



the
ASSASSIN
and the
DESERT

a THRONE *of* GLASS *novella*

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BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY
LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK SYDNEY

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Chapter One

There was nothing left in the world except sand and wind.

At least, that's how it seemed to Celaena Sardothien as she stood atop the crimson dune and gazed across the desert. Even with the wind, the heat was stifling, and sweat made her many layers of clothes cling to her body. But sweating, her nomad guide had told her, was a good thing—it was when you didn't sweat that the Red Desert became deadly. Sweat reminded you to drink. When the heat evaporated your perspiration before you could realize you were sweating, that's when you could cross into dehydration and not know it.

Oh, the *miserable* heat. It invaded every pore of her, made her head throb and her bones ache. The muggy warmth of Skull's Bay had been nothing compared to this. What she wouldn't give for just the briefest of cool breezes!

Beside her, the nomad guide pointed a gloved finger toward the southwest. "The *sessiz suikast* are there." *Sessiz suikast*. The Silent Assassins—the legendary order that she'd been sent here to train with.

"To learn obedience and discipline," Arobynn Hamel had said. *In the height of summer in the Red Desert* was what he'd failed to add. It was a punishment. Two months ago, when Arobynn had sent Celaena along with Sam Cortland to Skull's Bay on an unknown errand, they'd discovered that he'd actually dispatched them to trade in slaves. Needless to say, that hadn't sat well with Celaena or Sam, despite their occupation. So they'd freed the slaves, deciding to damn the consequences. But now . . . As punishments went, this was probably the worst. Given the bruises and cuts that were still healing on her face a month after Arobynn had bestowed them, that was saying something.

Celaena scowled. She pulled the scarf a bit higher over her mouth and nose as she took a step down the dune. Her legs strained against the sliding sand, but it was a welcome freedom after the harrowing trek through the Singing Sands, where each grain had hummed and whined and moaned. They'd spent a whole day monitoring each step, careful to keep the sand beneath them ringing in harmony. Or else, the nomad had told her, the sands could dissolve into quicksand.

Celaena descended the dune, but paused when she didn't hear her guide's footsteps. "Aren't you coming?"

The man remained atop the dune, and pointed again to the horizon. "Two

miles that way.” His use of the common tongue was a bit unwieldy, but she understood him well enough.

She pulled down the scarf from her mouth, wincing as a gust of sand stung her sweaty face. “I paid you to take me there.”

“Two miles,” he said, adjusting the large pack on his back. The scarf around his head obscured his tanned features, but she could still see the fear in his eyes.

Yes, yes, the *sessiz suikast* were feared and respected in the desert. It had been a miracle that she’d found a guide willing to take her this close to their fortress. Of course, offering gold had helped. But the nomads viewed the *sessiz suikast* as little less than shadows of death—and apparently, her guide would go no farther.

She studied the westward horizon. She could see nothing beyond dunes and sand that rippled like the surface of a windblown sea.

“Two miles,” the nomad said behind her. “They will find you.”

Celaena turned to ask him another question, but he had already disappeared over the other side of the dune. Cursing him, she tried to swallow, but failed. Her mouth was too dry. She had to start now, or else she’d need to set up her tent to sleep out the unforgiving midday and afternoon heat.

Two miles. How long could that take?

Taking a sip from her unnervingly light waterskin, Celaena pulled her scarf back over her mouth and nose and began walking.

The only sound was the wind hissing through the sand.

Hours later, Celaena found herself using all of her self-restraint to avoid leaping into the courtyard pools or kneeling to drink at one of the little rivers running along the floor. No one had offered her water upon her arrival, and she didn’t think her current escort was inclined to do so either as he led her through the winding halls of the red sandstone fortress.

The two miles had felt more like twenty. She had been just about to stop and set up her tent when she’d crested a dune and the lush green trees and adobe fortress had spread before her, hidden in an oasis nestled between two monstrous sand dunes.

After all that, she was parched. But she was Celaena Sardothien, Adarlan’s greatest Assassin. She had a reputation to uphold.

She kept her senses alert as they walked farther into the fortress—taking in exits and windows, noting where sentries were stationed. They passed a row of

open-air training rooms in which she could see people from all kingdoms and of all ages sparring or exercising or just sitting quietly, lost in meditation. They climbed a narrow flight of stairs that went up and up into a large building. The shade of the stairwell was wonderfully cool. But then they entered a long, enclosed hall, and the heat wrapped around her like a blanket.

For a fortress of supposedly silent assassins, the place was fairly noisy, with the clatter of weapons from the training rooms, the buzzing of insects in the many trees and bushes, the chatter of birds, the gurgle of all that crystal-clear water running through every room and hall.

They approached an open set of doors at the end of the hallway. Her escort—a middle-aged man flecked with scars that stood out like chalk against his tan skin—said nothing to her. Beyond the doors, the interior was a mixture of shadow and light. They entered a giant chamber flanked by blue-painted wooden pillars that supported a mezzanine on either side. A glance into the darkness of the balcony informed her that there were figures lurking there—watching, waiting. There were more in the shadows of the columns. Whoever they thought she was, they certainly weren't underestimating her. Good.

A narrow mosaic of green and blue glass tiles wove through the floor toward the dais, echoing the little rivers on the lower level. Atop the dais, seated among cushions and potted palms, was a white-robed man.

The Mute Master. She had expected him to be ancient, but he seemed to be around fifty. She kept her chin held high as they approached him, following the tile path in the floor. She couldn't tell if the Master's skin had always been that tan or if it was from the sun. He smiled slightly—he'd probably been handsome in his youth. Sweat oozed down Celaena's spine. Though the Master had no visible weapons, the two servants fanning him with palm leaves were armed to the teeth. Her escort stopped a safe distance from the Master and bowed.

Celaena did the same, and when she raised herself, she removed the hood from over her hair. She was sure it was a mess, and disgustingly greasy after two weeks in the desert with no water to bathe in, but she wasn't here to impress him with her beauty.

The Mute Master looked her up and down, and then nodded. Her escort nudged her with an elbow, and Celaena cleared her dry throat as she stepped forward.

She knew the Mute Master wouldn't say anything; his self-imposed silence was well-known. It was incumbent upon her to make the introduction. Arobynn had told her exactly what to say—*ordered* her was more like it. There would be no disguises, no masks, no fake names. Since she had shown such disregard for

Arobynn's best interests, he no longer had any inclination to protect hers. She'd debated for weeks how she might find a way to protect her identity—to keep these strangers from knowing who she was—but Arobynn's orders had been simple: she had one month to win the Mute Master's respect. And if she didn't return home with his letter of approval—a letter about *Celaena Sardothien*—she'd better find a new city to live in. Possibly a new continent.

“Thank you for granting me an audience, Master of the Silent Assassins,” she said, silently cursing the stiffness of her words.

She put a hand over her heart and dropped to both knees. “I am Celaena Sardothien, protégée of Arobynn Hamel, King of the Northern Assassins.” Adding “Northern” seemed appropriate; she didn't think the Mute Master would be much pleased to learn that Arobynn called himself King of *all* the Assassins. But whether or not it surprised him, his face revealed nothing, though she sensed some of the people in the shadows shifting on their feet.

“My master sent me here to beseech you to train me,” she said, chafing at the words. Train *her*! She lowered her head so the Master wouldn't see the ire on her face. “I am yours.” She tilted her palms face up in a gesture of supplication.

Nothing.

Warmth worse than the heat of the desert singed her cheeks. She kept her head down, her arms still upheld. Cloth rustled, then near-silent steps echoed through the chamber. At last, two bare, brown feet stopped before her.

A dry finger tilted her chin up, and Celaena found herself staring into the sea-green eyes of the Master. She didn't dare move. With one movement, the Master could snap her neck. This was a test—a test of trust, she realized.

She willed herself into stillness, focusing on the details of his face to avoid thinking about how vulnerable she was. Sweat beaded along the border of his dark hair, which was cropped close to his head. It was impossible to tell what kingdom he hailed from; his hazelnut skin suggested Eyllwe. But his elegant, almond-shaped eyes suggested one of the countries in the distant southern continent. Regardless, how had he wound up here?

She braced herself as his long fingers pushed back the loose strands of her braided hair, revealing the yellowing bruises still lingering around her eyes and cheeks, and the narrow arc of the scab along her cheekbone. Had Arobynn sent word that she would be coming? Had he told him the circumstances under which she'd been packed off? The Master didn't seem at all surprised by her arrival.

But the Master's eyes narrowed, his lips forming a tight line as he looked at

the remnants of the bruises on the other side of her face. She was lucky that Arobynn was skilled enough to keep his blows from permanently marring her face. A twinge of guilt went through her as she wondered if Sam had healed as well. In the three days following her beating, she hadn't seen him around the Keep. She'd blacked out before Arobynn could deal with her companion. And since that night, even during her trip out here, everything had been a haze of rage and sorrow and bone-deep weariness, as if she were dreaming while awake.

She calmed her thundering heart just as the Master released her face and stepped back. He motioned with a hand for her to rise, which she did, to the relief of her aching knees.

The Master gave her a crooked smile. She would have echoed the expression—but an instant later he snapped his fingers, triggering four men to charge at her.

Chapter Two

They didn't have weapons, but their intent was clear enough. The first man, clad in the loose, layered clothing that everyone here wore, reached her and she dodged the sweeping blow aimed at her face. His arm shot past her, and she grabbed it by the wrist and bicep, locking and twisting his arm so he grunted with pain. She whirled him around, careening him into the second attacker hard enough that the two men went tumbling to the ground.

Celaena leapt back, landing where her escort had been standing only seconds before, careful to avoid crashing into the Master. This was another test—a test to see at what level she might begin her training. And if she was worthy.

Of course she was worthy. She was Celaena Sardothien, gods be damned.

The third man pulled out two crescent-shaped daggers from the folds of his beige tunic and slashed at her. Her layered clothing was too cumbersome for her to dart away fast enough, so as he swiped for her face, she bent back. Her spine strained, but the two blades passed overhead, slicing through an errant strand of her hair. She dropped to the ground and lashed out with a leg, sweeping the man off his feet.

The fourth man, though, had come up behind her, a curved blade flashing in his hand as he made to plunge it through her head. She rolled, and the sword struck stone, sparking.

By the time she got to her feet, he'd raised the sword again. She caught his feint to the left before he struck at her right. She danced aside. The man was still swinging when she drove the base of her palm straight into his nose and slammed her other fist into his gut. The man dropped to the floor, blood gushing from his nose. She panted, the air ragged in her already-burning throat. She really, *really* needed water.

None of the four men on the ground moved. The Master began smiling, and it was then that the others gathered around the chamber stepped closer to the light. Men and women, all tan, though their hair showed the range of the various kingdoms on the continent. Celaena inclined her head. None of them nodded back. Celaena kept one eye on the four men before her as they got to their feet, sheathed their weapons, and stalked back to the shadows. Hopefully they wouldn't take it personally.

She scanned the shadows again, bracing herself for more assailants. Nearby, a young woman watched her, and she flashed Celaena a conspirator's grin. Celaena tried not to look too interested, though the girl was one of the most stunning people she'd ever beheld. It wasn't just her wine-red hair or the color of her eyes, a red brown Celaena had never seen before. No, it was the girl's armor that initially caught her interest: ornate to the point of probably being useless, but still a work of art.

The right shoulder was fashioned into a snarling wolf's head, and her helmet, tucked into the crook of her arm, featured a wolf hunched over the noseguard. Another wolf's head had been molded into the pommel of her broadsword. On anyone else, the armor might have looked flamboyant and ridiculous, but on the girl . . . There was a strange, boyish sort of innocence to her, and that was what made her so striking.

Still, Celaena wondered how it was possible not to be sweltering to death inside all that armor.

The Master clapped Celaena on the shoulder and beckoned to the girl to come forward. Not to attack—a friendly invitation. The girl's armor clinked as it moved, but her boots were near-silent.

The Master used his hands to form a series of motions between the girl and Celaena. The girl bowed low, then gave her that wicked grin again. "I'm Ansel," she said, her voice bright, amused. She had a barely perceptible lilt to her accent that Celaena couldn't place. "Looks like we're sharing a room while you're here." The Master gestured again, his calloused, scarred fingers creating rudimentary gestures that Ansel could somehow decipher. "Say, how long will that be, actually?"

Celaena fought her frown. "One month." She inclined her head to the Master. "If you allow me to stay that long."

With the month that it took to get here, and the month it would take to get home, she'd be away from Rifthold three months before she returned.

The Master merely nodded and walked back to the cushions atop the dais. "That means you can stay," Ansel whispered, and then touched Celaena's shoulder with an armor-clad hand. Apparently not all the assassins here were under a vow of silence—or had a sense of personal space. "You'll start training tomorrow," Ansel went on. "At dawn."

The Master sank onto the cushions, and Celaena almost sagged with relief. Arobynn had made her think that convincing him to train her would be nearly impossible. Fool. Pack her off to the desert to suffer, would he!

"Thank you," Celaena said to the Master, keenly aware of the eyes

watching her in the hall as she bowed again. He waved her away.

“Come,” Ansel said, her hair shimmering in a ray of sunlight. “I suppose you’ll want a bath before you do anything else. *I* certainly would, if I were you.” Ansel gave her a smile that stretched the splattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks.

Celaena glanced sidelong at the girl and her ornate armor, and followed her from the room. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard in weeks,” she said with a grin.

Alone with Ansel as they strode through the halls, Celaena keenly felt the absence of the long daggers usually sheathed in her belt. But they’d been taken from her at the gate, along with her sword and her pack. She let her hands dangle at her sides, ready to react to the slightest movement from her guide. Whether or not Ansel noticed Celaena’s readiness to fight her, the girl swung her arms casually, her armor clanking with the movement.

Her roommate. That was an unfortunate surprise. Sharing a room with Sam for a few nights was one thing. But a month with a complete stranger? Celaena studied Ansel out of the corner of her eye. She was slightly taller, but Celaena couldn’t see much else about her, thanks to the armor. She’d never spent much time around other girls, save the courtesans that Arobynn invited to the Keep for parties or took to the theater, and most of them were not the sort of person that Celaena cared to know. There were no other female assassins in Arobynn’s guild. But here . . . in addition to Ansel, there had been just as many women as men. In the Keep, there was no mistaking who she was. Here, she was just another face in the crowd.

For all she knew, Ansel might be better than her. The thought didn’t sit well.

“So,” Ansel said, her brows rising. “Celaena Sardothien.”

“Yes?”

Ansel shrugged—or at least shrugged as well as she could, given the armor. “I thought you’d be . . . more dramatic.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Celaena said, not sounding very sorry at all. Ansel steered them up a short staircase, then down a long hall. Children popped in and out of the rooms along the passage, buckets and brooms and mops in hand. The youngest looked about eight, the eldest about twelve.

“Acolytes,” Ansel said in response to Celaena’s silent question. “Cleaning the rooms of the older assassins is part of their training. Teaches them responsibility and humility. Or something like that.” Ansel winked at a child who gaped up at her as she passed. Indeed, several of the children stared after

Ansel, their eyes wide with wonder and respect; Ansel must be well regarded, then. None of them bothered to look at Celaena. She raised her chin.

“And how old were you when you came here?” The more she knew the better.

“I had barely turned thirteen,” Ansel said. “So I just missed having to do the drudgery work.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Trying to get a read on me, are you?”

Celaena kept her face blank.

“I just turned eighteen. You look about my age, too.”

Celaena nodded. She certainly didn’t have to yield any information about herself. Even though Arobynn had ordered her not to hide her identity here, that didn’t mean she had to give away details. And at least Celaena had started her training at eight; she had several years on Ansel. That had to count for something. “Has training with the Master been effective?”

Ansel gave her a rueful smile. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve been here for five years, and he’s still refused to train me personally. Not that I care. I’d say I’m pretty damn good with or without his expertise.”

Well, *that* was certainly odd. How had she gone so long without working with the Master? Though, many of Arobynn’s assassins never received private lessons with him, either. “Where are you from, originally?” Celaena asked.

“The Flatlands.” The Flatlands . . . Where in hell were the Flatlands? Ansel answered for her. “Along the coast of the Western Wastes—formerly known as the Witch Kingdom.”

The Wastes were certainly familiar. But she’d never heard of the Flatlands.

“My father,” Ansel went on, “is Lord of Briarcliff. He sent me here for training, so I might ‘make myself useful.’ But I don’t think five hundred years would be enough to teach me that.”

Despite herself, Celaena chuckled. She stole another glance at Ansel’s armor. “Don’t you get hot in all that armor?”

“Of course,” Ansel said, tossing her shoulder-length hair. “But you have to admit it’s rather striking. And very well suited for strutting about a fortress full of assassins. How else am I to distinguish myself?”

“Where did you get it from?” Not that she might want some for herself; she had no use for armor like that.

“Oh, I had it made for me.” So—Ansel had money, then. Plenty of it, if she could throw it away on armor. “But the sword”—Ansel patted the wolf-shaped

hilt at her side—“belongs to my father. His gift to me when I left. I figured I’d have the armor match it—wolves are a family symbol.”

They entered an open walkway, the heat of the midafternoon sun slamming into them with full force. Yet Ansel’s face remained jovial, and if the armor did indeed make her uncomfortable, she didn’t show it. Ansel looked her up and down. “How many people have you killed?”

Celaena almost choked, but kept her chin high. “I don’t see how that is any of your concern.”

Ansel chuckled. “I suppose it’d be easy enough to find out; you must leave *some* indication if you’re so notorious.” Actually, it was Arobynn who usually saw to it that word got out through the proper channels. She left very little behind once her job was finished. Leaving a sign felt somewhat . . . cheap. “I’d want *everyone* to know that I’d done it,” Ansel added.

Well, Celaena *did* want everyone to know that she was the best, but something about the way Ansel said it seemed different from her own reasoning.

“So, which of you looks worse?” Ansel asked suddenly. “You, or the person who gave those to you?” Celaena knew that she meant the fading bruises and cuts on her face.

Her stomach tightened. It was getting to be a familiar feeling.

“Me,” Celaena said quietly.

She didn’t know why she admitted it. Bravado might have been the better option. But she was tired, and suddenly so heavy with the weight of that memory.

“Did your master do that to you?” Ansel asked. This time, Celaena kept quiet, and Ansel didn’t push her.

At the other end of the walkway, they took a spiral stone staircase down into an empty courtyard where benches and little tables stood in the shade of the towering date trees. Someone had left a book lying atop one of the wooden tables, and as they passed by, Celaena glimpsed the cover. The title was in a scrawling, strange script that she didn’t recognize.

If she’d been alone, she might have paused to flip through the book, just to see words printed in a language so different from anything she knew, but Ansel continued on toward a pair of carved wooden doors.

“The baths. It’s one of the places here where silence is actually enforced, so try to keep quiet. Don’t splash too much, either. Some of the older assassins can get cranky about even that.” Ansel pushed one of the doors open. “Take your time. I’ll see to it that your things are brought to our room. When you’re done, just ask an acolyte to take you there. Dinner isn’t for a few hours; I’ll

come by the room then.”

Celaena gave her a long look. The idea of Ansel—or anyone—handling the weapons and gear she’d left at the gate wasn’t appealing. Not that she had anything to hide—though she did cringe inwardly at the thought of the guards pawing at her undergarments as they searched her bag. Her taste for very expensive and very delicate underwear wouldn’t do much for her reputation.

But she was here at their mercy, and her letter of approval depended on her good behavior. And good attitude.

So Celaena merely said “Thank you,” before striding past Ansel and into the herb-scented air beyond the doors.

While the fortress had communal baths, they were thankfully separated between men and women, and at that point in the day, the women’s baths were empty.

Hidden by towering palms and date trees sagging with the weight of their fruit, the baths were made from the same sea green and cobalt tiles that had formed the mosaic in the Master’s chamber, kept cool by white awnings jutting out from the walls of the building. There were multiple large pools—some steamed, some bubbled, some steamed *and* bubbled—but the one Celaena slipped into was utterly calm and clear and cold.

Remembering Ansel’s warning about keeping quiet, Celaena stifled a groan as she submerged herself. She stayed under until her lungs ached. While modesty was a trait she’d learned to live without, she still kept herself low in the water, just in case. Of course, it had nothing to do with the fact that her ribs and arms were still peppered with fading bruises, and that the sight of them made her sick. Sometimes it was sick with anger; other times it was with sadness. Often, it was both. She wanted to go back to Rifthold—to see what had happened to Sam, to resume the life that had splintered in a few agonizing minutes. But she also dreaded it.

At least, here at the edge of the world, that night—and all of Rifthold and the people it contained—seemed very far away.

She stayed in the pool until her hands turned uncomfortably pruny.

Ansel wasn’t in their tiny, rectangular room when Celaena arrived, though someone had unpacked Celaena’s belongings. Aside from her sword and daggers, some undergarments, and a few tunics, she hadn’t brought much—and hadn’t bothered to bring her finer clothing. Which she was grateful for, now that she’d seen how quickly the sand had worn through the bulky clothes the nomad had made her wear.

There were two narrow beds, and it took her a moment to figure out which was Ansel's. The red stone wall behind it was bare. Aside from the small iron wolf figurine on the bedside table, and a human-sized dummy that must be used to store Ansel's extraordinary armor, Celaena would have had no idea that she was sharing a room with anyone.

Peeking through Ansel's chest of drawers was equally futile. Burgundy tunics and black pants, all neatly folded. The only things that offset the monotony were several white tunics—garb that many of the men and women had been wearing. Even the undergarments were plain—and folded. Who folded their undergarments? Celaena thought of her enormous closet back home, exploding with color and different fabrics and patterns, all tossed together. Her undergarments, while expensive, usually wound up in a heap in their drawer.

Sam, probably, folded his undergarments. Though, depending on how much of him Arobynn had left intact, he might not even be able to now. Arobynn would never permanently maim *her*, but Sam might have fared worse. Sam had always been the expendable one.

She shoved the thought away and nestled farther into the bed. Through the small window, the silence of the fortress lulled her to sleep.

She'd never seen Arobynn so angry, and it was scaring the hell out of her. He didn't yell, and he didn't curse—he just went very still and very quiet. The only signs of his rage were his silver eyes, glittering with a deadly calm.

She tried not to flinch in her chair as he stood from his giant wooden desk. Sam, seated beside her, sucked in a breath. She couldn't speak; if she started talking, her trembling voice would betray her. She couldn't endure that kind of humiliation.

“Do you know how much money you've cost me?” Arobynn asked her softly.

Celaena's palms began sweating. It was worth it, she told herself. Freeing those two hundred slaves was worth it. No matter what was about to happen, she'd never regret doing it.

“It's not her fault,” Sam cut in, and she flashed him a warning glare. “We both thought it was—”

“Don't lie to me, Sam Cortland,” Arobynn growled. “The only way you became involved in this was because she decided to do it—and it was either let her die trying, or help her.”

Sam opened his mouth to object, but Arobynn silenced him with a sharp whistle through his teeth. His office doors opened. Wesley, Arobynn's

manservant, peered in. Arobynn kept his eyes on Celaena as he said, “Get Tern, Mullin, and Harding.”

This wasn’t a good sign. She kept her face neutral, though, as Arobynn continued watching her. Neither she nor Sam dared speak in the long minutes that passed. She tried not to shake.

At last, the three assassins—all men, all cut from muscle and armed to the teeth, filed in. “Shut the door,” Arobynn said to Harding, the last one to enter. Then he told the others, “Hold him.”

Instantly, Sam was dragged out of his chair, his arms pinned back by Tern and Mullin. Harding took a step in front of them, his fist flexing.

“No,” Celaena breathed as she met Sam’s wide-eyed stare. Arobynn wouldn’t be that cruel—he wouldn’t make her watch as he hurt Sam. Something tight and aching built in her throat.

But Celaena kept her head high, even as Arobynn said quietly to her, “You are not going to enjoy this. You will not forget this. And I don’t want you to.”

She whipped her head back to Sam, a plea for Harding not to hurt him on her lips.

She sensed the blow only a heartbeat before Arobynn struck her.

She toppled out of her chair and didn’t have time to raise herself properly before Arobynn grabbed her by the collar and swung again, his fist connecting with her cheek. Light and darkness reeled. Another blow, hard enough that she felt the warmth of her blood on her face before she felt the pain.

Sam began screaming something. But Arobynn hit her again. She tasted blood, yet she didn’t fight back, didn’t dare to. Sam struggled against Tern and Mullin. They held him firm, Harding putting a warning arm in front of Sam to block his path.

Arobynn hit her—her ribs, her jaw, her gut. And her face. Again and again and again. Careful blows—blows meant to inflict as much pain as possible without doing permanent damage. And Sam kept roaring, shouting words she couldn’t quite hear over the agony.

The last thing she remembered was a pang of guilt at the sight of her blood staining Arobynn’s exquisite red carpet. And then darkness, blissful darkness, full of relief that she hadn’t seen him hurt Sam.

Chapter Three

Celaena dressed in the nicest tunic she'd brought—which wasn't really anything to admire, but the midnight blue and gold *did* bring out the turquoise hues in her eyes. She went so far as to apply some cosmetics to her eyes, but opted to avoid putting anything on the rest of her face. Even though the sun had set, the heat remained. Anything she put on her skin would likely slide right off.

Ansel made good on her promise to retrieve her before dinner and pestered Celaena with questions about her journey during the walk to the dining hall. As they walked, there were some areas where Ansel talked normally, others where she kept her voice at a whisper, and others where she signaled not to speak at all. Celaena couldn't tell why certain rooms demanded utter silence and others did not—they all seemed the same to her. Still exhausted despite her nap, and unsure when she could speak, Celaena kept her answers brief. She wouldn't have minded missing dinner and just sleeping all night.

Staying alert as they entered the hall was an effort of will. Yet even with her exhaustion, she instinctively scanned the room. There were three exits—the giant doors through which they entered, and two servants' doors on either end. The hall was packed wall-to-wall with long wooden tables and benches, full of people of all ages, all nationalities. At least seventy of them in total. None of them looked at Celaena as Ansel ambled toward a table near the front of the room. If they knew who she was, they certainly didn't care. She tried not to scowl.

Ansel slid into place at a table and patted the empty spot on the bench beside her. The nearest assassins looked up from their meal—some had been talking quietly and others were silent—as Celaena stood before them.

Ansel waved a hand in Celaena's direction. "Celaena, this is everyone. Everyone, this is Celaena. Though I'm sure you gossips know everything about her already." She spoke softly, and even though some assassins in the hall were talking, everyone around them seemed to hear her just fine. Even the clank of their utensils seemed hushed.

Celaena scanned the faces of those around her; they all seemed to be watching her with benign, if not amused, curiosity. Carefully, all too aware of each of her movements, Celaena sat on the bench and surveyed the table. Platters of grilled, fragrant meats; bowls full of spherical, spiced grains; fruits

and dates; and pitcher after pitcher of water.

Ansel helped herself, her armor glinting in the light of the ornate glass lanterns dangling from the ceiling, and then piled the same food on Celaena's plate. "Just start eating," she whispered. "It all tastes good, and none of it is poisoned." To emphasize her point, Ansel popped a cube of charred lamb into her mouth and chewed. "See?" she said between bites. "Lord Berick might want to kill us, but he knows better than to try to get rid of us through poisons. We're far too skilled to fall for that sort of thing. Aren't we?" The assassins around her grinned.

"Lord Berick?" Celaena asked, now staring at her plate and all the food on it.

Ansel made a face, gobbling down some saffron-colored grains. "Our local villain. Or I suppose we're *his* local villains, depending on who is telling the story."

"He's the villain," said a curly-haired, dark-eyed man across from Ansel. He was handsome in a way, but had a smile far too much like Captain Rolfe's for Celaena's liking. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five. "No matter *who* is telling the story."

"Well, *you* are ruining *my* story, Mikhail," Ansel said, but grinned at him. He tossed a grape at Ansel, and she caught it in her mouth with ease. Celaena still didn't touch her food. "Anyway," Ansel said, dumping more food onto Celaena's plate, "Lord Berick rules over the city of Xandria, and *claims* that he rules this part of the desert, too. Of course, we don't quite agree with that, but . . . To shorten a long and frightfully dull story, Lord Berick has wanted us all dead for years and years. The King of Adarlan set an embargo on the Red Desert after Lord Berick failed to send troops into Eyllwe to crush some rebellion, and Berick has been dying to get back in the king's good graces ever since. He somehow got it into his thick skull that killing all of us—and sending the head of the Mute Master to Adarlan on a silver platter—would do the trick."

Ansel took another bite of meat and went on. "So, every now and then, he tries some tactic or other: sending asps in baskets, sending soldiers posing as our beloved foreign dignitaries"—she pointed to a table at the end of the hall, where the people were dressed in exotic clothing—"sending troops in the dead of night to fire flaming arrows at us . . . Why, two days ago, we caught some of his soldiers trying to dig a tunnel beneath our walls. Ill-conceived plan from the start."

Across the table, Mikhail chuckled. "Nothing's worked yet," he said. Hearing the noise of their conversation, an assassin at a nearby table pivoted to

raise a finger to her lips, shushing them. Mikhail gave them an apologetic shrug. The dining hall, Celaena gleaned, must be a silence-is-requested-but-not-required sort of place.

Ansel poured a glass of water for Celaena, then one for herself, and spoke more quietly. “I suppose that’s the problem with attacking an impenetrable fortress full of skilled warriors: you have to be smarter than us. Though . . . Berick is almost brutal enough to make up for it. The assassins that have fallen into his hands came back in pieces.” She shook her head. “He enjoys being cruel.”

“And Ansel knows that firsthand,” Mikhail chimed in, though his voice was little more than a murmur. “She’s had the pleasure of meeting him.”

Celaena raised a brow, and Ansel made a face. “Only because I’m the most charming of you lot. The Master sometimes sends me to Xandria to meet with Berick—to try to negotiate some sort of accord between us. Thankfully, he still won’t dare violate the terms of parlay, but . . . one of these days, I’ll pay for my courier duties with my hide.”

Mikhail rolled his eyes at Celaena. “She likes to be dramatic.”

“That I do.”

Celaena gave them both a weak smile. It had been a few minutes, and Ansel certainly wasn’t dead. She bit into a piece of meat, nearly moaned at the array of tangy-smoky spices, and set about eating. Ansel and Mikhail began chattering to each other, and Celaena took the opportunity to glance down the table.

Outside of the markets in Rifthold and the slave ships at Skull’s Bay, she’d never seen such a mix of different kingdoms and continents. And though most of the people here were trained killers, there was an air of peace and contentment—of joy, even. She flicked her eyes to the table of foreign dignitaries that Ansel had pointed out. Men and women, hunched over their food, whispered with each other and occasionally watched the assassins in the room.

“Ah,” Ansel said quietly. “They’re just squabbling over which of us they want to make a bid for.”

“Bid?”

Mikhail leaned forward to see the ambassadors through the crowd. “They come here from foreign courts to offer us positions. They make offers for the assassins that most impress them—sometimes just for one mission, other times for a lifelong contract. Any of us are free to go, if we wish. But not all of us want to leave.”

“And you two . . . ?”

“Ach, no,” Ansel said. “My father would wallop me from here to the ends of the earth if I bound myself to a foreign court. He’d say it’s a form of prostitution.”

Mikhail laughed under his breath. “Personally, I like it here. When I want to leave, I’ll let the Master know I’m available. But until then . . .” He glanced at Ansel, and Celaena could have sworn she saw the girl’s face flush slightly. “Until then, I’ve got my reasons to stay.”

Celaena asked, “What courts do the dignitaries hail from?”

“None in Adarlan’s grip, if that’s what you’re asking.” Mikhail scratched the day’s worth of stubble on his face. “Our Master knows well enough that everything from Eyllwe to Terrasen is *your* Master’s territory.”

“It certainly is.” She didn’t know why she said it. Given what Arobynn had done to her, she hardly felt defensive of the assassins in Adarlan’s empire. But . . . but to see all these assassins gathered here, so much collective power and knowledge, and to know that they wouldn’t dare intrude on Arobynn’s—on *her*—territory . . .

Celaena went on eating in silence as Ansel and Mikhail and a few others around them talked quietly. Vows of silence, Ansel had explained earlier, were taken for as long as each person saw fit. Some spent weeks in silence; others, years. Ansel claimed she’d once sworn to be silent for a month, and had only lasted two days before she gave up. She liked talking too much. Celaena didn’t have any trouble believing that.

A few of the people around them were pantomiming. Though it often took them a few tries to discern the vague gestures, it seemed like Ansel and Mikhail could interpret the movements of their hands.

Celaena felt someone’s attention on her, and tried not to blink when she noticed a dark-haired, handsome young man watching her from a few seats down. Stealing glances at her was more like it, since his sea-green eyes kept darting to her face, then back to his companions. He didn’t open his mouth once, but pantomimed to his friends. Another silent one.

Their eyes met, and his tan face spread into a smile, revealing dazzlingly white teeth. Well, he was certainly desirable—as desirable as Sam, maybe.

Sam—when had she ever thought of him as *desirable*? He’d laugh until he died if he ever knew she thought of him like that.

The young man inclined his head slightly in greeting, then turned back to his friends.

“That’s Ilias,” Ansel whispered, leaning closer than Celaena would like.

Didn't she have any sense of personal space? "The Master's son."

That explained the sea-green eyes. Though the Master had an air of holiness, he must not be celibate.

"I'm surprised you caught Ilias's eye," Ansel teased, keeping her voice low enough for only Celaena and Mikhail to hear. "He's usually too focused on his training and meditating to notice anyone—even pretty girls."

Celaena raised her brows, biting back a reply that she didn't want to know *any* of this.

"I've known him for years, and he's never been anything but aloof with me," Ansel continued. "But maybe he has a thing for blondes." Mikhail snorted.

"I'm not here for anything like that," Celaena said.

"And I bet you have a flock of suitors back home, anyway."

"I certainly do not."

Ansel's mouth popped open. "You're lying."

Celaena took a long, long sip of water. It was flavored with slices of lemon—and was unbelievably delicious. "No, I'm not."

Ansel gave her a quizzical look, then fell back into conversation with Mikhail. Celaena pushed around the food on her plate. It wasn't that she wasn't romantic. She'd been infatuated with a few men before—from Archer, the young male courtesan who'd trained with them for a few months when she was thirteen, to Ben, Arobynn's now-deceased Second, back when she was too young to really understand the impossibility of such a thing.

She dared another look at Ilias, who was laughing silently at something one of his companions had said. It was flattering that he even considered her worthy of second thought; she'd avoided looking in the mirror in the month since that night with Arobynn, only checking to ensure nothing was broken or out of place.

"So," Mikhail said, shattering her thoughts as he pointed a fork at her, "when your master beat the living daylights out of you, did you actually deserve it?"

Ansel shot him a dark look, and Celaena straightened. Even Ilias was now listening, his lovely eyes fixed on her face. But Celaena stared right at Mikhail. "I suppose it depends on who is telling the story."

Ansel chuckled.

"If Arobynn Hamel is telling the story, then yes, I suppose I did deserve it. I cost him a good deal of money—a kingdom's worth of riches, probably. I was disobedient and disrespectful, and completely remorseless about what I did."

She didn't break her stare, and Mikhail's smile faltered.

"But if the two hundred slaves that I freed are telling the story, then no, I suppose I didn't deserve it."

None of them were smiling anymore. "Holy Gods," Ansel whispered. True silence fell over their table for a few heartbeats.

Celaena resumed eating. She didn't feel like talking to them after that.

Under the shade of the date trees that separated the oasis from the sand, Celaena stared out at the expanse of desert stretching before them. "Say that again," she said flatly to Ansel. After the hushed dinner last night and the utterly silent fortress walkways that had brought them here, speaking normally grated on her ears.

But Ansel, who was wearing a white tunic and pants and boots wrapped in camel pelts, just grinned and fastened her white scarf around her red hair. "It's a three-mile run to the next oasis." Ansel handed Celaena the two wooden buckets she'd brought with her. "These are for you."

Celaena raised her brows. "I thought I was going to be training with the Master."

"Oh, no. Not today," Ansel said, picking up two buckets of her own. "When he said 'training' he meant this. You might be able to wallop four of our men, but you still smell like the northern wind. Once you start reeking like the Red Desert, then he'll bother to train you."

"That's ridiculous. Where is he?" She looked toward the fortress towering behind them.

"Oh, you won't find him. Not until you prove yourself. Show that you're willing to leave behind all that you know and all that you were. Make him think you're worth his time. Then he'll train you. At least, that's what I've been told." Ansel's mahogany eyes gleamed with amusement. "Do you know how many of us have begged and groveled to just have *one* lesson with him? He picks and chooses as he sees fit. One morning, he might approach an acolyte. The next, it might be someone like Mikhail. I'm still waiting for *my* turn. I don't think even Ilias knows the method behind his father's decisions."

This wasn't at all what Celaena had planned. "But I need him to write me a letter of approval. I *need* him to train me. I'm *here* so he can train me—"

Ansel shrugged. "So are we all. If I were you, though, I'd suggest training with me until he decides that you're worth it. If anything, I can get you into the rhythm of things. Make it seem more like you care about us, and less like you're here just for that letter of approval. Not that we *all* don't have our own secret

agenda.” Ansel winked, and Celaena frowned. Panicking now wouldn’t do her any good. She needed time to come up with a logical plan of action. She’d try to speak to the Master later. Perhaps he hadn’t understood her yesterday. But for now . . . she’d tag along after Ansel for the day. The Master had been at dinner the night before; if she needed to, she could corner him in the dining hall tonight.

When Celaena didn’t object further, Ansel held up a bucket. “So this bucket is for your journey back from the oasis—you’ll need it. And this one”—she held up the other—“is just to make the trip hell.”

“Why?”

Ansel hooked the buckets into the yoke across her shoulders. “Because if you can run three miles across the dunes of the Red Desert, then three miles back, you can do almost anything.”

“Run?” Celaena’s throat dried up at the thought of it. All around them, assassins—mostly the children, plus a few others a bit older than her—began running for the dunes, their buckets clacking along.

“Don’t tell me the infamous Celaena Sardothien can’t run three miles!”

“If you’ve been here for so many years, doesn’t the three miles seem like nothing now?”

Ansel rolled her neck like a cat stretching out in the sun. “Of course it does. But the running keeps me in shape. You think I was just *born* with these legs?” Celaena ground her teeth as Ansel gave her a fiendish grin. She’d never met anyone who smiled and winked so much.

Ansel began jogging, leaving the shade of the date trees overhead, kicking up a wave of red sand behind her. She glanced over her shoulder. “If you walk, it’ll take all day! And then you’ll certainly never impress anyone!” Ansel pulled her scarf over her nose and mouth and took off at a gallop.

Taking a deep breath, cursing Arobynn to hell, Celaena hooked the buckets onto the yoke and ran.

If it had been three flat miles, even three miles up grassy knolls, she might have made it. But the dunes were enormous and unwieldy, and Celaena made it one measly mile before she had to slow to a walk, her lungs near to combusting. It was easy enough to find the way—the dozens of footprints from the people racing ahead of her showed her where she needed to go.

She ran when she could and walked when she couldn’t, but the sun rose higher and higher, toward that dangerous noontime peak. Up one hill, down the other. One foot in front of the next. Bright flashes flitted across her vision, and her head pounded.

The red sand shimmered, and she draped her arms over the yoke. Her lips became filmy, cracking in places, and her tongue turned leaden in her mouth.

Each step made her head throb, and the sun rose higher and higher . . .

One more dune. Just one more dune.

But many more dunes later, she was still trudging along, following the smattering of footprints in the sand. Had she somehow tracked the *wrong* group?

Even as she thought it, assassins appeared atop the dune before her, already running back to the fortress, their buckets heavy with water.

She kept her head high as they passed her, and didn't look any of them in the face. Most of them didn't bother looking at her, though a few spared her a mortifyingly pitying glance. Their clothes were sodden.

She crested a dune so steep she had to use one hand to brace herself, and just when she was about to sink to her knees atop it, she heard splashing.

A small oasis, mostly just trees and a giant pool fed by a shimmering stream, was barely an eighth of a mile away.

She was Adarlan's Assassin—at least she'd *made* it here.

In the shallows of the pool, many disciples splashed or bathed or just sat, cooling themselves. No one spoke—and hardly anyone gestured. Another of the Absolutely Silent places, then. She spotted Ansel with her feet in the water, tossing dates into her mouth. None of the others paid Celaena any heed. And for once, she was glad. Perhaps she should have found a way to defy Arobynn's order and come here under an alias.

Ansel saw her and waved her over. If she gave her one look that hinted at her being so slow . . .

But Ansel merely held up a date, offering it to her.

Celaena, trying to control her panting, didn't bother taking the date as she strode into the cool water until she was completely submerged.

Celaena drank an entire bucket before she was even halfway back to the fortress, and by the time she reached the sandstone complex and its glorious shade, she'd consumed all of the second.

At dinner, Ansel didn't mention that it'd taken Celaena a long, long while to return. Celaena had had to wait in the shade of the palms until later in the afternoon to leave—and wound up walking the whole way back. She'd reached the fortress near dusk. A whole day spent "running."

"Don't look so glum," Ansel whispered, taking a forkful of those delightful spiced grains. She was wearing her armor again. "You know what happened my

first day out there?”

Some of the assassins seated at the long table gave knowing grins.

Ansel swallowed and braced her arms on the table. Even the gauntlets of her armor were delicately engraved with a wolf motif. “My first run, I collapsed. Mile two. Completely unconscious. Ilias found me on his way back and carried me here. In his arms and everything.” Ilias’s eyes met with Celaena’s, and he smiled at her. “If I hadn’t been about to die, I would have been swooning,” Ansel finished and the others grinned, some of them laughing silently.

Celaena blushed, suddenly too aware of Ilias’s attention, and took a sip from her cup of lemon water. As the meal wore on, her blush remained as Ilias continued flicking his eyes toward her.

She tried not to preen too much. But then she remembered how miserably she’d performed today—how she hadn’t even gotten a chance to train—and the swagger died a bit.

She kept an eye on the Master, who dined at the center of the room, safely ensconced within rows of his deadly assassins. He sat at a table of acolytes, whose eyes were so wide that Celaena could only assume his presence at their table was an unexpected surprise.

She waited and waited for him to stand, and when he did, Celaena made her best attempt to look casual as she, too, stood and bid everyone goodnight. As she turned away, she noticed that Mikhail took Ansel’s hand and held it in the shadows beneath the table.

The Master was just leaving the hall when she caught up to him. With everyone still eating, the torch-lit halls were empty. She took a loud step, unsure if he’d appreciate if she tried being mute, and how, exactly, to address him.

The Master paused, his white clothes rustling around him. He offered her a little smile. Up close, she could certainly see his resemblance to his son. There was a pale line around one of his fingers—perhaps where a wedding ring had once been. Who was Ilias’s mother?

Of course, it wasn’t at all the time for questions like that. Ansel had told her to try to impress him—to make him think she *wanted* to be here. Perhaps silence would work. But how to communicate what needed to be said? She gave him her best smile, even though her heart raced, and began making a series of motions, mostly just her best impression of running with the yoke, and a lot of shaking her head and frowning that she hoped he’d take to mean “I came here to train with *you*, not with the others.”

The Master nodded, as if he already knew. Celaena swallowed, her mouth still tasting of those spices they used to season their meat. She gestured between

the two of them several times, taking a step closer to indicate her wanting to work *only* with him. She might have been more aggressive with her motions, might have really let her temper and exhaustion get the better of her, but . . . that confounded letter!

The Master shook his head.

Celaena ground her teeth, and tried the gesturing between the two of them again.

He shook his head once more, and bobbed his hands in the air, as if he were telling her to slow down—to wait. To wait for him to train her.

She reflected the gesture, raising an eyebrow as if to say, “Wait for you?” He nodded. How on earth to ask him “until when?” She exposed her palms, beseeching, doing her best to look confused. Still, she couldn’t keep the irritation from her face. She was only here for a month. How long would she have to wait?

The Master understood her well enough. He shrugged, an infuriatingly casual gesture, and Celaena clenched her jaw. So Ansel had been right—she was to wait for him to send for her. The Master gave her that kind smile and turned on his heel, resuming his walk. She took a step toward him, to beg, to shout, to do whatever her body seized up to do, but someone grabbed her arm.

She whirled, already reaching for her daggers, but found herself looking into Ilias’s sea-green eyes.

He shook his head, his gaze darting from the Master to her and back again. She was not to follow him.

So perhaps Ilias hadn’t paid attention to her out of admiration, but because he didn’t trust her. And why should he? Her reputation didn’t exactly lend itself to trust. He must have followed her out of the hall the moment he saw her trailing his father. Had their positions been reversed—had *he* been visiting Rifthold—she wouldn’t have dared leave him alone with Arobynn.

“I have no plans to hurt him,” she said softly. But Ilias gave her a half smile, his brows rising as if to ask if she could blame him for being protective of his father.

He slowly released her arm. He wore no weapons at his side, but she had a feeling he didn’t need them. He was tall—taller than Sam, even—and broad-shouldered. Powerfully built, yet not bulky. His smile spread a bit more as he extended his hand toward her. A greeting.

“Yes,” she said, fighting her own smile. “I don’t suppose we’ve been properly introduced.”

He nodded, and put his other hand on his heart. Scars peppered his hand—

small, slender scars that suggested years of training with blades.

“You’re Ilias, and I’m Celaena.” She put a hand on her own chest. Then she took his extended hand and shook it. “It’s nice to meet you.”

His eyes were vivid in the torchlight, his hand firm and warm around hers. She let go of his fingers. The son of the Mute Master and the protégée of the King of the Assassins. If there was anyone here that was at all similar to her, she realized, it was Ilias. Rifthold might be her realm, but this was his. And from the easy way he carried himself, from the way she’d seen his companions gazing at him with admiration and respect, she could tell that he was utterly at home here—as if this place had been made for him, and he never needed to question his spot in it. A strange sort of envy wended its way through her heart.

Ilias suddenly began making a series of motions with his long, tan fingers, but Celaena laughed softly. “I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

Ilias looked skyward and sighed through his nose. Throwing his hands in the air in mock defeat, he merely patted her on the shoulder before passing by—following his father, who had disappeared down the hall.

Though she walked back toward her room—in the other direction—she didn’t once believe that the son of the Mute Master wasn’t still watching her, making sure she wasn’t going to follow his father.

Not that you have anything to worry about, she wanted to shout over her shoulder. She couldn’t run six measly miles in the desert.

As she walked back to her room, Celaena had a horrible feeling that here, being Adarlan’s Assassin might not count for much.

Later that night, when she and Ansel were both in their beds, Ansel whispered into the darkness: “Tomorrow will be better. It might be only a foot more than today, but it will be a foot longer that you can run.”

That was easy enough for Ansel to say. *She* didn’t have a reputation to uphold—a reputation that might be crumbling around her. Celaena stared at the ceiling, suddenly homesick, strangely wishing Sam was with her. At least if she were to fail, she’d fail with him.

“So,” Celaena said suddenly, needing to get her mind off of everything—especially Sam. “You and Mikhail . . .”

Ansel groaned. “It’s that obvious? Though I suppose we don’t really make that much of an effort to hide it. Well, *I* try, but he doesn’t. He *was* rather irritated when he found out I suddenly had a roommate.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

Ansel was silent for a long moment before answering. “Since I was

fifteen.”

Fifteen! Mikhail was in his mid-twenties, so even if this had started almost three years ago, he still would have been far older than Ansel. It made her a little queasy.

“Girls in the Flatlands are married as early as fourteen,” Ansel said.

Celaena choked. The idea of being anyone’s *wife* at fourteen, let alone a mother soon after . . . “Oh,” was all she managed to get out.

When Celaena didn’t say anything else, Ansel drifted into sleep. With nothing else to distract her, Celaena eventually returned to thinking about Sam. Even weeks later, she had no idea how she’d somehow gotten attached to him, what he’d been shouting when Arobynn beat her, and why Arobynn had thought he’d need three seasoned assassins to restrain him that day.

Chapter Four

Though Celaena didn't want to admit it, Ansel was right. She did run farther the next day. And the day after that, and the one following that. But it still took her so long to get back that she didn't have time to seek out the Master. Not that she could. He'd send for *her*. Like a lackey!

She did manage to find *some* time late in the afternoon to attend drills with Ansel. The only guidance she received there was from a few older-looking assassins who positioned her hands and feet, tapped her stomach, and slapped her spine into the correct posture. Occasionally, Ilias would train alongside her, never *too* close, but close enough for her to know his presence was more than coincidental.

Like the assassins in Adarlan, the Silent Assassins weren't known for any skill in particular—save the uncannily quiet way they moved. Their weapons were mostly the same, though their bows and blades were slightly different in length and shape. But just watching them—it seemed that there was a good deal less . . . *viciousness* here.

Arobynn encouraged cutthroat behavior. Even when they were children, he'd set her and Sam against each other, use their victories and failures against them. He'd made her see everyone but Arobynn and Ben as a potential enemy. As allies, yes, but also as foes to be closely watched. Weakness was never to be shown at any cost. Brutality was rewarded. And education and culture were equally important—words could be just as deadly as steel.

But the Silent Assassins . . . Though they, too, might be killers, they looked to each other for learning. Embraced collective wisdom. Older warriors smiled as they taught the acolytes; seasoned assassins swapped techniques. And while they were all competitors, it appeared that an invisible link bound them together. Something had brought them to this place at the ends of the earth. More than a few, she discovered, were actually mute from birth. But all of them seemed full of secrets. As if the fortress and what it offered somehow held the answers they sought. As if they could find whatever they were looking for in the silence.

Still, even as they corrected her posture and showed her new ways to control her breathing, she tried her best not to snarl at them. She knew plenty—she wasn't Adarlan's Assassin for nothing. But she needed that letter of good behavior as proof of her training. These people might all be called upon by the

Mute Master to give an opinion of her. Perhaps if she demonstrated that she was good enough in these practices, the Master might take notice of her.

She'd get that letter. Even if she had to hold a dagger to his throat while he wrote it.

The attack by Lord Berick happened on her fifth night. There was no moon, and Celaena had no idea how the Silent Assassins spotted the thirty or so soldiers creeping across the dark dunes. Mikhail had burst into their room and whispered to come to the fortress battlements. Hopefully, this would turn out to be another opportunity to prove herself to the Master. With just over three weeks left, she was running out of options. But the Master wasn't at the battlements. And neither were many of the assassins. She heard a woman question another, asking how Berick's men had known that a good number of the assassins would be away that night, busy escorting some foreign dignitaries back to the nearest port. It was too convenient to be coincidental.

Crouched atop the parapet, an arrow nocked into her bow, Celaena peered through one of the crenels in the wall. Ansel, squatting beside her, also twisted to look. Up and down the battlements, assassins hid in the shadow of the wall, clothed in black and with bows in hand. At the center of the wall, Ilias knelt, his hands moving quickly as he conveyed orders down the line. It seemed more like the silent language of soldiers than the basic gestures used to represent the common tongue.

"Get your arrow ready," Ansel murmured, dipping her cloth-covered arrow tip into the small bowl of oil between them. "When Ilias gives the signal, light it on the torch as fast as you can and fire. Aim for the ridge in the sand just below the soldiers."

Celaena glanced into the darkness beyond the wall. Rather than give themselves away by extinguishing the lights of the fortress, the defenders had kept them on—which made focusing in the dark nearly impossible. But she could still make out the shapes against the starlit sky—thirty men on their stomachs, poised to do whatever they had planned. Attack the assassins outright, murder them in their sleep, burn the place to the ground . . .

"We're not going to kill them?" Celaena whispered back. She weighed the weapon in her hands. The bow of the Silent Assassins was different—shorter, thicker, harder to bend.

Ansel shook her head, watching Ilias down the line. "No, though I wish we could." Celaena didn't particularly care for the casual way she said it, but Ansel went on. "We don't want to start an all-out battle with Lord Berick. We just

need to scare them off. Mikhail and Ilias rigged that ridge last week; the line in the sand is a rope soaking in a trough of oil.”

Celaena was beginning to see where this was going. She dipped her arrow into the dish of oil, drenching the cloth around it thoroughly. “That’s going to be a long wall of fire,” she said, following the course of the ridge.

“You have no idea. It stretches around the whole fortress.” Ansel straightened, and Celaena glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Ilias’s arm make a neat, slicing motion.

Instantly, they were on their feet. Ansel reached the torch in the nearby bracket before Celaena did, and was at the battlements a heartbeat later. Swift as lightning.

Celaena nearly dropped her bow as she swiped her arrow through the flame and heat bit at her fingers. Lord Berick’s men started shouting, and over the crackle of the ignited arrows, Celaena heard twangs as the soldiers fired their own ammunition.

But Celaena was already at the wall, wincing as she drew the burning arrow back far enough for it to singe her fingers. She fired.

Like a wave of shooting stars, their flaming arrows went up, up, up, then dropped. But Celaena didn’t have time to see the ring of fire erupt between the soldiers and the fortress. She ducked against the wall, throwing her hands over her head. Beside her, Ansel did the same.

Light burst all around them, and the roar of the wall of flame drowned out the hollering of Lord Berick’s men. Black arrows rained from the sky, ricocheting off the stones of the battlements. Two or three assassins grunted, swallowing their screams, but Celaena kept her head low, holding her breath until the last of the enemy’s arrows had fallen.

When there was nothing but the muffled moaning of the injured assassins and the crackling of the wall of fire, Celaena dared to look at Ansel. The girl’s eyes were bright. “Well,” Ansel breathed, “wasn’t *that* fun?”

Celaena grinned, her heart racing. “Yes.” Pivoting, she spied Lord Berick’s men fleeing back across the dunes. “Yes, it was.”

Near dawn, when Celaena and Ansel were back in their room, a soft knock sounded. Ansel was instantly on her feet, and opened the door only wide enough for Celaena to spy Mikhail on the other side. He handed Ansel a sealed scroll. “You’re to go to Xandria today and give him this.” Celaena saw Ansel’s shoulders tense. “Master’s orders,” he added.

She couldn’t see Ansel’s face as she nodded, but Celaena could have sworn

Mikhail brushed her cheek before he turned away. Ansel let out a long breath and shut the door. In the growing light of predawn, Celaena saw Ansel wipe the sleep from her eyes. “Care to join me?”

Celaena hoisted herself up onto her elbows. “Isn’t that two days from here?”

“Yes. Two days through the desert, with only yours truly to keep you company. Unless you’d rather stay here, running every day and waiting like a dog for the Master to notice you. In fact, coming with me might help get him to consider training you. He’d certainly see your dedication to keeping us safe.” Ansel wriggled her eyebrows at Celaena, who rolled her eyes.

It was actually sound reasoning. What better way to prove her dedication than to sacrifice four days of her precious time in order to help the Silent Assassins? It was risky, yes, but . . . it might be bold enough to catch his attention. “And what will we be doing in Xandria?”

“That’s for you to find out.”

From the mischief twinkling in Ansel’s red-brown eyes, Celaena could only wonder what might await them.

Chapter Five

Celaena lay on her cloak, trying to imagine that the sand beneath her was her down mattress in Rifthold, and that she wasn't completely exposed to the elements in the middle of the desert. The last thing she needed was to wake up with a scorpion in her hair. Or worse.

She flipped onto her side, cradling her head in the nook of her arm.

"Can't sleep?" Ansel asked from a few feet away. Celaena tried not to growl. They'd spent the entire day trudging across the sand, stopping only at midday to sleep under their cloaks and avoid the mind-crisping glare of the sun.

And a dinner of dates and bread hadn't been exactly filling, either. But Ansel had wanted to travel light, and said that they could pick up more food once they got to Xandria tomorrow afternoon. When Celaena complained about *that*, Ansel just told her that she should be grateful it wasn't sandstorm season.

"I've got sand in every crevice of my body," Celaena muttered, squirming as she felt it grind against her skin. How in hell had sand gotten inside her clothes? Her white tunic and pants were layered enough that *she* couldn't even find her skin beneath.

"Are you *sure* you're Celaena Sardothien? Because I don't think she'd actually be this fussy. I bet she's used to roughing it."

"I'm plenty used to roughing it," Celaena said into the darkness, her words sucked into the dunes rising around them. "That doesn't mean I have to *enjoy* it. I suppose that someone from the Western Wastes would find this luxurious."

Ansel chuckled. "You have no idea."

Celaena quit her taunting as curiosity seized her. "Are your lands as cursed as they claim?"

"Well, the Flatlands used to be part of the Witch Kingdom. And yes, I suppose you could say they're somewhat cursed." Ansel sighed loudly. "When the Crochan Queens ruled five hundred years ago, it was very beautiful. At least, the ruins all over the place seem like they would have been beautiful. But then the three Ironteeth Clans destroyed it all when they overthrew the Crochan Dynasty."

"Ironteeth?"

Ansel let out a low hiss. "Some witches, like the Crochans, were gifted with ethereal beauty. But the Ironteeth Clans have iron teeth, sharp as a fish's.

Actually, their iron fingernails are more dangerous; those can gut you in one swipe.”

A chill went down Celaena’s spine.

“But when the Ironteeth Clans destroyed the kingdom, they say the last Crochan Queen cast a spell that turned the land against any that flew under the banners of the Ironteeth—so that no crops would grow, the animals withered up and died, and the waters turned muddy. It’s not like that now, though. The land has been fertile ever since the Ironteeth Clans journeyed east . . . toward your lands.”

“So . . . so have *you* ever seen one of the witches?”

Ansel was quiet for a moment before she said, “Yes.”

Celaena turned toward her, propping a head on her hand. Ansel remained looking at the sky.

“When I was eight and my sister was eleven, she and I and Maddy, one of her friends, snuck out of Briarcliff Hall. A few miles away, there was a giant tor with a lone watchtower on top. The upper bits were all ruined because of the witch-wars, but the rest of it was still intact. See, there was this archway that went through the bottom of the watchtower—so you could see through it to the other side of the hill. And one of the stable boys told my sister that if you looked through the archway on the night of the summer solstice, then you might see into another world.”

The hair on Celaena’s neck stood. “So you went inside?”

“No,” Ansel said. “I got near the top of the tor and became so terrified that I wouldn’t set foot on it. I hid behind a rock, and my sister and Maddy left me there while they went the rest of the way. I can’t remember how long I waited, but then I heard screaming.

“My sister came running. She just grabbed my arm and we ran. It didn’t come out at first, but when we got to my father’s hall, she told them what had happened. They had gone under the archway of the tower and seen an open door leading to its interior. But an old woman with metal teeth was standing in the shadows, and she grabbed Maddy and dragged her into the stairwell.”

Celaena choked on a breath.

“Maddy began screaming, and my sister ran. And when she told my father and his men, they raced for the tor. They arrived at dawn, but there was no trace of Maddy, or the old woman.”

“Gone?” Celaena whispered.

“They found one thing,” Ansel said softly. “They climbed the tower, and on one of the landings, they found the bones of a child. White as ivory and

picked clean.”

“Gods above,” Celaena said.

“After that, my father walloped us within an inch of our lives, and we were on kitchen duty for six months, but he knew my sister’s guilt would be punishment enough. She never really lost that haunted gleam in her eyes.”

Celaena shuddered. “Well, now I certainly won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

Ansel laughed. “Don’t worry,” she said, nestling down on her cloak. “I’ll tell you a valuable secret: the only way to kill a witch is to cut off her head. Besides, I don’t think an Ironteeth witch stands much of a chance against us.”

“I hope you’re right,” Celaena muttered.

“I am right,” Ansel said. “They might be vicious, but they’re not invincible. And if I had an army of my own . . . if I had even twenty of the Silent Assassins at my command, I’d hunt down all the witches. They wouldn’t stand a chance.” Her hand thumped against the sand; she must have struck the ground. “You know, these assassins have been here for ages, but what do they *do*? The Flatlands would *prosper* if they had an army of assassins to defend them. But no, they just sit in their oasis, silent and thoughtful, and whore themselves out to foreign courts. If *I* were the Master, I’d use our numbers for greatness—for glory. We’d defend every unprotected realm out there.”

“So noble of you,” Celaena said. “Ansel of Briarcliff, Defender of the Realm.”

Ansel only laughed, and soon was asleep.

Celaena, though, stayed awake a while longer, unable to stop imagining what that witch had done when she dragged Maddy into the shadows of the tower.

It was Market Day in Xandria, and though the city had long suffered from Adarlan’s embargo, it still seemed that there were vendors from all the kingdoms on the continent—and beyond. They were crammed into every possible space in the small, walled port city. All around Celaena were spices and jewels and clothes and food, some sold right out of brightly painted wagons, others spread on blankets in shadowy alcoves. There was no sign that anyone knew anything about the ill-fated attack on the Silent Assassins the other night.

She kept close to Ansel as they walked along, the red-haired girl weaving through the crowd with a kind of casual grace that Celaena, despite herself, envied. No matter how many people shoved into Ansel, or stepped in her path, or cursed her for stepping in theirs, she didn’t falter, and her boyish grin only grew. Many people stopped to stare at her red hair and matching eyes, but Ansel

took it in her stride. Even without her armor, she was stunning. Celaena tried not to think about how few people bothered to notice *her*.

With the bodies and the heat, Celaena was oozing sweat by the time Ansel stopped near the edge of the souk. “I’m going to be a couple hours,” Ansel said, and waved a long, elegant hand to the sandstone palace hovering above the small city. “The old bore likes to talk and talk and talk. Why don’t you do some shopping?”

Celaena straightened. “I’m not going with you?”

“Into Berick’s palace? Of course not. It’s the Master’s business.”

Celaena felt her nostrils flare. Ansel clapped her on the shoulder. “Believe me, you’d much rather spend the next few hours in the souk than waiting in the stables with Berick’s men leering at you. Unlike us”—Ansel flashed that grin—“they don’t have access to baths whenever they please.”

Ansel kept glancing at the palace, still a few blocks away. Nervous that she’d be late? Or nervous that she was going to confront Berick on behalf of the Master? Ansel brushed the remnants of red sand from the layers of her white clothes. “I’ll meet you at that fountain at three. Try not to get into *too* much trouble.”

And with that, Ansel vanished into the press of bodies, her red hair gleaming like a hot brand. Celaena contemplated trailing her. Even if she was an outsider, why let her accompany Ansel on the journey if she was just going to have to sit outside? What could be so important and secret that Ansel wouldn’t allow her to partake in the meeting? Celaena took a step toward the palace, but passing people jostled her to and fro, and then a vendor began cooking something that smelled divine, and Celaena found herself following her nose instead.

She spent the two hours wandering from vendor to vendor. She cursed herself for not bringing more money with her. In Rifthold, she had a line of credit at all her favorite stores, and never had to bother carrying money, aside from small coppers and the occasional silver coin for tips and bribes. But here . . . well, the pouch of silver she’d brought felt rather light.

The souk wound through every street, great and small, down narrow stairways and onto half-buried alleys that had to have been there for a thousand years. Ancient doors opened onto small courtyards jammed with spice vendors or a hundred lanterns, glittering like stars in the shadowy interior. For such a remote city, Xandria was teeming with life.

She was standing under the striped awning of a vendor from the southern continent, debating if she had enough to buy the pair of curled-toe shoes before

her *and* the lilac perfume she'd smelled at a wagon owned by white-haired maidens. The maidens claimed they were the priestesses of Lani, the goddess of dreams—and perfume, apparently.

Celaena ran a finger down the emerald silk thread embroidered on the delicate shoes, tracing the curve of the point as it swept upward and curled over the shoe itself. They'd certainly be eye-catching in Rifthold. And no one else in the capital would have them. Though, in the filthy city streets, these would easily get ruined.

She reluctantly put the shoes down, and the vendor raised his brows. She shook her head, a rueful smile on her face. The man held up seven fingers—one less than the original asking price, and she chewed on her lip, signing back, “Six coppers?”

The man spat on the ground. Seven coppers. Seven coppers was laughably cheap.

She looked at the souk around her, then back at the beautiful shoes. “I’ll come back later,” she lied, and with one final, mournful glance, she continued along. The man began shouting after her in a language she’d never heard before, undoubtedly offering the shoes for six coppers, but she forced herself to keep walking. Besides, her pack was heavy enough; lugging the shoes around would just be an additional burden. Even if they were lovely and different and not *that* heavy. And the thread detailing along the sides was as precise and beautiful as calligraphy. And really, she could just wear them *inside*, so she—

She was about to turn around and walk right back to the vendor when something glistening in the shadows beneath an archway between buildings caught her eye. There were a few hired guards standing around the covered wagon, and a tall, lean man stood behind the table displayed in front of it. But it wasn’t the guards or the man or his wagon that grabbed her attention.

No, it was what was *on* his table that knocked the breath from her and made her curse her too-light money purse.

Spidersilk.

There were legends about the horse-sized stygian spiders that lurked in the woods of the Ruhnn Mountains of the north, spinning their thread for hefty costs. Some said they offered it in exchange for human flesh; others claimed the spiders dealt in years and dreams, and could take either as payment. Regardless, the thread was as delicate as gossamer, lovelier than silk, and stronger than steel. And she’d never seen so much of it before.

It was so rare that if you wanted it, odds were you had to go and get it for yourself. But here it was, yards of raw material waiting to be shaped. It was a

kingdom's ransom.

"You know," the merchant said in the common tongue, taking in Celaena's wide-eyed stare, "you're the first person today to recognize it for what it is."

"I'd know what that is even if I were blind." She approached the table, but didn't dare to touch the sheets of iridescent fabric. "But what are you doing here? Surely you can't get much business in Xandria."

The man chuckled. He was middle-aged, with close-cropped brown hair and midnight-blue eyes that seemed haunted, though they now sparkled with amusement. "I might also ask what a girl from the North is doing in Xandria." His gaze flicked to the daggers tucked into the brown belt slung across her white clothes. "And with such beautiful weapons."

She gave him a half smile. "At least your eye is worthy of your wares."

"I try." He sketched a bow, then beckoned her closer. "So, tell me, girl from the North, when have you seen Spidersilk?"

She clenched her fingers into fists to keep from touching the priceless material. "I know a courtesan in Rifthold whose madam had a handkerchief made from it—given to her by an extraordinarily wealthy client."

And that handkerchief had probably cost more than most peasants made in a lifetime.

"That was a kingly gift. She must have been skilled."

"She didn't become madam of the finest courtesans in Rifthold for nothing."

The merchant let out a low laugh. "So if you associate with the finest courtesans in Rifthold, then what brings you to this bit of desert scrub?"

She shrugged. "This and that." In the dim light beneath the canopy, the Spidersilk still glittered like the surface of the sea. "But I would like to know how *you* came across so much of this. Did you buy it, or find the stygian spiders on your own?"

He traced a finger down the plane of fabric. "I went there myself. What else is there to know?" His midnight eyes darkened. "In the depths of the Ruhn Mountains, everything is a labyrinth of mist and trees and shadows. So you don't find the stygian spiders—they find you."

Celaena stuffed her hands in her pockets to keep from touching the Spidersilk. Though her fingers were clean, there were still grains of red sand under her nails. "So why are you here, then?"

"My ship to the southern continent doesn't leave for two days; why not set up shop? Xandria might not be Rifthold, but you never know who might

approach your stall.” He winked at her. “How old are you, anyway?”

She raised her chin. “I turned seventeen two weeks ago.” And what a miserable birthday that had been! Trudging across the desert with no one to celebrate with except her recalcitrant guide, who just patted her shoulder when she announced it was her birthday. Horrible.

“Not much younger than me,” he said. She chuckled, but paused when she didn’t find him smiling.

“And how old are *you*?” she asked. There was no mistaking it—he *had* to be at least forty. Even if his hair wasn’t sprinkled with silver, his skin was weathered.

“Twenty-five,” he said. She gave a start. “I know. Shocking.”

The yards of Spidersilk lifted in a breeze from the nearby sea.

“Everything has a price,” he said. “Twenty years for two hundred yards of Spidersilk. I thought they meant to take them off the end of my life. But even if they’d warned me, I would have said yes.” She eyed the caravan behind him. This much Spidersilk was enough to enable him to live what years he had left as a very, very wealthy man.

“Why not take it to Rifthold?”

“Because I’ve seen Rifthold, and Orynth, and Banjali. I’d like to see what two hundred yards of Spidersilk might fetch me outside of Adarlan’s empire.”

“Is there anything to be done about the years you lost?”

He waved a hand. “I followed the western side of the mountains on my way here, and met an old witch along the way. I asked if she could fix me, but she said what was taken was taken, and only the death of the spider who consumed my twenty years could return them to me.” He examined his hands, already lined with age. “For a copper more, she told me that only a great warrior could slay a stygian spider. The greatest warrior in the land . . . Though perhaps an assassin from the North might do.”

“How did you—”

“You can’t honestly think no one knows about the *sessiz suikast*? Why else would a seventeen-year-old girl bearing exquisite daggers be here unescorted? And one who holds such fine company in Rifthold, no less. Are you here to spy for Lord Berick?”

Celaena did her best to quell her surprise. “Pardon me?”

The merchant shrugged, glancing toward the towering palace. “I heard from a city guard that strange dealings go on between Berick and some of the Silent Assassins.”

“Perhaps,” was all Celaena said. The merchant nodded, not all that interested in it anymore. But Celaena tucked the information away for later. Were some of the Silent Assassins actually working *for* Berick? Perhaps that was why Ansel had insisted on keeping the meeting so secret—maybe the Master didn’t want the names of the suspected traitors getting out.

“So?” the merchant asked. “Will you retrieve my lost years for me?”

She bit her lip, thoughts of spies instantly fading away. To journey into the depths of the Ruhn Mountains, to slay a stygian spider! She could certainly see herself battling the eight-legged monstrosities. And witches! Though after Ansel’s story, meeting a witch—especially one belonging to the Ironteeth Clans—was the last thing she ever wanted to do. For a heartbeat, she wished Sam were with her. Even if she told him about this encounter, he’d never believe her. But would *anyone* ever believe her?

As if he could read her daydreams, he said: “I could make you rich beyond your wildest imaginings.”

“I’m already rich. And I’m unavailable until the end of the summer.”

“I won’t be back from the southern continents for at least a year, anyway,” he countered.

She examined his face, the gleam in his eyes. Adventure and glory aside, anyone who’d sell twenty years of his life for a fortune couldn’t be trusted. But .

..

“The next time you’re in Rifthold,” she said slowly, “seek out Arobynn Hamel.” The man’s eyes widened. She wondered how he’d react if he knew who *she* was. “He’ll know where to find me.” She turned from the table.

“But what’s your name?”

She looked over her shoulder. “He’ll know where to find me,” she repeated, and began walking back toward the stall with the pointed shoes.

“Wait!” She paused in time to see him fumbling with the folds of his tunic. “Here.” He set down a plain wooden box on the table. “A reminder.”

Celaena flipped open the lid and her breath caught. A folded bit of woven Spidersilk lay inside, no larger than six square inches. She could buy ten horses with it. Not that she’d ever sell it. No, this was an heirloom to be passed down from generation to generation. If she ever had children. Which seemed highly unlikely.

“A reminder of what?” She shut the lid and tucked the small box into the inner pocket of her white tunic.

The merchant smiled sadly. “That everything has a price.”

A phantom pain flashed through her face. “I know,” she said, and left.

She wound up buying the shoes, though it was nearly impossible to pass over the lilac perfume, which smelled even more lovely the second time she approached the priestesses’ stall. When the city bells pealed three o’clock, she was sitting on the lip of the fountain, munching on what she *hoped* was mashed beans inside a warm bread pocket.

Ansel was fifteen minutes late, and didn’t apologize. She merely grabbed Celaena’s arm and began leading her through the still-packed streets, her freckled face gleaming with sweat.

“What is it?” Celaena asked. “What happened in your meeting?”

“That’s none of your business,” Ansel said a bit sharply. Then she added, “Just follow me.”

They wound up sneaking inside the Lord of Xandria’s palace walls, and Celaena knew better than to ask questions as they crept across the grounds. But they didn’t head to the towering central building. No—they approached the stables, where they slipped around the guards and entered the pungent shadows within.

“There had better be a good reason for this,” Celaena warned as Ansel crept toward a pen.

“Oh, there is,” she hissed back, and stopped at a gate, waving Celaena forward.

Celaena approached and frowned. “It’s a horse.” But even as the words left her mouth, she knew it wasn’t.

“It’s an Asterion horse,” Ansel breathed, her red-brown eyes growing huge.

The horse was black as pitch, with dark eyes that bored into Celaena’s own. She’d heard of Asterion horses, of course. The most ancient breed of horse in Erilea. Legend claimed that the Fae had made them from the four winds—spirit from the north, strength from the south, speed from the east, and wisdom from the west, all rolled into the slender-snouted, high-tailed, lovely creature that stood before her.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” Ansel whispered. “Her name is Hisli.” Mares, Celaena remembered, were more prized, as Asterion pedigrees were traced through the female line. “And that one,” Ansel said, pointing to the next stall, “is named Kasida—it means ‘drinker of the wind’ in the desert dialect.”

Kasida’s name was fitting. The slender mare was a dapple gray, with a sea-foam white mane and thundercloud coat. She huffed and stomped her forelegs,

staring at Celaena with eyes that seemed older than the earth itself. Celaena suddenly understood why the Asterion horses were worth their weight in gold.

“Lord Berick got them today. Bought them from a merchant on his way to Banjali.” Ansel slipped into Hisli’s pen. She cooed and murmured, stroking the horse’s muzzle. “He’s planning on testing them out in half an hour.” That explained why they were already saddled.

“And?” Celaena whispered, holding out a hand for Kasida to smell. The mare’s nostrils flared, her velvety nose tickling Celaena’s fingertips.

“And then he’s either going to give them away as a bribe, or lose interest and let them languish here for the rest of their lives. Lord Berick tends to tire of his playthings rather quickly.”

“What a waste.”

“Indeed it is,” Ansel muttered from inside the stall. Celaena lowered her fingers from Kasida’s muzzle and peered into Hisli’s pen. Ansel was running a hand down Hisli’s black flank, her face still full of wonder. Then she turned. “Are you a strong rider?”

“Of course,” Celaena said slowly.

“Good.”

Celaena bit down on her cry of alarm as Ansel unlocked the stall door and guided Hisli out of her pen. In a smooth, quick motion, the girl was atop the horse, clutching the reins in one hand. “Because you’re going to have to ride like hell.”

With that, Ansel sent Hisli into a gallop, heading straight for the stable doors.

Celaena didn’t have time to gape or really even to process what she was about to do as she unlocked Kasida’s pen, yanked her out, and heaved herself into the saddle. With a muffled curse, she dug her heels into the mare’s sides and took off.

Chapter Six

The guards didn't know what was happening until the horses had already rushed past them in a blur of black and gray, and they were through the main palace gate before the guards' cries finished echoing. Ansel's red hair shone like a beacon as she broke for the side exit from the city, people leaping aside to let them pass.

Celaena looked back through the crowded streets only once—and that was enough to see the three mounted guards charging after them, shouting.

But the girls were already through the city gate and into the sea of red dunes that spread beyond, Ansel riding as if the denizens of hell were behind her. Celaena could only race after her, doing her best to keep in the saddle.

Kasida moved like thunder and turned with the swiftness of lightning. The mare was so fast that Celaena's eyes watered in the wind. The three guards, astride ordinary horses, were still far off, but not nearly far enough for comfort. In the vastness of the Red Desert, Celaena had no choice but to follow Ansel.

Celaena clung to Kasida's mane as they took dune after dune, up and down, down and up, until there was only the red sand and the cloudless sky and the rumble of hooves, hooves, hooves rolling through the world.

Ansel slowed enough for Celaena to catch up, and they galloped along the broad, flat top of a dune.

"Are you out of your damned mind?" Celaena shouted.

"I don't want to walk home! We're taking a shortcut!" Ansel shouted back. Behind them, the three guards still charged onward.

Celaena debated slamming Kasida into Hisli to send Ansel tumbling onto the dunes—leaving her for the guards to take care of—but the girl pointed over Hisli's dark head. "Live a little, Sardothien!"

And just like that, the dunes parted to reveal the turquoise expanse of the Gulf of Oro. The cool sea breeze kissed her face, and Celaena leaned into it, almost moaning with pleasure.

Ansel let out a whoop, careening down the final dune and heading straight toward the beach and the breaking waves. Despite herself, Celaena smiled and held on tighter.

Kasida hit the hard-packed red sand and gained speed, faster and faster.

Celaena had a sudden moment of clarity then, as her hair ripped from her braid and the wind tore at her clothes. Of all the girls in all the world, here she was on a spit of beach in the Red Desert, astride an Asterion horse, racing faster than the wind. Most would never experience this—*she* would never experience anything like this again. And for that one heartbeat, when there was nothing more to it than that, she tasted bliss so complete that she tipped her head back to the sky and laughed.

The guards reached the beach, their fierce cries nearly swallowed up by the booming surf.

Ansel cut away, surging toward the dunes and the giant wall of rock that arose nearby. The Desert Cleaver, if Celaena knew her geography correctly—which she did, as she'd studied maps of the Deserted Land for weeks now. A giant wall that arose from the earth and stretched from the eastern coast all the way to the black dunes of the south—split clean down the middle by an enormous fissure. They'd come around it on the way from the fortress, which was on the other side of the Cleaver, and that was what had made their journey so insufferably long. But today . . .

"Faster, Kasida," she whispered in the horse's ear. As if the mare understood her, she took off, and soon Celaena was again beside Ansel, cutting up dune after dune as they headed straight for the red wall of rock. "What are you doing?" she called to Ansel.

Ansel gave her a fiendish grin. "We're going through it. What good is an Asterion horse if it can't jump?"

Celaena's stomach dropped. "You can't be serious."

Ansel glanced over her shoulder, her red hair streaming past her face. "They'll chase us to the doors of the fortress if we go the long way!" But the guards couldn't make the jump, not with ordinary horses.

A narrow opening in the wall of red rock appeared, twisting away from sight. Ansel headed straight toward it. How *dare* she make such a reckless, stupid decision without consulting Celaena first?

"You planned this the whole time," Celaena snapped. Though the guards still remained a good distance away, they were close enough for Celaena to see the weapons, including longbows, strapped to them.

Ansel didn't reply. She just sent Hisli flying forward.

Celaena had to choose between the unforgiving walls of the Cleaver and the three guards behind them. She could take the guards in a few seconds—if she slowed enough to draw her daggers. But they were mounted, and aiming might be impossible. Which meant she'd have to get close enough to kill them,

as long as they didn't start firing at her first. They probably wouldn't shoot at Kasida, not when she was worth more than all of their lives put together, but Celaena couldn't bring herself to risk the magnificent beast. And if she killed the guards, that still left her alone in the desert, since Ansel surely wouldn't stop until she was on the other side of the Cleaver. Since she had no desire to die of thirst . . .

Cursing colorfully, Celaena plunged after Ansel into the passage through the canyon.

The passage was so narrow that Celaena's legs nearly grazed the rain-smoothed orange walls. The beating hooves of their horses echoed like firecrackers, the sound only worsening as the three guards entered the canyon. It would have been nice, she realized, to have Sam with her. He might be a pain in her ass, but he'd proven himself to be more than handy in a fight. Extraordinarily skilled, if she felt like admitting it.

Ansel wove and turned with the passage, fast as a stream down a mountainside, and it was all Celaena could do to hold on to Kasida as they followed.

A twang snapped through the canyon, and Celaena ducked low to Kasida's surging head—just as an arrow ricocheted off the rock a few feet away. So much for not firing at the horses. Another sharp turn set her in the clear, but the relief was short-lived as she beheld the long, straight passage—and the ravine beyond it.

Celaena's breath lodged in her throat. The jump had to be thirty feet at least—and she didn't want to know how long a fall it was if she missed.

Ansel barreled ahead; then her body tensed, and Hisli leapt from the cliff edge.

The sunlight caught in Ansel's hair as they flew over the ravine, and she loosed a joyous cry that set the whole canyon humming. A moment later, she landed on the other side, with only inches to spare.

There wasn't enough room for Celaena to stop—even if she tried, they wouldn't have enough space to slow down, and they'd go right over the edge. So she began praying to anyone, anything. Kasida gave a sudden burst of speed, as if she, too, understood that only the gods would see them safely over.

And then they were at the lip of the ravine, which went down, down, down to a jade river hundreds of feet below. And Kasida was soaring, only air beneath them, nothing to keep her from the death that now wrapped around her completely.

Celaena could only hold on and wait to fall, to die, to scream as she met

her horrible end . . .

But then there was rock under them, solid rock. She gripped Kasida tighter as they landed in the narrow passage on the other side, the impact exploding through her bones, and kept galloping.

Back across the ravine, the guards had pulled to a halt, and cursed at them in a language she was grateful she didn't understand.

Ansel let out another whoop when they came out the other end of the Cleaver, and she turned to find Celaena still riding close behind her. They rode across the dunes, heading west, the setting sun turning the entire world bloodred.

When the horses were too winded to keep running, Ansel finally stopped atop a dune, Celaena pulling up beside her. Ansel looked at Celaena, wildness still rampant in her eyes. "Wasn't that wonderful?"

Breathing hard, Celaena didn't say anything as she punched Ansel so hard in the face that the girl went flying off her horse and tumbled onto the sand.

Ansel just clutched her jaw and laughed.

Though they could have made it back before midnight, and though Celaena pushed her to continue riding, Ansel insisted on stopping for the night. So when their campfire was nothing but embers and the horses were dozing behind them, Ansel and Celaena lay on their backs on the side of a dune and stared up at the stars.

Her hands tucked behind her head, Celaena took a long, deep breath, savoring the balmy night breeze, the exhaustion ebbing from her limbs. She rarely got to see stars so bright—not with the lights of Rifthold. The wind moved across the dunes, and the sand sighed.

"You know," Ansel said quietly, "I never learned the constellations. Though I think ours are different from yours—the names, I mean."

It took Celaena a moment to realize that by "ours" she didn't mean the Silent Assassins—she meant her people in the Western Wastes. Celaena pointed to a cluster of stars to their left. "That's the dragon." She traced the shape. "See the head, legs, and tail?"

"No." Ansel chuckled.

Celaena nudged her with an elbow and pointed to another grouping of stars. "That's the swan. The lines on either side are the wings, and the arc is its neck."

"What about that one?" Ansel said.

"That's the stag," Celaena breathed. "The Lord of the North."

“Why does he get a fancy title? What about the swan and the dragon?”

Celaena snorted, but the smile faded when she stared at the familiar constellation. “Because the stag remains constant—no matter the season, he’s always there.”

“Why?”

Celaena took a long breath. “So the people of Terrasen will always know how to find their way home. So they can look up at the sky, no matter where they are, and know Terrasen is forever with them.”

“Do you ever want to return to Terrasen?”

Celaena turned her head to look at Ansel. She hadn’t told her she was from Terrasen. Ansel said, “You talk about Terrasen the way my father used to talk about our land.”

Celaena was about to reply when she caught the word. *Used to.*

Ansel’s attention remained on the stars. “I lied to the Master when I came here,” she whispered, as if afraid someone else would hear them in the emptiness of the desert. Celaena looked back to the sky. “My father never sent me to train. And there is no Briarcliff, or Briarcliff Hall. There hasn’t been for five years.”

A dozen questions sprung up, but Celaena kept her mouth shut, letting Ansel speak.

“I was twelve,” Ansel said, “when Lord Loch took several territories around Briarcliff, and then demanded we yield to him as well—that we bow to him as High King of the Flatlands. My father refused. He said there was one tyrant already conquering everything east of the mountains—he didn’t want one in the west, too.” Celaena’s blood went cold as she braced herself for what she was certain was coming. “Two weeks later, Lord Loch marched into our land with his men, seizing our villages, our livelihood, our people. And when he got to Briarcliff Hall . . .”

Ansel drew a shuddering breath. “When he arrived at Briarcliff Hall, I was in the kitchen. I saw them from the window and hid in a cupboard as Loch walked in. My sister and father were upstairs, and Loch stayed in the kitchen as his men brought them down and . . . I didn’t dare make a sound as Lord Loch made my father watch as he . . .” She stumbled, but forced it out, spitting it as if it were poison. “My father begged on his hands and knees, but Loch still made my father watch as he slit my sister’s throat, then his. And I just hid there, even as they killed our servants, too. I hid there and did nothing.”

“And when they were gone, I took my father’s sword from his corpse and ran. I ran and ran until I couldn’t run anymore, at the foothills of the White Fang

Mountains. And that's when I collapsed at the campfire of a witch—one of the Ironteeth. I didn't care if she killed me. But she told me that it was not my fate to die there. That I should journey south, to the Silent Assassins in the Red Desert, and there . . . there I would find my fate. She fed me, and bound my bleeding feet, and gave me gold—gold that I later used to commission my armor—then sent me on my way.”

Ansel wiped at her eyes. “So I've been here ever since, training for the day when I'm strong enough and fast enough to return to Briarcliff and take back what is mine. Someday, I'll march into High King Loch's hall and repay him for what he did to my family. With my father's sword.” Her hand grazed the wolf-head hilt. “This sword will end his life. Because this sword is all I have left of them.”

Celaena hadn't realized she was crying until she tried to take a deep breath. Saying that she was sorry didn't feel adequate. She knew what this sort of loss was like, and words didn't do anything at all.

Ansel slowly turned to look at her, her eyes lined with silver. She traced Celaena's cheekbone, where the bruises had once been. “Where do men find it in themselves to do such monstrous things? How do they find it acceptable?”

“We'll make them pay for it in the end.” Celaena grasped Ansel's hand. The girl squeezed back hard. “We'll see to it that they pay.”

“Yes.” Ansel shifted her gaze back to the stars. “Yes, we will.”

Chapter Seven

Celaena and Ansel knew their little escapade with the Asterion horses would have consequences. Celaena had at least expected to have enough time to tell a decent lie about how they acquired the horses. But when they returned to the fortress and found Mikhail waiting, along with three other assassins, she knew that word of their stunt had somehow already reached the Master.

She kept her mouth shut as she and Ansel knelt at the foot of the Master's dais, heads bowed, eyes on the floor. She certainly wouldn't convince him to train her now.

His receiving chamber was empty today, and each of his steps scraped softly against the floor. She knew he could be silent if he wished. He wanted them to feel the dread of his approach.

And Celaena felt it. She felt each footstep, the phantom bruises on her face throbbing with the memory of Arobynn's fists. And suddenly, as the memory of that day echoed through her, she remembered the words Sam kept screaming at Arobynn as the King of the Assassins beat her, the words that she somehow had forgotten in the fog of pain: *I'll kill you!*

Sam had said it like he meant it. He'd bellowed it. Again and again and again.

The clear, unexpected memory was almost jarring enough for her to forget where she was—but then the snow-white robes of the Master came into view. Her mouth went dry.

"We just wanted to have some fun," Ansel said quietly. "We can return the horses."

Celaena, eyes still lowered, glanced toward Ansel. She was staring up at the Master as he towered over them. "I'm sorry," Celaena murmured, wishing she could convey it with her hands, too. Though silence might have been preferable, she needed him to hear her apology.

The Master just stood there, disapproval written all over his face.

Ansel was the first to break under his stare. She sighed. "I know it was foolish. But there's nothing to worry about. I can handle Lord Berick; I've been handling him for ages."

There was enough bitterness in her words that Celaena's brows rose slightly. Perhaps his refusal to train her wasn't easy for Ansel to bear. She was

never outright competitive about getting the Master's attention, but . . . After so many years of living here, being stuck as the mediator between the Master and Berick didn't exactly seem like the sort of glory Ansel was interested in. Celaena certainly wouldn't have enjoyed it.

The Master's clothes whispered as they moved, and Celaena flinched when she felt his calloused fingers hook under her chin. He lifted her face so she was forced to look at him, his face lined with disapproval. She remained perfectly still, bracing herself for the strike, already praying he wouldn't damage her too significantly. But then the Master's sea-green eyes narrowed ever so slightly, his head cocking, and he gave her a sad smile as he released her.

Her face burned. He hadn't been about to hit her. He'd wanted her to look at him, to tell him her side of the story. But even if he wasn't going to strike her, he still might punish them. And if he kicked out Ansel for what they'd done . . . Ansel needed to be here, to learn all that these assassins could teach her, because Ansel wanted to *do* something with her life. Ansel had a purpose. And Celaena . . .

"It was my idea," Celaena blurted, her words too loud in the empty chamber. "I didn't feel like walking back here, and I thought it would be useful to have horses. And when I saw the Asterion mares . . . I thought we might as well travel in style." She gave him a shaky half grin, and the Master's brows rose as he looked between them. For a long, long moment, he just watched them.

Whatever he saw on Ansel's face suddenly made him nod. Ansel quickly bowed her head. "Before you decide on a punishment . . ." She turned to Celaena, then looked back at the Master. "Since we like horses so much, maybe we could . . . be on stable duty? For the morning shift. Until Celaena leaves."

Celaena almost choked, but she schooled her features into neutrality.

A faint glimmer of amusement shone in his eyes, and he considered Ansel's words for a moment. Then he nodded again. Ansel loosened a breath. "Thank you for your lenience," she said. The Master just glanced toward the doors behind them. They were dismissed.

Ansel got to her feet, and Celaena followed suit. But as Celaena turned, the Master grabbed her arm. Ansel paused to watch as the Master made a few motions with his hand. When he finished, Ansel's brows rose. He repeated the motions again—slower, pointing to Celaena repeatedly. When it seemed she was certain she understood him, Ansel turned to Celaena.

"You're to report to him at sunset tomorrow. For your first lesson."

Celaena bit back her sigh of relief, and gave the Master a genuine grin. He

returned a hint of a smile. She bowed deeply, and couldn't stop smiling as she and Ansel left the hall and headed to the stables. She had three and a half weeks left—that would be more than enough time to get that letter.

Whatever he had seen in her face, whatever she had said . . . somehow, she'd proven herself to him at last.

It turned out that they weren't just responsible for shoveling horse dung. Oh, no—they were responsible for cleaning the pens of *all* the four-legged livestock in the fortress, a task that took them from breakfast until noon. At least they did it in the morning, before the afternoon heat really made the smell atrocious.

Another benefit was that they didn't have to go running. Though after four hours of shoveling animal droppings, Celaena would have begged to take the six-mile run instead.

Anxious as she was to be out of the stables, she couldn't contain her growing trepidation as the sun arced across the sky, heading toward sunset. She didn't know what to expect; even Ansel had no idea what the Master might have in mind. They spent the afternoon sparring as usual—with each other, and with whatever assassins wandered into the shade of the open-air training courtyard. And when the sun finally hovered near the horizon, Ansel gave Celaena a squeeze on the shoulder and sent her to the Master's hall.

But the Master wasn't in his receiving hall, and when she ran into Ilias, he just gave her his usual smile and pointed toward the roof. After taking a few staircases and then climbing a wooden ladder and squeezing through a hatch in the ceiling, she found herself in the open air, high atop the fortress.

The Master stood by the parapet, gazing across the desert. She cleared her throat, but he remained with his back to her.

The roof couldn't have been more than twenty square feet, and the only thing on it was a covered reed basket placed in the center. Torches burned, illuminating the rooftop.

Celaena cleared her throat again, and the Master finally turned. She bowed, which, strangely, was something she felt he actually deserved, rather than something she ought to do. He gave her a nod and pointed to the reed basket, beckoning her to open the lid. Doing her best not to look skeptical, hoping there was a beautiful new weapon inside, she approached. She stopped when she heard the hissing.

Unpleasant, don't-come-closer hissing. From inside the basket.

She turned to the Master, who hopped onto one of the merlons, his bare feet dangling in the gap between one block of stone and the next, and beckoned

her again. Palms sweating, Celaena took a deep breath and snatched back the lid.

A black asp curled into itself, head drawn back low as it hissed.

Celaena leapt away a yard, making for the parapet wall, but the Master let out a low click of his tongue.

His hands moved, flowing and winding through the air like a river—like a snake. *Observe it*, he seemed to tell her. *Move with it*.

She looked back at the basket in time to see the slender, black head of the asp slide over the rim, then down to the tiled roof.

Her heart thundered in her chest. It was poisonous, wasn't it? It had to be. It looked poisonous.

The snake moved across the roof, and Celaena moved away from it, not daring to look away for even a heartbeat. She reached for a dagger, but the Master again clicked his tongue. A glance in his direction was enough for her to understand the meaning of the sound.

Don't kill it. Absorb.

The snake slithered effortlessly, lazily, and tasted the evening air with its black tongue. With a deep, steadying breath, Celaena observed.

She spent every night that week on the roof with the asp, watching it, copying its movements, internalizing its rhythm and sounds until she could move like it moved, until they could face each other and she could anticipate how it would strike; until she could strike like the asp, swift and unflinching.

After that, she spent three days dangling from the rafters of the fortress stables with the bats. It took her longer to figure out their strengths—how they became so silent that no one noticed they were there, how they could drown out the external noise and focus only on the sound of their prey. And after that, it was two nights spent with jackrabbits on the dunes, learning their stillness, absorbing how they used their speed and dexterity to evade talons and claws, how they slept above ground to better hear their enemies approaching. Night after night, the Master watched from nearby, never saying a word, never doing anything except occasionally pointing out how an animal moved.

As the remaining weeks passed, she saw Ansel only during meals and for the few hours they spent each morning shoveling manure. And after a long night spent sprinting or hanging upside down or running sideways to see why crabs bothered moving like that, Celaena was usually in no mood to talk. But Ansel was merry—almost gleeful, more and more with every passing day. She never said why, exactly, but Celaena found it rather infectious.

And every day, Celaena went to sleep after lunch and dozed until the sun went down, her dreams full of snakes and rabbits and chirping desert beetles. Sometimes she spotted Mikhail training the acolytes, or found Ilias meditating in an empty training room, but she rarely got the chance to spend time with them.

They had no more attacks from Lord Berick, either. Whatever Ansel had said during that meeting with him in Xandria, whatever the Master's letter had contained, it seemed to have worked, even after the theft of his horses.

There were quiet moments also, when she wasn't training or working with Ansel. Moments when her thoughts drifted back to Sam, to what he'd said. He'd threatened to *kill* Arobynn. For hurting her. She tried to work through it, tried to figure out what had changed in Skull's Bay to make Sam dare to say such a thing to the King of the Assassins. But whenever she caught herself thinking about it too much, she shoved those thoughts into the back of her mind.

Chapter Eight

“You mean to tell me you do this *every day*?” Ansel said, her brows high on her forehead as Celaena brushed rouge onto the girl’s cheeks.

“Sometimes twice a day,” Celaena said, and Ansel opened an eye. They were sitting on Celaena’s bed, a scattering of cosmetics between them—a small fraction of Celaena’s enormous collection back in Rifthold. “Besides being useful for my work, it’s fun.”

“Fun?” Ansel opened her other eye. “Smearing all this gunk on your face is fun?”

Celaena set down her pot of rouge. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll draw a mustache on you.”

Ansel’s lips twitched, but she closed her eyes again as Celaena raised the little container of bronze powder and dusted some on her eyelids.

“Well, it *is* my birthday. And Midsummer Eve,” Ansel said, her eyelashes fluttering beneath the tickle of Celaena’s delicate brush. “We so rarely get to have fun. I suppose I should look nice.”

Ansel always looked nice—better than nice, actually—but Celaena didn’t need to tell her that. “At a minimum, at least you don’t smell like horse droppings.”

Ansel let out a breathy chuckle, the air warm on Celaena’s hands as they hovered near her face. She kept quiet while Celaena finished with the powder, then held still as she lined her eyes with kohl and darkened her lashes.

“All right,” Celaena said, sitting back so she could see Ansel’s face. “Open your eyes.”

Ansel opened her eyes, and Celaena frowned.

“What?” Ansel said.

Celaena shook her head. “You’re going to have to wash it all off.”

“Why?”

“Because you look better than I do.”

Ansel pinched Celaena’s arm. Celaena pinched her back, laughter on her lips. But then the single remaining week that Celaena had left loomed before her, brief and unforgiving, and her chest tightened at the thought of leaving. She hadn’t even dared ask the Master for her letter yet. But more than that . . . Well,

she'd never had a female friend—never really had *any* friends—and somehow, the thought of returning to Rifthold without Ansel was a tad unbearable.

The Midsummer Eve festival was like nothing Celaena had ever experienced. She'd expected music and drinking and laughter, but instead, the assassins gathered in the largest of the fortress courtyards. And all of them, including Ansel, were totally silent. The moon provided the only light, silhouetting the date trees swaying along the courtyard walls.

But the strangest part was the dancing. Even though there was no music, most of the people danced—some of the dances foreign and strange, some of them familiar. Everyone was smiling, but aside from the rustle of clothing and the scrape of merry feet against the stones, there was no sound.

But there *was* wine, and she and Ansel found a table in a corner of the courtyard and fully indulged themselves.

Though she loved, loved, *loved* parties, Celaena would have rather spent the night training with the Master. With only one week left, she wanted to spend every waking moment working with him. But he'd insisted she go to the party—*if only because he wanted to go to the party.* The old man danced to a rhythm Celaena could not hear or make out, and looked more like someone's benevolent, clumsy grandfather than the master of some of the world's greatest assassins.

She couldn't help but think of Arobynn, who was all calculated grace and restrained aggression—Arobynn who danced with a select few, and whose smile was razor-sharp.

Mikhail had dragged Ansel to the dancing, and she was grinning as she twirled and bobbed and bounced from partner to partner, all of the assassins now keeping the same, silent beat. Ansel had experienced great horror, and yet she could also be so carefree, so keenly alive. Mikhail caught her in his arms and dipped her, low enough for Ansel's eyes to widen.

Mikhail truly liked Ansel—that much was obvious. He always found excuses to touch her, always smiled at her, always looked at her as if she were the only person in the room.

Celaena sloshed her wine around in her glass. If she were being honest, sometimes she thought Sam looked at her that way. But then he'd go and say something absurd, or try to undermine her, and she'd chide herself for even thinking that about him.

Her stomach tightened. What had Arobynn done to him that night? She should have inquired after him. But in the days afterward, she'd been so busy,

so wrapped in her rage . . . She hadn't dared look for him, actually. Because if Arobynn had hurt Sam the way he'd hurt her—if he'd hurt Sam *worse* than he'd hurt her . . .

Celaena drained the rest of her wine. During the two days after she'd awoken from her beating, she'd used a good chunk of her savings to purchase her own apartment, away and well hidden from the Assassin's Keep. She hadn't told anyone—partially because she was worried she might change her mind while she was away—but with each day here, with each lesson with the kind and gentle Master, she was more and more resolved to tell Arobynn she was moving out. She was actually eager to see the look on his face. She still owed him money, of course—he'd seen to it that her debts would keep her with him for a while—but there was no rule that said she had to live *with* him. And if he ever laid a hand on her again . . .

If Arobynn ever laid a hand on her *or* Sam again, she'd see to it that he lost that hand. Actually, she'd see to it that he lost everything up to the elbow.

Someone touched her shoulder, and Celaena looked up from her empty wine goblet to find Ilias standing behind her. She hadn't seen much of him in the past few days, aside from at dinner, where he still glanced at her and gave her those lovely smiles. He offered his hand.

Celaena's face instantly warmed and she shook her head, trying her best to convey a sense of not knowing these dances.

Ilias shrugged, his eyes bright. His hand remained extended.

She bit her lip and glanced pointedly at his feet. Ilias shrugged again, this time as if to suggest that his toes weren't all that valuable, anyway.

Celaena glanced at Mikhail and Ansel, spinning wildly to a beat only the two of them could hear. Ilias raised his brows. *Live a little, Sardothien!* Ansel had said that day they stole the horses. Why not live a little tonight, too?

Celaena gave him a dramatic shrug and took his hand, tossing a wry smile his way. *I suppose I could spare a dance or two*, she wanted to say.

Even though there was no music, Ilias led her through the dances with ease, each of his movements sure and steady. It was hard to look away—not just from his face, but also from the contentment that radiated from him. And he looked back at her so intently that she had to wonder if he'd been watching her all these weeks not just to protect his father.

They danced until well after midnight; wild dances that weren't at all like the waltzes she'd learned in Rifthold. Even when she switched partners, Ilias was always there, waiting for the next dance. It was almost as intoxicating as the oddity of dancing to no music, to hearing a collective, silent rhythm—to letting

the wind and the sighing sand outside the fortress provide the beat and the melody. It was lovely and strange, and as the hours passed, she often wondered if she'd strayed into some dream.

When the moon was setting, Celaena found herself leaving the dance floor, doing her best to convey how exhausted she was. It wasn't a lie. Her feet hurt, and she hadn't had a proper night's rest in weeks and weeks. Ilias tried pulling her back onto the floor for one last dance, but she nimbly slipped out of his grasp, grinning as she shook her head. Ansel and Mikhail were still dancing, holding each other closer than any other pair on the dance floor. Not wanting to interrupt her friend, Celaena left the hall, Ilias in tow.

She couldn't deny that her racing heartbeat wasn't just from the dancing as they walked down the empty hall. Ilias strolled beside her, silent as ever, and she swallowed tightly.

What would he say—that is, if he could speak—if he knew that Adarlan's Assassin had never been kissed? She'd killed men, freed slaves, stolen horses, but she'd never kissed anyone. It was ridiculous, somehow. Something that she should have gotten out of the way at some point, but she'd never found the right person.

All too quickly, they were standing outside the door to her room. Celaena didn't touch the door handle, and tried to calm her breathing as she turned to face Ilias.

He was smiling. Maybe he didn't mean to kiss her. His room was, after all, just a few doors down.

"Well," she said. After so many hours of silence, the word was jarringly loud. Her face burned. He stepped closer, and she tried not to flinch as he slipped a hand around her waist. It would be so simple to kiss him, she realized as she looked up at him.

His other hand slid against her neck, his thumb caressing her jaw as he gently tilted her head back. Her blood pounded through every inch of her. Her lips parted . . . but as Ilias inclined his head, she went rigid and stepped back.

He immediately withdrew, his brows crossed with concern. She wanted to seep into the stones and disappear, but she swallowed hard. "I'm sorry," she said thickly, trying not to look too mortified. "I—I can't. I mean, I'm leaving in a week. And . . . and you live here. And I'm in Rifthold, so . . ." She was babbling. She should stop. Actually, she should just stop talking. Forever.

But if he sensed her mortification, he didn't show it. Instead, he just bowed his head and squeezed her shoulder. Then he gave her one of those shrugs, which she interpreted to mean, *If only we didn't live thousands of miles apart.*

But can you blame me for trying?

With that, he strode the few feet to his room. He gave her a friendly wave before disappearing inside.

Alone in the hallway, Celaena watched the shadows cast by the torches. It hadn't been the mere impossibility of a relationship with Ilias that had made her pull away.

No; it was the memory of Sam's face that had stopped her from kissing him.

Ansel didn't come back to their room that night. And when she stumbled into the stables the following morning, still wearing her clothes from the party, Celaena could assume she'd either spent the whole night dancing, or with Mikhail. From the flush on Ansel's freckled cheeks, Celaena thought it might be both.

Ansel took one look at the grin on Celaena's face and glowered. "Don't you even start."

Celaena shoveled a heap of manure into the nearby wagon. Later she'd cart it to the gardens, where a gardener would take it for fertilizer. "What?" Celaena said, grinning even wider. "I wasn't going to say anything."

Ansel snatched her shovel from where it leaned against the wooden wall, several pews down from where Kasida and Hisli now had their new homes. "Good. I got enough of it from the others while I was walking here."

Celaena leaned against her shovel in the open gate. "I'm sure Mikhail will get his fair share of teasing, too."

Ansel straightened, her eyes surprisingly dark. "No, he won't. They'll congratulate him, just like they always do, for a conquest well made." She let out a long sigh from her nose. "But me? I'll get teased until I snap at them. It's always the same."

They continued their work in silence. After a moment, Celaena spoke. "Even though they tease you, you still want to be with Mikhail?"

Ansel shrugged again, flinging dung into the pile she'd gathered in the wagon. "He's an amazing warrior; he's taught me far more than I would have learned without him. So they can tease me all they want, but at the end of the day, he's still the one giving me extra attention when we train."

That didn't sit well with Celaena, but she opted to keep her mouth shut.

"Besides," Ansel said, glancing sidelong at Celaena, "not all of us can so easily convince the Master to train us."

Celaena's stomach twisted a little. Was Ansel jealous of that? "I'm not entirely sure why he changed his mind."

“Oh?” Ansel said, sharper than Celaena had ever heard her. It scared her, surprisingly. “The noble, clever, beautiful assassin from the North—the *great* Celaena Sardothien, has no idea why he’d want to train her? No idea that he might want to leave his mark on you, too? To have a hand in shaping your glorious fate?”

Celaena’s throat tightened, and she cursed herself for feeling so hurt by the words. She didn’t think the Master felt that way at all, but she still hissed, “Yes, my glorious fate. Shoveling dung in a barn. A worthy task for me.”

“But certainly a worthy task for a girl from the Flatlands?”

“I didn’t say that,” Celaena said through her teeth. “Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Why not? I know you think it—and you know I’m telling the truth. I’m not good enough for the Master to train me. I began seeing Mikhail to get extra attention during lessons, and I certainly don’t have a notorious name to flaunt around.”

“Fine,” Celaena said. “Yes: most of the people in the kingdoms know my name—know to fear me.” Her temper rose with dizzying speed. “But you . . . You want to know the truth about you, Ansel? The truth is, even if you go home and get what you want, no one will give a damn if you take back your speck of territory—no one will even hear about it. Because no one except for *you* will even care.”

She regretted the words the instant they left her mouth. Ansel’s face went white with anger, and her lips trembled as she pressed them together. Ansel threw down her shovel. For a moment, Celaena thought that she’d attack, and even went as far as slightly bending her knees in anticipation of a fight.

But Ansel stalked past her and said, “You’re just a spoiled, selfish bitch.” With that, she left Celaena to finish their morning chores.

Chapter Nine

Celaena couldn't focus on her lesson with the Master that night. All day, Ansel's words had been ringing in her ears. She hadn't seen her friend for hours—and dreaded the moment when she'd have to return to her room and face her again. Though Celaena hated to admit it, Ansel's parting claim had felt true. She *was* spoiled. And selfish.

The Master snapped his fingers, and Celaena, who was yet again studying an asp, looked up. Though she'd been mirroring the snake's movements, she hadn't noticed it was slowly creeping toward her.

She leapt back a few feet, crouching close to the roof's wall, but stopped when she felt the Master's hand on her shoulder. He motioned to leave the snake be and sit beside him on the merlons that ran around the roof. Grateful for a break, she hopped up, trying not to glance down at the ground far, far below. Though she was well acquainted with heights, and had no problems with balance, sitting on an edge never really felt *natural*.

The Master raised his eyebrows. *Talk*, he seemed to say.

She tucked her left foot under her right thigh, making sure to keep an eye on the asp, which slithered into the shadows of the roof.

But telling him about her fight with Ansel felt so . . . childish. As if the Master of the Silent Assassins would want to hear about a petty squabble!

Cicadas buzzed in the trees of the keep, and somewhere in the gardens, a nightingale sang her lament. *Talk*. Talk about what?

She didn't have anything to say, so they sat on the parapet in silence for a while—until even the cicadas went to sleep, and the moon slipped away behind them, and the sky began to brighten. *Talk*. Talk about what had been haunting her these months. Haunting every thought, every dream, every breath. *Talk*.

"I'm scared to go home," she said at last, staring out at the dunes beyond the walls.

The predawn light was bright enough for her to see the Master's brows rise. *Why?*

"Because everything will be different. Everything is already different. I think everything changed when Arobynn punished me, but . . . Some part of me still thinks that the world will go back to the way it was before that night. Before I went to Skull's Bay."

The Master's face was unreadable, but his eyes shone like emeralds. Compassionate—sorrowful.

"I'm not sure I *want* it to go back to the way it was before," she admitted. "And I think . . . I think that's what scares me the most."

The Master smiled at her reassuringly, then rolled his neck and stretched his arms over his head before standing atop the merlon.

Celaena tensed, unsure if she should follow.

But the Master didn't look at her as he began a series of movements, graceful and winding, as elegant as a dance and deadly as the asp that lurked on the roof.

The asp.

Watching the Master, she could see each of the qualities she had copied for the past few weeks—the contained power and swiftness, the cunning and the smooth restraint.

He went through the motions again, and it took only a glance in her direction to get her to her feet atop the parapet wall. Mindful of her balance, she slowly copied him, her muscles singing with the *rightness* of the movements. She grinned as night after night of careful observation and mimicry clicked into place.

Again and again, the sweep and curve of her arm, the twisting of her torso, even the rhythm of her breathing. Again and again, until she became the asp, until the sun broke over the horizon, bathing them in red light.

Again and again, until there was nothing left but the Master and her and their steady breathing as they greeted the new day.

An hour after sunup, Celaena crept into her room, bracing herself for another fight, but found Ansel already gone to the stables. Since Ansel had abandoned her to do the chores by herself yesterday, Celaena decided to return the favor. She sighed with contentment as she collapsed atop her bed.

She was later awoken by someone shaking her shoulder—someone who smelled like manure.

"It had better be afternoon," Celaena said, rolling onto her stomach and burying her face in her pillow.

Ansel chuckled. "Oh, it's almost dinner. And the stables and pens are in good order, no thanks to you."

"You left me to do it all yesterday," Celaena mumbled.

"Yes, well . . . I'm sorry."

Celaena straightened and peeled her face from the pillow to look at Ansel, who stood over the bed. Ansel twisted her hands. She was wearing her father's armor again. At the sight of it, Celaena winced as she recalled what she'd said about her friend's homeland.

Ansel tucked her red hair behind her ears. "I shouldn't have said those things about you. I don't think you're spoiled or selfish."

"Oh, don't worry. I am—very much so." Celaena sat up. Ansel gave her a weak smile. "But," she went on, "I'm sorry for what I said, too. I didn't mean it."

Ansel nodded, glancing toward the shut door, as if she expected someone to be there. "I have lots of friends here, but you're the first *true* friend I've had. I'll be sorry to see you go."

"I still have five days," Celaena said. Given how popular Ansel was, it was surprising—and somewhat relieving—to hear that she'd also felt slightly alone.

Ansel flicked her eyes to the door again. What was she nervous about? "Try to remember me fondly, will you?"

"I'll try. But it might be hard."

Ansel let out a quiet laugh and took two goblets from the table beneath the window. "I brought us some wine." She handed one to Celaena. Ansel lifted her copper goblet. "To making amends—and fond memories."

"To being the most fearsome and imposing girls the world has ever seen." Celaena raised her goblet high before she drank.

As she swallowed a large mouthful of wine, she had two thoughts.

The first was that Ansel's eyes were now filled with unmasked sorrow.

And the second—which explained the first—was that the wine tasted strange.

But Celaena didn't have time to consider what poison it was before she heard her own goblet clatter to the floor, and the world spun and went black.

Chapter Ten

Someone was hammering against an anvil somewhere very, very close to her head. So close that she felt each beat in her body, the sound shattering through her mind, stirring her from sleep.

With a jolt, Celaena sat up. There was no hammer and no anvil—just a pounding headache. And there was no assassin’s fortress, only endless miles of red dunes, and Kasida standing watch over her. Well, at least she wasn’t dead.

Cursing, she got to her feet. What had Ansel done?

The moon illuminated enough of the desert for her to see that the assassin’s fortress was nowhere in sight, and that Kasida’s saddlebags were full of her belongings. Except for her sword. She searched and searched, but it wasn’t there. Celaena reached for one of her two long daggers, but stiffened when she felt a scroll of paper tucked into her belt.

Someone had also left a lantern beside her, and it took only a few moments for Celaena to get it lit and nestled into the dune. Kneeling before the dim light, she unrolled the paper with shaking hands.

It was in Ansel’s nearly illegible handwriting, and wasn’t long.

I’m sorry it had to end this way. The Master said it would be easier to let you go like this, rather than shame you by publicly asking you to leave early. Kasida is yours—as is the Master’s letter of approval, which is in the saddlebag. Go home.

I will miss you,

Ansel

Celaena read the letter three times to make sure she hadn’t missed something. She was being let go—but why? She had the letter of approval, at least, but . . . but what had she done that made it so urgent to get rid of her that he’d drug her and then dump her in the middle of the desert? She had five days left; he couldn’t have waited for her to leave?

Her eyes burned as she sorted through the events of the past few days for ways she might have offended the Master. She got to her feet and rifled through the saddlebags until she pulled out the letter of approval. It was a folded square of paper, sealed with sea-green wax—the color of the Master’s eyes. A little vain, but . . .

Her fingers hovered over the seal. If she broke it, then Arobynn might

accuse her of tampering with the letter. But what if it said horrid things about her? Ansel said it was a letter of approval, so it couldn't be that bad. Celaena tucked the letter back into the saddlebag.

Perhaps the Master had also realized that she was spoiled and selfish. Maybe everyone had just been tolerating her, and . . . maybe they'd heard of her fight with Ansel and decided to send her packing. It wouldn't surprise her. They were looking out for their own, after all. Never mind that for a while, *she* had felt like one of their own—felt, for the first time in a long, long while, like she had a place where she belonged. Where she might learn something more than deceit and how to end lives.

But she'd been wrong. Somehow, realizing that hurt far worse than the beating Arobynn had given her.

Her lips trembled, but she squared her shoulders and scanned the night sky until she found the Stag and the crowning star that led north. Sighing, Celaena blew out the lantern, mounted Kasida, and rode into the night.

She rode toward Xandria, opting to find a ship there instead of braving the northern trek across the Singing Sands to Yurpa—the port she'd originally sailed into. Without a guide, she didn't really have much of a choice. She took her time, often walking instead of riding Kasida, who seemed as sad as she was to leave the Silent Assassins and their luxurious stables.

The next day, she was a few miles into her late afternoon trek when she heard the *thump, thump, thump*. It grew louder, the movements now edged with clashing and clattering and deep voices. She hopped onto Kasida's back and crested a dune.

In the distance, at least two hundred men were marching—straight into the desert. Some bore red and black banners. Lord Berick's men. They marched in a long column, with mounted soldiers galloping along the flanks. Though she had never seen Berick, a quick examination of the host showed no signs of a lord being present. He must have stayed behind.

But there was nothing out here. Nothing except for . . .

Celaena's mouth went dry. Nothing except for the assassins' fortress.

A mounted soldier paused his riding, his black mare's coat gleaming with sweat. He stared toward her. With her white clothes concealing all of her but her eyes, he had no way of identifying her, no way of telling what she was.

Even from the distance, she could see the bow and quiver of arrows he bore. How good was his aim?

She didn't dare to move. The last thing she needed was the attention of all

those soldiers on her. They all possessed broadswords, daggers, shields, and arrows. This definitely wasn't going to be a friendly visit, not with this many men.

Was that why the Master had sent her away? Had he somehow known this would happen and didn't want her caught up in it?

Celaena nodded to the soldier and continued riding toward Xandria. If the Master didn't want anything to do with her, then she certainly didn't need to warn them. Especially since he probably knew. And he had a fortress full of assassins. Two hundred soldiers were nothing compared to seventy or so of the *sessiz suikast*.

The assassins could handle themselves. They didn't need her. They'd made that clear enough.

Still, the muffled thump of Kasida's steps away from the fortress became more and more difficult to bear.

The next morning, Xandria was remarkably quiet. At first, Celaena thought it was because the citizens were all waiting for news about the attack on the assassins, but she soon realized she found it quiet because she had only seen it on Market Day. The winding, narrow streets that had been crammed with vendors were now empty, littered with errant palm fronds and piles of sand that slithered in the fierce winds from the sea.

She bought passage on a ship that would sail to Amier, the nearest port in Melisande across the Gulf of Oro. With the embargo on ships from Xandria going to other parts of Adarlan's empire, a distant, forgotten port like Amier would be her best bet. From there, she'd travel on Kasida back to Rifthold, hopefully catching another boat somewhere on the long arm of the Avery River that would take her the last leg to the capital.

The ship didn't leave until high tide that afternoon, which left Celaena with a few hours to wander the city. The Spidersilk merchant was long gone, along with the cobbler and the temple priestesses.

Nervous the mare would be identified in the city, but more worried that someone would steal Kasida if she left her unguarded, Celaena led the horse through back alleys until she found a near-private trough for Kasida. Celaena leaned against a sandstone wall as her horse drank her fill. Had Lord Berick's men reached the fortress yet? At the rate they were going, they would probably arrive this night or early tomorrow morning. She just hoped the Master was prepared—and that he had at least restocked the flaming wall after the last attack from Berick. Had he sent her away for her own safety, or was he about to

be blindsided?

She glanced up at the palace towering over the city. Berick hadn't been with his men. Delivering the Mute Master's head to the King of Adarlan would surely get the embargo lifted from his city. Was he doing it for the sake of his people, or for himself?

But the Red Desert also needed the assassins—and the money and the trade the foreign emissaries brought in, too.

Berick and the Master had certainly been communicating in the past few weeks. What had gone wrong? Ansel had made another trip a week ago to see him, and hadn't mentioned trouble. She'd seemed quite jovial, actually.

Celaena didn't really know why a chill snaked down her spine in that moment. Or why she found herself suddenly digging through the saddlebags until she pulled out the Master's letter of approval, along with the note Ansel had written her.

If the Master had known about the attack, he would have been fortifying his defenses already; he wouldn't have sent Celaena away. She was Adarlan's greatest assassin, and if two hundred men were marching on his fortress, he'd *need* her. The Master wasn't proud—not like Arobynn. He truly loved his disciples; he looked after and nurtured them. But he'd never trained Ansel. Why?

And with so many of his loved ones in the fortress, why send only Celaena away? Why not send them all?

Her heart beat so fast it stumbled, and Celaena tore open the letter of approval.

It was blank.

She flipped the paper over. The other side was also blank. Holding it up to the sun revealed no hidden ink, no watermark. But it had been sealed by him, hadn't it? That was *his* seal on the—

It was easy to steal a signet ring. She'd done it with Captain Rolfe. And she'd seen the white line around the Master's finger—his ring *had* been missing.

But if Ansel had drugged her, and given her a document sealed with the Master's signet ring . . .

No, it wasn't possible. And it didn't make sense. Why would Ansel send her away and pretend the Master had done it? Unless . . .

Celaena looked up at Lord Berick's palace. Unless Ansel hadn't been visiting Lord Berick on behalf of the Master at all. Or maybe she had at first, long enough to gain the Master's trust. But while the Master thought she was mending the relationships between them, Ansel was really doing quite the

opposite. And that Spidersilk merchant had mentioned something about a spy among the assassins—a spy working for Berick. But why?

Celaena didn't have time to ponder it. Not with two hundred men so close to the fortress. She might have questioned Lord Berick, but that, too, would take precious time.

One warrior might not make a difference against two hundred, but she was Celaena Sardothien. That had to count for something. That *did* count for something.

She mounted Kasida and turned her toward the city gates.

“Let's see how fast you can run,” she whispered into the mare's ear, and took off.

Chapter Eleven

Like a shooting star across a red sky, Kasida flew over the dunes, and made the jump across the Cleaver as if she were leaping over a brook. They paused only long enough for the horse to rest and fill up on water, and though Celaena apologized to the mare for pushing her so hard, Kasida never faltered. She, too, seemed to sense the urgency.

They rode through the night, until the crimson dawn broke over the dunes and smoke stained the sky, and the fortress spread before them.

Fires burned here and there, and shouts rang out, along with the clashing of weapons. The assassins hadn't yielded yet, though their walls had been breached. A few bodies littered the sand leading up to the gates, but the gates themselves showed no sign of a forced entry—as if someone had left them unlocked.

Celaena dismounted Kasida before the final dune, leaving the horse to either follow or find her own way, and crept the rest of the way into the fortress. She paused long enough to swipe a sword from a dead soldier and tuck it into her belt. It was cheaply made and unbalanced, but the point was sharp enough to do the job. From the muffled clapping of hooves behind her, she knew Kasida had followed. Still, Celaena didn't dare take her eyes away from the scene before her as she drew her two long daggers.

Inside the walls, bodies were everywhere—assassin and soldier alike. Otherwise, the main courtyard was empty, its little rivers now flowing red. She tried her best not to look too closely at the faces of the fallen.

Fires smoldered, most of them just smoking piles of ash. Charred remnants of arrows revealed that they'd probably been ablaze when they hit. Every step into the courtyard felt like a lifetime. The shouts and clanging weapons came from other parts of the fortress. Who was winning? If all the soldiers had gotten in with so few dead on the sand, then someone *had* to have let them in—probably in the dead of night. How long had it taken before the night watch spotted the soldiers creeping inside? . . . Unless the night watch had been dispatched before they could sound the alarm.

But, as Celaena took step after step, she realized that the question she *should* be asking was far worse. *Where is the Master?*

That was what Lord Berick had wanted—the Master's head.

And Ansel . . .

Celaena didn't want to finish that thought. Ansel hadn't sent her away because of this. Ansel couldn't be behind this. But . . .

Celaena started sprinting for the Master's greeting room, heedless of the noise. Blood and destruction were everywhere. She passed courtyards full of soldiers and assassins, locked in deadly battle.

She was halfway up the stairs to the Master's room when a soldier came rushing down them, his blade drawn. She ducked the blow for her head and struck low and deep, her long dagger burying itself into his gut. With the heat, the soldiers had forgone metal armor—and their leather armor couldn't turn a blade made with Adarlanian steel.

She jumped aside as he groaned and tumbled down the steps. She didn't bother sparing him a final look as she continued her ascent. The upper level was completely silent.

Her breath sharp in her throat, she careened toward the open doors of the greeting room. The two hundred soldiers were meant to destroy the fortress—and provide a distraction. The Master could have been unguarded with everyone focused on the attack. But he was still the Master. How could Ansel expect to best him?

Unless she used that drug on him as well. How else would she be able to disarm him and catch him unawares?

Celaena hurled herself through the open wooden doors and nearly tripped on the body prostrate between them.

Mikhail lay on his back, his throat slit, eyes staring up at the tiled ceiling. Dead. Beside him was Ilias, struggling to rise as he clutched his bleeding belly. Celaena bit back her cry, and Ilias raised his head, blood dripping from his lips. She made to kneel beside him, but he grunted, pointing to the room ahead.

To his father.

The Master lay on his side atop the dais, his eyes open and his robes still unstained by blood. But he had the stillness of one drugged—paralyzed by whatever Ansel had given him.

The girl stood over him, her back to Celaena as she talked, swift and quiet. Babbling. She clenched her father's sword in one hand, the bloodied blade drooping toward the floor. The Master's eyes shifted to Celaena's face, then to his son. They were filled with pain. Not for himself, but for Ilias—for his bleeding boy. He looked back to Celaena's face, his sea-green eyes now pleading. *Save my son.*

Ansel took a deep breath and the sword rose in the air, making to slice off

the Master's head.

Celaena had a heartbeat to flip the knife in her hands. She cocked her wrist and let it fly.

The dagger slammed into Ansel's forearm, exactly where Celaena had aimed. Ansel let out a cry, her fingers splaying. Her father's sword clattered to the ground. Her face went white with shock as she whirled, clutching the bleeding wound, but the expression shifted into something dark and unyielding as she beheld Celaena. Ansel scrambled for her fallen blade.

But Celaena was already running.

Ansel grabbed her sword, dashing back to the Master and lifting it high over her head. She plunged the sword toward the Master's neck.

Celaena managed to tackle her before the blade struck, sending them both crashing to the floor. Cloth and steel and bone, twisting and rolling. She brought her legs up high enough to kick Ansel, hard. The girls split apart, and Celaena was on her feet the moment she stopped moving.

But Ansel was already standing, her sword still in her hands, still between Celaena and the paralyzed Master. The blood from Ansel's arm dripped to the floor.

They panted, and Celaena steadied her reeling head. "Don't do it," she breathed.

Ansel let out a low laugh. "I thought I told you to go home."

Celaena drew the sword from her belt. If only she had a blade like Ansel's, not some bit of scrap metal! It shook in her hands as she realized who, exactly, stood between her and the Master. Not some nameless soldier, not some stranger, or a person she'd been hired to kill. But Ansel.

"Why?" Celaena whispered.

Ansel cocked her head, raising her sword a bit higher. "Why?" Celaena had never seen anything more hideous than the hate that twisted Ansel's face. "Because Lord Berick promised me a thousand men to march into the Flatlands, that's why. Stealing those horses was exactly the public excuse he needed to attack this fortress. And all I had to do was take care of the guards and leave the gate open last night. And bring him this." She gestured with her sword to the Master behind her. "The Master's head." She ran an eye up and down Celaena's body, and Celaena hated herself for trembling further. "Put down your sword, Celaena."

Celaena didn't move. "Go to hell."

Ansel chuckled. "I've been to hell. I spent some time there when I was

twelve, remember? And when I march into the Flatlands with Berick's troops, I'll see to it that High King Loch sees a bit of hell, too. But first . . ."

She turned to the Master and Celaena sucked in a breath. "*Don't*," Celaena said. From this distance, Ansel would kill him before she could do anything to stop her.

"Just look the other way, Celaena." Ansel stepped closer to the old man.

"If you touch him, I'll put this sword through your neck," Celaena snarled. The words shook, and she blinked away the building moisture in her eyes.

Ansel looked over her shoulder. "I don't think you will."

Ansel took another step closer to the Master, and Celaena's second dagger flew. It grazed the side of Ansel's armor, leaving a long mark before it clattered to a stop at the foot of the dais.

Ansel paused, giving Celaena a faint smile. "You missed."

"Don't do it."

"Why?"

Celaena put a hand over her heart, tightly gripping her sword with the other. "Because I know what it feels like." She dared another step. "Because I *know* how it feels to have that kind of hate, Ansel. I know how it feels. And this isn't the way. *This*," she said louder, gesturing to the fortress and all the corpses in it, all the soldiers and assassins still fighting. "This is not the way."

"Says the assassin," Ansel spat.

"I've become an assassin because I had no choice. But *you* have a choice, Ansel. You've always had a choice. Please don't kill him."

Please don't make me kill you was what she truly meant to say.

Ansel shut her eyes. Celaena steadied her wrist, testing the balance of her blade, trying to get a sense of its weight. When Ansel opened her eyes, there was little of the girl she'd grown to care for over the past month.

"These men," Ansel said, her sword rising higher. "These men destroy *everything*."

"I know."

"You know, and yet you do nothing! You're just a dog chained to your master." She closed the distance between them, her sword lowering. Celaena almost sagged with relief, but didn't lighten her grip on her own blade. Ansel's breathing was ragged. "You could come with me." She brushed back a strand of Celaena's hair. "The two of us alone could conquer the Flatlands—and with Lord Berick's troops . . ." Her hand grazed Celaena's cheek, and Celaena tried not to recoil at the touch and at the words that came out of Ansel's mouth. "I

would make you my right hand. We'd take the Flatlands back."

"I can't," Celaena answered, even though she could see Ansel's plan with perfect clarity—even if it was tempting.

Ansel stepped back. "What does Rifthold have that's so special? How long will you bow and scrape for that monster?"

"I can't go with you, and you know it. So take your troops and leave, Ansel."

She watched the expressions flitter across Ansel's face. Hurt. Denial. Rage.

"So be it," Ansel said.

She struck, and Celaena only had time to tilt her head to dodge the hidden dagger that shot out of Ansel's wrist. The blade grazed her cheek, and blood warmed her face. Her *face!* Of all the places for Ansel to cut her . . .

Ansel swiped with her sword, so close that Celaena had to flip herself backward. She landed on her feet, but Ansel was fast enough and near enough that Celaena could only bring up her blade. Their swords met.

Celaena spun, shoving Ansel's sword from hers. The force was so strong that Ansel stumbled, and Celaena used it to gain the advantage, striking again and again. Ansel met each blow, her superior sword hardly impacted.

They passed the prostrate Master and the dais. Celaena dropped to the ground, swiping at Ansel with a leg. Ansel leapt back, dodging the blow. Celaena used the precious seconds to snatch her fallen dagger from where it lay on the dais steps.

When Ansel struck again, she met the crossed blades of Celaena's sword and dagger.

Ansel let out a low laugh. "How do you imagine this ending?" She pressed Celaena's blades. "Or is it a fight to the death?"

Celaena braced her feet against the floor. She'd never known Ansel was so strong—or so much taller than her. And Ansel's armor—how would she get through *that*? There was a joint between the armpit and the ribs—and then around her neck . . .

"You tell me," Celaena said. The blood from her face slid down her throat. "You seem to have everything planned."

"I tried to protect you." Ansel shoved hard against Celaena's blades, but not strongly enough to dislodge them. "And you came back anyway."

"You call that protection? Drugging me and leaving me in the desert?" She'd been fooled and betrayed. Celaena bared her teeth.

But before she could launch another assault, Ansel struck with her free

hand, right across the X made by their weapons, her fist slamming between Celaena's eyes.

Celaena's head snapped back, the world flashing, and she landed hard on her knees. Her sword and dagger clattered to the floor.

Ansel was on her in a second, her bloodied arm across Celaena's chest, the other hand pressing the edge of her sword against Celaena's unmarred cheek.

"Give me one reason not to kill you right here," Ansel whispered into her ear, kicking away Celaena's sword. Her fallen dagger still lay near them, just out of reach.

Celaena struggled, trying to put some distance between Ansel's sword and her face.

"Oh, how vain can you *be*?" Ansel said, and Celaena winced as the sword dug into her skin. "Afraid I'll scar your face?" Ansel angled the sword downward, the blade now biting into Celaena's throat. "What about your neck?"

"Stop it."

"I didn't want it to end this way between us. I didn't want you to be a part of this."

Celaena believed her. If Ansel wanted to kill her, she would have done it already. If she wanted to kill the Master, she would have done that already, too. And all of this waffling between sadistic hate and passion and regret . . . "You're insane," Celaena said.

Ansel snorted.

"Who killed Mikhail?" Celaena demanded. Anything to keep her talking, to keep her focused on herself. Because just a few feet away lay her dagger . . .

"I did," Ansel said. A little of the fierceness faded from her voice. Her back pressed against Ansel's chest, Celaena couldn't be sure without seeing Ansel's face, but she could have sworn the words were tinged with remorse. "When Berick's men attacked, I made sure that I was the one who notified the Master; the fool didn't sniff once at the water jug he drank from before he went to the gates. But then Mikhail figured out what I was doing and burst in here—too late to stop the Master from drinking, though. And then Ilias just . . . got in the way."

Celaena looked at Ilias, who still lay on the ground—still breathing. The Master watched his son, his eyes wide and pleading. If someone didn't staunch Ilias's bleeding, he'd die soon. The Master's fingers twitched slightly, making a curving motion.

"How many others did you kill?" Celaena asked, trying to keep Ansel distracted as the Master made the motion again. A kind of slow, strange wriggling . . .

“Only them. And the three on the night watch. I let the soldiers do the rest.”

The Master’s finger twisted and slithered . . . like a snake.

One strike—that was all it would take. Just like the asp.

Ansel was fast. Celaena just had to be faster.

“You know what, Ansel?” Celaena breathed, memorizing the motions she’d have to make in the next few seconds, imagining her muscles moving, praying not to falter, to stay focused.

Ansel pressed the edge of the blade into Celaena’s throat. “What, *Celaena*?”

“You want to know what the Master taught me during all those lessons?”

She felt Ansel tense, felt the question distract her. It was all the opportunity she needed.

“This.” Celaena twisted, slamming her shoulder into Ansel’s torso. Her bones connected against the armor with a jarring thud, and the sword cut into Celaena’s neck, but Ansel lost her balance and teetered back. Celaena hit Ansel’s fingers so hard they dropped the sword right into Celaena’s waiting hand.

In a flash, like a snake turning in on itself, Celaena pinned Ansel facedown on the ground, her father’s sword now pressed against the back of her neck.

Celaena hadn’t realized how silent the room was until she was kneeling there, one knee pinning Ansel to the ground, the other braced on the floor. Blood seeped from where the sword tip rested against Ansel’s tan neck, redder than her hair. “Don’t do it,” Ansel whispered, in that voice that she’d so often heard—that girlish, carefree voice. But had it always been a performance?

Celaena pushed harder and Ansel sucked in a breath, closing her eyes.

Celaena tightened her grip on the sword, steadying her breathing, willing steel into her veins. Ansel should die; for what she’d done, she deserved to die. And not just for all those assassins lying dead around them, but also for the soldiers who’d spent their lives for her agenda. And for Celaena herself, who, even as she knelt there, felt her heart breaking. Even if she didn’t put the sword through Ansel’s neck, she’d still lose her. She’d already lost her.

But maybe the world had lost Ansel long before today.

Celaena couldn’t stop her lips from trembling as she asked, “Was it ever real?”

Ansel opened an eye, staring at the far wall. “There were some moments when it was. The moment I sent you away, it was real.”

Celaena reined in her sob and took a long, steadying breath. Slowly, she lifted the sword from Ansel's neck—only a fraction of an inch.

Ansel made to move, but Celaena pressed the steel against her skin again, and she went still. From outside came cries of victory—and concern—in voices that sounded hoarse from disuse. The assassins had won. How long before they got here? If they saw Ansel, saw what she had done . . . they'd kill her.

“You have five minutes to pack your things and leave the fortress,” Celaena said quietly. “Because in twenty minutes, I'm going up to the battlements and I'm going to fire an arrow at you. And you'd better hope that you're out of range by then, because if you're not, that arrow is going straight through your neck.”

Celaena lifted the sword. Ansel slowly got to her feet, but didn't flee. It took Celaena a heartbeat to realize she was waiting for her father's sword.

Celaena looked at the wolf-shaped hilt and the blood staining the steel. The one tie Ansel had left to her father, her family, and whatever twisted shred of hope burned in her heart.

Celaena turned the blade and handed it hilt-first to Ansel. The girl's eyes were wide and damp as she took the sword. She opened her mouth, but Celaena cut her off. “Go home, Ansel.”

Ansel's face went white again. She took the blade from Celaena and sheathed it at her side. She glanced at Celaena only once before she took off at a sprint, leaping over Mikhail's corpse as if he were nothing more than a bit of debris.

Then she was gone.

Chapter Twelve

Celaena rushed to Ilias, who moaned as she turned him over. The wound in his stomach was still bleeding. She ripped strips from her tunic, which was already soaked with blood, and shouted for help as she bound him tightly.

There was a scrape of cloth over stone, and Celaena looked over her shoulder to see the Master trying to drag himself over the stones to his son. The paralytic must be wearing off.

Five bloodied assassins came rushing up the stairs, eyes wide and faces pale as they beheld Mikhail and Ilias. Celaena left Ilias in their care as she dashed to the Master.

“Don’t move,” she told him, wincing as blood from her face dripped onto his white clothes. “You might hurt yourself.” She scanned the podium for any sign of the poison, and rushed to the fallen bronze goblet. A few sniffs revealed that the wine had been laced with a small amount of gloriella, just enough to paralyze him, not kill him. Ansel must have wanted him completely prone before she killed him—she must have wanted him to *know* she was the one who had betrayed him. To have him conscious while she severed his head. How had he not noticed it before he drank? Perhaps he wasn’t as humble as he seemed; perhaps he’d been arrogant enough to believe that he was safe here. “It’ll wear off soon,” she told the Master, but she still called for an antidote to speed up the process. One of the assassins took off at a run.

She sat by the Master, one hand clutching her bleeding neck. The assassins at the other end of the room carried Ilias out, stopping to reassure the Master that his son would be fine.

Celaena nearly groaned with relief at that, but straightened as a dry, calloused hand wrapped around hers, squeezing faintly. She looked down into the face of the Master, whose eyes shifted to the open door. He was reminding her of the promise she’d made. Ansel had been given twenty minutes to clear firing range.

It was time.

Ansel was already a dark blur in the distance, Hisli galloping as if demons were at her hooves. She was heading northwest over the dunes, toward the Singing Sands, to the narrow bridge of feral jungle that separated the Deserted Land from

the rest of the continent, and then the open expanse of the Western Wastes beyond them. Toward Briarcliff.

Atop the battlements, Celaena drew an arrow from her quiver and nocked it into her bow.

The bowstring moaned as she pulled it back, farther and farther, her arm straining.

Focusing upon the tiny figure atop the dark horse, Celaena took aim.

In the silence of the fortress, the bowstring twanged like a mournful harp.

The arrow soared, turning relentlessly. The red dunes passed beneath in a blur, closing the distance. A sliver of winged darkness edged with steel. A quick, bloody death.

Hisli's tail flicked to the side as the arrow buried itself in the sand just inches behind her rear hooves.

But Ansel didn't dare look over her shoulder. She kept riding, and she did not stop.

Celaena lowered her bow and watched until Ansel disappeared beyond the horizon. One arrow, that had been her promise.

But she'd also promised Ansel that she had twenty minutes to get out of range.

Celaena had fired after twenty-one.

The Master called Celaena to his chamber the following morning. It had been a long night, but Ilias was on the mend, the wound having narrowly missed puncturing any organs. All of Lord Berick's soldiers were dead, and were in the process of being carted back to Xandria as a reminder to Berick to seek the King of Adarlan's approval elsewhere. Twenty assassins had died, and a heavy, mourning silence filled the fortress.

Celaena sat on an ornately carved wooden chair, watching the Master as he stared out the window at the sky. She nearly fell out of her seat when he began speaking.

"I am glad you did not kill Ansel." His voice was raw, and his accent thick with the clipped yet rolling sounds of some language she'd never heard before. "I have been wondering when she would decide what to do with her fate."

"So you knew—"

The Master turned from the window. "I have known for years. Several months after Ansel's arrival, I sent inquiries to the Flatlands. Her family had not written her any letters, and I was worried that something might have happened." He took a seat in a chair across from Celaena. "My messenger returned to me

some months later, saying that there was no Briarcliff. The lord and his eldest daughter had been murdered by the High King, and the youngest daughter—Ansel—was missing.”

“Why didn’t you ever . . . confront her?” Celaena touched the narrow scab on her left cheek. It wouldn’t scar if she looked after it properly. And if it *did* scar . . . then maybe she’d hunt down Ansel and return the favor.

“Because I hoped she would eventually trust me enough to tell me. I had to give her that chance, even though it was a risk. I hoped she would learn to face her pain—that she’d learn to endure it.” He smiled sadly at Celaena. “If you can learn to endure pain, you can survive anything. Some people learn to embrace it—to love it. Some endure it through drowning it in sorrow, or by making themselves forget. Others turn it into anger. But Ansel let her pain become hate, and let it consume her until she became something else entirely—a person I don’t think she ever wished to be.”

Celaena absorbed his words, but set them aside for consideration at a later time. “Are you going to tell everyone about what she did?”

“No. I would spare them that anger. Many believed Ansel was their friend—and part of me, too, believes that at times she was.”

Celaena looked at the floor, wondering what to do with the ache in her chest. Would turning it into rage, as he said, help her endure it?

“For what it is worth, Celaena,” he rasped, “I believe you were the closest thing to a friend Ansel has ever allowed herself to have. And I think she sent you away because she truly cared for you.”

She hated her mouth for wobbling. “That doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“I didn’t think it would. But I think you will leave a lasting imprint on Ansel’s heart. You spared her life, and returned her father’s sword. She will not soon forget that. And maybe when she makes her next move to reclaim her title, she will remember the assassin from the North and the kindness you showed her, and try to leave fewer bodies in her wake.”

He walked to a latticework hutch, as if he were giving her the time to regain her composure, and pulled out a letter. By the time he returned to her, Celaena’s eyes were clear. “When you give this to your master, hold your head high.”

She took the letter. Her recommendation—what she’d been working for this past month. It seemed inconsequential in the face of everything that had just happened. “How is it that you’re speaking to me now? I thought your vow of silence was eternal.”

He shrugged. “The world seems to think so, but as far as my memory

serves me, I've never officially sworn to be silent. I choose to be silent most of the time, and I've become so used to it that I often forget I have the capacity for speech, but there are some times when words are necessary—when explanations are needed that mere gestures cannot convey.”

She nodded, trying her best to hide her surprise. After a pause, the Master said, “If you ever want to leave the North, you will always have a home here. I promise you the winter months are far better than the summer. And I think my son would be rather happy if you decided to return, too.” He chuckled, and Celaena blushed. He took her hand. “When you leave tomorrow, you’ll be accompanied by a few of my people.”

“Why?”

“Because they will be needed to drive the wagon to Xandria. I know that you are indentured to your master—that you still owe him a good deal of money before you are free to live your own life. He’s making you pay back a fortune that he forced you to borrow.” He squeezed her hand before approaching one of three trunks pushed against the wall. “For saving my life—and sparing hers.” He flipped open the lid of a trunk, then another, and another.

Sunlight gleamed on the gold inside, reflecting through the room like light on water. All that gold . . . and the piece of Spidersilk the merchant had given her . . . she couldn’t think of the possibilities that wealth would open to her, not right now.

“When you give your master his letter, also give him this. And tell him that in the Red Desert, we do not beat our disciples.”

Celaena smiled slowly, her eyes stinging. “I think I can manage that.”

She looked to the open window, to the world beyond. For the first time in a long while, she heard the song of a northern wind, calling her home. And she was not afraid.

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

This electronic edition first published in Great Britain in March 2012 by
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP

First published in the United States of America in March 2012 by Bloomsbury
Books for Young Readers

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eISBN 978 1 4088 3421 3

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