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HEIR OF FIRE

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

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*Again, for Susan—
whose friendship changed my life for the better
and gave this book its heart.*

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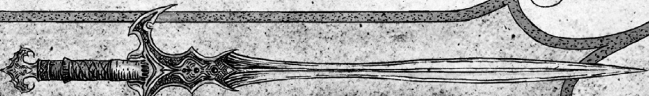
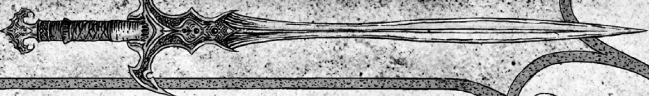
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PART ONE

Heir of Ash

1

Gods, it was boiling in this useless excuse for a kingdom.

Or maybe it felt that way because Celaena Sardothien had been lounging on the lip of the terra-cotta roof since midmorning, an arm flung over her eyes, slowly baking in the sun like the loaves of flatbread the city's poorest citizens left on their windowsills because they couldn't afford brick ovens.

And gods, she was sick of flatbread—*teggya*, they called it. Sick of the crunchy, oniony taste of it that even mouthfuls of water couldn't wash away. If she never ate another bite of *teggya* again, it would be too soon.

Mostly because it was all she'd been able to afford when she landed in Wendlyn two weeks ago and made her way to the capital city, Varese, just as she'd been ordered by his Grand Imperial Majesty and Master of the Earth, the King of Adarlan.

She'd resorted to swiping *teggya* and wine off vendors' carts since

her money ran out, not long after she'd taken one look at the heavily fortified limestone castle, at the elite guards, at the cobalt banners flapping so proudly in the dry, hot wind and decided *not* to kill her assigned targets.

So it had been stolen teggya . . . and wine. The sour red wine from the vineyards lining the rolling hills around the walled capital—a taste she'd initially spat out but now very, very much enjoyed. Especially since the day when she decided that she didn't particularly care about anything at all.

She reached for the terra-cotta tiles sloping behind her, groping for the clay jug of wine she'd hauled onto the roof that morning. Patting, feeling for it, and then—

She swore. Where in hell was the wine?

The world tilted and went blindingly bright as she hoisted herself onto her elbows. Birds circled above, keeping well away from the white-tailed hawk that had been perched atop a nearby chimney all morning, waiting to snatch up its next meal. Below, the market street was a brilliant loom of color and sound, full of braying donkeys, merchants waving their wares, clothes both foreign and familiar, and the clacking of wheels against pale cobblestones. But where in hell was the—

Ah. There. Tucked beneath one of the heavy red tiles to keep cool. Just where she'd stashed it hours before, when she'd climbed onto the roof of the massive indoor market to survey the perimeter of the castle walls two blocks away. Or whatever she'd thought sounded official and useful before she'd realized that she'd rather sprawl in the shadows. Shadows that had long since been burned away by that relentless Wendlyn sun.

Celaena swigged from the jug of wine—or tried to. It was empty, which she supposed was a blessing, because *gods* her head was spinning. She needed water, and more teggya. And perhaps something for the gloriously painful split lip and scraped cheekbone she'd earned last night in one of the city's *tabernas*.

Groaning, Celaena rolled onto her belly and surveyed the street forty feet below. She knew the guards patrolling it by now—had marked their faces and weapons, just as she had with the guards atop the high castle walls. She'd memorized their rotations, and how they opened the three massive gates that led into the castle. It seemed that the Ashryvers and their ancestors took safety very, very seriously.

It had been ten days since she'd arrived in Varese itself, after hauling ass from the coast. Not because she was particularly eager to kill her targets, but because the city was so damn large that it seemed her best chance of dodging the immigration officials, whom she'd given the slip instead of registering with their oh-so-benevolent work program. Hurrying to the capital had also provided welcome activity after weeks at sea, where she hadn't really felt like doing anything other than lying on the narrow bed in her cramped cabin or sharpening her weapons with a near-religious zeal.

You're nothing but a coward, Nehemia had said to her.

Every slice of the whetting stone had echoed it. *Coward, coward, coward.* The word had trailed her each league across the ocean.

She had made a vow—a vow to free Eyllwe. So in between moments of despair and rage and grief, in between thoughts of Chaol and the Wyrdkeys and all she'd left behind and lost, Celaena had decided on one plan to follow when she reached these shores. One plan, however insane and unlikely, to free the enslaved kingdom: find and obliterate the Wyrdkeys the King of Adarlan had used to build his terrible empire. She'd gladly destroy herself to carry it out.

Just her, just him. Just as it should be; no loss of life beyond their own, no soul stained but hers. It would take a monster to destroy a monster.

If she had to be here thanks to Chaol's misplaced good intentions, then at least she'd receive the answers she needed. There was one person in Erilea who had been present when the Wyrdkeys were wielded by a conquering demon race that had warped them into three tools of

such mighty power that they'd been hidden for thousands of years and nearly wiped from memory. Queen Maeve of the Fae. Maeve knew everything—as was expected when you were older than dirt.

So the first step of her stupid, foolish plan had been simple: seek out Maeve, get answers about how to destroy the Wyrdkeys, and then return to Adarlan.

It was the least she could do. For Nehemia—for . . . a lot of other people. There was nothing left in her, not really. Only ash and an abyss and the unbreakable vow she'd carved into her flesh, to the friend who had seen her for what she truly was.

When they had docked at the largest port city in Wendlyn, she couldn't help but admire the caution the ship took while coming to shore—waiting until a moonless night, then stuffing Celaena and the other refugee women from Adarlan in the galley while navigating the secret channels through the barrier reef. It was understandable: the reef was the main defense keeping Adarlan's legions from these shores. It was also part of her mission here as the King's Champion.

That was the other task lingering in the back of her mind: to find a way to keep the king from executing Chaol or Nehemia's family. He'd promised to do it should she fail in her mission to retrieve Wendlyn's naval defense plans and assassinate its king and prince at their annual midsummer ball. But she'd shoved all those thoughts aside when they'd docked and the refugee women had been herded ashore for processing by the port's officials.

Many of the women were scarred inside and out, their eyes gleaming with echoes of whatever horrors had befallen them in Adarlan. So even after she'd vanished from the ship during the chaos of docking, she'd lingered on a nearby rooftop while the women were escorted into a building—to find homes and employment. Yet Wendlyn's officials could later bring them to a quiet part of the city and do whatever they wanted. Sell them. Hurt them. They were refugees: unwanted and without any rights. Without any voice.

But she hadn't lingered merely from paranoia. No—Nehemia would have remained to ensure they were safe. Realizing that, Celaena had wound up on the road to the capital as soon as she was certain the women were all right. Learning how to infiltrate the castle was merely something to occupy her time while she decided how to execute the first steps of her plan. While she tried to stop thinking about Nehemia.

It had all been fine—fine and easy. Hiding in the little woods and barns along the way, she passed like a shadow through the countryside.

Wendlyn. A land of myths and monsters—of legends and nightmares made flesh.

The kingdom itself was a spread of warm, rocky sand and thick forest, growing ever greener as hills rolled inland and sharpened into towering peaks. The coast and the land around the capital were dry, as if the sun had baked all but the hardiest vegetation. Vastly different from the soggy, frozen empire she'd left behind.

A land of plenty, of opportunity, where men didn't just take what they wanted, where no doors were locked and people smiled at you in the streets. But she didn't particularly care if someone did or didn't smile at her—no, as the days wore on, she found it suddenly very difficult to bring herself to care about anything at all. Whatever determination, whatever rage, whatever *anything* she'd felt upon leaving Adarlan had ebbed away, devoured by the nothingness that now gnawed at her.

It was four days before Celaena spotted the massive capital city built across the foothills. Varese, the city where her mother had been born; the vibrant heart of the kingdom.

While Varese was cleaner than Rifthold and had plenty of wealth spread between the upper and lower classes, it was a capital city all the same, with slums and back alleys, whores and gamblers—and it hadn't taken too long to find its underbelly.

On the street below, three of the market guards paused to chat, and Celaena rested her chin on her hands. Like every guard in this kingdom, each was clad in light armor and bore a good number of weapons.

Rumor claimed the Wendlynite soldiers were trained by the Fae to be ruthless and cunning and swift. And she didn't want to know if that was true, for about a dozen different reasons. They certainly seemed a good deal more observant than the average Rifthold sentry—even if they hadn't yet noticed the assassin in their midst. But these days, Celaena knew the only threat she posed was to herself.

Even baking in the sun each day, even washing up whenever she could in one of the city's many fountain-squares, she could still feel Archer Finn's blood soaking her skin, into her hair. Even with the constant noise and rhythm of Varese, she could still hear Archer's groan as she gutted him in that tunnel beneath the castle. And even with the wine and heat, she could still see Chaol, horror contorting his face at what he'd learned about her Fae heritage and the monstrous power that could easily destroy her, about how hollow and dark she was inside.

She often wondered whether he'd figured out the riddle she'd told him on the docks of Rifthold. And if he had discovered the truth . . . Celaena never let herself get that far. Now wasn't the time for thinking about Chaol, or the truth, or any of the things that had left her soul so limp and weary.

Celaena tenderly prodded her split lip and frowned at the market guards, the movement making her mouth hurt even more. She'd deserved that particular blow in the brawl she'd provoked in last night's taberna—she'd kicked a man's balls into his throat, and when he'd caught his breath, he'd been enraged, to say the least. Lowering her hand from her mouth, she observed the guards for a few moments. They didn't take bribes from the merchants, or bully or threaten with fines like the guards and officials in Rifthold. Every official and soldier she'd seen so far had been similarly . . . good.

The same way Galan Ashryver, Crown Prince of Wendlyn, was good.

Dredging up some semblance of annoyance, Celaena stuck out her

tongue. At the guards, at the market, at the hawk on the nearby chimney, at the castle and the prince who lived inside it. She wished that she had not run out of wine so early in the day.

It had been a week since she'd figured out how to infiltrate the castle, three days after arriving in Varese itself. A week since that horrible day when all her plans crumbled around her.

A cooling breeze pushed past, bringing with it the spices from the vendors lining the nearby street—nutmeg, thyme, cumin, lemon verbena. She inhaled deeply, letting the scents clear her sun-and-wine-addled head. The pealing of bells floated down from one of the neighboring mountain towns, and in some square of the city, a minstrel band struck up a merry midday tune. Nehemia would have loved this place.

That fast, the world slipped, swallowed up by the abyss that now lived within her. Nehemia would never see Wendlyn. Never wander through the spice market or hear the mountain bells. A dead weight pressed on Celaena's chest.

It had seemed like such a perfect plan when she'd arrived in Varese. In the hours she'd spent figuring out the royal castle's defenses, she'd debated how she'd find Maeve to learn about the keys. It had all been going smoothly, flawlessly, until . . .

Until that gods-damned day when she'd noted how the guards left a hole in their defense in the southern wall every afternoon at two o'clock, and grasped how the gate mechanism operated. Until Galan Ashryver had come riding out through those gates, in full view of where she'd been perched on the roof of a nobleman's house.

It hadn't been the sight of him, with his olive skin and dark hair, that had stopped her dead. It hadn't been the fact that, even from a distance, she could see his turquoise eyes—*her* eyes, the reason she usually wore a hood in the streets.

No. It had been the way people cheered.



Cheered for him, their prince. Adored him, with his dashing smile and his light armor gleaming in the endless sun, as he and the soldiers behind him rode toward the north coast to continue blockade running. *Blockade running*. The prince—her target—was a gods-damned blockade runner against Adarlan, and his people *loved* him for it.

She'd trailed the prince and his men through the city, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, and all it would have taken was one arrow through those turquoise eyes and he would have been dead. But she followed him all the way to the city walls, the cheers growing louder, people tossing flowers, everyone beaming with pride for their perfect, perfect prince.

She'd reached the city gates just as they opened to let him through. And when Galan Ashryver rode off into the sunset, off to war and glory and to fight for good and freedom, she lingered on that roof until he was a speck in the distance.

Then she had walked into the nearest taberna and gotten into the bloodiest, most brutal brawl she'd ever provoked, until the city guard was called in and she vanished moments before everyone was tossed into the stocks. And then she had decided, as her nose bled down the front of her shirt and she spat blood onto the cobblestones, that she wasn't going to do *anything*.

There was no point to her plans. Nehemia and Galan would have led the world to freedom, and Nehemia should have been breathing. Together the prince and princess could have defeated the King of Adarlan. But Nehemia was dead, and Celaena's vow—her stupid, pitiful vow—was worth as much as mud when there were beloved heirs like Galan who could do so much more. She'd been a fool to make that vow.

Even Galan—Galan was barely making a dent against Adarlan, and he had an entire armada at his disposal. She was one person, one complete waste of life. If Nehemia hadn't been able to stop the king . . . then that plan, to find a way to contact Maeve . . . that plan was absolutely useless.

Mercifully, she still hadn't seen one of the Fae—not a single damn one—or the faeries, or even a lick of magic. She'd done her best to avoid it. Even before she'd spotted Galan, she'd kept away from the market stalls that offered everything from healing to trinkets to potions, areas that were usually also full of street performers or mercenaries trading their gifts to earn a living. She'd learned which tabernas the magic-wielders liked to frequent and never went near them. Because sometimes she felt a trickling, writhing *thing* awaken in her gut if she caught a crackle of its energy.

It had been a week since she'd given up her plan and abandoned any attempt to care at all. And she suspected it'd be many weeks more before she decided she was truly sick of teggya, or brawling every night just to feel something, or guzzling sour wine as she lay on rooftops all day.

But her throat was parched and her stomach was grumbling, so Celaena slowly peeled herself off the edge of the roof. Slowly, not because of those vigilant guards, but rather because her head was well and truly spinning. She didn't trust herself to care enough to prevent a tumble.

She glared at the thin scar stretching across her palm as she shimmed down the drainpipe and into the alley off the market street. It was now nothing more than a reminder of the pathetic promise she'd made at Nehemia's half-frozen grave over a month ago, and of everything and everyone else she'd failed. Just like her amethyst ring, which she gambled away every night and won back before sunrise.

Despite all that had happened, and Chaol's role in Nehemia's death, even after she'd destroyed what was between them, she hadn't been able to forfeit his ring. She'd lost it thrice now in card games, only to get it back—by whatever means necessary. A dagger poised to slip between the ribs usually did a good deal more convincing than actual words.

Celaena supposed it was a miracle she made it down to the alley, where the shadows momentarily blinded her. She braced a hand on the cool stone wall, letting her eyes adjust, willing her head to stop

spinning. A mess—she was a gods-damned mess. She wondered when she'd bother to stop being one.

The tang and reek of the woman hit Celaena before she saw her. Then wide, yellowed eyes were in her face, and a pair of withered, cracked lips parted to hiss, “Slattern! Don't let me catch you in front of my door again!”

Celaena pulled back, blinking at the vagrant woman—and at her door, which . . . was just an alcove in the wall, crammed with rubbish and what had to be sacks of the woman's belongings. The woman herself was hunched, her hair unwashed and teeth a ruin of stumps. Celaena blinked again, the woman's face coming into focus. Furious, half-mad, and filthy.

Celaena held up her hands, backing away a step, then another. “Sorry.”

The woman spat a wad of phlegm onto the cobblestones an inch from Celaena's dusty boots. Failing to muster the energy to be disgusted or furious, Celaena would have walked away had she not glimpsed herself as she raised her dull gaze from the glob.

Dirty clothes—stained and dusty and torn. Not to mention, she smelled *atrocious*, and this vagrant woman had mistaken her for . . . for a fellow vagrant, competing for space on the streets.

Well. Wasn't that just *wonderful*. An all-time low, even for her. Perhaps it'd be funny one day, if she bothered to remember it. She couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed.

At least she could take some comfort in knowing that it couldn't get worse.

But then a deep male voice chuckled from the shadows behind her.

2

The man—male—down the alley was Fae.

After ten years, after all the executions and burnings, a Fae male was prowling toward her. Pure, solid Fae. There was no escaping him as he emerged from the shadows yards away. The vagrant in the alcove and the others along the alley fell so quiet Celaena could again hear those bells ringing in the distant mountains.

Tall, broad-shouldered, every inch of him seemingly corded with muscle, he was a male blooded with power. He paused in a dusty shaft of sunlight, his silver hair gleaming.

As if his delicately pointed ears and slightly elongated canines weren't enough to scare the living shit out of everyone in that alley, including the now-whimpering madwoman behind Celaena, a wicked-looking tattoo was etched down the left side of his harsh face, the whorls of black ink stark against his sun-kissed skin.

The markings could easily have been decorative, but she still

remembered enough of the Fae language to recognize them as words, even in such an artistic rendering. Starting at his temple, the tattoo flowed over his jaw and down his neck, where it disappeared beneath the pale surcoat and cloak he wore. She had a feeling the markings continued down the rest of him, too, concealed along with at least half a dozen weapons. As she reached into her cloak for her own hidden dagger, she realized he might have been handsome were it not for the promise of violence in his pine-green eyes.

It would have been a mistake to call him young—just as it would have been a mistake to call him anything but a warrior, even without the sword strapped across his back and the vicious knives at his sides. He moved with lethal grace and surety, scanning the alley as if he were walking onto a killing field.

The hilt of the dagger was warm in her hand, and Celaena adjusted her stance, surprised to be feeling—fear. And enough of it that it cleared the heavy fog that had been clouding her senses these past few weeks.

The Fae warrior stalked down the alley, his knee-high leather boots silent on the cobblestones. Some of the loiterers shrank back; some bolted for the sunny street, to random doorways, anywhere to escape his challenging stare.

Celaena knew before his sharp eyes met hers that he was here for her, and who had sent him.

She reached for her Eye amulet, startled to find it was no longer around her neck. She'd given it to Chaol—the only bit of protection she could grant him upon leaving. He'd probably thrown it away as soon as he figured out the truth. Then he could go back to the haven of being her enemy. Maybe he'd tell Dorian, too, and the pair of them would both be safe.

Before she could give in to the instinct to scuttle back up the drain-pipe and onto the roof, she considered the plan she'd abandoned. Had some god remembered she existed and decided to throw her a bone? She'd needed to see Maeve.

Well, here was one of Maeve's elite warriors. Ready. Waiting.

And from the vicious temper emanating from him, not entirely happy about it.

The alley remained as still as a graveyard while the Fae warrior surveyed her. His nostrils flared delicately, as if he were—

He was getting a whiff of her scent.

She took some small satisfaction in knowing she smelled horrific, but it wasn't that smell he was reading. No, it was the scent that marked her as *her*—the smell of her lineage and blood and what and who she was. And if he said her name in front of these people . . . then she knew that Galan Ashryver would come running home. The guards would be on high alert, and *that* was not part of her plan at all.

The bastard looked likely to do such a thing, just to prove who was in charge. So she summoned her energy as best she could and sauntered over to him, trying to remember what she might have done months ago, before the world had gone to hell. "Well met, my friend," she purred. "Well met, indeed."

She ignored the shocked faces around them, focusing solely on sizing him up. He stood with a stillness that only an immortal could achieve. She willed her heartbeat and breathing to calm. He could probably hear them, could probably smell every emotion raging through her. There'd be no fooling him with bravado, not in a thousand years. He'd probably lived that long already. Perhaps there'd be no beating him, either. She was Celaena Sardothien, but he was a Fae warrior and had likely been one for a great while.

She stopped a few feet away. Gods, he was huge. "What a lovely surprise," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear. When was the last time she'd sounded that pleasant? She couldn't even remember the last time she'd spoken in full sentences. "I thought we were to meet at the city walls."

He didn't bow, thank the gods. His harsh face didn't even shift. Let him think what he wanted. She was sure she looked nothing like what

he'd been told to expect—and he'd certainly laughed when that woman mistook her for a fellow vagrant.

“Let's go,” was all he said, his deep, somewhat bored voice seeming to echo off the stones as he turned to leave the alley. She'd bet good money that the leather vambraces on his forearms concealed blades.

She might have given him a rather obnoxious reply, just to feel him out a bit more, but people were still watching. He prowled along, not deigning to look at any of the gawkers. She couldn't tell if she was impressed or revolted.

She followed the Fae warrior into the bright street and through the bustling city. He was heedless of the humans who paused their working and walking and milling about to stare. He certainly didn't wait for her to catch up as he strode up to a pair of ordinary mares tied by a trough in a nondescript square. If memory served her correctly, the Fae usually possessed far finer horses. He had probably arrived in another form and purchased these here.

All Fae possessed a secondary animal form. Celaena was currently in hers, her mortal human body as animal as the birds wheeling above. But what was his? He could have been a wolf, she thought, with that layered surcoat that flowed to midhigh like a pelt, his footfalls so silent. Or a mountain cat, with that predatory grace.

He mounted the larger of the mares, leaving her to the piebald beast that looked more interested in seeking out a quick meal than trekking across the land. That made two of them. But they'd gone far enough without any explanation.

She stuffed her satchel into a saddlebag, angling her hands so that her sleeves hid the narrow bands of scars on her wrists, reminders of where the manacles had been. Where *she* had been. It was none of his business. None of Maeve's business, either. The less they knew about her, the less they could use against her. “I've known a few brooding warrior-types in my day, but I think you might be the broodiest of them

all.” He whipped his head to her, and she drawled, “Oh, hello. I think you know who I am, so I won’t bother introducing myself. But before I’m carted off to gods-know-where, I’d like to know who *you* are.”

His lips thinned. He surveyed the square—where people were now watching. And everyone instantly found somewhere else to be.

When they’d scattered, he said, “You’ve gathered enough about me at this point to have learned what you need to know.” He spoke the common tongue, and his accent was subtle—lovely, if she was feeling generous enough to admit it. A soft, rolling purr.

“Fair enough. But what am I to call you?” She gripped the saddle but didn’t mount it.

“Rowan.” His tattoo seemed to soak up the sun, so dark it looked freshly inked.

“Well, Rowan—” Oh, he did *not* like her tone one bit. His eyes narrowed slightly in warning, but she went on, “Dare I ask where we’re going?” She had to be drunk—still drunk or descending to a new level of apathy—if she was talking to him like this. But she couldn’t stop, even as the gods or the Wyrd or the threads of fate readied to shove her back toward her original plan of action.

“I’m taking you where you’ve been summoned.”

As long as she got to see Maeve and ask her questions, she didn’t particularly care how she got to Doranelle—or whom she traveled with.

Do what has to be done, Elena had told her. In her usual fashion, Elena had omitted to specify *what* had to be done once she arrived in Wendlyn. At least this was better than eating flatbread and drinking wine and being mistaken for a vagrant. Perhaps she could be on a boat back to Adarlan within three weeks, possessing the answers that would solve everything.

It should have energized her. But instead she found herself silently mounting her mare, out of words and the will to use them. Just the past few minutes of interaction had drained her completely.

It was better that Rowan didn't seem inclined to speak as she followed him out of the city. The guards merely waved them through the walls, some even backing away.

As they rode on, Rowan didn't ask why she was here and what she'd been doing for the past ten years while the world had gone to hell. He pulled his pale hood over his silver hair and moved ahead, though it was still easy enough to mark him as different, as a warrior and law unto himself.

If he was truly as old as she suspected, she was likely little more than a speck of dust to him, a fizzle of life in the long-burning fire of his immortality. He could probably kill her without a second thought—and then move on to his next task, utterly untroubled by ending her existence.

It didn't unnerve her as much as it should have.

3

For a month now, it had been the same dream. Every night, over and over, until Chaol could see it in his waking hours.

Archer Finn groaning as Celaena shoved her dagger up through his ribs and into his heart. She embraced the handsome courtesan like a lover, but when she gazed over Archer's shoulder, her eyes were dead. Hollow.

The dream shifted, and Chaol could say nothing, do nothing as the golden-brown hair darkened to black and the agonized face wasn't Archer's but Dorian's.

The Crown Prince jerked, and Celaena held him tighter, twisting the dagger one final time before she let Dorian slump to the gray stones of the tunnel. Dorian's blood was already pooling—too fast. But Chaol still couldn't move, couldn't go to his friend or the woman he loved.

The wounds on Dorian multiplied, and there was blood—so much blood. He knew these wounds. Though he'd never seen the body, he'd

combed through the reports detailing what Celaena had done to the rogue assassin Grave in that alley, the way she'd butchered him for killing Nehemia.

Celaena lowered her dagger, each drop of blood from its gleaming blade sending ripples through the pool already around her. She tipped back her head, breathing in deep. Breathing in the death before her, taking it into her soul, vengeance and ecstasy mingling at the slaughter of her enemy. Her true enemy. The Havilliard Empire.

The dream shifted again, and Chaol was pinned beneath her as she writhed above him, her head still thrown back, that same expression of ecstasy written across her blood-splattered face.

Enemy. Lover.

Queen.



The memory of the dream splintered as Chaol blinked at Dorian, who was sitting beside him at their old table in the Great Hall—and waiting for an answer to whatever he had said. Chaol gave an apologetic wince.

The Crown Prince didn't return Chaol's half smile. Instead, Dorian quietly said, "You were thinking about her."

Chaol took a bite from his lamb stew but tasted nothing. Dorian was too observant for his own good. And Chaol had no interest in talking about Celaena. Not with Dorian, not with anyone. The truth he knew about her could jeopardize more lives than hers.

"I was thinking about my father," Chaol lied. "When he returns to Anielle in a few weeks, I'm to go with him." It was the price for getting Celaena to the safety of Wendlyn: his father's support in exchange for his return to the Silver Lake to take up his title as the heir of Anielle. And he'd been willing to make that sacrifice; he'd make any sacrifice to keep Celaena and her secrets safe. Even now that he knew who—

what she was. Even after she'd told him about the king and the Wyrdskeys. If this was the price he had to pay, so be it.

Dorian glanced toward the high table, where the king and Chaol's father dined. The Crown Prince should have been eating with them, but he'd chosen to sit with Chaol instead. It was the first time Dorian had done so in ages—the first time they had spoken since their tense conversation after the decision was made to send Celaena to Wendlyn.

Dorian would understand if he knew the truth. But Dorian couldn't know who and what Celaena was, or what the king was truly planning. The potential for disaster was too high. And Dorian's own secrets were deadly enough.

"I heard the rumors you were to go," Dorian said warily. "I didn't realize they were true."

Chaol nodded, trying to find something—anything—to say to his friend.

They still hadn't spoken of the other thing between them, the other bit of truth that had come out that night in the tunnels: Dorian had magic. Chaol didn't want to know anything about it. If the king decided to interrogate him . . . he hoped he'd hold out, if it ever came to that. The king, he knew, had far darker methods of extracting information than torture. So he hadn't asked, hadn't said one word. And neither had Dorian.

He met Dorian's gaze. There was nothing kind in it. But Dorian said, "I'm trying, Chaol."

Trying, because Chaol's not consulting him on the plan to get Celaena out of Adarlan had been a breach of trust, and one that shamed him, though Dorian could never know that, either. "I know."

"And despite what happened, I'm fairly certain we're not enemies." Dorian's mouth quirked to the side.

You will always be my enemy. Celaena had screamed those words at Chaol the night Nehemia had died. Screamed it with ten years' worth

of conviction and hatred, a decade spent holding the world's greatest secret so deep within her that she'd become another person entirely.

Because Celaena was Aelin Ashryver Galathynius, heir to the throne and rightful Queen of Terrasen.

It made her his mortal enemy. It made her Dorian's enemy. Chaol still didn't know what to do about it, or what it meant for them, for the life he'd imagined for them. The future he'd once dreamed of was irrevocably gone.

He'd seen the deadness in her eyes that night in the tunnels, along with the wrath and exhaustion and sorrow. He'd seen her go over the edge when Nehemia died, and knew what she'd done to Grave in retribution. He didn't doubt for one heartbeat that she could snap again. There was such glittering darkness in her, an endless rift straight through her core.

Nehemia's death had shattered her. What *he* had done, his role in that death, had shattered her, too. He knew that. He just prayed that she could piece herself back together again. Because a broken, unpredictable assassin was one thing. But a queen . . .

"You look like you're going to be sick," Dorian said, bracing his forearms on the table. "Tell me what's wrong."

Chaol had been staring at nothing again. For a heartbeat, the weight of everything pressed so heavily upon him that he opened up his mouth.

But the boom of swords striking shields in salute echoed from the hallway, and Aedion Ashryver—the King of Adarlan's infamous General of the North and cousin to Aelin Galathynius—stalked into the Great Hall.

The hall fell silent, including his father and the king at the high table. Before Aedion was halfway across the room, Chaol was positioned at the bottom of the dais.

It wasn't that the young general was a threat. Rather, it was the way Aedion prowled toward the king's table, his shoulder-length golden hair gleaming in the torchlight as he smirked at them all.

Handsome was a light way of describing what Aedion was. Overwhelming was more like it. Towering and heavily muscled, Aedion was every inch the warrior rumor claimed him to be. Even though his clothes were mostly for function, Chaol could tell that the leather of his light armor was of fine make and exquisitely detailed. A white wolf pelt was slung across his broad shoulders, and a round shield had been strapped to his back—along with an ancient-looking sword.

But his face. And his eyes . . . Holy gods.

Chaol put a hand on his sword, schooling his features to remain neutral, disinterested, even as the Wolf of the North came close enough to slaughter him.

They were Celaena's eyes. Ashryver eyes. A stunning turquoise with a core of gold as bright as their hair. Their hair—even the shade of it was the same. They could have been twins, if Aedion weren't twenty-four and tanned from years in the snow-bright mountains of Terrasen.

Why had the king bothered to keep Aedion alive all those years ago? Why bother to forge him into one of his fiercest generals? Aedion was a prince of the Ashryver royal line and had been raised in the Galathynius household—and yet he served the king.

Aedion's grin remained as he stopped before the high table and sketched a bow shallow enough that Chaol was momentarily stunned. "Majesty," the general said, those damning eyes alight.

Chaol looked at the high table to see if the king, if anyone, noticed the similarities that could doom not only Aedion but also Chaol and Dorian and everyone he cared about. His father just gave him a small, satisfied smile.

But the king was frowning. "I expected you a month ago."

Aedion actually had the nerve to shrug. "Apologies. The Staghorns were slammed with a final winter storm. I left when I could."

Every person in the hall held their breath. Aedion's temper and insolence were near-legendary—part of the reason he was stationed in the far reaches of the North. Chaol had always thought it wise to keep

him far from Rifthold, especially as Aedion seemed to be a bit of a two-faced bastard, and the Bane—Aedion’s legion—was notorious for its skill and brutality, but now . . . why had the king summoned him to the capital?

The king picked up his goblet, swirling the wine inside. “I didn’t receive word that your legion was here.”

“They’re not.”

Chaol braced for the execution order, praying he wouldn’t be the one to do it. The king said, “I told you to bring them, General.”

“Here I was, thinking you wanted the pleasure of my company.” When the king growled, Aedion said, “They’ll be here within a week or so. I didn’t want to miss any of the fun.” Aedion again shrugged those massive shoulders. “At least I didn’t come empty-handed.” He snapped his fingers behind him and a page rushed in, bearing a large satchel. “Gifts from the North, courtesy of the last rebel camp we sacked. You’ll enjoy them.”

The king rolled his eyes and waved a hand at the page. “Send them to my chambers. Your *gifts*, Aedion, tend to offend polite company.” A low chuckle—from Aedion, from some men at the king’s table. Oh, Aedion was dancing a dangerous line. At least Celaena had the good sense to keep her mouth shut around the king.

Considering the trophies the king had collected from Celaena as Champion, the items in that satchel wouldn’t be mere gold and jewels. But to collect heads and limbs from Aedion’s own people, Celaena’s people . . .

“I have a council meeting tomorrow; I want you there, General,” the king said.

Aedion put a hand on his chest. “Your will is mine, Majesty.”

Chaol had to clamp down on his terror as he beheld what glinted on Aedion’s finger. A black ring—the same that the king, Perrington, and most of those under their control wore. *That* explained why the

king allowed the insolence: when it came down to it, the king's will truly was Aedion's.

Chaol kept his face blank as the king gave him a curt nod—dismissal. Chaol silently bowed, now all too eager to get back to his table. Away from the king—from the man who held the fate of their world in his bloodied hands. Away from his father, who saw too much. Away from the general, who was now making his rounds through the hall, clapping men on the shoulder, winking at women.

Chaol had mastered the horror roiling in his gut by the time he sank back into his seat and found Dorian frowning. “Gifts indeed,” the prince muttered. “Gods, he’s insufferable.”

Chaol didn’t disagree. Despite the king’s black ring, Aedion still seemed to have a mind of his own—and was as wild off the battlefield as he was on it. He usually made Dorian look like a celibate when it came to finding debauched ways to amuse himself. Chaol had never spent much time with Aedion, nor wanted to, but Dorian had known him for some time now. Since—

They’d met as children. When Dorian and his father had visited Terrasen in the days before the royal family was slaughtered. When Dorian had met Aelin—met Celaena.

It was good that Celaena wasn’t here to see what Aedion had become. Not just because of the ring. To turn on your own people—

Aedion slid onto the bench across from them, grinning. A predator assessing prey. “You two were sitting at this same table the last time I saw you. Good to know some things don’t change.”

Gods, that face. It was Celaena’s face—the other side of the coin. The same arrogance, the same unchecked anger. But where Celaena crackled with it, Aedion seemed to . . . pulse. And there was something nastier, far more bitter in Aedion’s face.

Dorian rested his forearms on the table and gave a lazy smile. “Hello, Aedion.”

Aedion ignored him and reached for a roast leg of lamb, his black ring glinting. “I like the new scar, Captain,” he said, jerking his chin toward the slender white line across Chaol’s cheek. The scar Celaena had given to him the night Nehemia died and she’d tried to kill him—now a permanent reminder of everything he’d lost. Aedion went on, “Looks like they didn’t chew you up just yet. And they finally gave you a big-boy sword, too.”

Dorian said, “I’m glad to see that storm didn’t dim your spirits.”

“Weeks inside with nothing to do but train and bed women? It was a miracle I bothered to come down from the mountains.”

“I didn’t realize you bothered to do anything unless it served your best interests.”

A low laugh. “There’s that charming Havilliard spirit.” Aedion dug into his meal, and Chaol was about to demand why he was bothering to sit with them—other than to torment them, as he’d always liked to do when the king wasn’t looking—when he noticed that Dorian was staring.

Not at Aedion’s sheer size or armor, but at his face, at his eyes . . .

“Shouldn’t you be at some party or other?” Chaol said to Aedion. “I’m surprised you’re lingering when your usual enticements await in the city.”

“Is that your courtly way of asking for an invitation to my gathering tomorrow, Captain? Surprising. You’ve always implied that you were above my sort of party.” Those turquoise eyes narrowed and he gave Dorian a sly grin. “You, however—the last party I threw worked out *very* well for you. Redheaded twins, if I recall correctly.”

“You’ll be disappointed to learn I’ve moved on from that sort of existence,” Dorian said.

Aedion dug back into his meal. “More for me, then.”

Chaol clenched his fists under the table. Celaena had not exactly been virtuous in the past ten years, but she’d never killed a natural-born

citizen of Terrasen. Had refused to, actually. And Aedion had always been a gods-damned bastard, but now . . . Did he know what he wore on his finger? Did he know that despite his arrogance, his defiance and insolence, the king could *make* him bend to his will whenever he pleased? He couldn't warn Aedion, not without potentially getting himself and everyone he cared about killed should Aedion truly have allegiance to the king.

"How are things in Terrasen?" Chaol asked, because Dorian was studying Aedion again.

"What would you like me to tell you? That we are well-fed after a brutal winter? That we did not lose many to sickness?" Aedion snorted. "I suppose hunting rebels is always fun, if you've a taste for it. Hopefully His Majesty has summoned the Bane to the South to finally give them some real action." As Aedion reached for the water, Chaol glimpsed the hilt of his sword. Dull metal flecked with dings and scratches, its pommel nothing more than a bit of cracked, rounded horn. Such a simple, plain sword for one of the greatest warriors in Erilea.

"The Sword of Orynth," Aedion drawled. "A gift from His Majesty upon my first victory."

Everyone knew that sword. It had been an heirloom of Terrasen's royal family, passed from ruler to ruler. By right, it was Celaena's. It had belonged to her father. For Aedion to possess it, considering what that sword now did, the lives it took, was a slap in the face to Celaena and to her family.

"I'm surprised you bother with such sentimentality," Dorian said.

"Symbols have power, Prince," Aedion said, pinning him with a stare. Celaena's stare—unyielding and alive with challenge. "You'd be surprised by the power this still wields in the North—what it does to convince people not to pursue foolhardy plans."

Perhaps Celaena's skills and cunning weren't unusual in her bloodline. But Aedion was an Ashryver, not a Galathynius—which meant

that his great-grandmother had been Mab, one of the three Fae-Queens, in recent generations crowned a goddess and renamed Deanna, Lady of the Hunt. Chaol swallowed hard.

Silence fell, taut as a bowstring. “Trouble between you two?” Aedion asked, biting into his meat. “Let me guess: a woman. The King’s Champion, perhaps? Rumor has it she’s . . . interesting. Is that why you’ve moved on from my sort of fun, princeling?” He scanned the hall. “I’d like to meet her, I think.”

Chaol fought the urge to grip his sword. “She’s away.”

Aedion instead gave Dorian a cruel smile. “Pity. Perhaps she might have convinced me to move on as well.”

“Mind your mouth,” Chaol snarled. He might have laughed had he not wanted to strangle the general so badly. Dorian merely drummed his fingers on the table. “And show some respect.”

Aedion chuckled, finishing off the lamb. “I am His Majesty’s faithful servant, as I have always been.” Those Ashryver eyes once more settled on Dorian. “Perhaps I’ll be your whore someday, too.”

“If you’re still alive by then,” Dorian purred.

Aedion went on eating, but Chaol could still feel his relentless focus pinned on them. “Rumor has it a Matron of a witch clan was killed on the premises not too long ago,” Aedion said casually. “She vanished, though her quarters indicated she’d put up a hell of a fight.”

Dorian said sharply, “What’s your interest in that?”

“I make it my business to know when the power brokers of the realm meet their end.”

A shiver spider-walked down Chaol’s spine. He knew little about the witches. Celaena had told him a few stories—and he’d always prayed they were exaggerated. But something like dread flickered across Dorian’s face.

Chaol leaned forward. “It’s none of your concern.”

Aedion again ignored him and winked at the prince. Dorian’s

nostrils flared, the only sign of the rage that was rising to the surface. That, and the air in the room shifted—brisker. Magic.

Chaol put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We're going to be late," he lied, but Dorian caught it. He had to get Dorian out—away from Aedion—and try to leash the disastrous storm that was brewing between the two men. "Rest well, Aedion." Dorian didn't bother saying anything, his sapphire eyes frozen.

Aedion smirked. "The party's tomorrow in Rifthold if you feel like reliving the good old days, Prince." Oh, the general knew exactly what buttons to push, and he didn't give a damn what a mess it made. It made him dangerous—deadly.

Especially where Dorian and his magic were concerned. Chaol forced himself to say good night to some of his men, to look casual and unconcerned as they walked from the dining hall. Aedion Ashryver had come to Rifthold, narrowly missing running into his long-lost cousin.

If Aedion knew Aelin was still alive, if he knew who and what she had become or what she had learned regarding the king's secret power, would he stand with her, or destroy her? Given his actions, given the ring he bore . . . Chaol didn't want the general anywhere near her. Anywhere near Terrasen, either.

He wondered how much blood would spill when Celaena learned what her cousin had done.

Chaol and Dorian walked in silence for most of the trek to the prince's tower. When they turned down an empty hallway and were certain no one could overhear them, Dorian said, "I didn't need you to step in."

"Aedion's a bastard," Chaol growled. The conversation could end there, and part of him was tempted to let it, but he made himself say, "I was worried you'd snap. Like you did in the passages." He loosed a tight breath. "Are you . . . stable?"

"Some days are better than others. Getting angry or frightened seems to set it off."

They entered the hallway that ended in the arched wooden door to Dorian's tower, but Chaol stopped him with an arm on his shoulder. "I don't want details," he murmured so the guards posted outside Dorian's door couldn't hear, "because I don't want my knowledge used against you. I know I've made mistakes, Dorian. Believe me, I know. But my priority has always been—and still is—keeping you protected."

Dorian stared at him for a long moment, cocking his head to the side. Chaol must have looked as miserable as he felt, because the prince's voice was almost gentle as he said, "Why did you really send her to Wendlyn?"

Agony punched through him, raw and razor-edged. But as much as he yearned to tell the prince about Celaena, as much as he wanted to unload all his secrets so it would fill the hole in his core, he couldn't. So he just said, "I sent her to do what needs to be done," and strode back down the hall. Dorian didn't call after him.

4

Manon pulled her bloodred cloak tightly around herself and pressed into the shadows of the closet, listening to the three men who had broken into her cottage.

She'd tasted the rising fear and rage on the wind all day and had spent the afternoon preparing. She'd been sitting on the thatched roof of the whitewashed cottage when she spotted their torches bobbing over the high grasses of the field. None of the villagers had tried to stop the three men—though none had joined them, either.

A Crochan witch had come to their little green valley in the north of Fenharrow, they'd said. In the weeks that she'd been living amongst them, carving out a miserable existence, she'd been waiting for this night. It was the same at every village she'd lived in or visited.

She held her breath, keeping still as a deer as one of the men—a tall, bearded farmer with hands the size of dinner plates—stepped into her bedroom. Even from the closet, she could smell the ale on his

breath—and the bloodlust. Oh, the villagers knew exactly what they planned to do with the witch who sold potions and charms from her back door, and who could predict the sex of a babe before it was due. She was surprised it had taken these men so long to work up the nerve to come here, to torment and then destroy what petrified them.

The farmer stopped in the middle of the room. “We know you’re here,” he coaxed, even as he stepped toward the bed, scanning every inch of the room. “We just want to talk. Some of the townsfolk are spooked, you see—more scared of you than you are of them, I bet.”

She knew better than to listen, especially as a dagger glinted behind his back while he peered under the bed. Always the same, at every backwater town and uptight mortal village.

As the man straightened, Manon slipped from the closet and into the darkness behind the bedroom door.

Muffled clinking and thudding told her enough about what the other two men were doing: not just looking for her, but stealing whatever they wanted. There wasn’t much to take; the cottage had already been furnished when she’d arrived, and all her belongings, by training and instinct, were in a sack in the corner of the closet she’d just vacated. Take nothing with you, leave nothing behind.

“We just want to talk, witch.” The man turned from the bed, finally noticing the closet. He smiled—in triumph, in anticipation.

With gentle fingers, Manon eased the bedroom door shut, so quietly the man didn’t notice as he headed for the closet. She’d oiled the hinges on every door in this house.

His massive hand gripped the closet doorknob, dagger now angled at his side. “Come out, little Crochan,” he crooned.

Silent as death, Manon slid up behind him. The fool didn’t even know she was there until she brought her mouth close to his ear and whispered, “Wrong kind of witch.”

The man whirled, slamming into the closet door. He raised the

dagger between them, his chest heaving. Manon merely smiled, her silver-white hair glinting in the moonlight.

He noticed the shut door then, drawing in breath to shout. But Manon smiled broader, and a row of dagger-sharp iron teeth pushed from the slits high in her gums, snapping down like armor. The man started, hitting the door behind him again, eyes so wide that white shone all around them. His dagger clattered on the floorboards.

And then, just to really make him soil his pants, she flicked her wrists in the air between them. The iron claws shot over her nails in a stinging, gleaming flash.

The man began whispering a plea to his soft-hearted gods as Manon let him back toward the lone window. Let him think he stood a chance while she stalked toward him, still smiling. The man didn't even scream before she ripped out his throat.

When she was done with him, she slipped through the bedroom door. The two men were still looting, still believing that all of this belonged to her. It had merely been an abandoned house—its previous owners dead or smart enough to leave this festering place.

The second man also didn't get the chance to scream before she gutted him with two swipes of her iron nails. But the third farmer came looking for his companions. And when he beheld her standing there, one hand twisted in his friend's insides, the other holding him to her as she used her iron teeth to tear out his throat, he ran.

The common, watery taste of the man, laced with violence and fear, coated her tongue, and she spat onto the wooden floorboards. But Manon didn't bother wiping away the blood slipping down her chin as she gave the remaining farmer a head start into the field of towering winter grass, so high that it was well over their heads.

She counted to ten, because she wanted to hunt, and had been that way since she tore through her mother's womb and came roaring and bloody into this world.

Because she was Manon Blackbeak, heir to the Blackbeak Witch-Clan, and she had been here for weeks, pretending to be a Crochan witch in the hope that it would flush out the real ones.

They were still out there, the self-righteous, insufferable Crochans, hiding as healers and wise-women. Her first, glorious kill had been a Crochan, no more than sixteen—the same age as Manon at the time. The dark-haired girl had been wearing the bloodred cloak that all Crochans were gifted upon their first bleeding—and the only good it had done was mark her as prey.

After Manon left the Crochan's corpse in that snow-blasted mountain pass, she'd taken the cloak as a trophy—and still wore it, over a hundred years later. No other Iron-teeth witch could have done it—because no other Iron-teeth witch would have dared incur the wrath of the three Matrons by wearing their eternal enemy's color. But from the day Manon stalked into Blackbeak Keep wearing the cloak and holding that Crochan heart in a box—a gift for her grandmother—it had been her sacred duty to hunt them down, one by one, until there were none left.

This was her latest rotation—six months in Fenharrow while the rest of her coven was spread through Melisande and northern Eyllwe under similar orders. But in the months that she'd prowled from village to village, she hadn't discovered a single Crochan. These farmers were the first bit of fun she'd had in weeks. And she would be damned if she didn't enjoy it.

Manon walked into the field, sucking the blood off her nails as she went. She slipped through the grasses, no more than shadow and mist.

She found the farmer lost in the middle of the field, softly bleating with fear. And when he turned, his bladder loosening at the sight of the blood and the iron teeth and the wicked, wicked smile, Manon let him scream all he wanted.

5

Celaena and Rowan rode down the dusty road that meandered between the boulder-spotted grasslands and into the southern foothills. She'd memorized enough maps of Wendlyn to know that they'd pass through them and then over the towering Cambrian Mountains that marked the border between mortal-ruled Wendlyn and the immortal lands of Queen Maeve.

The sun was setting as they ascended the foothills, the road growing rockier, bordered on one side by rather harrowing ravines. For a mile, she debated asking Rowan where he planned to stop for the night. But she was tired. Not just from the day, or the wine, or the riding.

In her bones, in her blood and breath and soul, she was so, so tired. Talking to anyone was too taxing. Which made Rowan the perfect companion: he didn't say a single word to her.

Twilight fell as the road brought them through a dense forest that spread into and over the mountains, the trees turning from cypress to

oak, from narrow to tall and proud, full of thickets and scattered mossy boulders. Even in the growing dark, the forest seemed to be breathing. The warm air hummed, leaving a metallic taste coating her tongue. Far behind them, thunder grumbled.

Wouldn't that be wonderful. Especially since Rowan was finally dismounting to make camp. From the look of his saddlebags, he didn't have a tent. Or bedrolls. Or blankets.

Perhaps it was now fair to assume that her visit with Maeve wasn't to be pleasant.

Neither of them spoke as they led their horses into the trees, just far enough off the road to be hidden from any passing travelers. Dumping their gear at the camp he'd selected, Rowan brought his mare to a nearby stream he must have heard with those pointed ears. He didn't falter one step in the growing dark, though Celaena certainly stubbed her toes against a few rocks and roots. Excellent eyesight, even in the dark—another Fae trait. One she could have if she—

No, she wasn't going to think about that. Not after what had happened on the other side of that portal. She'd shifted then—and it had been awful enough to remind her that she had no interest in ever doing it again.

After the horses drank, Rowan didn't wait for her as he took both mares back to the camp. She used the privacy to see to her own needs, then dropped to her knees on the grassy bank and drank her fill of the stream. Gods, the water tasted . . . new and ancient and powerful and delicious.

She drank until she understood the hole in her belly might very well be from hunger, then staggered back to camp, finding it by the gleam of Rowan's silver hair. He wordlessly handed her some bread and cheese, then returned to rubbing down the horses. She muttered a thank-you, but didn't bother offering to help as she plunked down against a towering oak.

When her belly had stopped hurting so much and she realized just

how loudly she'd been munching on the apple he'd also tossed her while feeding the horses, she mustered enough energy to say, "Are there so many threats in Wendlyn that we can't risk a fire?"

He sat against a tree and stretched his legs, crossing his ankles. "Not from mortals."

His first words to her since they'd left the city. It could have been an attempt to spook her, but she still did a mental inventory of all the weapons she carried. She wouldn't ask. Didn't want to know what manner of thing might crawl toward a fire.

The tangle of wood and moss and stone loomed, full of the rustling of heavy leaves, the gurgling of the swollen brook, the flapping of feathered wings. And there, lurking over the rim of a nearby boulder, were three sets of small, glowing eyes.

The hilt of her dagger was in her palm a heartbeat later. But they just stared at her. Rowan didn't seem to notice. He only leaned his head against the oak trunk.

They had always known her, the Little Folk. Even when Adarlan's shadow had covered the continent, they still recognized what she was. Small gifts left at campsites—a fresh fish, a leaf full of blackberries, a crown of flowers. She'd ignored them, and stayed out of Oakwald Forest as much as she could.

The faeries kept their unblinking vigil. Wishing she hadn't downed the food so quickly, Celaena watched them back, ready to spring to a defensive position. Rowan hadn't moved.

What ancient oaths the faeries honored in Terrasen might be disregarded here. Even as she thought it, more eyes glowed between the trees. More silent witnesses to her arrival. Because Celaena was Fae, or something like a mongrel. Her great-grandmother had been Maeve's sister, proclaimed a goddess when she died. Ridiculous, really. Mab had been very much mortal when she tied her life to the human prince who loved her so fiercely.

She wondered how much these creatures knew about the wars that

had destroyed her land, about the Fae and faeries that had been hunted down, about the burning of the ancient forests and the butchering of the sacred stags of Terrasen. She wondered if they had ever learned what became of their brethren in the West.

She didn't know how she found it in herself to care. But they seemed so . . . curious. Surprising even herself, Celaena whispered into the humming night, "They still live."

All those eyes vanished. When she glanced at Rowan, he hadn't opened his eyes. But she had the sense that the warrior had been aware the entire time.

6

Dorian Havilliard stood before his father's breakfast table, his hands held behind his back. The king had arrived moments ago but hadn't told him to sit. Once Dorian might have already said something about it. But having magic, getting drawn into whatever mess Celaena was in, seeing that other world in the secret tunnels . . . all of that had changed everything. The best he could do these days was maintain a low profile—to keep his father or anyone else from looking too long in his direction. So Dorian stood before the table and waited.

The King of Adarlan finished off the roast chicken and sipped from whatever was in his bloodred glass. "You're quiet this morning, Prince." The conqueror of Erilea reached for a platter of smoked fish.

"I was waiting for you to speak, Father."

Night-black eyes shifted toward him. "Unusual, indeed."

Dorian tensed. Only Celaena and Chaol knew the truth about his magic—and Chaol had shut him out so completely that Dorian didn't

feel like attempting to explain himself to his friend. But this castle was full of spies and sycophants who wanted nothing more than to use whatever knowledge they could to advance their position. Including selling out their Crown Prince. Who knew who'd seen him in the hallways or the library, or who had discovered that stack of books he'd hidden in Celaena's rooms? He'd since moved them down to the tomb, where he went every other night—not for answers to the questions that plagued him but just for an hour of pure silence.

His father resumed eating. He'd been in his father's private chambers only a few times in his life. They could be a manor house of their own, with their library and dining room and council chamber. They occupied an entire wing of the glass castle—a wing opposite from Dorian's mother. His parents had never shared a bed, and he didn't particularly want to know more than that.

He found his father watching him, the morning sun through the curved wall of glass making every scar and nick on the king's face even more gruesome. "You're to entertain Aedion Ashryver today."

Dorian kept his composure as best he could. "Dare I ask why?"

"Since General Ashryver failed to bring his men here, it appears he has some spare time while awaiting the Bane's arrival. It would be beneficial to you both to become better acquainted—especially when your choice of friends of late has been so . . . common."

The cold fury of his magic clawed its way up his spine. "With all due respect, Father, I have two meetings to prepare for, and—"

"It's not open for debate." His father kept eating. "General Ashryver has been notified, and you will meet him outside your chambers at noon."

Dorian knew he should keep quiet, but he found himself asking, "Why do you tolerate Aedion? Why keep him alive—why make him a general?" He'd been unable to stop wondering about it since the man's arrival.

His father gave a small, knowing smile. “Because Aedion’s rage is a useful blade, and he is capable of keeping his people in line. He will not risk their slaughter, not when he has lost so much. He has quelled many a would-be rebellion in the North from that fear, for he is well aware that it would be his own people—the civilians—who suffered first.”

He shared *blood* with a man this cruel. But Dorian said, “It’s still surprising that you’d keep a general almost as a captive—as little more than a slave. Controlling him through fear alone seems potentially dangerous.”

Indeed, he wondered if his father had told Aedion about Celaena’s mission to Wendlyn—homeland of Aedion’s royal bloodline, where Aedion’s cousins the Ashryvers still ruled. Though Aedion trumpeted about his various victories over rebels and acted like he practically owned half the empire himself . . . How much did Aedion remember of his kin across the sea?

His father said, “I have my ways of leashing Aedion should I need to. For now, his brazen irreverence amuses me.” His father jerked his chin toward the door. “I will not be amused, however, if you miss your appointment with him today.”

And just like that, his father fed him to the Wolf.



Despite Dorian’s offers to show Aedion the menagerie, the kennels, the stables—even the damned library—the general only wanted to do one thing: walk through the gardens. Aedion claimed he was feeling restless and sluggish from too much food the night before, but the smile he gave Dorian suggested otherwise.

Aedion didn’t bother talking to him, too preoccupied with humming bawdy tunes and inspecting the various women they passed. He’d dropped the half-civilized veneer only once, when they’d been

striding down a narrow path flanked by towering rosebushes—stunning in the summer, but deadly in the winter—and the guards had been a turn behind, blind for the moment. Just enough time for Aedion to subtly trip Dorian into one of the thorny walls, still humming his lewd songs.

A quick maneuver had kept Dorian from falling face-first into the thorns, but his cloak had ripped, and his hand stung. Rather than give the general the satisfaction of seeing him hiss and inspect his cuts, Dorian had tucked his barking, freezing fingers into his pockets as the guards rounded the corner.

They spoke only when Aedion paused by a fountain and braced his scarred hands on his hips, assessing the garden beyond as though it were a battlefield. Aedion smirked at the six guards lurking behind, his eyes bright—so bright, Dorian thought, and so strangely familiar as the general said, “A prince needs an escort in his own palace? I’m insulted they didn’t send more guards to protect you from me.”

“You think you could take six men?”

The Wolf had let out a low chuckle and shrugged, the scarred hilt of the Sword of Orynth catching the near-blinding sunlight. “I don’t think I should tell you, in case your father ever decides my usefulness is not worth my temperament.”

Some of the guards behind them murmured, but Dorian said, “Probably not.”

And that was it—that was all Aedion said to him for the rest of the cold, miserable walk. Until the general gave him an edged smile and said, “Better get that looked at.” That was when Dorian realized his right hand was still bleeding. Aedion just turned away. “Thanks for the walk, Prince,” the general said over his shoulder, and it felt more like a threat than anything.

Aedion didn’t act without a reason. Perhaps the general had convinced his father to force this excursion. But for what purpose, Dorian couldn’t grasp. Unless Aedion merely wanted to get a feel for what sort

of man Dorian had become and how well Dorian could play the game. He wouldn't put it past the warrior to have done it just to assess a potential ally or threat—Aedion, for all his arrogance, had a cunning mind. He probably viewed court life as another sort of battlefield.

Dorian let Chaol's hand-selected guards lead him back into the wonderfully warm castle, then dismissed them with a nod. Chaol hadn't come today, and he was grateful—after that conversation about his magic, after Chaol refused to speak about Celaena, Dorian wasn't sure what else was left for them to talk about. He didn't believe for one moment that Chaol would willingly sanction the deaths of innocent men, no matter whether they were friends or enemies. Chaol had to know, then, that Celaena wouldn't assassinate the Ashryver royals, for whatever reasons of her own. But there was no point in bothering to talk to Chaol, not when his friend was keeping secrets, too.

Dorian mulled over his friend's puzzle-box of words again as he walked into the healers' catacombs, the smell of rosemary and mint wafting past. It was a warren of supply and examination rooms, kept far from the prying eyes of the glass castle high above. There *was* another ward high in the glass castle, for those who wouldn't deign to make the trek down here, but this was where the best healers in Rifthold—and Adarlan—had honed and practiced their craft for a thousand years. The pale stones seemed to breathe the essence of centuries of drying herbs, giving the subterranean halls a pleasant, open feeling.

Dorian found a small workroom where a young woman was hunched over a large oak table, a variety of glass jars, scales, mortars, and pestles before her, along with vials of liquid, hanging herbs, and bubbling pots over small, solitary flames. The healing arts were one of the few that his father hadn't completely outlawed ten years ago—though once, he'd heard, they'd been even more powerful. Once, healers had used magic to mend and save. Now they were left with whatever nature provided them.

Dorian stepped into the room and the young woman looked up from the book she was scanning, a finger pausing on the page. Not beautiful, but—pretty. Clean, elegant lines, chestnut hair woven in a braid, and golden-tan skin that suggested at least one family member came from Eyllwe. “Can I—” She got a good look at him, then, and dropped into a bow. “Your Highness,” she said, a flush creeping up the smooth column of her neck.

Dorian held up his bloodied hand. “Thornbush.” *Rosebush* made his cuts seem that much more pathetic.

She kept her eyes averted, biting her full bottom lip. “Of course.” She gestured a slender hand toward the wooden chair before the table. “Please. Unless—unless you’d rather go to a proper examination room?”

Dorian normally hated dealing with the stammering and scrambling, but this young woman was still so red, so soft-spoken that he said, “This is fine,” and slid into the chair.

The silence lay heavy on him as she hurried through the workroom, first changing her dirty white apron, then washing her hands for a good long minute, then gathering all manner of bandages and tins of salve, then a bowl of hot water and clean rags, and then finally, finally pulling a chair around the table to face him.

They didn’t speak, either, when she carefully washed and then examined his hand. But he found himself watching her hazel eyes, the sureness of her fingers, and the blush that remained on her neck and face. “The hand is—very complex,” she murmured at last, studying the cuts. “I just wanted to make sure that nothing was damaged and that there weren’t any thorns lodged in there.” She swiftly added, “Your Highness.”

“I think it looks worse than it actually is.”

With a feather-light touch, she smeared a cloudy salve on his hand, and, like a damn fool, he winced. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “It’s to disinfect the cuts. Just in case.” She seemed to curl in on herself, as if he’d give the order to hang her merely for that.

He fumbled for the words, then said, "I've dealt with worse."

It sounded stupid coming out, and she paused for a moment before reaching for the bandages. "I know," she said, and glanced up at him.

Well, damn. Weren't those eyes just stunning. She quickly looked back down, gently wrapping his hand. "I'm assigned to the southern wing of the castle—and I'm often on night duty."

That explained why she looked so familiar. She'd healed not only him that night a month ago but also Celaena, Chaol, Fleetfoot . . . had been there for *all* of their injuries these past seven months. "I'm sorry, I can't remember your name—"

"It's Sorscha," she said, though there was no anger in it, as there should have been. The spoiled prince and his entitled friends, too absorbed in their own lives to bother learning the name of the healer who had patched them up again and again.

She finished wrapping his hand and he said, "In case we didn't say it often enough, thank you."

Those green-flecked brown eyes lifted again. A tentative smile. "It's an honor, Prince." She began gathering up her supplies.

Taking that as his cue to leave, he stood and flexed his fingers. "Feels good."

"They're minor wounds, but keep an eye on them." Sorscha dumped the bloodied water down the sink in the back of the room. "And you needn't come all the way down here the next time. Just—just send word, Your Highness. We're happy to attend to you." She curtsied low, with the long-limbed grace of a dancer.

"You've been responsible for the southern stone wing all this time?" The question within the question was clear enough: *You've seen everything? Every inexplicable injury?*

"We keep records of our patients," Sorscha said softly—so no one else passing by the open doorway could hear. "But sometimes we forget to write down everything."

She hadn't told anyone what she'd seen, the things that didn't add up. Dorian gave her a swift bow of thanks and strode from the room. How many others, he wondered, had seen more than they let on? He didn't want to know.



Sorscha's fingers, thankfully, had stopped shaking by the time the Crown Prince left the catacombs. By some lingering grace of Silba, goddess of healers and bringer of peace—and gentle deaths—she'd managed to keep them from trembling while she patched up his hand, too. Sorscha leaned against the counter and loosed a long breath.

The cuts hadn't merited a bandage, but she'd been selfish and foolish and had wanted to keep the beautiful prince in that chair for as long as she could manage.

He didn't even know who she was.

She'd been appointed full healer a year ago, and had been called to attend to the prince, the captain, and their friend countless times. And the Crown Prince still had no idea who she was.

She hadn't lied to him—about failing to keep records of everything. But she remembered it all. Especially that night a month ago, when the three of them had been bloodied up and filthy, the girl's hound injured, too, with no explanation and no one raising a fuss. And the girl, their friend . . .

The King's Champion. That's who she was.

Lover, it seemed, of both the prince and his captain at one time or another. Sorscha had helped Amithy tend to the young woman after the brutal duel to win her title. Occasionally, she'd checked on the girl and found the prince holding her in bed.

She'd pretended it didn't matter, because the Crown Prince was notorious where women were involved, but . . . it hadn't stopped the sinking ache in her chest. Then things had changed, and when the girl