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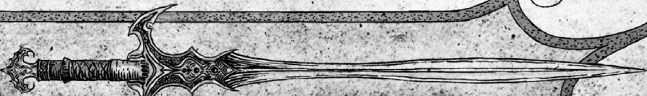
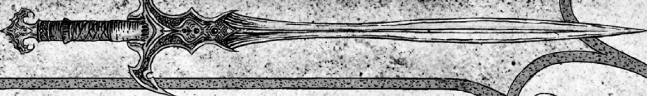
*To all my readers from FictionPress—
for being with me at the beginning and staying long after the end.
Thank you for everything.*

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CRILEA



THE FROZEN WASTES

Amaroth

RUINS OF MORLA

JUNGLE OF MORLA

THE WESTERN WASTES

BRIARCLIFF

Ghe Witch Kingdom

THE DESERTED LAND

Ghe Singing Sands

THE RED DESERT

YURPA

Oasis of Barg

Silent Assassins

Noll

Ghe Black Dunes

Ghe Cleaver

Gulf of Dro

XANDRIA

Volcano Flows

Ghe Black Sands of Roth



The Narrow Sea

To the Southern Continent

To Wendlyn

Great Ocean

North Sea

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.

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 Sardothen* 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.

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 pick-axes 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.

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 steady 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 descendents 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.

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.

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