves behind the refining sheds. And each week, those graves filled up.

She became all too aware of the three long scars down her back. Even if she won her freedom ... even if she lived in peace in the countryside ... those scars would always remind her of what she'd endured. And that even if she was free, others were not.

Celaena faced forward, pushing those thoughts from her mind as they entered the passage through the wall. The interior was thick, almost smoky, and damp. The sounds of the horses echoed like rolling thunder. The iron gates opened, and she glimpsed the wicked name of the mine

before it split in two and swung wide. Within a few heartbeats, the gates groaned shut behind them. She was out.

She shifted her hands in their shackles, watching the chain sway and clank between her and the Captain of the Guard. It was attached to his saddle, which was cinched around his horse, which, when they stopped, could be subtly unbridled, just enough so that with a fierce tug from her end, the chain would rip the saddle off the beast, he'd tumble to the ground, and she would—

She sensed Captain Westfall's attention. He stared at her beneath lowered brows, his lips tightly pursed, and she shrugged as she dropped the chain.

As the morning wore on, the sky became a crisp blue with hardly a cloud. Taking the forest road, they swiftly passed from the mountainous wasteland of Endovier and into fairer country.

By midmorning they were within Oakwald Forest, the wood that surrounded Endovier and served as a continental divide between the "civilized" countries of the East and the uncharted lands of the West. Legends were still told of the strange and deadly people who dwelt there—the cruel and bloodthirsty descendants of the fallen Witch Kingdom. Celaena had once met a young woman from that cursed land, and though she'd turned out to be both cruel and bloodthirsty, she was still just a human. And had still bled like one.

After hours of silence, Celaena turned to Chaol. "Rumor has it that once the king is finished with his war against Wendlyn, he'll begin colonizing the West." She said it casually, but hoped he'd confirm or deny. The more she knew of the king's current position and maneuverings, the better. The captain surveyed her up and down, frowned, and then looked away. "I agree," she said, sighing loudly. "The fate of those empty, wide plains and those miserable mountain regions seems dull to me as well."

His jaw tightened as he clamped his teeth.

"Do you intend to ignore me forever?"

Captain Westfall's brows rose. "I didn't know I was ignoring you."

She pursed her lips, checking her irritation. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"So young!" She batted her eyelashes, watching him for some kind of response. "It only took a few years to climb the ranks?"

He nodded. "And how old are *you*?"

"Eighteen." But he said nothing. "I know," she continued. "It is impressive that I accomplished so much at such an early age."

"Crime isn't an accomplishment, Sardothien."

"Yes, but becoming the world's most famous assassin is!" He didn't respond. "You might ask me how I did it."

"Did what?" he said tightly.

"Became so talented and famous so quickly."

"I don't want to hear about it."

Those weren't the words she'd wanted to hear.

"You're not very kind," she said through her teeth. If she were going to get under his skin, she'd have to push a lot harder.

"You're a criminal. I'm Captain of the Royal Guard. I'm not obligated to bestow any kindness or conversation upon you. Be grateful we don't keep you locked up in the wagon."

"Yes, well, I'd wager that you're rather unpleasant to talk to even when you're *bestowing* kindness upon others." When he failed to respond again, Celaena couldn't help but feel a bit foolish. A few minutes passed. "Are you and the Crown Prince close friends?"

"My personal life is none of your concern."

She clicked her tongue. "How wellborn are you?"

"Well enough." His chin lifted almost imperceptibly higher.

"Duke?"

"No."

"Lord?" He didn't reply, and she smiled slowly. "Lord Chaol Westfall." She fanned herself with a hand. "How the court ladies must *fawn* over you!"

"Don't call me that. I'm not given the title of lord," he said quietly.

"You have an older brother?"

"No."

"Then why don't you bear the title?" Again, no response. She knew she should stop prying, but she couldn't help it. "A scandal? A deprived birthright? In what sort of messy intrigue are you involved?"

His lips squeezed together so tightly they turned white.

She leaned toward him. "Do you find that—"

"Shall I gag you, or are you capable of being silent without my assistance?" He stared ahead at the Crown Prince, his face blank again.

She tried not to laugh when he grimaced as she began speaking again.
“Are you married?”

“No.”

She picked at her nails. “I’m not married, either.” His nostrils flared.
“How old were you when you became Captain of the Guard?”

He gripped the reins of his horse. “Twenty.”

The party halted in a clearing and the soldiers dismounted. She faced Chaol, who swung a leg over his horse. “Why have we stopped?”

Chaol unhooked the chain from his saddle and gave it a firm yank, motioning for her to dismount. “Lunch,” he said.

CHAPTER 5

Celaena brushed a stray wisp of hair from her face and allowed herself to be led into the clearing. If she wanted to break free, she'd have to go through Chaol first. Had they been alone, she might have attempted it, though the chains would make it difficult; but with an entourage of royal guards trained to kill without hesitation ...

Chaol remained close beside her while a fire was kindled and food prepared from the boxes and sacks of supplies. The soldiers rolled logs to make small circles, where they sat while their companions stirred and fried. The Crown Prince's dogs, who had dutifully trotted alongside their master, approached the assassin with wagging tails and lay at her feet. At least someone was glad for her company.

Hungry by the time a plate was finally laid in her lap, Celaena became a bit more than irritated when the captain did not immediately remove her irons. After giving her a long warning look, he unlocked her chains and clamped them onto her ankles. She only rolled her eyes as she raised a small portion of meat to her lips. She chewed slowly. The last thing she needed was to be sick in front of them. While the soldiers talked amongst themselves, Celaena took in their surroundings. She and Chaol sat with five soldiers. The Crown Prince, of course, sat with Perrington on their own two logs, far from her. While Dorian had been all arrogance and amusement the previous night, his features were grave as he spoke to the duke. His entire body seemed tensed, and she didn't fail to notice the way he clenched his jaw when Perrington spoke. Whatever their relationship was, it wasn't cordial.

Midbite, Celaena tore her focus from the prince to study the trees. The forest had gone silent. The ebony hounds' ears were erect, though they didn't seem to be bothered by the stillness. Even the soldiers quieted. Her

heart skipped a beat. The forest was different here.

The leaves dangled like jewels—tiny droplets of ruby, pearl, topaz, amethyst, emerald, and garnet; and a carpet of such riches coated the forest floor around them. Despite the ravages of conquest, this part of Oakwald Forest remained untouched. It still echoed with the remnants of the power that had once given these trees such unnatural beauty.

She'd been only eight when Arobynn Hamel, her mentor and the King of the Assassins, found her half-submerged on the banks of a frozen river and brought her to his keep on the border between Adarlan and Terrasen. While training her to be his finest and most loyal assassin, Arobynn had never allowed her to return home to Terrasen. But she still remembered the beauty of the world before the King of Adarlan had ordered so much of it burned. Now there was nothing left for her there, nor would there ever be. Arobynn had never said it aloud, but if she'd refused his offer to train her, he would have handed her to those who would have killed her. Or worse. She'd been newly orphaned, and even at eight, she knew that a life with Arobynn, with a new name that no one would recognize but someday everyone would fear, was a chance to start over. To escape the fate that led her to leap into the icy river that night ten years ago.

“Damned forest,” said an olive-skinned soldier in their circle. A soldier beside him chuckled. “The sooner it’s burned, the better, I say.” The other soldiers nodded, and Celaena stiffened. “It’s full of hate,” said another.

“Did you expect anything else?” she interrupted. Chaol’s hand darted to his sword as the soldiers turned to her, some of them sneering. “This isn’t just any forest.” She beckoned with her fork to the woods. “It’s Brannon’s forest.”

“My father used to tell me stories about it being full of faeries,” a soldier said. “They’re all gone now.” One took a bite from an apple, and said: “Along with those damned wretched Fae.” Another said: “We got rid of them, didn’t we?”

“I’d watch your tongues,” Celaena snapped. “King Brannon was Fae, and Oakwald is still his. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the trees remember him.”

The soldiers laughed. “They’d have to be two thousand years old, them trees!” said one.

“Fae are immortal,” she said.

“Trees ain’t.”

Bristling, Celaena shook her head and took another small forkful of food.

“What do you know about this forest?” Chaol quietly asked her. Was he mocking her? The soldiers sat forward, poised to laugh. But the captain’s golden-brown eyes held mere curiosity.

She swallowed her meat. “Before Adarlan began its conquest, this forest was cloaked in magic,” she said softly, but not meekly.

He waited for her to continue, but she had said enough. “And?” he prodded.

“And that’s all I know,” she said, meeting his gaze. Disappointed at the lack of anything to mock, the soldiers returned to their meals.

She had lied, and Chaol knew it. She knew plenty about this forest, knew that the denizens of this place had once been faeries: gnomes, sprites, nymphs, goblins, more names than anyone could count or remember. All ruled by their larger, human-like cousins, the immortal Fae—the original inhabitants and settlers of the continent, and the oldest beings in Erilea.

With the growing corruption of Adarlan and the king’s campaign to hunt them down and execute them, the faeries and Fae fled, seeking shelter in the wild, untouched places of the world. The King of Adarlan had outlawed it all—magic, Fae, faeries—and removed any trace so thoroughly that even those who had magic in their blood almost believed it had never really existed, Celaena herself being one of them. The king had claimed that magic was an affront to the Goddess and her gods—that to wield it was to impertinently imitate their power. But even though the king had banned magic, most knew the truth: within a month of his proclamation, magic had completely and utterly disappeared of its own accord. Perhaps it had realized what horrors were coming.

She could still smell the fires that had raged throughout her eighth and ninth years—the smoke of burning books chock-full of ancient, irreplaceable knowledge, the screams of gifted seers and healers as they’d been consumed by the flames, the storefronts and sacred places shattered and desecrated and erased from history. Many of the magic-users who hadn’t been burned wound up prisoners in Endovier—and most didn’t survive long there. It had been a while since she’d contemplated the gifts she’d lost, though the memory of her abilities haunted her dreams. Despite the carnage, perhaps it *was* good that magic had vanished. It was far too

dangerous for any sane person to wield; her gifts might have destroyed her by this point.

The smoking fire burned her eyes as she took another bite. She'd never forget the stories about Oakwald Forest, legends of dark, terrible glens and deep, still pools, and caves full of light and heavenly singing. But they were now only stories and nothing more. To speak of them was to invite trouble.

She looked at the sunlight filtering through the canopy, how the trees swayed in the wind with their long, bony arms around each other. She suppressed a shiver.

Lunch, thankfully, was over quickly. Her chains were transferred to her wrists again, and the horses were refreshed and reloaded. Celaena's legs had become so stiff that Chaol was forced to help her onto her horse. It was painful to ride, and her nose also suffered a blow as the continual stench of horse sweat and excrement floated to the back of the entourage.

They traveled for the remainder of the day, and the assassin sat in silence as she watched the forest pass, the tightness in her chest not easing until they'd left that shimmering glen far behind. Her body ached by the time they stopped for the night. She didn't bother to speak at dinner, nor to care when her small tent was erected, guards posted outside, and she was allowed to sleep, still shackled to one of them. She didn't dream, but when she awoke, she couldn't believe her eyes.

Small white flowers lay at the foot of her cot, and many infant-sized footprints led in and out of the tent. Before someone could enter and notice, Celaena swept a foot over the tracks, destroying any trace, and stuffed the flowers into a nearby satchel.

Though no one mentioned another word about faeries, as they traveled onward, Celaena continually scanned the soldiers' faces for any indication that they'd seen something strange. She spent a good portion of the following day with sweaty palms and a racing heartbeat, and kept one eye fixed on the passing woods.

CHAPTER 6

For the next two weeks, they traveled down through the continent, the nights becoming colder, the days shorter. Icy rain kept them company for four days, during which time Celaena was so miserably cold that she contemplated throwing herself into a ravine, hopefully dragging Chaol with her.

Everything was wet and half-frozen, and while she could bear sodden hair, she couldn't withstand the agony of wet shoes. She had little sensation in her toes. Each night, she wrapped them in whatever spare, dry clothing she could find. She felt as though she were in a state of partial decay, and with each gust of frigid, stinging wind, she wondered when her skin would rip from her bones. But, as it was autumn weather, the rain suddenly disappeared, and cloudless, brilliant skies once more stretched over them.

Celaena was half-asleep on her horse when the Crown Prince pulled out of line and came trotting toward them, his dark hair bouncing. His red cape rose and fell in a crimson wave. Above his unadorned white shirt was a fine cobalt-blue jerkin trimmed with gold. She would have snorted, but he *did* look rather good in his knee-high brown boots. And his leather belt *did* go nicely—even though the hunting knife seemed a bit too bejeweled. He pulled up alongside Chaol. “Come,” he said to the captain, and jerked his head at the steep, grassy hill that the company was starting to ascend.

“Where?” the captain asked, jangling Celaena's chain for Dorian to notice. Wherever he went, she went.

“Come see the view,” Dorian clarified. “Bring that one, I suppose.” Celaena bristled. “That one”! As if she were a piece of baggage!

Chaol moved them out of line, giving her chain a fierce tug. She grasped the reins as they advanced into a gallop, the tangy smell of

horsehair creeping into her nostrils. They rode quickly up the steep hill, the horse jerking and surging beneath her. Celaena tried not to wince as she slid backward in the saddle. If she fell, she'd die of humiliation. But the setting sun emerged from the trees behind them, and her breath caught in her throat as a spire, then three, then six more appeared, piercing the sky.

Atop the hill, Celaena stared at the crowning achievement of Adarlan. The glass castle of Rifthold.

It was gargantuan, a vertical city of shimmering, crystalline towers and bridges, chambers and turrets, domed ballrooms and long, endless hallways. It had been built above the original stone castle, and cost a kingdom's wealth to construct.

She thought of the first time she'd seen it, eight years ago, cold and still, frozen like the earth beneath her fat pony. Even then, she found the castle tasteless, a waste of resources and talent, its towers reaching into the sky like clawed fingers. She remembered the powder-blue cloak that she kept touching, the weight of her fresh curls, the scratch of her stockings against the saddle, how she'd worried about the spot of mud on her red velvet shoes, and how she kept on thinking about that man—the man she'd killed three days earlier.

"One more tower and the whole thing will collapse," the Crown Prince said from his spot on the other side of Chaol. The sounds of their approaching party filled the air. "We've still got a few miles left, and I'd rather navigate these foothills in the daylight. We'll camp here tonight."

"I wonder what your father will think of her," Chaol said.

"Oh, he'll be fine—until she opens her mouth. Then the bellowing and the blustering will begin, and I'll regret wasting the past two months tracking her down. But—well, I think my father has more important matters to worry over." With that, the prince moved off.

Celaena couldn't keep her eyes from the castle. She felt so small, even from far away. She'd forgotten how dwarfing the building was.

The soldiers scurried about, lighting fires and raising tents. "You look as if you're facing the gallows, not your freedom," the captain said beside her.

She wound and unwound a strap of leather rein around a finger. "It's odd to see it."

"The city?"

"The city, the castle, the slums, the river." The shadow of the castle

grew across the city like a hulking beast. “I still don’t entirely know how it happened.”

“How you were captured?”

She nodded. “Despite your visions of a perfect world under an empire, your rulers and politicians are quick to destroy each other. So are assassins, I suppose.”

“You believe one of your kind betrayed you?”

“Everyone knew I received the best hires and could demand any payment.” She scanned the twisting city streets and the winding glimmer of the river. “Were I gone, a vacancy would arise from which they could profit. It might have been one; it might have been many.”

“You shouldn’t expect to find honor amongst such company.”

“I didn’t say that I did. I never trusted most of them, and I knew they hated me.” She had her suspicions, of course. And the one that seemed most likely was a truth she wasn’t yet ready to face—not now, not ever.

“Endovier must have been terrible,” Chaol said. Nothing malicious or mocking lay beneath his words. Did she dare call it sympathy?

“Yes,” she said slowly. “It was.” He gave her a look that asked for more. Well, what did she care if she told him? “When I arrived, they cut my hair, gave me rags, and put a pickax in my hand as if I knew what to do with it. They chained me to the others, and I endured my whippings with the rest of them. But the overseers had been instructed to treat me with extra care, and took the liberty of rubbing salt into my wounds—salt *I* mined—and whipped me often enough so that some of the gashes never really closed. It was through the kindness of a few prisoners from Eyllwe that my wounds didn’t become infected. Every night, one of them stayed up the hours it took to clean my back.”

Chaol didn’t reply, and only glanced at her before dismounting. Had she been a fool to tell him something so personal? He didn’t speak to her again that day, except to bark commands.



Celaena awoke with a gasp, a hand on her throat, cold sweat sliding down her back and pooling in the hollow between her mouth and chin. She’d had the nightmare before—that she was lying in one of those mass graves in Endovier. And when she tried to pull herself from the tangle of rotting limbs, she’d been dragged down into a pile twenty bodies deep. And then

no one noticed that she was still screaming when they buried her alive.

Nauseated, Celaena wrapped her arms around her knees. She breathed—in and out, in and out—and tilted her head, her sharp kneecaps pushing against her cheekbone. Due to the unseasonably warm weather, they'd foregone sleeping in tents—which gave her an unparalleled view of the capital. The illuminated castle rose from the sleeping city like a mound of ice and steam. There was something greenish about it, and it seemed to pulse.

By this time tomorrow, she'd be confined within those walls. But tonight—tonight it was so quiet, like the calm before a storm.

She imagined that the whole world was asleep, enchanted by the sea-green light of the castle. Time came and went, mountains rising and falling, vines creeping over the slumbering city, concealing it with layers of thorns and leaves. She was the only one awake.

She pulled her cloak around her. She would win. She'd win, and serve the king, and then vanish into nothing, and think no more of castles or kings or assassins. She didn't wish to reign over this city again. Magic was dead, the Fae were banished or executed, and she would never again have anything to do with the rise and fall of kingdoms.

She wasn't fated for anything. Not anymore.



A hand upon his sword, Dorian Havilliard watched the assassin from his spot on the other side of the sleeping company. There was something sad about her—sitting so still with her legs against her chest, the moonlight coloring her hair silver. No bold, swaggering expressions strutted across her face as the glow of the castle rippled in her eyes.

He found her beautiful, if a bit strange and sour. It was something in the way that her eyes sparked when she looked at something lovely in the landscape. He couldn't understand it.

She stared at the castle unflinchingly, her form silhouetted against the blazing brightness that sat on the edge of the Avery River. Clouds gathered above them and she raised her head. Through a clearing in the swirling mass, a cluster of stars could be seen. He couldn't help thinking that they gazed down at her.

No, he had to remember she was an assassin with the blessing of a pretty face and sharp wits. She washed her hands with blood, and was just

as likely to slit his throat as offer him a kind word. And she was his Champion. She was here to fight for him—and for her freedom. And nothing more. He lay down, his hand still upon his sword, and fell asleep.

Still, the image haunted his dreams throughout the night: a lovely girl gazing at the stars, and the stars who gazed back.

CHAPTER 7

Trumpeters signaled their arrival as they passed through the looming alabaster walls of Rifthold. Crimson flags depicting gold wyverns flapped in the wind above the capital city, the cobblestone streets were cleared of traffic, and Celaena, unchained, dressed, painted, and seated in front of Chaol, frowned as the odor of the city met her nose.

Beneath the smell of spices and horses lay a foundation of filth, blood, and spoiled milk. The air held a hint of the salty waters of the Avery—different from the salt of Endovier. This brought with it warships from every ocean in Erilea, merchant vessels crammed with goods and slaves, and fishing boats with half-rotted, scale-covered flesh that people somehow managed to eat. From bearded peddlers to servant girls carrying armfuls of hatboxes, everyone paused as the flag-bearers trotted proudly ahead, and Dorian Havilliard waved.

They followed the Crown Prince, who, like Chaol, was swathed in a red cape, pinned over the left breast with a brooch fashioned after the royal seal. The prince wore a golden crown upon his neat hair, and she had to concede that he looked rather regal.

Young women flocked to them, waving. Dorian winked and grinned. Celaena couldn't help but notice the sharp stares from the same women when they beheld her in the prince's retinue. She knew how she appeared, seated atop a horse like some prize lady being brought to the castle. So Celaena only smiled at them, tossed her hair, and batted her eyelashes at the prince's back.

Her arm stung. "What?" she hissed at the Captain of the Guard as he pinched her.

"You look ridiculous," he said through his teeth, smiling at the crowd.

She mirrored his expression. "*They're* ridiculous."

“Be quiet and act normally.” His breath was hot on her neck.

“I should jump from the horse and run,” she said, waving at a young man, who gaped at what he thought was a court lady’s attention. “I’d vanish in an instant.”

“Yes,” he said, “you’d vanish with three arrows buried in your spine.”

“Such pleasant talk.”

They entered the shopping district, where the crowd swelled between the trees lining the broad avenues of white stone. The glass storefronts were nearly invisible beyond the crowd, but a ravenous sort of hunger arose in her as they passed shop after shop. Each window displayed dresses and tunics, which stood proudly behind lines of sparkling jewelry and broad-rimmed hats clumped together like bouquets of flowers. Above it all, the glass castle loomed, so high she had to tilt her head back to see the uppermost towers. Why had they chosen such a long and inconvenient route? Did they really wish to parade about?

Celaena swallowed. There was a break in the buildings, and sails spread like moth’s wings greeted them as they turned onto the avenue along the Avery. Ships sat docked along the pier, a mess of rope and netting with sailors calling to each other, too busy to notice the royal procession. At the sound of a whip, her head snapped to the side.

Slaves staggered down the gangplank of a merchant ship. A mix of conquered nations bound together, each of them had the hollow, raging face she’d seen so many times before. Most of the slaves were prisoners of war—rebels who survived the butchering blocks and endless lines of Adarlan’s armies. Some were probably people who had been caught or accused of trying to practice magic. But others were just ordinary folk, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now that she noticed, there were countless chained slaves working the docks, lifting and sweating, holding parasols and pouring water, eyes on the ground or the sky—never on what was before them.

She wanted to leap from her horse and run to them, or to simply scream that she wasn’t a part of this prince’s court, that she had no hand in bringing them here, chained and starved and beaten, that she had worked and bled with them, with their families and friends—she was not like these monsters that destroyed everything. That she had *done* something, nearly two years ago, when she had freed almost two hundred slaves from the Pirate Lord. Even that, though, wasn’t enough.

The city was suddenly separate, ripped from her. People still waved and bowed, cheering and laughing, throwing flowers and other nonsense before their horses. She had difficulty breathing.

Sooner than she would have liked, the iron and glass gate of the castle appeared, latticework doors opened, and a dozen guards flanked the cobblestone path that led through the archway. Spears erect, they held rectangular shields, and their eyes were dark beneath bronze helmets. Each wore a red cape. Their armor, while tarnished, was well crafted from copper and leather.

Beyond the archway sloped a road, lined with trees of gold and silver. Glass lampposts sprouted up between the hedges bordering the path. The sounds of the city vanished as they passed under another arch, this one made of sparkling glass, and then the castle rose before them.

Chaol sighed as he dismounted in the open courtyard. Hands pulled Celaena from the saddle and set her on wobbly legs. Glass gleamed everywhere, and a hand clamped on her shoulder. Stableboys quietly and quickly led her horse away.

Chaol pulled her to his side, keeping a firm grip on her cloak as the Crown Prince approached. "Six hundred rooms, military and servant's quarters, three gardens, a game park, and stables on either side," said Dorian, staring at his home. "Who could ever need so much space?"

She managed a weak smile, a bit baffled by his sudden charm. "I don't know how you can sleep at night with only a wall of glass keeping you from death." She glanced up, but quickly lowered her focus to the ground. She wasn't afraid of heights, but the thought of being so high up with nothing but glass to protect her made her stomach clench.

"Then you're like me." Dorian chuckled. "Thank the gods I gave you rooms in the stone castle. I'd hate for you to be uncomfortable."

Deciding that scowling at him wouldn't be the wisest decision, Celaena looked instead toward the massive castle gates. The doors were made of cloudy red glass, gaping at her like the mouth of a giant. But she could see the interior was made of stone, and it seemed to her that the glass castle had been dropped on top of the original building. What a ridiculous idea: a castle made of glass.

"Well," said Dorian. "You've fattened up a bit, and your skin has some color now. Welcome to my home, Celaena Sardothien." He nodded at a few passing nobles, who scraped and bowed. "The competition begins

tomorrow. Captain Westfall will show you to your chambers.”

She rolled her shoulders and searched for any sign of her competitors. No one else seemed to be arriving, though.

The prince nodded to another flock of cooing courtiers, and didn't look at either the assassin or the Captain of the Guard as he spoke again. “I have to meet with my father,” he said, running his gaze along the body of a particularly pretty lady. He winked at her, and she hid her face behind a lace fan as she continued her walk. Dorian nodded to Chaol. “I'll see you later tonight.” Without saying a word to Celaena, he strode up the steps to the palace, his red cape blowing in the wind.



The Crown Prince lived up to his word. Her chambers were in a wing of the stone castle, and much bigger than she anticipated. They consisted of a bedroom with an attached bathing chamber and a dressing room, a small dining room, and a music and gaming room. Each room was furnished in gold and crimson, her bedroom also decorated with a giant tapestry along one wall, with couches and deep-cushioned chairs scattered in a tasteful manner. Her balcony overlooked a fountain in one of the gardens, and whichever it was, it was beautiful—never mind the guards she spotted posted beneath.

Chaol left her, and Celaena didn't wait to hear the door shut before closing herself in her bedroom. Between her murmurs of appreciation during Chaol's brief tour of her rooms, she'd counted the windows—twelve—the exits—one—and the guards posted outside her door, windows, and balcony—nine. They were each armed with a sword, knife, and crossbow, and though they'd been alert while their captain passed by, she knew a crossbow wasn't exactly a light weight to bear for hours on end.

Celaena crept to her bedroom window, pressing herself against the marble wall, and glanced down. Sure enough, the guards had already strapped the crossbows across their backs. It would waste precious seconds to grab the weapon and load it—seconds when she could take their swords, cut their throats, and vanish into the gardens. She smiled as she stepped fully in front of the window to study the garden. Its far border ended in the trees of a game park. She knew enough about the castle to know that she was on the southern side, and if she went through the game park, she'd

reach a stone wall and the Avery River beyond.

Celaena opened and closed the doors of her armoire, dresser, and vanity. Of course, there weren't any weapons, not even a fire poker, but she grabbed the few bone hairpins left in the back of a dresser drawer, and some string she found in a mending basket in her giant dressing room. No needles. She knelt on the carpeted floor of the dressing room—which was void of clothes—and, one eye on the door behind her, she made quick work of the hairpins, snapping their heads off before binding them all together with the string. When she finished, she held up the object and frowned.

Well, it wasn't a knife, but clustered together like that, the jagged points of the broken pins could do some damage. She tested the tips with a finger, and winced as a shard of bone pricked her calloused skin. Yes, it would certainly hurt if she jammed it into a guard's neck. And disable him long enough for her to grab his weapons.

Celaena reentered the bedroom, yawning, and stood on the edge of the mattress to tuck the makeshift weapon into one of the folds of the partial canopy over the bed. When she'd concealed it, she glanced around the room again. Something about the dimensions seemed a little off—something with the height of the walls, but she couldn't be sure. Regardless, the canopy provided plenty of hiding places. What else could she take without them noticing? Chaol had probably had the room looked over before they arrived. She listened at the bedroom door for any signs of activity. When she was certain no one was in her chambers, she entered the foyer and strode through it to the gaming room. She beheld the billiards cues along the far wall, and the heavy colored balls stacked on the green felt table, and grinned. Chaol wasn't nearly as smart as he thought he was.

Ultimately, she left the billiards equipment, if only because it would arouse suspicion if it all disappeared, but it would be easy enough to get a stick if she needed to escape, or to use the dense balls to knock the guards unconscious. Exhausted, she returned to her bedroom and finally hoisted herself onto the enormous bed. The mattress was so soft that she sank down a few inches, and it was wide enough for three people to sleep without noticing each other. Curling on her side, Celaena's eyes grew heavier and heavier.

She slept for an hour, until a servant announced the arrival of the tailor,

to outfit her with proper court attire. And thus another hour was spent being measured and pinned, and sitting through a presentation of different fabrics and colors. She hated most of them. A few caught her attention, but when she tried to recommend specific styles that flattered her, she received only the wave of a hand and a curl of the lip. She considered jabbing one of the tailor's pearl-headed pins through his eye.

She bathed, feeling almost as dirty as she had in Endovier, and was grateful for the gentle servants who attended her. Many of the wounds had scabbed or remained as thin white lines, though her back retained most of its damage. After nearly two hours of pampering—trimming her hair, shaping her nails, and scraping away the callouses on her feet and hands—Celaena grinned at the mirror in the dressing room.

Only in the capital could servants have done such fine work. She looked spectacular. Utterly and completely spectacular. She wore a dress with skirts and long sleeves of white, streaked and spotted with orchid-purple. The indigo bodice was bordered with a thin line of gold, and an ice-white cape hung from her shoulders. Her hair, half up and twisted with a fuchsia ribbon, fell in loose waves. But her smile faltered as she remembered why, exactly, she was here.

The King's Champion indeed. She looked more like the King's Lapdog.

"Beautiful," said an older, female voice, and Celaena pivoted, the yards of cumbersome fabric twisting with her. Her corset—the stupid, cursed thing—pushed on her ribs so hard that the breath was sucked from her. *This* was why she mostly preferred tunics and pants.

It was a woman, large but well contained within the gown of cobalt and peach that marked her as one of the servants of the royal household. Her face, while a bit wrinkled, was red-cheeked and finely colored. She bowed. "Philippa Spindlehead," said the woman, rising. "Your personal servant. You must be—"

"Celaena Sardothien," she said flatly.

Philippa's eyes widened. "Keep that to yourself, miss," she whispered. "I'm the only one who knows. And the guards, I suppose."

"Then what do people think about all my guards?" she asked.

Philippa approached, ignoring Celaena's glower as she adjusted the folds of the assassin's gown, fluffing them in the right places. "Oh, the other ... *Champions* have guards outside their rooms, too. Or people just think you're another lady-friend of the prince."

“Another?”

Philippa smiled, but kept her eyes upon the dress. “He has a big heart, His Highness.”

Celaena wasn’t at all surprised. “A favorite with women?”

“It’s not my place to speak about His Highness. And you should mind your tongue, too.”

“I’ll do as I please.” She surveyed the withered face of her servant. Why send such a soft woman to serve her? She’d overpower her in a heartbeat.

“Then you’ll find yourself back in those mines, poppet.” Philippa put a hand on her hip. “Oh, don’t scowl—you ruin your face when you look like that!” She reached to pinch Celaena’s cheek, and Celaena pulled away.

“Are you mad? I’m an assassin—not some court idiot!”

Philippa clucked. “You’re still a woman, and so long as you’re under my charge, you’ll act like one, or Wyrd help me!”

Celaena blinked, then slowly said: “You’re awfully bold. I hope you don’t act like this around court ladies.”

“Ah. There was surely a reason why I was assigned to attend you.”

“You understand what my occupation entails, don’t you?”

“No disrespect, but this sort of finery is worth far more than seeing my head roll on the ground.” Celaena’s upper lip pulled back from her teeth as the servant turned from the room. “Don’t make such a face,” Philippa called over her shoulder. “It squishes that little nose of yours.”

Celaena could only gape as the servant woman shuffled away.



The Crown Prince of Adarlan stared at his father unblinkingly, waiting for him to speak. Seated on his glass throne, the King of Adarlan watched him back. Sometimes Dorian forgot how little he looked like his father—it was his younger brother, Hollin, who took after the king, with his broad frame and his round, sharp-eyed face. But Dorian, tall, toned, and elegant, bore no resemblance to him. And then there was the matter of Dorian’s sapphire eyes—not even his mother had his eyes. No one knew where they came from.

“She has arrived?” his father asked. His voice was hard, edged with the clash of shields and the scream of arrows. As far as greetings went, that was probably the kindest one he’d get.

“She shouldn’t pose any threat or problem while she’s here,” Dorian said as calmly as he could. Picking Sardothien had been a gamble—a bet against his father’s tolerance. He was about to see if it was worth it.

“You think like every fool she’s murdered.” Dorian straightened as the king continued. “She owes allegiance to none but herself, and won’t balk at putting a knife through your heart.”

“Which is why she’ll be fully capable of winning this competition of yours.” His father said nothing, and Dorian went on, his heart racing. “Come to think of it, the whole competition might be unnecessary.”

“You say that because you’re afraid of losing good coin.” If only his father knew that he hadn’t just ventured to find a champion to win gold, but also to get out—to get away from *him*, for as long as he could manage.

Dorian steeled his nerve, remembering the words he’d been brooding over for the entire journey from Endovier. “I guarantee she’ll be able to fulfill her duties; we truly don’t need to train her. I’ve told you already: it’s foolish to have this competition at all.”

“If you do not mind your tongue, I’ll have her use you for practice.”

“And then what? Have Hollin take the throne?”

“Do not doubt me, Dorian,” his father challenged. “You might think this ... *girl* can win, but you forget that Duke Perrington is sponsoring Cain. You would have been better off picking a Champion like him—forged in blood and iron on the battlefield. A true Champion.”

Dorian stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Don’t you find the title a little ridiculous, given that our ‘Champions’ are no more than criminals?”

His father rose from his throne and pointed at the map painted on the far wall of his council chamber. “I am the conqueror of this continent, and soon to be ruler of *all* Erilea. You will not question me.”

Dorian, realizing how close he was to crossing a boundary between impertinence and rebellion—a boundary that he’d been very, very careful to maintain—mumbled his apologies.

“We’re at war with Wendlyn,” his father went on. “I have enemies all around. Who better to do my work than someone utterly grateful for being granted not only a second chance, but also wealth and the power of my name?” The king smiled when Dorian didn’t reply. Dorian tried not to flinch as his father studied him. “Perrington tells me that you behaved yourself well on this trip.”

“With Perrington as a watchdog, I couldn’t do otherwise.”

“I’ll not have some peasant woman banging on the gate, wailing that you’ve broken her heart.” Dorian’s face colored, but he did not drop his father’s stare. “I’ve toiled too hard and long to establish my empire; you will not complicate it with illegitimate heirs. Marry a proper woman, then dally as you will after you give me a grandson or two. When you are king, you will understand consequences.”

“When I’m king, I won’t declare control over Terrasen through thin claims of inheritance.” Chaol had warned him to watch his mouth when speaking to his father, but when he spoke to him like that, as if he were a pampered idiot ...

“Even if you offered them self-rule, those rebels would mount your head on a pike before the gates of Orynth.”

“Perhaps alongside all my illegitimate heirs, if I’m so fortunate.”

The king gave him a poisonous smile. “My silver-tongued son.” They watched each other in silence before Dorian spoke again.

“Perhaps you should consider our difficulty in getting past Wendlyn’s naval defenses to be a sign that you should stop playing at being a god.”

“Playing?” The king smiled, his crooked teeth glowing yellow in the firelight. “I am not playing. And this is not a game.” Dorian’s shoulders stiffened. “Though she may look pleasant, she’s still a witch. You are to keep your distance, understood?”

“Who? The assassin?”

“She’s dangerous, boy, even if you’re sponsoring her. She wants one thing and one thing only—don’t think she won’t use you to get it. If you court her, the consequences will not be pleasant. Not from her, and not from me.”

“And if I condescend to associate with her, what would you do, father? Throw me in the mines as well?”

His father was upon him before Dorian could brace himself. The back of the king’s hand connected with Dorian’s cheek, and the prince staggered, but regained his countenance. His face throbbed, stinging so badly he fought to keep his eyes from watering. “Son or no son,” the king snarled, “I am still your king. You will obey me, Dorian Havilliard, or you will pay. I’ll have no more of your questioning.”

Knowing he’d only cause more trouble for himself if he stayed, the Crown Prince of Adarlan bowed silently and left his father, eyes gleaming with barely controlled anger.

CHAPTER 8

Celaena walked down a marble hall, her dress flowing behind in a purple and white wave. Chaol strode beside her, a hand on the eagle-shaped pommel of his sword.

“Is there anything interesting down this hall?”

“What else would you care to see? We’ve already seen all three gardens, the ballrooms, the historical rooms, and the nicest views offered from the stone castle. If you refuse to go into the glass castle, there’s nothing else to see.”

She crossed her arms. She’d managed to convince him to give her a tour under the pretense of extreme boredom—when, in fact, she’d used every moment to plot a dozen escape routes from her room. The castle was old, and most of its halls and stairwells went nowhere; escaping would require some thought. But with the competition beginning tomorrow, what else did she have to do? And what better way to prepare for a potential disaster?

“I don’t understand why you refuse to enter the glass addition,” he went on. “There’s no difference between the interiors—you wouldn’t even know that you were inside it unless someone told you or you looked out the window.”

“Only an idiot would walk in a house made of glass.”

“It’s as sturdy as steel and stone.”

“Yes, until someone just a bit too heavy enters and it comes crashing down.”

“That’s impossible.”

The thought of standing on floors of glass made her queasy. “Is there no menagerie or library that we could see?” They passed by a set of closed doors. The sounds of lilting speech reached them, along with the gentle

strumming of a harp. “What’s in there?”

“The queen’s court.” He grabbed her arm and pulled her down the hall.

“Queen Georgina?” Didn’t he have any idea what information he was giving away? Perhaps he honestly thought she wasn’t a threat. She hid her scowl.

“Yes, Queen Georgina Havilliard.”

“Is the young prince at home?”

“Hollin? He’s at school.”

“And is he as handsome as his older brother?” Celaena smirked as Chaol tensed.

It was well known that the ten-year-old prince was rotten and spoiled, inside and out, and she remembered the scandal that had erupted a few months before her capture. Hollin Havilliard, upon finding his porridge burnt, had beaten one of his servants so badly that there was no possibility of it being concealed. The woman’s family had been paid off, and the young prince shipped to school in the mountains. Of course everyone knew. Queen Georgina had refused to hold court for a month.

“Hollin will grow into his lineage,” Chaol grumbled. There was a bounce to her step as Celaena walked on, the court fading away behind them. They were silent for a few minutes before an explosion sounded nearby, then another.

“What is that awful noise?” Celaena said. The captain led her through a set of glass doors, and he pointed up as they entered into a garden.

“The clock tower,” he said, his bronze eyes shining with amusement, as the clock finished its war cry. She’d never heard bells like that.

From the garden sprouted a tower made of inky black stone. Two gargoyles, wings spread for flight, perched on each of the four clock faces, soundlessly roaring at those beneath. “What a horrible thing,” she whispered. The numbers were like war paint on the white face of the clock, the hands like swords as they slashed across the pearly surface.

“As a child, I wouldn’t go near it,” Chaol admitted.

“You’d see something like this before the Gates of Wyrd—not in a garden. How old is it?”

“The king had it built around Dorian’s birth.”

“This king?” Chaol nodded. “Why would he build such a wretched thing?”

“Come on,” he said, turning as he ignored her question. “Let’s go.”

Celaena examined the clock for a second more. The thick, clawed finger of a gargoyle pointed at her. She could have sworn that its jaws had widened. As she made to follow Chaol, she noticed a tile on the paved pathway. “What’s this?”

He stopped. “What’s what?”

She pointed at the mark engraved on the slate. It was a circle with a vertical line through the middle that extended beyond the circumference. Both ends of the line were hooked, one directing downward, the other up. “What is this mark on the path here?”

He walked around until he stood beside her. “I have no idea.”

Celaena examined the gargoyle again. “He’s pointing at it. What does the symbol mean?”

“It means you’re wasting my time,” he said. “It’s probably some sort of decorative sundial.”

“Are there other marks?”

“If you looked, I’m sure you’d find them.” She allowed herself to be dragged from the garden, away from the shadow of the clock tower and into the marble halls of the castle. Try as she might, and walk as far as they did, she couldn’t shake the feeling that those bulging eyes were still upon her.

They continued past the kitchen quarters, which were a mess of shouting, clouds of flour, and surging fires. Once beyond, they entered a long hallway, empty and silent save for their footsteps. Celaena suddenly halted. “What,” she breathed, “is *that*?” She pointed at the twenty-foot oak doors, her eyes widening at the dragons that grew out of either side of the stone wall. Four-legged dragons—not vicious, bipedal wyverns like those on the royal seal.

“The library.” The two words were like a shot of lightning.

“The ...” She looked at the claw-shaped iron handles. “Can we—may we go in?”

The Captain of the Guard opened the doors reluctantly, the strong muscles of his back shifting as he pushed hard against the worn oak. Compared to the sunlit hallway, the interior that stretched beyond them seemed formidably dark, but as she stepped inside, candelabras came into view, along with black-and-white marble floors, large mahogany tables with red velvet chairs, a slumbering fire, mezzanines, bridges, ladders, railings, and then books—books and books and books.

She'd entered a city made entirely of leather and paper. Celaena put a hand against her heart. Escape routes be damned. "I've never seen—how many volumes are there?"

Chaol shrugged. "The last time anyone bothered to count, it was a million. But that was two hundred years ago. I'd say maybe more than that, especially given the legends that a second library lies deep beneath, in catacombs and tunnels."

"Over a million? A million *books*?" Her heart leapt and danced, and she cracked a smile. "I'd die before I even got through half of that!"

"You like to read?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't you?" Not waiting for an answer, she moved farther into the library, the train of her gown sweeping across the floor. She neared a shelf and looked at the titles. She recognized none of them.

Grinning, she whirled and moved through the main floor, running a hand across the dusty books. "I didn't know assassins liked to read," Chaol called. If she were to die now, it would be in complete bliss. "You said you were from Terrasen; did you ever visit the Great Library of Orynth? They say it's twice the size of this—and that it used to hold all the knowledge of the world."

She turned from the stack she was currently studying. "Yes," she admitted. "When I was very young. Though they wouldn't let me explore—the Master Scholars were too afraid I'd ruin some valuable manuscript." She hadn't returned to the Great Library since—and wondered how many of those invaluable works had been ordered destroyed by the King of Adarlan when he outlawed magic. From the way Chaol said "used to" with a tinge of sadness, she assumed much had been lost. Though part of her savored the hope that those Master Scholars had smuggled many of the priceless books to safety—that when the royal family had been slaughtered and the King of Adarlan invaded, those stuffy old men had had the good sense to start hiding two thousand years' worth of ideas and learning.

A dead, empty space opened inside her. Needing to change the subject, she asked, "Why are none of your folk here?"

"Guards are of no use in a library." Oh, how wrong he was! Libraries were full of ideas—perhaps the most dangerous and powerful of all weapons.

She said, "I was referring to your noble companions."

He leaned against a table, a hand still on his sword. At least one of them remembered that they were alone together in the library. “Reading is a bit out of fashion, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, well—more for me to read, then.”

“Read? These belong to the king.”

“It’s a library, isn’t it?”

“It’s the king’s property, and you aren’t of noble blood. You need permission from either him or the prince.”

“I highly doubt either would notice the loss of a few books.”

Chaol sighed. “It’s late. I’m hungry.”

“So?” she said. He growled and practically dragged her from the library.

After a solitary supper, over which she contemplated all of her planned escape routes and how she might make more weapons for herself, Celaena paced through her rooms. Where were the other competitors being kept? Did they have access to books, if they wanted?

Celaena slumped into a chair. She was tired, but the sun had barely set. Instead of reading, she could perhaps use the pianoforte, but ... well, it had been a while, and she wasn’t sure she could endure the sound of her own stumbling, clumsy playing. She traced a finger over a splotch of fuchsia silk on her dress. All those books, with no one to read them.

An idea flashed, and she jumped to her feet, only to sit at the desk and grab a piece of parchment. If Captain Westfall insisted on protocol, then she’d give it to him in abundance. She dipped the glass pen in a pot of ink and held it over the paper.

How odd it felt to hold a pen! She traced the letters in the air. It was impossible that she’d forgotten how to write. Her fingers moved awkwardly as the pen touched the paper, but she carefully wrote her name, then the alphabet, three times. The letters were uneven, but she could do it. She pulled out another piece of paper and began to write.

Your Highness—

It has come to my attention that your library isn’t a library, but rather a personal collection for only you and your esteemed father to enjoy. As many of your million books seem to be present and underused, I must beg you to grant me permission to borrow a few

so that they might receive the attention they deserve. Since I am deprived of company and entertainment, this act of kindness is the least someone of your importance could deign to bestow upon a lowly, miserable wretch such as I.

***Yours most truly,
Celaena Sardothien***

Celaena beamed at her note and handed it to the nicest-looking servant she could find, with specific instructions to give it immediately to the Crown Prince. When the woman returned half an hour later with a stack of books piled in her arms, Celaena laughed as she swiped the note that crowned the column of leather.

My Most True Assassin,

Enclosed are seven books from my personal library that I have recently read and enjoyed immensely. You are, of course, free to read as many of the books in the castle library as you wish, but I command you to read these first so that we might discuss them. I promise they are not dull, for I am not one inclined to sit through pages of nonsense and bloated speech, though perhaps you enjoy works and authors who think very highly of themselves.

Most affectionately,
Dorian Havilliard

Celaena laughed again and took the books from the woman's arms, thanking her for her trouble. She walked into her bedroom, shutting the door with a backward kick, and dropped onto the bed, scattering the books across the crimson surface. She didn't recognize any of the titles, though one author was familiar. Choosing the book that seemed the most interesting, Celaena flipped onto her back and began to read.



Celaena awoke the next morning to the wretched booming of the clock tower. Half-asleep, she counted the chimes. Noon. She sat up. Where was Chaol? And, more importantly, what about the competition? Wasn't it supposed to have started today?

She leapt from bed and stalked through her chambers, half expecting to find him sitting in a chair, a hand upon his sword. He wasn't there. She popped her head into the hallway, but the four guards only reached for their weapons. She paced onto the balcony, the crossbows of five guards beneath clicking into position, and put her hands on her hips as she surveyed the autumn day.

The trees in the garden were gold and brown, half of the leaves already dead on the earth. Yet the day was so warm it could have passed for summer. Celaena took a seat on the rail, and waved at the guards with their crossbows aimed at her. Out across Rifthold, she could make out the sails of ships, and the wagons and people streaming through the streets. The green roofs of the city glowed emerald in the sun.

She looked again at the five guards beneath the balcony. They stared right back at her, and when they slowly lowered their crossbows, she grinned. She could knock them senseless with a few heavy books.

A sound flitted through the garden, and some of the guards glanced toward the source. Three women appeared from around a nearby hedge, clustered in conversation.

Most of the talk Celaena had overheard yesterday was immensely dull, and she didn't expect much as the women neared. They wore fine dresses, though the one in the middle—the raven-haired one—wore the finest. The red skirts were the size of a tent, and her bodice was so tightly bound that Celaena wondered if her waist were any more than sixteen inches. The other women were blondes dressed in pale blue, their matching gowns suggesting their rank as ladies-in-waiting. Celaena backed away from the ledge as they stopped at the nearby fountain.

From her place at the back of the balcony, Celaena could still see as the woman in red brushed a hand down the front of her skirts. "I should have worn my white dress," she said loudly enough for everyone in Rifthold to hear. "Dorian likes white." She adjusted a pleat in her skirt. "But I'll wager that everyone's wearing white."

"Shall we go change, milady?" asked one of the blondes.

"No," snapped the woman. "This dress is fine. Old and shabby as it is."

"But—" said the other blonde, then stopped as her mistress's head whipped around. Celaena approached the rail again and peered over. The dress hardly looked old.

"It won't take long for Dorian to ask me for a private audience."

Celaena now leaned over the edge of the balcony. The guards watched the three girls, rapt for another reason entirely. “Though I worry how much Perrington’s courting will interfere; but I *do* adore the man for inviting me to Rifthold. My mother must be writhing in her grave!” She paused, and then said: “I wonder who she is.”

“Your mother, milady?”

“The girl the prince brought into Rifthold. I heard he traveled all over Erilea to find her, and that she rode into the city on the Captain of the Guard’s horse. I’ve heard nothing else about her. Not even her name.” The two women lagged behind their mistress and exchanged exasperated looks that informed the assassin this conversation had been held many times before. “I don’t need to worry,” the woman mused. “The prince’s harlot won’t be well-received.”

His what?

The ladies in waiting stopped beneath the balcony, batting their eyelashes at the guards. “I need my pipe,” the woman murmured, rubbing her temples. “I feel a headache coming on.” Celaena’s brows rose. “Regardless,” the woman continued, striding away, “I shall have to watch my back. I might even have to—”

CRASH!

The women screamed, the guards whirled with their crossbows pointed, and Celaena looked skyward as she retreated from the rail and into the shadows of the balcony doorway. The flowerpot had missed. This time.

The woman cursed so colorfully that Celaena clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. The servants cooed, wiping mud from the woman’s skirts and suede shoes. “Be quiet!” the woman hissed. The guards, wisely, didn’t let their amusement show. “Be quiet and let’s go!”

The women hurried off as the prince’s harlot strode into her chambers and called for her servants to dress her in the finest gown they could find.

CHAPTER 9

Celaena stood before the rosewood mirror, smiling.

She ran a hand down her gown. Sea-foam white lace bloomed from the sweeping neckline, washing upon her breast from the powder-green ocean of silk that made up the dress. A red sash covered the waist, forming an inverted peak that separated the bodice from the explosion of skirts beneath. Patterns of clear green beads were embroidered in whorls and vines across the whole of it, and bone-colored stitching stretched along the ribs. Tucked inside her bodice was the small makeshift hairpin dagger, though it poked mercilessly at her chest. She lifted her hands to touch her curled and pinned hair.

She didn't know what she planned to do now that she was dressed, especially if she'd probably have to change before the competition started, but—

Skirts rustled from the doorway, and Celaena raised her eyes in the reflection to see Philippa enter behind her. The assassin tried not to preen—and failed miserably. “It’s such a pity you are who you are,” Philippa said, turning Celaena to face her. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you managed to ensnare some lord into marriage. Maybe even His Highness, if you were charming enough.” She adjusted the green folds of Celaena’s dress before kneeling down to brush the assassin’s ruby-colored slippers.

“Well, it seems rumor has already suggested that. I overheard a girl saying that the Crown Prince brought me here to woo me. I thought the entire court knew about this stupid competition.”

Philippa rose. “Whatever the rumors are, it’ll all be forgotten in a week—just you wait. Let him find a new woman he likes and you’ll vanish from the whisperings of the court.” Celaena straightened as Philippa fixed a stray curl. “Oh, it’s not meant as an offense, poppet. Beautiful ladies are

always associated with the Crown Prince—you should be flattered that you're attractive enough to be considered his lover.”

“I'd rather not be seen that way at all.”

“Better than as an assassin, I'd wager.”

She looked at Philippa and then laughed.

Philippa shook her head. “Your face is much more pretty when you smile. Girlish, even. Far better than that frown you always have.”

“Yes,” Celaena admitted, “you might be right.” She made to sit down upon the mauve ottoman.

“Ah!” Philippa said, and Celaena froze, standing upright. “You'll wrinkle the fabric.”

“But my feet hurt in these shoes.” She frowned pitifully. “You can't intend for me to stand all day? Even through my meals?”

“Only until someone tells me how lovely you look.”

“No one knows you're my servant.”

“Oh, they know I've been assigned to the *lover* the prince brought to Rifthold.”

Celaena chewed on her lip. *Was* it a good thing that no one knew who she truly was? What would her competition think? Perhaps a tunic and pants would have been better.

Celaena reached to move a curl that itched her cheek, and Philippa batted her hand away. “You'll ruin your hair.”

The doors to her apartment slammed open, followed by an already familiar snarling and stomping about. She watched in the mirror as Chaol appeared in the doorway, panting. Philippa curtsied.

“You,” he began, then stopped as Celaena faced him. His brows lowered as his eyes traveled along her body. His head cocked, and he opened his mouth as if to say something, but only shook his head and scowled. “Upstairs. Now.”

She curtsied, looking up at him beneath lowered lashes. “Where, pray tell, are we going?”

“Oh, don't simper at me.” He grabbed her by the arm, guiding her out of the room.

“Captain Westfall!” Philippa scolded. “She'll trip on her dress. At least let her hold her skirts.”

She actually did trip on her dress, and her shoes cut into her heels quite terribly, but he would hear none of her objections as he dragged her into

the hall. She smiled at the guards outside her door, and her smile burst into a grin at their exchanged approving glances. The captain's grip tightened until it hurt. "Hurry," he said. "We can't be late."

"Perhaps if you'd given me ample warning, I'd have dressed earlier and you wouldn't have to drag me!" It was hard to breathe with the corset crushing her ribs. As they hurried up a long staircase, she raised a hand to her hair to ensure that it hadn't fallen out.

"My mind was elsewhere; you were fortunate to be dressed, though I wish you'd worn something less ... frilly to see the king."

"The king?" She was thankful that she hadn't yet eaten.

"Yes, the king. Did you think you wouldn't see him? The Crown Prince told you the competition was to start today—this meeting will mark the official beginning. The real work begins tomorrow."

Her arms became heavy and she forgot all about her aching feet and crushed ribs. In the garden, the queer, off-kilter clock tower began chiming the hour. They reached the top of the staircase and rushed down a long hallway. She couldn't breathe.

Nauseated, she looked out the windows that lined the passage. The earth was far below—far, far below. They were in the glass addition. She didn't want to be there. She couldn't be in the glass castle. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because he just decided to see you now. He'd originally said this evening. Hopefully, the other Champions will be later than us."

She felt like fainting. The king.

"When you enter," he said over his shoulder, "stop where I stop. Bow—low. When you raise your head, keep it high and stand straight. Don't look the king in the eye, don't answer anything without 'Your Majesty' attached, and do *not*, under any circumstances, talk back. He'll have you hanged if you don't please him."

She had a terrible headache around her left temple. Everything was sickly and frail. They were so high up, so dangerously high ... Chaol stopped before rounding a corner. "You're pale."

She had difficulty focusing on his face as she breathed in and out, in and out. She hated corsets. She hated the king. She hated glass castles.

The days surrounding her capture and sentencing had been like a fever dream, but she could perfectly visualize her trial—the dark wood of the walls, the smoothness of the chair beneath her, the way her injuries still

ached from the capture, and the terrible silence that had overtaken her body and soul. She had glanced at the king—only once. It was enough to make her reckless, to wish for any punishment that would take her far from him—even a quick death.

“Celaena.” She blinked, her cheeks burning. Chaol’s features softened. “He’s just a man. But a man you should treat with the respect his rank demands.” He began walking with her again, slower. “This meeting is only to remind you and the other Champions of why you’re here, and what you’re to do, and what you stand to gain. You’re not on trial. You will not be tested today.” They entered a long hallway, and she spied four guards posted before large glass doors at the other end. “Celaena.” He stopped a few feet from the guards. His eyes were rich, molten brown.

“Yes?” Her heartbeat steadied.

“You look rather pretty today,” was all he said before the doors opened and they walked forward. Celaena raised her chin as they entered the crowded room.

CHAPTER 10

She saw the floor first. Red marble, its white veins illuminated in the light of the sun, which slowly vanished as the opaque glass doors groaned shut. Chandeliers and torches hung all around. Her eyes darted from one side of the large, crowded chamber to the next. There were no windows, just a wall of glass looking out into nothing but sky. No escape, save for the door behind her.

To her left, a fireplace occupied most of the wall, and as Chaol led her farther into the room, Celaena tried not to stare at the thing. It was monstrous, shaped like a roaring, fanged mouth, a blazing fire burning within. There was something greenish about the flame, something that made her spine straighten.

The captain stopped in the open space before the throne, and Celaena halted with him. He didn't seem to notice their ominous surroundings, or if he did, he hid it far better. She pulled her gaze forward, taking in the crowd that filled the room. Stiffly, knowing that many eyes were upon her, Celaena dropped into a low bow, her skirts whispering.

She found her legs weak when Chaol put a hand on her back to motion her to rise. He led her from the center of the room, where they took up a spot beside Dorian Havilliard. The absence of dirt and three weeks' worth of hard travel had a noticeable effect on his smooth face. He wore a red-and-gold jacket, his black hair brushed and shining. An expression of surprise crossed his features when he beheld her in her finery, but it quickly melted into a wry grin as he looked toward his father. She might have returned it, had she not been focusing so much on keeping her hands from shaking.

The king spoke at last. "Now that you've all finally bothered to arrive, perhaps we can begin."

It was a voice she had heard before, deep and raspy. It made her bones crack and splinter, made her feel the astonishing cold of a winter long since past. Her eyes only dared to venture as far as his chest. It was broad, not entirely with muscle, and seemed tightly restrained within a crimson and black tunic. A cape of white fur hung from his shoulders, and a sword was sheathed at his side. Atop its hilt perched a wyvern, open-mouthed and screaming. None that came before that broad blade lived to see another day. She knew that sword.

Nothing was its name.

“You have all been retrieved from across Erilea for the purpose of serving your country.”

It was easy enough to tell the nobility from her competitors. Old and wrinkled, each nobleman wore fine clothes and decorative swords. Beside each of them stood a man—some tall and slender, some burly, some average, all of them surrounded by at least three vigilant guards.

Twenty-three men stood between her and freedom. Most of them had enough bulk to warrant a double take, but when she scanned their faces—often scarred, pockmarked, or just plain hideous—there was no spark behind their eyes, no shining kernel of cleverness. They’d been picked for muscles, not brains. Three of them were actually in chains. Were they that dangerous?

A few of them met her gaze, and she stared right back, wondering if they thought she was a competitor or just a court lady. Most of the competitors’ attention jumped right over her. She gritted her teeth. The dress had been a mistake. Why had Chaol not told her about the meeting *yesterday*?

A moderately handsome black-haired young man stared at her, though, and she willed her face into neutrality while his gray eyes took her in. He was tall and lean, but not gangly, and he inclined his head to her. She studied him for a moment longer, from the way he balanced his weight to his left, to what feature he first noticed when his eyes moved on and he examined the other competitors.

One was a gargantuan man standing beside Duke Perrington, who seemed crafted of muscle and steel—and took pains to display it with his sleeveless armor. The man’s arms looked capable of crushing a horse’s skull. It wasn’t that he was ugly—in fact, his tanned face was rather pleasant, but there was something nasty about his demeanor, about his

obsidian eyes as they shifted and met her own. His large, white teeth gleamed.

The king spoke. “You are each competing for the title of my Champion—my right-hand sword in a world brimming with enemies.”

A flicker of shame sparked within her. What was “Champion” but a dressed-up name for murderer? Could she actually stomach working for him? She swallowed. She had to. She had no other choice.

“Over the next thirteen weeks, you shall each dwell and compete in my home. You will train every day, and be tested once a week—a test during which one of you will be eliminated.” Celaena did the calculations. There were twenty-four of them—and only thirteen weeks. As if sensing her question, the king said, “These tests will not be easy, nor will your training. Some of you might die in the process. We will add additional elimination tests as we see fit. And if you fall behind, if you fail, if you displease me, you will be packed off to whatever dark hole you came from.

“The week after Yulemas, the four remaining Champions will face each other in a duel to win the title. Until then, while my court is aware that some sort of contest is being held among my closest friends and advisors”—he waved a huge, scarred hand to encompass the room—“you will keep your business private. Any wrongdoing on your part, and I’ll stake you to the front gates.”

By accident, her gaze slipped onto the king’s face, and she found his dark eyes staring into hers. The king smirked. Her heart threw itself backward and clung to the bars of her ribcage.

Murderer.

He should be hanging from the gallows. He had killed many more than she—people undeserving and defenseless. He’d destroyed cultures, destroyed invaluable knowledge, destroyed so much of what had once been bright and good. His people should revolt. Erilea should revolt—the way those few rebels had dared to do. Celaena struggled to maintain his gaze. She couldn’t retreat.

“Is that understood?” the king asked, still staring at her.

Her head was heavy as she nodded. She had only until Yulemas to beat them all. One test a week—perhaps more.

“Speak!” the king bellowed to the room, and she tried not to flinch. “Are you not grateful for this opportunity? Do you not wish to give me

your thanks and allegiance?”

She bowed her head and stared at his feet. “Thank you, Your Majesty. I am most appreciative,” she murmured, the sound blending in with the words of the other Champions.

The king put a hand upon Nothung’s hilt. “This should be an interesting thirteen weeks.” She could feel his attention still upon her face, and she ground her teeth. “Prove trustworthy, become my Champion, and wealth and glory will be yours eternal.”

Only thirteen weeks to win her freedom.

“I am to depart next week for my own purposes. I will not return until Yulemas. But don’t think I won’t be able to give the command to execute any of you, should I hear word of any trouble, or *accidents*.” The Champions nodded once more.

“If we’re finished, I’m afraid I must take my leave,” interrupted Dorian from beside her, and her head snapped up at the sound of his voice—and his impertinence in interrupting his father. He bowed to his father, and nodded to the mute councilors. The king waved his son away, not even bothering to look at him. Dorian winked at Chaol before walking from the room.

“If there are no questions,” the king said to the Champions and their sponsors in a tone that suggested that asking questions would only guarantee a trip to the gallows, “then you have my leave. Do not forget that you are here to honor me—and my empire. Be gone, all of you.”

Celaena and Chaol didn’t speak as they strode down the hallway, quickly moving from the throng of competitors and their sponsors, who lingered to speak with one another—and size each other up. With every step away from the king, steadying warmth returned. It wasn’t until they rounded a corner that Chaol let out a deep breath and removed his hand from her back.

“Well, you managed to keep your mouth shut—for once,” he said.

“But how convincing she was in her nodding and bowing!” said a cheerful voice. It was Dorian, leaning against a wall.

“What are you doing?” Chaol asked.

Dorian pushed off the wall. “Why, waiting for you, of course.”

“We’re to dine this evening,” Chaol said.

“I was speaking to my Champion,” Dorian said with a roguish wink. Remembering how he’d smiled at the court lady the day of their arrival,

she kept her gaze ahead. The Crown Prince took up a place safely beside Chaol as they walked on. “I apologize for my father’s gruffness.” She stared down the hall, at the servants who bowed to Dorian. He ignored them.

“By the Wyrd!” Dorian laughed. “He’s trained you well already!” He nudged Chaol with his elbow. “From the way you two are blatantly ignoring me, I’d say she could pass for your sister! Though you don’t really look like each other—it would be hard to pass off someone so pretty as *your* sister.”

Celaena was unable to keep a hint of a smile from her lips. Both she and the prince had grown up under strict, unforgiving fathers—well, father figure in her case. Arobynn had never replaced the father she’d lost, nor had he ever tried to. But at least Arobynn had an excuse for being equal parts tyrannical and doting. Why had the King of Adarlan let his son become anything but an identical copy of himself?

“There!” Dorian said. “A reaction—thank the gods I’ve amused her.” He glanced behind them, making sure there was no one there, before his voice quieted. “I don’t think Chaol told you our plan before the meeting—risky, on all of our parts.”

“What plan?” She traced a finger along the beading on her skirts, watching it shimmer in the afternoon light.

“For your identity. Which you should keep quiet about; your competitors might know a thing or two about Adarlan’s Assassin and use it against you.”

Fair enough, even if it had taken them weeks to bother to fill her in. “And who, exactly, am I to be, if not a ruthless killer?”

“To everyone in this castle,” Dorian said, “your name is Lillian Gordaina. Your mother is dead and your father is a wealthy merchant from Bellhaven. You are the sole heir to his fortune. However, you have a dark secret: you spend your nights as a jewel thief. I met you this summer after you tried to rob me while I was vacationing in Bellhaven, and I saw your potential then. But your father discovered your nightly fun, and removed you from the lure of the city to a town near Endovier. When my father decided to have this competition, I journeyed to find you, and brought you here as my Champion. You can fill in the gaps yourself.”

She raised her brows. “Really? *A jewel thief?*”

Chaol snorted, but Dorian went on. “It’s rather charming, don’t you

think?” When she didn’t respond, the prince asked, “Do you find my home to your liking?”

“It’s very fine indeed,” she said dully.

“ ‘Very fine indeed’? Maybe I should move my Champion to even *larger* chambers.”

“If it pleases you.”

Dorian chuckled. “I’m glad to find that seeing your competition hasn’t damaged that swagger of yours. What’d you make of Cain?”

She knew whom he meant. “Perhaps you should start feeding me whatever Perrington is giving him.” When Dorian continued staring at her, she rolled her eyes. “Men of his size usually aren’t very fast, or very nimble. He could knock me out in one punch, probably, but he’d have to be swift enough to catch me.” She gave Chaol a quick glance, daring him to challenge her claim, but Dorian answered.

“Good. I thought so. And what of the others? Any potential rivals? Some of the Champions have rather gruesome reputations.”

“Everyone else looks pathetic,” she lied.

The prince’s smile grew. “I bet they won’t expect to be trounced by a beautiful lady.”

This was all a game to him, wasn’t it? Before Celaena could ask, someone curtsied in the middle of their path. “Your Highness! What a surprise!” The voice was high, but smooth and calculated. It was the woman from the garden. She’d changed—she now wore a gown of white and gold that, despite herself, Celaena greatly admired. She was unfairly stunning.

And Celaena was willing to bet a fortune that this was anything *but* a surprise—the woman had probably been waiting here for a while.

“Lady Kaltain,” Dorian said tersely, his body tensing.

“I’ve just come from Her Majesty’s side,” said Kaltain, putting her back to Celaena. The assassin might have bothered to care about the slight if she had any interest in courtiers. “Her Majesty wishes to see Your Highness. Of course, I informed Her Majesty that Your Highness was in a meeting and could not be—”

“Lady Kaltain,” interrupted Dorian, “I’m afraid you haven’t been introduced to my friend.” Celaena could have sworn the young woman bristled. “Allow me to present the Lady Lillian Gordaina. Lady Lillian, meet Lady Kaltain Rompier.”

Celaena curtsied, restraining the urge to keep walking; if she had to deal with too much courtly nonsense, she might be better off back in Endovier. Kaltain bowed, the gold streaks in her dress glistening in the sunlight.

“Lady Lillian is from Bellhaven—she arrived just yesterday.”

The woman studied Celaena from beneath dark, shaped eyebrows. “And how long will you be staying with us?”

“Only a few years,” Dorian said with a sigh.

“ ‘Only’! Why, Your Highness! How droll! That is a very long stretch of time!” Celaena studied Kaltain’s narrow, narrow waist. Was it really that small? Or could she barely breathe in her corset?

She caught a glance exchanged between the two men—exasperation, annoyance, condescension. “The Lady Lillian and Captain Westfall are very close companions,” Dorian said dramatically. To Celaena’s delight, Chaol blushed. “It will feel short for them, I assure you.”

“And for you, Your Highness?” Kaltain said coyly. A concealed edge lingered beneath her voice.

Mischief coiled and sprang within her, but Dorian answered. “I suppose,” he drawled, turning those brilliant blue eyes on Celaena, “that it *will* be difficult for Lady Lillian and I as well. Perhaps more so.”

Kaltain snapped her attention to Celaena. “Wherever did you find that dress?” she purred. “It’s extraordinary.”

“I had it made for her,” Dorian said casually, picking at his nails. The assassin and the prince glanced at each other, their blue eyes reflecting the same intent. At least they had *one* common enemy. “It *does* look extraordinary on her, doesn’t it?”

Kaltain’s lips pursed for a moment, but then bloomed into a full smile. “Simply stunning. Though such pale green tends to wash out women of pallid skin.”

“The Lady Lillian’s paleness was a source of pride for her father. It makes her rather unusual.” Dorian looked to Chaol, who failed in his attempt to not appear incredulous. “Don’t you agree, Captain Westfall?”

“Agree about what?” he snapped.

“How *unusual* our Lady Lillian is!”

“Shame on you, Your Highness!” Celaena chided, concealing her wicked amusement beneath a giggle. “I *pale* in comparison to Lady Kaltain’s fine features.”

Kaltain shook her head, but looked at Dorian as she spoke. “You are

too kind.”

Dorian shifted on his feet. “Well, I’ve dallied enough. I must attend to my mother.” He bowed to Kaltain, then to Chaol. Finally, he faced Celaena. She watched with raised brows as he lifted her hand to his lips. His mouth was soft and smooth upon her skin, and the kiss sent a red-hot line of fire up through her arm that singed her cheeks. She fought against the urge to step back. Or smack him. “Until our next meeting, Lady Lillian,” he said with a charming smile. She would have highly enjoyed seeing Kaltain’s face, but she dipped into a curtsy.

“We must be on our way as well,” Chaol said as Dorian strode off, whistling to himself, his hands in his pockets. “May we escort you anywhere?” It was an insincere offer.

“No,” Kaltain said flatly, the facade falling. “I’m meeting with His Grace, Duke Perrington. I do hope we’ll see more of each other, Lady Lillian,” she said, watching her with a keenness that would make any assassin proud. “We must be friends, you and I.”

“Of course,” Celaena said. Kaltain swept past them, the skirts of her dress floating in the air around her. They resumed walking, waiting until her footsteps had vanished from their ears before speaking. “Enjoyed that, did you?” Chaol growled.

“Immensely.” Celaena patted Chaol’s arm as she took it in her own. “Now you must pretend that you *like* me, or else everything will be ruined.”

“You and the Crown Prince share the same sense of humor, it seems.”

“Perhaps he and I will become dear friends, and you will be left to rot.”

“Dorian is more inclined to associate with ladies of better breeding and beauty.” She whipped her head to look at him. He smiled. “How vain you are.”

She glared. “I hate women like that. They’re so desperate for the attention of men that they’d willingly betray and harm members of their own sex. And we claim men cannot think with their brains! At least men are direct about it.”

“They say that her father is as rich as a king,” Chaol said. “I suppose that’s part of why Perrington is so infatuated. She arrived here in a litter bigger than most peasant huts; it was carried here from her home. A distance of almost two hundred miles.”

“What debauchery.”

“I pity her servants.”

“I pity her father!” They chuckled, and he lifted the arm linked with hers a bit higher. She nodded to the guards outside her chambers as they stopped. She faced Chaol. “Are you eating lunch? I’m starved.”

He glanced at the guards, his smile fading. “I have important work to do. Like prepare a company of men for the king to bring with him on his journey.”

She opened the door, but looked at him. The tiny freckle upon his cheek moved upward as a smile spread once more.

“What?” she asked. Something smelled delicious inside her chambers, and her stomach grumbled.

Chaol shook his head. “Adarlan’s Assassin,” he chuckled, and began walking back down the hall. “You should rest,” he called over his shoulder. “The competition *actually* begins tomorrow. And even if you’re as fantastic as you claim to be, you’re going to need every moment of sleep you can get.”

Though she rolled her eyes and slammed the door, Celaena found herself humming throughout her meal.

CHAPTER 11

Celaena felt as if she'd barely closed her eyes when a hand jabbed her side. She groaned, wincing as the drapes were thrown back to welcome the morning sun.

“Wake up.” Not surprisingly, it was Chaol.

She shimmied beneath the blankets, pulling them over her head, but he grabbed the covers and threw them to the floor. Her nightgown was wrapped around her thighs. Celaena shivered.

“It’s cold,” she moaned, holding her knees to her body. She didn’t care that she had only a few months to beat the other Champions—she needed *sleep*. It would have been nice if the Crown Prince had considered springing her from Endovier earlier so she could have *some* time to regain her strength; how long had he known about this competition, anyway?

“Get up.” Chaol ripped the pillows from beneath her head. “Now you’re wasting my time.” If he noticed how much skin she was showing, he didn’t react.

Grumbling, Celaena slithered to the edge of the bed, dangling a hand over the edge to touch the floor. “Fetch my slippers,” she mumbled. “The floor’s like ice.”

He growled, but Celaena ignored him as she got to her feet. She staggered and slouched into the dining room, where an enormous breakfast lay on the table. Chaol jerked his chin toward the food. “Eat up. The competition starts in an hour.”

Whatever nerves she felt, she kept them hidden from him as she gave an exaggerated sigh and collapsed into a chair with the grace of a large beast. Celaena scanned the table. Yet again, there were no knives. She stabbed her fork into a piece of sausage.

From the doorway, Chaol asked, “Why, might I ask, are you so tired?”

She gulped down the rest of the pomegranate juice and wiped her mouth on a napkin. “I was up until four reading,” she said. “I sent a letter to your princeling, asking for permission to borrow books from the library. He granted my wish, and sent seven books from his *personal* library that I’m commanded to read.”

Chaol shook his head in disbelief. “It isn’t your place to write to the Crown Prince.”

She gave him a simpering smile and took a bite of ham. “He could have ignored the letter. And besides, I’m his *Champion*. Not everyone feels obligated to be as nasty to me as you do.”

“You’re an assassin.”

“If I say I’m a jewel thief, will you treat me with more courtesy?” She waved a hand. “Don’t answer that.” She spooned porridge into her mouth, found it to be bland, and scooped four heaping mounds of brown sugar into the gray mess.

Would the competitors actually be worthy opponents? Before she could start worrying, she examined his black clothes. “Don’t you ever wear normal clothing?”

“Hurry up,” was all he said. The competition awaited.

Suddenly not hungry, she pushed away her bowl of porridge. “I should get dressed, then.” She turned her head to call for Philippa, but paused. “Just what sort of activities might I expect at the tournament today? So I can dress accordingly, of course.”

“I don’t know—they don’t give us the details until you arrive.” The captain rose and drummed the pommel of his sword before calling to a servant as Celaena walked into her bedroom. Behind her, Chaol spoke to the servant girl. “Dress her in pants and a shirt—something loose, nothing frilly or revealing, and bring a cloak.” The girl disappeared into the dressing room. Celaena followed after her, unceremoniously stripping down to her underclothes and enjoying it far too much when Chaol’s cheeks reddened before he turned away.

A few minutes later, Celaena frowned at herself as she hurried after the captain into the foyer. “I look ridiculous! These pants are absurd, and this shirt is awful.”

“Stop whining. No one gives a damn about your clothes.” He flung open the door to the hall, the guards outside instantly at attention. “Besides, you can take them off at the barracks. I’m sure everyone will be

thrilled to see you in your undergarments.” She swore violently under her breath, pulling her green velvet cloak tight around herself, and trailed after him.

The Captain of the Guard rushed through the castle, still freezing with the early-morning chill, and they soon entered the barracks. Guards in various states of armor saluted them. An open doorway revealed a large mess hall, where many of the guards were just sitting down to breakfast.

Finally, Chaol stopped somewhere on the ground floor. The giant rectangular room they entered was the size of the Grand Ballroom. Lined with pillars that supported a mezzanine, the floor was checkered black-and-white tile, and the floor-to-ceiling glass doors that made up one entire wall were open, the gossamer curtains blowing in the chilly breeze that drifted in from the garden. Most of the twenty-three other Champions were already scattered throughout the room, sparring with what could only be their sponsors’ trainers. Everyone was carefully monitored by guards. None bothered to look at her, save for that slightly handsome young man with the gray eyes, who gave her a half smile before returning to firing arrows at a target across the room with unnerving accuracy. She lifted her chin and surveyed a rack of weapons. “You expect me to use a mace an hour after sunrise?”

Six guards appeared in the doorway behind them, joining the dozens already in the chamber, swords at the ready. “If you attempt anything foolish,” Chaol said quietly, “they’ll be here.”

“I’m just a jewel thief, remember?” She approached the rack. Foolish, foolish decision to leave all those weapons out. Swords, sword-breakers, axes, bows, pikes, hunting daggers, maces, spears, throwing knives, wooden staves ... While she generally preferred the stealth of a dagger, she was familiar with every weapon here. She glanced around the sparring room and hid her grimace. So were most of the competitors, it seemed. As she inspected them, she caught a movement in the corner of her vision.

Cain entered the hall, flanked by two guards and a scarred, burly man who must have been his trainer. She squared her shoulders as Cain strode straight toward her, his thick lips parting in a grin.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice raspy and deep. His dark eyes snaked along her body, then found her face again. “I’d have thought you’d be running home by now.”

She gave him a close-lipped smile. “The fun’s just starting, isn’t it?”

Cain returned her smile and stalked off.

It would have been so, so easy. *So* easy to whirl and grab him by the neck and slam his face into the ground. She didn't even realize she was trembling with rage until Chaol stepped into her line of vision. "Save it for the competition," he said softly, but not weakly.

"I'm going to kill him," she breathed.

"No, you're not. If you want to shut him up, then beat him. He's just a brute from the king's army—don't waste your strength on hating him."

She rolled her eyes. "Thank you *so much* for interfering on my behalf."

"You don't need me to rescue you."

"It still would have been nice."

"You can fight your own battles." He pointed with his sword to the weapons rack. "Pick one." His eyes shone with the challenge as she untied her cloak and tossed it behind her. "Let's see if you can actually back up your swaggering."

She'd shut Cain up—in an unmarked grave for all eternity. But for now ... Now, she'd make Chaol eat his words.

All the weapons were finely made, and glistened in the sunlight. Celaena eliminated her options one by one, seeing each weapon for what sort of damage she might do to the captain's face.

Her heart beat rapidly as she ran a finger across the blades and handles of each. She found herself torn between the hunting daggers and a lovely rapier with an ornate bell-guard. She could cut out his heart from a safe distance with that.

The sword whined as she drew it from the stand and held it in her hands. It was a good blade—strong, smooth, light. They wouldn't let her have a butter knife on her table, but they gave her access to *this*?

Why not wear him down a bit?

Chaol tossed his cape on top of hers, his toned body flexing through the dark threads of his shirt. He drew his sword. "On your guard!" He moved into defensive position, and Celaena looked at him dully.

Who do you think you are? What sort of person says "On your guard"?

"Aren't you first going to show me the *basics*?" she said quietly enough for only him to hear, her sword dangling from one hand. She rubbed the hilt, her fingers contracting on the cool surface. "I was in Endovier for a year, you realize. I could have easily forgotten."

"From the amount of killing that went on in your section of the mines, I

highly doubt you've forgotten a thing."

"That was with a pickax," she said, her smile growing feral. "All I had to do was crack a man's head open or hurl the ax into his stomach." Thankfully, none of the other Champions paid them any heed. "If you consider that sort of gracelessness *equal* to swordsmanship ... what sort of fighting do *you* do, Captain Westfall?" She put a spare hand over her heart and closed her eyes for emphasis.

With a growl, the Captain of the Guard lunged.

But she had been waiting for some time now, and her eyes flew open as soon as his boots scraped against the ground. With a turn of her arm she brought the sword into blocking position, her legs bracing for the impact as steel struck steel. The noise was strange, somehow more painful than receiving the blow, but Celaena thought little of it when he charged again and she met his weapon, parrying with ease. Her arms ached as they were shaken from their slumber, but she continued to deflect and parry.

Swordplay was like dancing—certain steps must be followed or else it would fall apart. Once she heard the beat, it all came rushing back. The other competitors faded away into shadows and sunlight.

"Good," he said through his teeth, blocking her thrust as she forced him to take a defensive stance. Her thighs burned. "Very good," he breathed. He was pretty good himself—better than good, actually. Not that she'd tell him that.

With a clang, the two swords met, and they pressed each other's blades. He was stronger, and she grunted at the force required to hold her sword against his. But, strong as he might be, he was not as quick.

She withdrew and feinted, her feet jabbing and flexing on the floor with birdlike grace. Caught off-guard, he only had time to deflect, his parry lost in his size.

She surged forward, her arm coming down again and again, twisting and turning, loving the smooth ache within her shoulder as the blade slammed against his. She was moving fast—fast like a dancer in a temple ritual, fast like a snake in the Red Desert, fast like water down the side of a mountain.

He kept up, and she allowed him to advance before reclaiming the position. He tried to catch her unawares with a blow to the face, but her anger awoke as her elbow snapped up and deflected, slamming into his fist and forcing it down.

“Something to remember when fighting me, Sardothien,” he panted. The sun caught in his golden-brown eyes.

“Hmm?” she grunted, lunging to deflect his newest attack.

“I don’t lose.” He grinned at her, and before she could comprehend the words, something cut into her feet and—

She had the sickening feeling of falling. She gasped as her spine collided with marble, the rapier flying from her hand. Chaol pointed his blade at her heart. “I win,” he breathed.

She pushed herself onto her elbows. “You had to resort to tripping me. That’s hardly winning at all.”

“I’m not the one with the sword at my heart.”

The sound of clashing weapons and labored breathing filled the air. She flicked her eyes to the other Champions, who were all in the middle of sparring. All, of course, except Cain. He grinned broadly at her, and Celaena bared her teeth.

“You have the skills,” Chaol said, “but some of your moves are still undisciplined.”

She broke her stare with Cain and glared up into Chaol’s face. “That’s never stopped me from killing before,” she spat.

Chaol chuckled at her agitation and pointed his sword at the rack, allowing her to get to her feet. “Pick another—something different. Make it interesting, too. Something that will make me sweat, please.”

“You’ll be sweating when I skin you alive and squish your eyeballs beneath my feet,” she muttered, picking up the rapier.

“That’s the spirit.”

She practically threw the rapier into place, and drew the hunting knives without hesitation.

My dear old friends.

A wicked smile spread across her face.

CHAPTER 12

Just as Celaena was about to launch herself and her knives at the captain, someone stomped a spear on the ground and called the room to attention. She faced the voice and found a stocky, balding man standing beneath the mezzanine.

“Your attention *now*,” the man repeated. Celaena looked to Chaol, who nodded, taking the knives from her as they joined the twenty-three other competitors encircling the man. “I’m Theodus Brullo, Weapons Master and judge of this competition. Of course, our king’s the final judge of you sorry lot, but I’ll be the one determining every day if you’re fit to be his Champion.”

He patted his sword hilt, and Celaena had to admire the beautiful woven gold of the pommel. “I’ve been Weapons Master here for thirty years, and lived in this castle for twenty-five more than that. I’ve trained many a lord and knight—and many a would-be Champion of Adarlan. It will be *very* hard to impress me.”

Beside Celaena, Chaol stood with his shoulders thrown back. It occurred to her that Brullo might have trained the captain. Given how easily Chaol had kept up with her, if Brullo had trained him, then the Weapons Master must live up to his title. She knew better than anyone not to underestimate opponents based on their appearance.

“The king’s already told you all there is to know about this competition,” Brullo said, holding his hands behind his back. “But I figured you lot are itching to know more about each other.” He pointed a stubby finger at Cain. “You. What’s your name, occupation, and where do you hail from? And be honest about it—I know none of you are bakers and candlestick makers.”

Cain’s insufferable grin returned. “Cain, soldier in the king’s army. I

hail from the White Fang Mountains.” Of course he did. She’d heard tales of the brutality of the mountain folk from that region, and seen a few of them up close, seen the fierceness in their eyes. Many of them had rebelled against Adarlan—and most wound up dead. What would his fellow mountain-dwellers say if they could see him now? She gritted her teeth; what would the people of Terrasen say if they could see *her* now?

Brullo, however, either didn’t know or didn’t care, and didn’t even give a nod before he pointed to the man to Cain’s right. Celaena immediately liked him. “And you?”

A slender, tall man with thinning blond hair surveyed the circle and sneered. “Xavier Forul. Master Thief of Melisande.” Master Thief! *That* man? Of course, she realized, his reed-thinness probably aided in slipping into houses. Maybe it wasn’t a bluff.

One by one, the twenty-one other competitors introduced themselves. There were six more seasoned soldiers—all of them thrown out of the army for questionable behavior, which must have been truly questionable, given that Adarlan’s army was notorious for ruthlessness. Then there were the three other thieves—including the dark-haired, gray-eyed Nox Owen, whom she’d actually heard of in passing, and who’d been giving her such charming smiles all morning. The three mercenaries looked ready to boil someone alive, and then there were the two shackled murderers.

As his name suggested, Bill Chastain, the Eye Eater, ate the eyes of his victims. He looked surprisingly plain, with mousy brown hair, tan skin, and average height, though Celaena had trouble not staring at his scar-flecked mouth. The other murderer was Ned Clement, who’d gone for three years under the name Scythe, for the weapon he’d used to torture and hack apart temple priestesses. It was a wonder they hadn’t executed either man, though from their tanned skin, she guessed they’d spent the years since their captures toiling under the sun in Calaculla, the southern sister labor camp to Endovier.

Next came two scarred, silent men who seemed to be cronies of some far-off warlord, and then the five assassins.

She immediately forgot the names of the first four: a gangly, haughty boy; a hulking brute; a disdainful runt of a man; and a sniveling, hawk-nosed prat who claimed he had an affinity for knives. They weren’t even in the Assassins Guild—not that Arobynn Hamel would ever allow them in. Membership required years of training and a more-than-impressive track

record. While these four might be skilled, they lacked the refinement that Arobynn favored in his followers. She'd have to keep an eye on them, but at least they weren't the Silent Assassins from the windswept dunes of the Red Desert. Those would be worthy of her—they'd make her sweat a bit. She'd spent a month training with them one burning summer, and her muscles still ached at the memory of their grueling exercises.

The last assassin, who called himself Grave, made her pause. He was slight and short, with the kind of wicked face that made people quickly look away. He'd entered the room wearing shackles, and only had them removed when his guards—all five of them—gave him a stern warning. Even now, they stood nearby, watching him relentlessly. As he introduced himself, Grave flashed an oily smile, revealing his brown teeth. Her disgust didn't improve when Grave ran an eye over her body. An assassin like that never stopped at just killing. Not if his victim was female. She willed herself to hold his hungry gaze.

"And you?" Brullo said, cutting into her thoughts.

"Lillian Gordaina," she said, holding her chin high. "Jewel thief from Bellhaven."

Some of the men sniggered, and she clenched her teeth. They'd stop their laughing if they knew her true name, if they knew that this "jewel thief" could skin them alive without a knife.

"Fine," Brullo said, waving a hand. "You all have five minutes to put away your weapons and catch your breath. Then we're on a mandatory run to see how fit you are. Those of you who can't run the distance go home, or back to whatever prison your sponsors found you rotting in. Your first Test is in five days; consider us merciful it's not sooner."

With that, everyone scattered, the Champions murmuring to their trainers about whatever competitor they deemed the biggest threat. Cain or Grave, most likely. Certainly not a jewel thief from Bellhaven. Chaol remained beside her, watching the Champions stride off. She hadn't spent eight years building a reputation and a year laboring in Endovier to be disregarded like *this*. "If I have to call myself a jewel thief again—"

Chaol raised his brows. "You'll do what, exactly?"

"Do you know how insulting it is to pretend to be some nobody thief from a small city in Fenharrow?"

He stared her down, quiet for a moment. "Are you *that* arrogant?" She bristled, but he went on. "It was foolish to spar with you just now. I'll

admit that I hadn't realized you'd be that good. Thankfully, no one noticed. And do you want to know *why*, Lillian?" He took a step closer, his voice lowering. "Because you're some pretty little girl. Because you're a nobody jewel thief from a small city in Fenharrow. Look around." He half-turned to the other Champions. "Is anyone staring at you? Are any of them sizing *you* up? No. Because you're not real competition. Because *you* don't stand between them and whatever freedom or wealth they're looking for."

"Exactly! It's insulting!"

"It's smart, that's what it is. And you're going to keep a low profile throughout this entire competition. You're not going to excel, and you're not going to trounce those thieves and soldiers and unknown assassins. You're going to stay solidly in the middle, where no one will look your way, because you're not a threat, because they'll think that you'll be eliminated sooner or later, and they should focus their attention on getting rid of bigger, stronger, faster Champions like Cain.

"But you're going to outlast them," Chaol continued. "And when they wake up on the morning of the final duel and find that *you* are their opponent, and that *you* have beaten them, the look on their faces will make all of the insults and lack of attention worthwhile." He extended his hand to lead her outside. "So, what do you have to say about *that*, Lillian Gordaina?"

"I can look out for myself," she said lightly, taking his hand. "But I have to say that you're rather brilliant, Captain. So brilliant, actually, that I might give you one of the jewels I plan to steal from the queen tonight."

Chaol chuckled, and they strode outside to where the running contest awaited.



Her lungs burned and her legs were leaden, but she kept running, kept her position in the middle of the pack of Champions. Brullo, Chaol, and the other trainers—along with three dozen armed guards—followed them around the game park on horseback. Some of the Champions, Grave, Ned, and Bill included, had been given long manacles. She supposed it was a privilege that Chaol hadn't locked her up, too. But to her surprise, Cain led the pack, and was nearly ten yards in front of the rest of them. How could he possibly be that fast?

The sound of crunching leaves and labored breathing filled the warm autumn air, and Celaena kept her gaze on the damp and gleaming dark hair of the thief in front of her. One step after another, one breath in, one breath out. Breathe—she had to remember to keep breathing.

Ahead, Cain turned a corner, heading north—back toward the castle. Like a flock of birds, they followed him. One step after another, never slowing down. Let them all watch Cain, let them plot against him. She didn't need to win the race to prove she was better—she was better without any kind of validation that the king could give her! She missed a breath, and her knees wobbled, but she kept upright. The run would be over soon. Soon.

She hadn't even dared to look behind her to see if any had fallen. She could feel Chaol's eyes on her, though, reminding her to keep in the middle. At least he had that much faith in her.

The trees parted, revealing the field that lay between the game park and the stables. The end of the path. Her head spun, and she would have cursed at the stitch that lanced through her side had she had any breath to do so. She had to stay in the middle. Stay in the middle.

Cain cleared the trees and raised his arms above his head in victory. He ran a few more feet, slowing his pace to cool down, and his trainer cheered for him. Celaena's only response was to keep her feet moving. Only a few yards left. The light of the open field grew brighter and brighter as it approached. Stars flashed before her eyes, swarming in her vision. She had to stay in the middle. Years of training with Arobynn Hamel had taught her the dangers of giving up too easily.

Then, she was through the trees, and the open field surrounded her in an explosion of space and grass and blue sky. The men in front of her slowed to a stop. It was all she could do to keep from sinking to her knees, but she made her legs slow, slow, slow, made her feet walk, made herself take breath after breath as the stars continued bursting before her eyes.

"Good," Brullo said, reining his horse and surveying whoever had first returned. "Get water. We've got more training after this."

Through the spots in her vision, she saw Chaol stop his horse. Her feet moved of their own accord toward him, then past, back to the woods. "Where are you going?"

"I dropped my ring back there," she lied, doing her best to look scatterbrained. "Just give me a moment to find it." Without waiting for his

approval, she entered the trees to the sneers and snickers of the Champions who had overheard. From the approaching crashing noises, she knew another Champion was on his way out. She stepped into the cover of the bushes, stumbling as the world became dark and light and tilted. She had barely sunk to her knees when she vomited.

She heaved and heaved until she had nothing left inside. The straggling Champion passed by. On trembling limbs, she grappled onto a nearby tree and hauled herself upright again. She found Captain Westfall standing across the path, watching her with pursed lips.

She wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist and said nothing to him as she exited the woods.

CHAPTER 13

It was lunchtime when Brullo released them for the day, and to say that Celaena was hungry would be a severe understatement. She was halfway through her meal, shoveling meat and bread down her throat, when the dining room door opened. “What are you doing here?” she said through a mouthful.

“What?” said the Captain of the Guard, taking a seat at the table. He’d changed his clothes and taken a bath. He pulled a platter of salmon toward him and piled it on his plate. Celaena made a disgusted face, her nose crinkling. “You don’t care for salmon?”

“I hate fish. I’d rather die than eat it.”

“That’s surprising,” he said, taking a bite.

“Why?”

“Because you smell like one.”

She opened her mouth to expose the ball of bread and beef that she was chewing. He shook his head. “You might fight well, but your manners are a disgrace.”

She waited for him to mention her earlier vomiting, but he didn’t continue. “I can act and talk like a lady, if it pleases me.”

“Then I suggest that you begin to do so.” After a pause, he asked, “How are you enjoying your temporary freedom?”

“Is that a snide remark or an honest question?”

He took a bite of fish. “Whichever you like.”

The window revealed the afternoon sky, slightly pale, but still lovely. “I’m enjoying it, for the most part. Especially now that I have books to read whenever you lock me in here. I don’t suppose you’d understand.”

“On the contrary. I might not have as much time to read as you and Dorian do, but that doesn’t mean I love books any less.”

She bit into an apple. It was tart, with a sweet, honey-like aftertaste. “Oh? And what books do you love?” He named a few, and she blinked. “Well, those are good choices—for the most part. What others?” she asked, and somehow, an hour flew by, carrying them on the wings of conversation. Suddenly, the clock chimed one, and he rose.

“The afternoon is yours to spend in any way that you like.”

“Where are you going?”

“To rest my limbs and my lungs.”

“Yes, well, hopefully you’ll read something of quality before I see you again.”

He sniffed the air as he walked out of her room. “Hopefully you’ll take a bath before I see *you* again.”

Sighing, Celaena called to her servants to draw her bath. An afternoon of reading on the balcony beckoned.



The following dawn, Celaena’s bedroom door opened, and a familiar stalking gait echoed through the room. Chaol Westfall stopped short when he found the assassin dangling from the beam of the bedroom doorway, repeatedly hoisting herself up to touch her chin to the wooden bar. Sweat soaked her undershirt and ran in rivulets down her pale skin. She’d been exercising for an hour already. Her arms quivered as she lifted herself again.

Though she might pretend to be in the middle of the pack, there was no reason to train like it. Even if every repetition made her body scream for her to stop. She wasn’t *that* out of shape—after all, her pickax in the mines had been heavy. And it definitely had nothing to do with her fellow competitors walloping her at the race yesterday.

She already had an edge on them. She just needed it to be a bit sharper.

She didn’t pause her exercising as she smiled at him, panting through her clenched teeth. To her surprise, he smiled back.



By that afternoon, a vicious rainstorm arrived, and Chaol permitted Celaena to walk around the castle with him after she’d finished training with the other Champions for the day. Though he spoke little, she was glad to be out of her rooms, and dressed in one of her new gowns—a lovely lilac silk dress with pale pink lace accents and pearl beading. But then they

rounded a corner and nearly collided with Kaltain Rompier. The assassin would have grimaced, but she forgot all about Kaltain as her eyes fell upon her companion. It was an Eyllwe woman.

She was stunning, long and lean, each of her features perfectly formed and smooth. Her loose white dress contrasted with her creamy brown skin, and a three-plated gold torque covered much of her chest and neck. Bracelets of ivory and gold glimmered around her wrists, and her feet were sandaled beneath matching anklets. A thin circlet comprising dangling gold and jewels crowned her head. She had two male guards with her, armed to the teeth with an assortment of curved Eyllwe daggers and swords, both of them studying Chaol and Celaena closely—weighing the threat.

The Eyllwe girl was a princess.

“Captain Westfall!” Kaltain said, and curtsied. Beside her, a short man dressed in the red-and-black garb of a councilman bowed to the pair.

The Eyllwe princess stood perfectly still, her brown eyes wary as she took in Celaena and her companion. Celaena offered her a slight smile, and the princess stepped closer, her guards tensing slightly. She moved with an easy grace.

Kaltain gestured to the girl, poorly hidden distaste written across her beautiful face. “This is Her Royal Highness the Princess Nehemia Ytger of Eyllwe.”

Chaol bowed low. The princess nodded, barely a dip of her chin. Celaena knew the name—she had often heard the Eyllwe slaves in Endovier boast of Nehemia’s beauty and bravery. Nehemia, the Light of Eyllwe, who would save them from their plight. Nehemia, who might someday pose a threat to the King of Adarlan’s rule over her home country when she ascended to the throne. Nehemia, they whispered, who smuggled information and supplies to the rebel groups hiding in Eyllwe. But what was she doing here?

“And the Lady Lillian,” Kaltain added briskly.

Celaena dropped into the lowest curtsy she could give without falling and said in Eyllwe, “Welcome to Rifthold, Your Highness.”

Princess Nehemia smiled slowly, and the others gaped. The councilman beamed, wiping the sweat from his brow. Why hadn’t they sent Nehemia with the Crown Prince, or even Perrington? Why was the princess herded around by Kaltain Rompier?

“Thank you,” the princess replied, her voice low.

“I imagine you’ve had a long journey,” Celaena continued in Eyllwe. “Have you arrived today, Your Highness?”

Nehemia’s guards exchanged glances, and Nehemia’s brows rose slightly. Not too many northerners spoke their language. “Yes, and the queen sent *this* one”—Nehemia jerked her head at Kaltain—“to bring me around with that sweating worm of a man as well.” The princess narrowed her eyes at the small councilman, who wrung his hands and dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. Perhaps he knew what sort of threat Nehemia posed; but why bring her to the castle?

Celaena ran her tongue across her teeth, trying not to laugh. “He seems a bit nervous.” She had to change the subject or else she’d indeed laugh. “What do you make of the castle?”

“It’s the most foolish thing I’ve ever seen,” Nehemia said, scanning the ceiling as if she could see through the stone and into the glass sections. “I’d sooner enter a castle made of sand.”

Chaol watched them, somewhat disbelievingly.

“I’m afraid I haven’t understood a word you’ve said,” Kaltain interrupted. Celaena tried not to roll her eyes—she’d forgotten the woman was there.

“We,” the princess said, struggling for the word in the common language, “were talking with the weather.”

“*About* the weather,” Kaltain corrected sharply.

“Watch your mouth,” Celaena snapped before she could think.

Kaltain gave Celaena a vicious little smile. “If she’s here to learn our ways, I should correct her so she doesn’t sound foolish.”

Here to learn their ways, or for something else entirely? The faces of the princess and her guards were unreadable.

“Your Highness,” Chaol said, stepping forward, a subtle movement to keep himself between Nehemia and Celaena. “Are you having a tour of the castle?”

Nehemia chewed on the words and then looked to Celaena, brows high—as if she’d expected a translation by now. A smile tugged on the corners of Celaena’s lips. No wonder the councilman was sweating so profusely. Nehemia was a force to be reckoned with. Celaena translated Chaol’s question with ease.

“If you consider this structure of madness to be a castle,” Nehemia

replied.

Celaena turned to Chaol. “She says yes.”

“I never knew so many words to mean one,” Kaltain said with faux sweetness. Celaena’s nails dug into her palms.

I’m going to rip your hair out.

Chaol took another step toward Nehemia—effectively blocking Celaena’s path to Kaltain. Smart man. He put a hand on his chest. “Your Highness, I am the Captain of the Royal Guard. Please allow me to escort you.”

Celaena translated again, and the princess nodded. “Get rid of her,” she said flatly to Celaena, and then waved a hand toward Kaltain. “I don’t care for her temperament.”

“You’re dismissed,” Celaena said to Kaltain, flashing a bright smile. “The princess tires of your company.”

Kaltain started. “But the queen—”

“If that is Her Highness’s wish, then it will be granted,” Chaol interrupted. Though his features were a mask of protocol, she could have sworn she glimpsed a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. Celaena wanted to hug him. She didn’t bother to nod her farewell to Kaltain as the princess and the councilman joined them and they strode down the hall, leaving the fuming lady behind.

“Are all of your royal women like that?” the princess said to Celaena in Eyllwe.

“Like Kaltain? Unfortunately, Your Highness.”

Nehemia examined the assassin, and Celaena knew she was taking in her clothes, her gait, her posture—everything Celaena herself had observed about the princess already. “But you—you’re not like them. How do you know how to speak Eyllwe so well?”

“I”—Celaena thought of a lie—“studied it for several years.”

“You use the intonation of the peasants. Is that taught in your books?”

“I knew an Eyllwe woman who taught it to me.”

“A slave of yours?” Her tone sharpened, and Chaol flicked his eyes toward them.

“No,” Celaena said hurriedly. “I don’t believe in keeping slaves.” Something twisted in her gut at the thought of all those slaves she’d left behind in Endovier, all those people doomed to suffer until they died. Just because she’d left Endovier didn’t mean Endovier had ceased to be.

Nehemia's voice was soft. "Then you are very unlike your court companions."

Celaena could only manage a nod to the princess as they turned their attention to the hall ahead. Servants darted past, eyes wide when they beheld the princess and her guards. After a moment of silence, Celaena squared her shoulders. "Why are you in Rifthold, if I might ask?" She added: "Your Highness."

"You don't need to bother calling me that." The princess toyed with one of the gold bangles around her wrist. "I came at the request of my father, the King of Eyllwe, to learn your language and customs so I might better serve Eyllwe and my people."

Given what she'd heard of Nehemia, Celaena didn't think that was the entirety of it, but she smiled politely as she said, "How long will you remain in Rifthold?"

"Until my father sends for me again." She stopped playing with her bracelets as she frowned at the rain pounding the windows. "If I'm fortunate, I'll only be here until spring. Unless my father decides that a man from Adarlan might make me a good consort, and then I'll be here until *that* matter is settled." Seeing the annoyance in the princess's eyes, Celaena felt a shred of pity for whatever man her father chose.

A thought struck her, and Celaena tilted her head to the side. "Whom would you marry? Prince Dorian?" It was prying, and a bit impertinent—and she regretted the question the second it came out.

But Nehemia just clicked her tongue. "That pretty boy? He grinned at me far too much—and you should only see how he winked at the other women in the court. I want a husband to warm *my* bed, and my bed alone." She glanced sidelong at the assassin, giving her another head-to-toe examination. Celaena caught the princess's eyes lingering on the few scars on her hands. "Where are you from, Lillian?"

Celaena casually hid her hands in the folds of her gown. "Bellhaven—a city in Fenharrow. It's a fishing port. Smells terrible." That wasn't a lie. Every time she'd visited Bellhaven for a mission, the reek of fish made her gag if she got too near the docks.

The princess chuckled. "Rifthold smells terrible. Too many people. At least in Banjali, the sun burns up everything. And my father's river palace smells like lotus blossoms."

Chaol cleared his throat beside them, obviously tired of being excluded

from the conversation, and Celaena grinned at him. “Don’t be so glum,” she said in the common tongue. “We must cater to the princess.”

“Stop your gloating,” he said, his brows low. He put a hand on the hilt of his sword, and Nehemia’s guards stepped closer to him. Though Chaol might be Captain of the Guard, Celaena didn’t doubt for a moment that Nehemia’s guards would put him down if he became a threat. “We’re only bringing her back to the king’s council. I’m going to have a word with them about allowing Kaltain to show her around.”

“Do you hunt?” Nehemia interrupted in Eyllwe.

“Me?” The princess nodded. “Oh—er, no,” Celaena said, then switched back to Eyllwe. “I’m more of a reader.”

Nehemia looked toward a rain-splattered window. “Most of our books were burned five years ago, when Adarlan marched in. It didn’t make a difference if the books were about magic”—her voice quieted at the word, even though Chaol and the councilman couldn’t understand them—“or history. They just burned the libraries whole, along with the museums and universities ...”

A familiar ache filled her chest. Celaena nodded. “Eyllwe wasn’t the only country where that happened.”

Something cold and bitter glittered in Nehemia’s eyes. “Now, most of the books we receive are from Adarlan—books in a language I can barely understand. That’s also what I must learn while I’m here. There are so many things!” She stomped her foot, her jewelry clinking. “And I hate these shoes! And this miserable dress! I don’t care if it’s Eyllwe silk and I’m supposed to be representing my kingdom—the material’s been itching me ever since I put it on!” She stared at Celaena’s elaborate gown. “How can you stand wearing that enormous thing?”

Celaena picked at the skirts of her dress. “It breaks my ribs, to be honest.”

“Well, at least I’m not the only one suffering,” Nehemia said. Chaol stopped before a door and informed the six sentries posted outside to watch the women and the princess’s guards. “What’s he doing?”

“Returning you to the council and ensuring that Kaltain doesn’t lead you around again.”

Nehemia’s shoulders slumped slightly. “I’ve only been here for a day, and I wish to leave.” She let out a long sigh through her nose, and again turned to the window, as if she could see all the way back to Eyllwe.

Suddenly, she grabbed Celaena's hand and squeezed it. Her fingers were surprisingly calloused—in all the spots where the hilt of a sword or dagger might rest. Celaena's eyes met with those of the princess and she dropped her hand.

Perhaps the rumors were correct about her association with the rebels in Eyllwe ...

"Will you keep me company while I'm here, Lady Lillian?"

Celaena blinked at the request—feeling, despite herself, honored. "Of course. When I'm available, I'll gladly attend you."

"I have attendants. I wish for someone to talk to."

Celaena couldn't help it—she beamed. Chaol entered into the hallway once more, and bowed to the princess. "The council would like to see you." Celaena translated.

Nehemia let out a low groan, but thanked Chaol before turning to Celaena. "I'm glad we met, Lady Lillian," Nehemia said, her eyes bright. "Peace be with you."

"And with you," the assassin murmured, watching her leave.

She never had many friends, and the ones she had often disappointed her. Sometimes with devastating consequences, as she'd learned that summer with the Silent Assassins of the Red Desert. After that, she'd sworn never to trust girls again, especially girls with agendas and power of their own. Girls who would do *anything* to get what they wanted.

But as the door closed behind the ivory train of the Eyllwe princess, Celaena wondered if she'd been wrong.



Chaol Westfall watched the assassin eat lunch, her eyes darting from one plate to the next. She had immediately stripped from her gown upon entering her rooms, and now sat in a rose-and-jade dressing robe that suited her well.

"You're awfully quiet today," she said, her mouth full of food. Would she never stop eating? She ate more than anyone he knew—including his guards. She had multiple helpings of every course at each meal. "Enthralled by the Princess Nehemia?" The words were barely distinguishable from her chewing.

"That headstrong girl?" He immediately regretted the remark as her eyes narrowed. A lecture was coming on, and he was in no mood to be

patronized. He had more important things on his mind. Before departing this morning, the king hadn't taken *any* of the guards he'd suggested he bring on his journey, and refused to say where he was going, or to accept his offer of accompaniment.

Not to mention the fact that a few of the royal hounds had gone missing, only to have their half-eaten remains found in the northern wing of the palace. *That* was worrisome; who would do such a gruesome thing?

"And what's wrong with headstrong girls?" she pressed. "Other than the fact that they're not wooden-headed ninnies who can only open their mouths to give orders and gossip?"

"I just prefer a certain type of woman."

Thankfully, it was the right thing to say, because she batted her eyelashes. "And what type of woman is that?"

"Not an arrogant assassin."

She pouted. "Suppose I wasn't an assassin. Would you fancy me then?"

"No."

"Would you prefer *Lady Kaltain*?"

"Don't be a fool." It was easy to be mean, but it was also getting far too easy to be nice. He took a bite of bread. She watched him, her head angled. He sometimes felt that she looked at him the way a cat regards a mouse. He just wondered how long it would take for her to pounce.

She shrugged, and took a bite from an apple. There was something girlish about her, too. Oh, he couldn't stand her contradictions!

"You're staring, Captain."

He almost apologized, but stopped. She was a haughty, vulgar, utterly impertinent assassin. He wished for the months to fly by, for her to be appointed Champion, and then, once her years of servitude were over, to be gone. He hadn't slept well since they'd taken her out of Endovier.

"You have food in your teeth," he said. She picked it out with a sharp nail and turned her head to the window. The rain slid down the glass. Was she looking at the rain, or something beyond?

He sipped from his goblet. Despite her arrogance, she was clever, and relatively kind, and somewhat charming. But where was that writhing darkness? Why didn't it show itself so he could just throw her into the dungeon and call off this ridiculous competition? There was something great and deadly concealed within her, and he didn't like it.

He'd be ready—when the time came, he'd be waiting. He just

wondered which one of them would survive.

CHAPTER 14

For the next four days, Celaena awoke before dawn to train in her room, using whatever she could to exercise—chairs, the doorway, even her billiards table and cue sticks. The balls made for remarkable balance tools. Around dawn, Chaol usually showed up for breakfast. Afterward, they ran through the game park, where he kept pace at her side. Autumn had fully come, and the wind smelled of crisp leaves and snow. Chaol never said anything when she doubled over, hands on her knees, and vomited up her breakfast, nor did he comment on the fact that she could go farther and farther each day without stopping for breath.

Once they'd finished their run, they trained in a private room far from her competitors' eyes. Until, that is, she collapsed to the ground and cried that she was about to die of hunger and fatigue. At lessons, the knives remained Celaena's favorite, but the wooden staff became dear; naturally, it had to do with the fact that she could freely whack him and not chop off an arm. Since her initial meeting with Princess Nehemia, she hadn't seen or heard from the princess—not even chatter from the servants.

Chaol always came for lunch, and afterward, she joined the other Champions for a few more hours of training under Brullo's watchful eye. Most of their training was just to make sure they could actually *use* weapons. And, of course, she kept her head down throughout it all, doing enough to keep Brullo from critiquing her, but not enough to make him praise her the way he did Cain.

Cain. How she loathed him! Brullo practically worshipped the man—and even the other Champions nodded their respect when he passed by. No one bothered to comment on how perfect *her* form was. Was this how the other assassins at the Assassins' Keep had felt all those years she had spent hogging Arobynn Hamel's attention? But here, it was hard to focus when

Cain was nearby, taunting and sneering, waiting for her to make one mistake. Hopefully he wouldn't distract her at the first elimination test. Brullo hadn't given them any indication *what* they might be tested for, and Chaol was just as clueless.

The day before the first Test, she knew something was wrong long before she got to the training hall. Chaol hadn't shown up for breakfast, but rather sent her guards to bring her to the training hall to practice on her own. He didn't show up for lunch, either, and by the time she was escorted to the hall, she was brimming with questions.

Without Chaol to stand near, she lingered beside a pillar, watching the competitors file in, flanked by guards and their trainers. Brullo wasn't there yet—another oddity. And there were far too many guards in the training hall today.

“What do you suppose this is about?” Nox Owen, the young thief from Perranth, asked from beside her. After proving himself somewhat skilled during practice, many of the other competitors had sought him out, but he still opted to keep to himself.

“Captain Westfall didn't train me this morning,” she offered. What was the harm in admitting that?

Nox held out his hand. “Nox Owen.”

“I know who you are,” she said, but shook his hand anyway. His grip was solid, his hand calloused and scarred. He'd seen his fair share of action.

“Good. I've felt a bit invisible with that hulking lout showing off these past few days.” He jerked his chin toward Cain, who was in the middle of examining his bulging biceps. A large ring of black, iridescent stone glimmered on Cain's finger—strange that he'd wear it to practice. Nox went on. “Did you see Verin? He looks like he's going to be sick.” He pointed to the loudmouthed thief that Celaena wanted to knock out cold. Normally, Verin could be found near Cain, taunting the other Champions. But today he stood alone by the window, face pale and eyes wide.

“I heard him talking to Cain,” said a timid voice behind them, and they found Pelor, the youngest assassin, standing nearby. She'd spent half a day watching Pelor—and while she only pretended to be mediocre, he truly could use the training.

Assassin indeed. His voice hasn't even deepened yet. How did he wind up here?

“What’d he say?” Nox put his hands in his pockets. His clothes weren’t as ratty as the other competitors’; the mere fact that she’d actually heard his name implied he must have been a good thief in Perranth.

Pelor’s freckled face paled a bit. “Bill Chastain—the Eye Eater—was found stone cold dead this morning.”

A Champion was dead? And a notorious killer at that. “How?” she demanded.

Pelor swallowed hard. “Verin said it wasn’t pretty. Like someone ripped him wide open. He passed the body on his way here.” Nox cursed under his breath, and Celaena studied the other Champions. A hush had fallen on the group, and clusters of them stood together, whispering. Verin’s story was spreading fast. Pelor went on. “He said Chastain’s body was in *ribbons*.”

A chill snaked down her spine, but she shook her head, just as a guard entered and told them that Brullo had ordered them to have free rein of the training hall today and to practice what they wanted. Needing to distract herself from the image forming in her mind, she didn’t bother to say good-bye to Nox and Pelor as she strode to the weapons rack and gathered a belt strapped with throwing knives.

She took up a place near the archery targets; Nox joined her a moment later, and started firing his knives at the target. He hit the second ring, but never got any closer to the center. His skill with knives wasn’t nearly as good as his archery.

She drew a dagger from the belt. Who would have killed one of the Champions so brutally? And how had they gotten away with it, if the body was in the hall? This castle was swarming with guards. A Champion was dead, and just a day before their first Test; would this start a pattern?

Her focus narrowed to the small, black dot in the center of the target. She steadied her breathing as she cocked her arm, letting her wrist go loose. The sounds of the other Champions faded. The blackness of the bull’s-eye beckoned, and as she exhaled, she sent the dagger flying.

It sparkled, a shooting star of steel. She smiled grimly as it struck home.

Beside her, Nox swore colorfully when his dagger hit the third ring on his target, and her smile broadened, despite the shredded corpse that lay somewhere in the castle.

Celaena drew another dagger, but paused as Verin called to her from the ring where he sparred with Cain. “Circus tricks ain’t much use when

you're the King's Champion." She shifted her gaze to him, but kept positioned toward the target. "You'd be better off on your back, learning tricks useful to a woman. In fact, I can teach you some tonight, if you'd like." He laughed, and Cain joined with him. Celaena gripped the hilt of a dagger so hard that it hurt.

"Don't listen to them," Nox murmured. He tossed another dagger, missing the bull's-eye again. "They wouldn't know the first thing to do with a woman, even if one walked stark naked into their bedroom."

Celaena threw her dagger, and the blade clanged as it landed a hair's breadth from the one she'd already embedded in the bull's-eye.

Nox's dark brows rose, accentuating his gray eyes. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five. "You've got impressive aim."

"For a girl?" she challenged.

"No," he said, and threw another dagger. "For anyone." The dagger yet again missed the mark. He stalked to the target, yanking out all six daggers and shoving them in their sheaths before returning to the throwing line. Celaena cleared her throat.

"You're standing wrong," she said, quietly enough so the other Champions couldn't hear. "And you're holding your wrist incorrectly."

Nox lowered his arm. She took up her stance. "Legs like this," she said. He studied her for a moment, then positioned his legs similarly. "Bend slightly at the knees. Shoulders back; loosen your wrist. Throw when you exhale." She demonstrated for him, and her dagger found its mark.

"Show me again," Nox said appreciatively.

She did so, and struck the target. Then she threw with her left hand, and fought her whoop of triumph as the blade sank into the handle of another dagger.

Nox focused on the target as he brought up his arm. "Well, you've just put me to shame," he said, laughing under his breath as he lifted his dagger higher.

"Keep your wrist even looser," was her reply. "It's all about how you snap it."

Nox obeyed, and as he exhaled a long breath, his dagger flew. It didn't hit the bull's-eye, but it came within the inner circle. His brows rose. "That's a bit of an improvement."

"Just a bit," she said, and held her ground as he gathered their knives from the two targets and handed hers back. She sheathed them in her belt.