

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J.
MAAS

CROWN

OF

MIDNIGHT

OVER 25
MILLION
COPIES
SOLD

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY

PRAISE FOR THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING
THRONE OF GLASS SERIES

THE ASSASSIN'S BLADE

"Action-packed . . . What a ride!" —*BOOKLIST*

THRONE OF GLASS

"A thrilling read." —*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, STARRED REVIEW

CROWN OF MIDNIGHT

"An epic fantasy readers will immerse themselves in
and never want to leave." —*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, STARRED REVIEW

HEIR OF FIRE

"Celaena is as much an epic hero as Frodo or Jon Snow!"
—*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR TAMORA PIERCE

QUEEN OF SHADOWS

"Packed . . . with brooding glances, simmering sexual tension, twisty plot
turns, lush world building, and snarky banter." —*BOOKLIST*

EMPIRE OF STORMS

"Tightly plotted, delightful escapism." —*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

TOWER OF DAWN

"Turns a corner from sprawling epic to thrilling
psychological fantasy." —*HUFFPOST*

KINGDOM OF ASH

"A worthy finale to one of the best fantasy book series
of the past decade." —*TIME*

CROWN OF MIDNIGHT

BOOKS BY SARAH J. MAAS

THE THRONE OF GLASS SERIES

The Assassin's Blade
Throne of Glass
Crown of Midnight
Heir of Fire
Queen of Shadows
Empire of Storms
Tower of Dawn
Kingdom of Ash

•

The Throne of Glass Colouring Book

THE COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES SERIES

A Court of Thorns and Roses
A Court of Mist and Fury
A Court of Wings and Ruin
A Court of Frost and Starlight
A Court of Silver Flames

•

A Court of Thorns and Roses Colouring Book

THE CRESCENT CITY SERIES

House of Earth and Blood
House of Sky and Breath

SARAH J.
MAAS

**CROWN OF
MIDNIGHT**

A THRONE OF GLASS NOVEL

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING and the Diana logo are
trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2013
This edition published 2023

Copyright © Sarah J. Maas, 2013
Map by Virginia Allyn

Sarah J. Maas has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act,
1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior
permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-3521-1; HB: 978-1-6397-3096-4;
eBook: 978-1-4088-3495-4; ePDF: 978-1-5266-3436-8

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters, including news about Sarah J. Maas.

*For Susan—
best friends until we're nothing but dust.
(And then some.)*

CONTENTS

Part One. The King's Champion

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Chapter One | 3 |
| Chapter Two | 5 |
| Chapter Three | 17 |
| Chapter Four | 22 |
| Chapter Five | 34 |
| Chapter Six | 45 |
| Chapter Seven | 54 |
| Chapter Eight | 63 |
| Chapter Nine | 69 |
| Chapter Ten | 75 |
| Chapter Eleven | 84 |
| Chapter Twelve | 90 |
| Chapter Thirteen | 101 |
| Chapter Fourteen | 105 |
| Chapter Fifteen | 115 |
| Chapter Sixteen | 121 |
| Chapter Seventeen | 130 |
| Chapter Eighteen | 139 |
| Chapter Nineteen | 149 |
| Chapter Twenty | 162 |
| Chapter Twenty-One | 167 |
| Chapter Twenty-Two | 175 |
| Chapter Twenty-Three | 185 |
| Chapter Twenty-Four | 192 |
| Chapter Twenty-Five | 207 |
| Chapter Twenty-Six | 208 |

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Chapter Twenty-Seven | 213 |
| Chapter Twenty-Eight | 219 |
| Chapter Twenty-Nine | 228 |

Part Two. The Queen's Arrow

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Chapter Thirty | 233 |
| Chapter Thirty-One | 237 |
| Chapter Thirty-Two | 246 |
| Chapter Thirty-Three | 248 |
| Chapter Thirty-Four | 251 |
| Chapter Thirty-Five | 256 |
| Chapter Thirty-Six | 265 |
| Chapter Thirty-Seven | 276 |
| Chapter Thirty-Eight | 287 |
| Chapter Thirty-Nine | 295 |
| Chapter Forty | 302 |
| Chapter Forty-One | 312 |
| Chapter Forty-Two | 319 |
| Chapter Forty-Three | 324 |
| Chapter Forty-Four | 332 |
| Chapter Forty-Five | 349 |
| Chapter Forty-Six | 354 |
| Chapter Forty-Seven | 360 |
| Chapter Forty-Eight | 364 |
| Chapter Forty-Nine | 375 |
| Chapter Fifty | 380 |
| Chapter Fifty-One | 386 |
| Chapter Fifty-Two | 390 |
| Chapter Fifty-Three | 398 |
| Chapter Fifty-Four | 406 |
| Chapter Fifty-Five | 409 |

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Chapter Fifty-Six | 415 |
| Acknowledgments | 419 |
| Teaser | 421 |

CRILEA



THE FROZEN WASTES

Amaroth

RUINS OF MORLA

JUNGLE OF MORLA

THE WESTERN WASTES

BRIARCLIFF

Ghe Witch Kingdom

THE DESERTED LAND

Ghe Singing Sands

THE RED DESERT

YURPA

Silent Assassins

Gulf of Dro

Oasis of Barg

Noll

Ghe Black Dunes

Ghe Cleaver

XANDRIA

Volcano Flows

Ghe Black Sands of Roth



North Sea

Great Ocean

To Wendlyn

To the Southern Continent

The Narrow Sea

GERRASEN

STAGHORN MOUNTAINS

ALLSBROOK

ORYNTH

SURIA

ELDRYS

PERRANTH MOUNTAINS

ILIUM

MEAH

ADARLAD

OAKWALD FOREST

MOUNTAINS OF ARARAT

RIFTHOLD

AVERY RIVER

ACANTHUS RIVER

TENDARROW

BELLHAVEN

DEAD ISLANDS

SKULL'S BAY

THE DEAD END

CALACULLA

CULLWE

LERIBA

GRASSLANDS OF EYLLWE

BANJALI

STONE MARSHES

ROSAMEL

PERRANTH

RUINN MOUNTAINS

THE OMEGA

THE FERIAN GAP

THE NORTHERN FANG

THE SILVER LAKE

ANIELLE

MORATH

INNISH

DELISANDE

ANASCAUL MOUNTAINS

WOLF GRIBE

WHITE FANG MOUNTAINS

PART ONE

The King's Champion

1

The shutters swinging in the storm winds were the only sign of her entry. No one had noticed her scaling the garden wall of the darkened manor house, and with the thunder and the gusting wind off the nearby sea, no one heard her as she shimmied up the drainpipe, swung onto the windowsill, and slithered into the second-floor hallway.

The King's Champion pressed herself into an alcove at the thud of approaching steps. Concealed beneath a black mask and hood, she willed herself to melt into the shadows, to become nothing more than a slip of darkness. A servant girl trudged past to the open window, grumbling as she latched it shut. Seconds later, she disappeared down the stairwell at the other end of the hall. The girl hadn't noticed the wet footprints on the floorboards.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the hallway. The assassin took a long breath, going over the plans she'd painstakingly memorized in the three days she'd been watching the manor house on the outskirts of

Bellhaven. Five doors on each side. Lord Nirall's bedroom was the third on the left.

She listened for the approach of any other servants, but the house remained hushed as the storm raged around them.

Silent and smooth as a wraith, she moved down the hall. Lord Nirall's bedroom door swung open with a slight groan. She waited until the next rumble of thunder before easing the door shut behind her.

Another flash of lightning illuminated two figures sleeping in the four-poster bed. Lord Nirall was no older than thirty-five, and his wife, dark haired and beautiful, slept soundly in his arms. What had they done to offend the king so gravely that he wanted them dead?

She crept to the edge of the bed. It wasn't her place to ask questions. Her job was to obey. Her freedom depended on it. With each step toward Lord Nirall, she ran through the plan again.

Her sword slid out of its sheath with barely a whine. She took a shuddering breath, bracing herself for what would come next.

Lord Nirall's eyes flew open just as the King's Champion raised her sword over his head.

2

Celaena Sardothien stalked down the halls of the glass castle of Rift-hold. The heavy sack clenched in her hand swung with each step, banging every so often into her knees. Despite the hooded black cloak that concealed much of her face, the guards didn't stop her as she strode toward the King of Adarlan's council chamber. They knew very well who she was—and what she did for the king. As the King's Champion, she outranked them. Actually, there were few in the castle she didn't outrank now. And fewer still who didn't fear her.

She approached the open glass doors, her cloak sweeping behind her. The guards posted on either side straightened as she gave them a nod before entering the council chamber. Her black boots were nearly silent against the red marble floor.

On the glass throne in the center of the room sat the King of Adarlan, his dark gaze locked on the sack dangling from her fingers. Just as she had the last three times, Celaena dropped to one knee before his throne and bowed her head.

Dorian Havilliard stood beside his father's throne—and she could feel his sapphire eyes fixed on her. At the foot of the dais, always between her and the royal family, stood Chaol Westfall, Captain of the Guard. She looked up at him from the shadows of her hood, taking in the lines of his face. For all the expression he showed, she might as well have been a stranger. But that was expected, and it was just part of the game they'd become so skilled at playing these past few months. Chaol might be her friend, might be someone she'd somehow come to trust, but he was still captain—still responsible for the royal lives in this room above all others. The king spoke.

“Rise.”

Celaena kept her chin high as she stood and pulled off her hood.

The king waved a hand at her, the obsidian ring on his finger gleaming in the afternoon light. “Is it done?”

Celaena reached a gloved hand into the sack and tossed the severed head toward him. No one spoke as it bounced, a vulgar thudding of stiff and rotting flesh on marble. It rolled to a stop at the foot of the dais, milky eyes turned toward the ornate glass chandelier overhead.

Dorian straightened, glancing away from the head. Chaol just stared at her.

“He put up a fight,” Celaena said.

The king leaned forward, examining the mauled face and the jagged cuts in the neck. “I can barely recognize him.”

Celaena gave him a crooked smile, though her throat tightened. “I'm afraid severed heads don't travel well.” She fished in her sack again, pulling out a hand. “Here's his seal ring.” She tried not to focus too much on the decaying flesh she held, the reek that had worsened with each passing day. She extended the hand to Chaol, whose bronze eyes were distant as he took it from her and offered it to the king. The king's lip curled, but he pried the ring off the stiff finger. He tossed the hand at her feet as he examined the ring.

Beside his father, Dorian shifted. When she'd been dueling in the competition, he hadn't seemed to mind her history. What did he *expect* would happen when she became the King's Champion? Though she supposed severed limbs and heads would turn the stomachs of most people—even after living for a decade under Adarlan's rule. And Dorian, who had never seen battle, never witnessed the chained lines shuffling their way to the butchering blocks . . . Perhaps she should be impressed he hadn't vomited yet.

"What of his wife?" the king demanded, turning the ring over in his fingers again and again.

"Chained to what's left of her husband at the bottom of the sea," Celaena replied with a wicked grin, and removed the slender, pale hand from her sack. It bore a golden wedding band, engraved with the date of the marriage. She offered it to the king, but he shook his head. She didn't dare look at Dorian or Chaol as she put the woman's hand back in the thick canvas sack.

"Very well, then," the king murmured. She remained still as his eyes roved over her, the sack, the head. After a too-long moment, he spoke again. "There is a growing rebel movement here in Rifthold, a group of individuals who are willing to do anything to get me off the throne—and who are attempting to interfere with my plans. Your next assignment is to root out and dispatch them all before they become a true threat to my empire."

Celaena clenched the sack so tightly her fingers ached. Chaol and Dorian were staring at the king now, as if this were the first they were hearing of this, too.

She'd heard whispers of rebel forces before she'd gone to Endovier—she'd *met* fallen rebels in the salt mines. But to have an actual movement growing in the heart of the capital; to have *her* be the one to dispatch them one by one . . . And plans—what plans? What did the rebels know of the king's maneuverings? She shoved the questions

down, down, down, until there was no possibility of his reading them on her face.

The king drummed his fingers on the arm of the throne, still playing with Nirall's ring in his other hand. "There are several people on my list of suspected traitors, but I will only give you one name at a time. This castle is crawling with spies."

Chaol stiffened at that, but the king waved his hand and the captain approached her, his face still blank as he extended a piece of paper to Celaena.

She avoided the urge to stare at Chaol's face as he gave her the letter, though his gloved fingers grazed hers before he let go. Keeping her features neutral, she looked at the paper. On it was a single name: *Archer Finn*.

It took every ounce of will and sense of self-preservation to keep her shock from showing. She knew Archer—had known him since she was thirteen and he'd come for lessons at the Assassins' Keep. He'd been several years older, already a highly sought-after courtesan . . . who was in need of some training on how to protect himself from his rather jealous clients. And their husbands.

He'd never minded her ridiculous girlhood crush on him. In fact, he'd let her test out flirting with him, and had usually turned her into a complete giggling mess. Of course, she hadn't seen him for several years—since before she went to Endovier—but she'd never thought him capable of something like this. He'd been handsome and kind and jovial, not a traitor to the crown so dangerous that the king would want him dead.

It was absurd. Whoever was giving the king his information was a damned idiot.

"Just him, or all his clients, too?" Celaena blurted.

The king gave her a slow smile. "You know Archer? I'm not surprised." A taunt—a challenge.

She just stared ahead, willing herself to calm, to breathe. "I used to.

He's an extraordinarily well-guarded man. I'll need time to get past his defenses." So carefully said, so casually phrased. What she really needed time for was to figure out how Archer had gotten tangled up in this mess—and whether the king was telling the truth. If Archer truly were a traitor and a rebel . . . well, she'd figure that out later.

"Then you have one month," the king said. "And if he's not buried by then, perhaps I shall reconsider your position, girl."

She nodded, submissive, yielding, gracious. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"When you have dispatched Archer, I will give you the next name on the list."

She had avoided the politics of the kingdoms—especially their rebel forces—for so many years, and now she was in the thick of it. Wonderful.

"Be quick," the king warned. "Be discreet. Your payment for Nirall is already in your chambers."

Celaena nodded again and shoved the piece of paper into her pocket.

The king was staring at her. Celaena looked away but forced a corner of her mouth to twitch upward, to make her eyes glitter with the thrill of the hunt. At last, the king lifted his gaze to the ceiling. "Take that head and be gone." He pocketed Nirall's seal ring, and Celaena swallowed her twinge of disgust. A trophy.

She scooped up the head by its dark hair and grabbed the severed hand, stuffing them into the sack. With only a glance at Dorian, whose face had gone pale, she turned on her heel and left.



Dorian Havilliard stood in silence as the servants rearranged the chamber, dragging the giant oak table and ornate chairs into the center of the room. They had a council meeting in three minutes. He hardly heard as Chaol took his leave, saying he'd like to debrief Celaena further. His father grunted his approval.



Celaena had killed a man and his wife. And his father had ordered it. Dorian had barely been able to look at either of them. He thought he'd been able to convince his father to reevaluate his brutal policies after the massacre of those rebels in Eyllwe before Yulemas, but it seemed like it hadn't made any difference. And Celaena . . .

As soon as the servants finished arranging the table, Dorian slid into his usual seat at his father's right. The councilmen began trickling in, along with Duke Perrington, who went straight to the king and began murmuring to him, too soft for Dorian to hear.

Dorian didn't bother saying anything to anyone and just stared at the glass pitcher of water before him. Celaena hadn't seemed like herself just now.

Actually, for the two months since she'd been named the King's Champion, she'd been like this. Her lovely dresses and ornate clothes were gone, replaced by an unforgiving, close-cut black tunic and pants, her hair pulled back in a long braid that fell into the folds of that dark cloak she was always wearing. She was a beautiful wraith—and when she looked at him, it was like she didn't even know who he was.

Dorian glanced at the open doorway, through which she had vanished moments before.

If she could kill people like this, then manipulating him into believing she felt something for him would have been all too easy. Making an ally of him—making him *love* her enough to face his father on her behalf, to ensure that she was appointed Champion . . .

Dorian couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. He'd visit her—tomorrow, perhaps. Just to see if there was a chance he was wrong.

But he couldn't help wondering if he'd ever meant anything to Celaena at all.



Celaena strode quickly and quietly down hallways and stairwells, taking the now-familiar route to the castle sewer. It was the same

waterway that flowed past her secret tunnel, though here it smelled far worse, thanks to the servants depositing refuse almost hourly.

Her steps, then a second pair—Chaol’s—echoed in the long subterranean passage. But she didn’t say anything until she stopped at the edge of the water, glancing at the several archways that opened on either side of the river. No one was here.

“So,” she said without looking behind her, “are you going to say hello, or are you just going to follow me everywhere?” She turned to face him, the sack still dangling from her hand.

“Are you still acting like the King’s Champion, or are you back to being Celaena?” In the torchlight, his bronze eyes glittered.

Of course Chaol would notice the difference; he noticed everything. She couldn’t tell whether it pleased her or not. Especially when there was a slight bite to his words.

When she didn’t reply, he asked, “How was Bellhaven?”

“The same as it always is.” She knew precisely what he meant; he wanted to know how her mission had gone.

“He fought you?” He jerked his chin toward the sack in her hand.

She shrugged and turned back to the dark river. “It was nothing I couldn’t handle.” She tossed the sack into the sewer. They watched in silence as it bobbed, then slowly sank.

Chaol cleared his throat. She knew he hated this. When she’d gone on her first mission—to an estate up the coast in Meah—he’d paced so much before she left that she honestly thought he would ask her not to go. And when she’d returned, severed head in tow and rumors flying about Sir Carlin’s murder, it had taken a week for him to even look her in the eye. But what had he expected?

“When will you begin your new mission?” he asked.

“Tomorrow. Or the day after. I need to rest,” she added quickly when he frowned. “And besides, it’ll only take me a day or two to figure out how guarded Archer is and sort out my approach. Hopefully I won’t even need the month the king gave me.” And hopefully Archer

would have some answers about how he'd gotten on the king's list, and what *plans*, exactly, that the king had alluded to. Then she would figure out what to do with him.

Chaol stepped beside her, still staring at the filthy water, where the sack was undoubtedly now caught in the current and drifting out into the Avery River and the sea beyond. "I'd like to debrief you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you at least going to take me to dinner first?" His eyes narrowed, and she gave him a pout.

"It's not a joke. I want the details of what happened with Nirall."

She brushed him aside with a grin, wiping her gloves on her pants before heading back up the stairs.

Chaol grabbed her arm. "If Nirall fought back, then there might be witnesses who heard—"

"He didn't make any noise," Celaena snapped, shaking him off as she stormed up the steps. After two weeks of travel, she just wanted to *sleep*. Even the walk up to her rooms felt like a trek. "You don't need to *debrief* me, Chaol."

He stopped her again at a shadowy landing with a firm hand on her shoulder. "When you go away," he said, the distant torchlight illuminating the rugged planes of his face, "I have *no* idea what's happening to you. I don't know if you're hurt or rotting in a gutter somewhere. Yesterday I heard a rumor that they caught the killer responsible for Nirall's death." He brought his face close to hers, his voice hoarse. "Until you arrived today, I thought they meant *you*. I was about to go down there myself to find you."

Well, that would explain why she'd seen Chaol's horse being saddled at the stables when she arrived. She loosed a breath, her face suddenly warm. "Have a little more faith in me than that. I am the King's Champion, after all."

She didn't have time to brace herself as he pulled her against him, his arms wrapping tightly around her.

She didn't hesitate before twining her arms over his shoulders, breathing in the scent of him. He hadn't held her since the day she'd learned she had officially won the competition, though the memory of that embrace often drifted into her thoughts. And as she held him now, the craving for it never to stop roared through her.

His nose grazed the nape of her neck. "Gods above, you smell horrible," he muttered.

She hissed and shoved him, her face burning in earnest now. "Carrying around dead body parts for weeks isn't exactly conducive to smelling nice! And maybe if I'd been given time for a bath instead of being ordered to report *immediately* to the king, I might have—" She stopped herself at the sight of his grin and smacked his shoulder. "Idiot." Celaena linked arms with him, tugging him up the stairs. "Come on. Let's go to my rooms so you can debrief me like a proper gentleman."

Chaol snorted and nudged her with his elbow but didn't let go.



After a joyous Fleetfoot calmed down enough for Celaena to speak without being licked, Chaol squeezed every last detail from her and left her with the promise to return for dinner in a few hours. And after she let Philippa fuss over her in the bath and bemoan the state of her hair and nails, Celaena collapsed onto her bed.

Fleetfoot leapt up beside her, curling in close to her side. Stroking the dog's silky golden coat, Celaena stared at the ceiling, the exhaustion seeping out of her sore muscles.

The king had believed her.

And Chaol hadn't once doubted her story as he inquired about her mission. She couldn't quite decide if that made her feel smug, disappointed, or outright guilty. But the lies had rolled off her tongue. Nirall awoke right before she killed him, she had to slit his wife's throat to

keep her from screaming, and the fight was a tad messier than she would have liked. She'd thrown in real details, too: the second-floor hall window, the storm, the servant with the candle . . . The best lies were always mixed with truth.

Celaena clutched the amulet on her chest. The Eye of Elena. She hadn't seen Elena since their last encounter in the tomb; hopefully, now that she was the King's Champion, the ancient queen's ghost would leave her alone. Still, in the months since Elena had given her the amulet for protection, Celaena had come to find its presence reassuring. The metal was always warm, as though it had a life of its own.

She squeezed it hard. If the king knew the truth about what she did—what she'd been doing these past two months . . .

She had embarked on the first mission intending to quickly dispatch the target. She'd prepared herself for the kill, told herself that Sir Carlin was nothing but a stranger and his life meant nothing to her. But when she got to his estate and witnessed the unusual kindness with which he treated his servants, when she saw him playing the lyre with a traveling minstrel he sheltered in his hall, when she realized whose agenda she was aiding . . . she couldn't do it. She tried to bully and coax and bribe herself into doing it. But she couldn't.

Still, she had to produce a murder scene—and a body.

She'd given Lord Nirall the same choice she'd given Sir Carlin: die right then, or fake his own death and flee—flee far, and never use his given name again. So far, of the four men she'd been assigned to dispatch, all had chosen escape.

It wasn't hard to get them to part with their seal rings or other token items. And it was even easier to get them to hand over their nightclothes so she could slash them in accordance with the wounds she would claim to have given them. Bodies were easy to acquire, too.

Sick-houses were always dumping fresh corpses. It was never

hard to find one that looked enough like her target—especially since the locations of the kills had been distant enough to give the flesh time to rot.

She didn't know who the head of Lord Nirall actually belonged to—only that he had similar hair, and when she inflicted a few slashes on his face and let the whole thing decompose a bit, it did the job. The hand had also come from that corpse. And the lady's hand . . . that had come from a young woman barely into her first bleeding, struck dead by a sickness that ten years ago a gifted healer could easily have cured. But with magic gone and those wise healers hanged or burned, people were dying in droves. Dying from stupid, once-curable illnesses. She rolled over to bury her face in Fleetfoot's soft coat.

Archer. How was she going to fake *his* death? He was so popular, and so recognizable. She still couldn't imagine him having a connection to whatever this underground movement was. But if he was on the king's list, then perhaps in the years since she'd seen him Archer had used his talents to become powerful.

Yet what information could the movement possibly have on the king's plans that would make it a true threat? The king had enslaved the entire continent—what more could he do?

There were other continents, of course. Other continents with wealthy kingdoms—like Wendlyn, that faraway land across the sea. It had held out against his naval attacks so far, but she'd heard next to nothing about that war since before she'd gone to Endovier.

And why would a rebel movement care about kingdoms on another continent when they had their own to worry about? So the plans had to be about *this* land, *this* continent.

She didn't want to know. She didn't want to know what the king was doing, what he imagined for the empire. She'd use this month to figure out what to do with Archer and pretend she'd never heard that horrible word: *plans*.

Celaena fought a shudder. She was playing a very, *very* lethal game. And now that her targets were people in Rifthold—now that it was *Archer* . . . She'd have to find a way to play it better. Because if the king ever learned the truth, if he found out what she was doing . . .

He'd destroy her.

3

Celaena sprinted through the darkness of the secret passageway, her breathing ragged. She glanced over her shoulder to find Cain grinning at her, his eyes like burning coals.

No matter how fast she ran, his stalking gait easily kept him just behind her. After him flowed a wake of glowing green Wyrdblocks, their strange shapes and symbols illuminating the ancient blocks of stone. And behind Cain, its long nails scraping against the ground, lumbered the *ridderak*.

Celaena stumbled, but remained upright. Each step felt like she was wading through mud. She couldn't escape him. He would catch her eventually. And once the *ridderak* got hold of her . . . She didn't dare glance again at those too-big teeth that jutted out of its mouth or those fathomless eyes, gleaming with the desire to devour her bit by bit.

Cain chuckled, the sound grating on the stone walls. He was close

now. Close enough that his fingers raked against the nape of her neck. He whispered her name, her true name, and she screamed as he—



Celaena awoke with a gasp, clutching the Eye of Elena. She scanned the room for denser shadows, for glowing Wyrdmarks, for signs that the secret door was open behind the tapestry that concealed it. But there was only the crackling of the dying fire.

Celaena sank back into her pillows. It was just a nightmare. Cain and the ridderak were gone, and Elena wouldn't bother her again. It was over.

Fleetfoot, sleeping under the many layers of blankets, put her head on Celaena's stomach. Celaena nestled down farther, wrapping her arms around the dog as she closed her eyes.

It was over.



In the chill mists of early morning, Celaena hurled a stick across the wide field of the game park. Fleetfoot took off through the pale grass like a bolt of golden lightning, so fast that Celaena let out a low, appreciative whistle. Beside her, Nehemia clicked her tongue, her eyes on the swift hound. With Nehemia so busy winning over Queen Georgina and gleaning information about the king's plans for Eyllwe, dawn was usually the only time they could see each other. Did the king know that the princess was one of the spies he'd mentioned? He couldn't, or else he'd never trust Celaena to be his Champion, not when their friendship was widely known.

"Why Archer Finn?" Nehemia mused in Eyllwe, keeping her voice low. Celaena had explained her latest mission, keeping the details brief.

Fleetfoot reached the stick and trotted back to them, her long tail wagging. Even though she wasn't yet fully grown, the dog was already

abnormally large. Dorian had never said what breed, exactly, he suspected her mother had mated with. Given Fleetfoot's size, it could have been a wolfhound. Or an actual wolf.

Celaena shrugged at Nehemia's question, stuffing her hands into the fur-lined pockets of her cloak. "The king thinks . . . he thinks that Archer is a part of some secret movement against him. A movement here in Rifthold to get him off the throne."

"Surely no one would be that bold. The rebels hide out in the mountains and forests and places where the local people can conceal and support them—not here. Rifthold would be a death trap."

Celaena shrugged again just as Fleetfoot returned and demanded the stick be thrown again. "Apparently not. And apparently the king has a list of people whom he thinks are key players in this movement against him."

"And you're to . . . kill them all?" Nehemia's creamy brown face paled slightly.

"One by one," Celaena said, throwing the stick as far as she could into the misty field. Fleetfoot shot off, dried grass and the remnants of the last snowstorm crunching beneath her huge paws. "He'll only reveal one name at a time. A bit dramatic, if you ask me. But apparently they're interfering with his *plans*."

"What plans?" Nehemia said sharply.

Celaena frowned. "I was hoping you might know."

"I don't." There was a tense pause. "If you learn anything . . .," Nehemia began.

"I'll see what I can do," Celaena lied. She wasn't even sure if she truly wanted to know what the king was up to—let alone *share* that information with anyone else. It was selfish, and stupid, perhaps, but she couldn't forget the warning the king had given the day he crowned her Champion: if she stepped out of line, if she betrayed him, he'd kill Chaol. And then Nehemia, and then the princess's family.

And all of this—every death she faked, every lie she told—put them at risk.

Nehemia shook her head but didn't reply. Whenever the princess or Chaol or even Dorian looked at her like that, it was almost too much to bear. But they had to believe the lies, too. For their own safety.

Nehemia began wringing her hands, and her eyes grew distant. Celaena had seen that expression often in the past month. "If you're fretting for my sake—"

"I'm not," Nehemia said. "You can take care of yourself."

"Then what is it?" Celaena's stomach clenched. If Nehemia talked more about the rebels, she didn't know how much of it she could take. Yes, she wanted to be free of the king—both as his Champion and as a child of a conquered nation—but she wanted nothing to do with whatever plots were brewing in Rifthold, and whatever desperate hope the rebels still savored. To stand against the king would be nothing but folly. They'd all be destroyed.

But Nehemia said, "Numbers in the Calaculla labor camp are swelling. Every day, more and more Eyllwe rebels arrive. Most consider it a miracle that they're *alive*. After the soldiers butchered those five hundred rebels . . . My people are afraid." Fleetfoot again returned, and it was Nehemia who took the stick from the dog's mouth and chucked it into the gray dawn. "But the conditions in Calaculla . . ."

She paused, probably recalling the three scars that raked down Celaena's back. A permanent reminder of the cruelty of the Salt Mines of Endovier—and a reminder that even though she was free, thousands of people still toiled and died there. Calaculla, the sister camp to Endovier, was rumored to be even worse.

"The king will not meet with me," Nehemia said, now toying with one of her fine, slender braids. "I have asked him three times to discuss the conditions in Calaculla, and each time he claims to be occupied. Apparently, he's too busy finding people for you to kill."

Celaena blushed at the harshness in Nehemia's tone. Fleetfoot returned again, but when Nehemia took the stick, the princess kept it in her hands.

"I must do something, Elentiya," Nehemia said, using the name she'd given her on the night Celaena admitted that she was an assassin. "I must find a way to help my people. When does gathering information become a stalemate? When do we act?"

Celaena swallowed hard. That word—"act"—scared her more than she'd like to admit. Worse than the word "plans." Fleetfoot sat at their feet, tail wagging as she waited for the stick to be thrown.

But when Celaena said nothing, when she promised nothing, just as she always did when Nehemia spoke about these things, the princess dropped the stick on the ground and quietly walked back to the castle.

Celaena waited until Nehemia's footsteps faded and let out a long breath. She was to meet Chaol for their morning run in a few minutes, but after that . . . after that, she was going into Rifthold. Let Archer wait until this afternoon.

After all, the king had given her a month, and despite her own questions for Archer, she wanted to get off the castle grounds for a bit. She had blood money to burn.

4

Chaol Westfall sprinted through the game park, Celaena keeping pace beside him. The chill morning air was like shards of glass in his lungs; his breath clouded in front of him. They'd bundled up as best they could without weighing themselves down—mostly just layers of shirts and gloves—but even with sweat running down his body, Chaol was freezing.

Chaol knew Celaena was freezing, too—her nose was tipped with pink, color stood high on her cheeks, and her ears shone bright red. Noticing his stare, she flashed him a grin, those stunning turquoise eyes full of light. “Tired?” she teased. “I *knew* you weren’t bothering to train while I was away.”

He let out a breathy chuckle. “*You* certainly didn’t train while you were on your mission. This is the second time this morning that I’ve had to slow my pace for you.”

A blatant lie. She kept up with him easily now, nimble as a stag

bounding through the woods. Sometimes he found it immensely hard not to watch her—to watch the way she moved.

“Keep telling yourself that,” she said, and ran a little faster.

He increased his speed, not wanting her to leave him behind. Servants had cleared a path through the snow blanketing the game park, but the ground was still icy and treacherous underfoot.

He’d been realizing it more and more recently—how much he hated it when she left him behind. How he hated her setting off on those cursed missions and not contacting him for days or weeks. He didn’t know how or when it had happened, but he’d somehow started caring whether she came back or not. And after all that they’d already endured together . . .

He’d killed Cain at the duel. Killed him to save her. Part of him didn’t regret it; part of him would do it again in a heartbeat. But the other part still woke him up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat that felt too much like Cain’s blood.

She looked over at him. “What’s wrong?”

He fought the rising guilt. “Keep your eyes on the path or you’ll slip.”

For once, she obeyed him. “You want to talk about it?”

Yes. No. If there were anyone who could understand the guilt and rage he grappled with when he thought about how he’d killed Cain, it would be her. “How often,” he said in between breaths, “do you think about the people you’ve killed?”

She whipped her gaze to him, then slowed. He didn’t feel like stopping, and might have kept running, but she grabbed his elbow and forced him to pause. Her lips formed a thin line. “If you think passing judgment on me before I’ve had breakfast is in *any* way a good idea—”

“No,” he interrupted, panting hard. “No—I didn’t mean it like . . .” He swallowed a few breaths. “I wasn’t judging.” If he could just get his damn breath back, he could explain what he’d meant.

Her eyes were as frozen as the park around him, but then she tilted her head to the side. “Is this about Cain?”

Hearing her speak the name made him clench his jaw, but he managed a nod.

The ice in her eyes melted completely. He hated the sympathy in her face, the understanding.

He was the Captain of the Guard—he was bound to have killed someone at some point. He’d already seen and done enough in the name of the king; he’d fought men, hurt them. So he shouldn’t even be having these feelings, and especially shouldn’t be telling *her*. There was a line between them, somewhere, and he was fairly certain that he’d been toeing it more and more these days.

“I’ll never forget the people I’ve killed,” she said. Her breath curled in the air between them. “Even the ones I killed to survive. I still see their faces, still remember the exact blow it took to kill them.” She looked to the skeletal trees. “Some days, it feels like another person did those things. And most of those lives I’m *glad* I ended. No matter the cause, though, it—it still takes away a little piece of you each time. So I don’t think I’ll ever forget them.”

Her gaze found his again, and he nodded.

“But, Chaol,” she said, and tightened her grip on his arm, a grip he hadn’t realized she’d still been holding, “what happened with Cain—that wasn’t an assassination, or even a cold-blooded murder.” He tried to step back, but she held firm. “What you did wasn’t dishonorable—and I’m not just saying that because it was my life you were saving.” She paused for a long moment. “You will never forget killing Cain,” she said at last, and when her eyes met his, his heart pounded so hard he could feel it across his whole body. “But I will never forget what you did to save me, either.”

The urge to lean into her warmth was staggering. He made himself step back, away from the grip of her hand, made himself nod again.

There *was* a line between them. The king might not think twice about their friendship, but crossing that final line could be deadly for both of them; it could make the king question his loyalty, his position, everything.

And if it ever came down to having to choose between his king and Celaena . . . He prayed to the Wyrd that he'd never be faced with that decision. Staying firmly on *this* side of the line was the logical choice. The honorable one, too, since Dorian . . . He'd seen the way Dorian still looked at her. He wouldn't betray his friend like that.

"Well," Chaol said with forced lightness, "I suppose having Adarlan's Assassin in my debt *could* be useful."

She gave him a bow. "At your service."

His smile was genuine this time.

"Come on, Captain," she said, starting into a slow jog. "I'm hungry, and I don't feel like freezing my ass off out here."

He chuckled under his breath, and they ran on through the park.



When they finished their run, Celaena's legs were wobbling, and her lungs were so raw from the cold and exertion that she thought they might be bleeding. They slowed to a brisk walk as they headed back to the toasty interior of the palace—and the giant breakfast that she was very much looking forward to devouring before going shopping.

They entered the castle gardens, weaving their way through the gravel paths and towering hedges. She kept her hands tucked under her arms. Even with the gloves, her fingers were frozen stiff. And her ears positively ached. Perhaps she'd start wearing a scarf over her head—even if Chaol would tease her mercilessly about it.

She glanced sideways at her companion, who had peeled off his outer layers of clothing to reveal the sweat-drenched shirt clinging to

his body. They rounded a hedge, and Celaena rolled her eyes when she saw what waited on the path ahead.

Every morning, more and more ladies found excuses to be walking through the gardens just after dawn. At first, it had just been a few young women who'd taken one look at Chaol and his sweaty, clingy clothes and halted their walk. Celaena could have sworn their eyes had bulged out of their heads and their tongues had rolled onto the ground.

Then the next morning, they'd appeared along the path *again*—wearing even nicer dresses. The day after that, more girls showed up. And then several more. And now every direct route from the game park to the castle had at least one set of young women patrolling, waiting for him to walk by.

“Oh, please,” Celaena hissed as they passed two women, who looked up from their fur muffs to bat their eyelashes at him. They must have awoken before dawn to be dressed so finely.

“What?” Chaol asked, his brows rising.

She didn't know whether he simply didn't notice, or he didn't want to say anything, but . . . “The gardens are rather busy for a winter morning,” she said carefully.

He shrugged. “Some people go a little stir-crazy being cooped up inside all winter.”

Or they just enjoy the sight of the Captain of the Guard and his muscles.

But all she said was, “Right,” and then shut her mouth. No need to point it out if he was *that* oblivious. Especially when some of the ladies were exceptionally pretty.

“Are you going into Rifthold to spy on Archer today?” Chaol asked softly, when the path was mercifully clear of giggling, blushing girls.

She nodded. “I want to get a sense of his schedule, so I'll probably trail him.”

“Why don't I help you?”

“Because I don't need your help.” She knew he'd probably interpret

it as arrogance—and it partially was—but . . . if he did get involved, then it would complicate things when it came time to smuggle Archer to safety. That is, after she got the truth out of him—and learned what plans the king had in mind.

“I know you don’t need my help. I just thought you might want . . .” He trailed off, then shook his head, as if reprimanding himself. She found herself wanting to know what he’d been about to say, but it was best to let the topic drop.

They rounded another hedge, the castle interior so close she almost groaned at the thought of that delicious warmth, but then—

“Chaol.” Dorian’s voice cut through the crisp morning.

She *did* groan then, a barely audible sound. Chaol shot her a puzzled look before they turned to find Dorian striding toward them, a blond young man in tow. She’d never seen the youth, who was finely dressed and looked about Dorian’s age, but Chaol stiffened.

The young man didn’t seem like a threat, though she knew better than to underestimate anyone in a court like this. He wore only a dagger at his waist, and his pale face seemed rather jovial, despite the winter morning chill.

She found Dorian watching her with a half smile, an amused gleam in his eye that made her want to slap him. The prince then glanced at Chaol and chuckled. “And here I was, thinking that all the ladies were out so early for Roland and me. When all of them catch a vicious cold, I’ll let their fathers know that you’re to blame.”

Chaol’s cheeks colored ever so slightly. So he wasn’t as ignorant of their morning audience as he’d led her to believe. “Lord Roland,” he said tightly to Dorian’s friend, and bowed.

The blond young man bowed back to Chaol. “Captain Westfall.” His voice was pleasant enough, but something in it made her pause. It wasn’t amusement or arrogance or anger . . . She couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Allow me to introduce my cousin,” Dorian said to her, clapping Roland on the shoulder. “Lord Roland Havilliard of Meah.” He extended a hand to Celaena. “Roland, this is Lillian. She works for my father.”

They still used her alias whenever she couldn’t avoid running into members of the court, though most everyone knew to some degree that she was not in the palace for administrative nonsense or politics.

“My pleasure,” Roland said, bowing at the waist. “Are you newly arrived to court? I don’t think I’ve seen you in years past.”

Just the way he spoke told her enough about his history with women. “I arrived this autumn,” she said a bit too quietly.

Roland gave her a courtier’s smile. “And what sort of work do you do for my uncle?”

Dorian shifted on his feet and Chaol went very still, but Celaena returned Roland’s smile and said, “I bury the king’s opponents where nobody will ever find them.”

Roland, to her surprise, actually chuckled. She didn’t dare look at Chaol, whom she was certain would give her a tongue-lashing for it later. “I’d heard about the King’s Champion. I didn’t think it would be someone so . . . lovely.”

“What brings you to the castle, Roland?” the captain demanded. When Chaol looked at *her* like that, she usually found herself running in the other direction.

Roland smiled again. He smiled too much—and too smoothly. “His Majesty has offered me a position on his council.” Chaol’s eyes snapped to Dorian, who gave a shrug of confirmation. “I arrived last night, and I’m to start today.”

Chaol smiled—if you could call it that. It was more a flash of teeth. Yes, she’d most *definitely* be running if Chaol looked at her like that.

Dorian understood the look, too, and gave a deliberate chuckle. But before the prince could speak, Roland studied Celaena further, a

tad too intently. “Perhaps you and I shall get to work with each other, Lillian. Your position intrigues me.”

She wouldn’t mind working with him—but not in the way Roland meant. Her way would include a dagger, a shovel, and an unmarked grave.

As if he could read her thoughts, Chaol put a guiding hand on her back. “We’re late for breakfast,” he said, bowing his head to Dorian and Roland. “Congratulations on your appointment.” He sounded like he’d swallowed rancid milk.

As she let Chaol lead her inside the castle, she realized she was in desperate need of a bath. But it had nothing to do with her sweaty clothes, and everything to do with the oily grin and roaming eyes of Roland Havilliard.



Dorian watched Celaena and Chaol disappear behind the hedges, the captain’s hand still on the middle of her back. She did nothing to shake it off.

“An unexpected choice for your father to make, even with that competition,” Roland mused beside him.

Dorian checked his irritation before replying. He’d never particularly liked his cousin, whom he’d seen at least twice a year while growing up.

Chaol positively hated Roland, and whenever he came up in conversation, it was usually accompanied by phrases like “conniving wretch” and “sniveling, spoiled ass.” At least, that’s what Chaol had been roaring three years ago, after the captain had punched Roland so hard in the face that the youth blacked out.

But Roland had deserved it. Deserved it enough that it hadn’t interfered with Chaol’s sterling reputation and later appointment to Captain of the Guard. If anything, it had improved Chaol’s standing among the other guards and lesser nobles.

If Dorian worked up the nerve, he'd ask his father what he'd been thinking when he appointed Roland to the council. Meah was a small yet prosperous coastal city in Adarlan, but it held no real political power. It didn't even have a standing army, save for the city's sentries. Roland was his father's cousin's son; perhaps the king felt that they needed more Havilliard blood in the council room. Still—Roland was untried, and had always seemed more interested in girls than politics.

"Where did your father's Champion come from?" Roland asked, drawing Dorian's attention back to the present.

Dorian turned toward the castle, heading for a different entrance than the one Chaol and Celaena had used. He still remembered the way they'd looked when he'd walked in on them embracing in her rooms after the duel, two months ago.

"Lillian's story is hers to tell," Dorian lied. He just didn't feel like explaining the competition to his cousin. It was bad enough that his father had ordered him to take Roland on a walk this morning. The only bright spot had been seeing Celaena so obviously contemplate ways to bury the young lord.

"Is she for your father's personal use, or do the other councilmen also employ her?"

"You've been here for less than a day, and you already have enemies to dispatch, cousin?"

"We're Havilliards, cousin. We'll always have enemies that need dispatching."

Dorian frowned. It was true, though. "Her contract is exclusively with my father. But if you feel threatened, then I can have Captain Westfall assign a—"

"Oh, of course not. I was merely curious."

Roland was a pain in the ass, and too aware of the effect his looks and his Havilliard name had on women, but he was harmless. Wasn't he?

Dorian didn't know the answer—and he wasn't sure if he wanted to.



Her salary as King's Champion was considerable, and Celaena spent every last copper of it. Shoes, hats, tunics, dresses, jewelry, weapons, baubles for her hair, and books. Books and books and books. So many books that Philippa had to bring up another bookcase for her room.

When Celaena returned to her rooms that afternoon, lugging hat boxes, colorful bags full of perfume and sweets, and brown paper parcels with the books she absolutely *had* to read immediately, she nearly dropped it all at the sight of Dorian Havilliard sitting in her foyer.

"Gods above," he said, taking in all of her purchases.

He didn't know the half of it. This was just what she could carry. More had been ordered, and more would be delivered soon.

"Well," he said as she dumped the bags on the table, nearly toppling into a heap of tissue paper and ribbons, "at least you're not wearing that dreadful black today."

She shot him a glare over her shoulder as she straightened. Today she was wearing a lilac and ivory gown—a little bright for the end of winter, but worn in the hope that spring would soon come. Plus, dressing nicely guaranteed her the best service in whatever stores she visited. To her surprise, many of the shopkeepers remembered her from years ago—and had bought her lie about a long journey to the southern continent.

"And to what do I owe this pleasure?" She untied her white fur cloak—another gift to herself—and tossed it onto one of the chairs around the foyer table. "Didn't I already see you this morning in the garden?"

Dorian remained seated, that familiar, boyish grin on his face. "Aren't friends allowed to visit each other more than once a day?"

She stared down at him. Being friends with Dorian wasn't something she was certain she could actually *do*. Not when he would always have that gleam in his sapphire eyes—and not when he was the son of the man who gripped her fate in his hands. But in the two months since she'd ended whatever had been between them, she'd often found herself missing him. Not the kissing and flirting, but just *him*.

“What do you want, Dorian?”

A glimmer of ire flashed across his face, and he stood. She had to tip her head back to look at him. “You said you still wanted to be friends with me.” His voice was low.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “I meant it.”

“So be my friend,” he said, his tone lifting. “Dine with me, play billiards with me. Tell me what books you're reading—or buying,” he added with a wink in the direction of her parcels.

“Oh?” she asked, forcing herself to give him a half smile. “And you have so much time on your hands these days that you can spend hours with me again?”

“Well, I have my usual flock of ladies to attend to, but I can *always* make time for you.”

She batted her eyelashes at him. “I'm truly honored.” Actually, the thought of Dorian with other women made her want to shatter a window, but it wouldn't be fair to let him know that. She glanced at the clock on the small table beside a wall. “I actually need to go back into Rifthold right now,” she said. It wasn't a lie. She still had a few hours of daylight left—enough time to survey Archer's elegant townhouse and start trailing him to get a sense of his usual whereabouts.

Dorian nodded, his smile fading.

Silence fell, interrupted only by the ticking of the clock on the table. She crossed her arms, remembering how he'd smelled, how his lips had tasted. But this distance between them, this horrible gap that spread every day . . . it was for the best.