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THRONE OF GLASS

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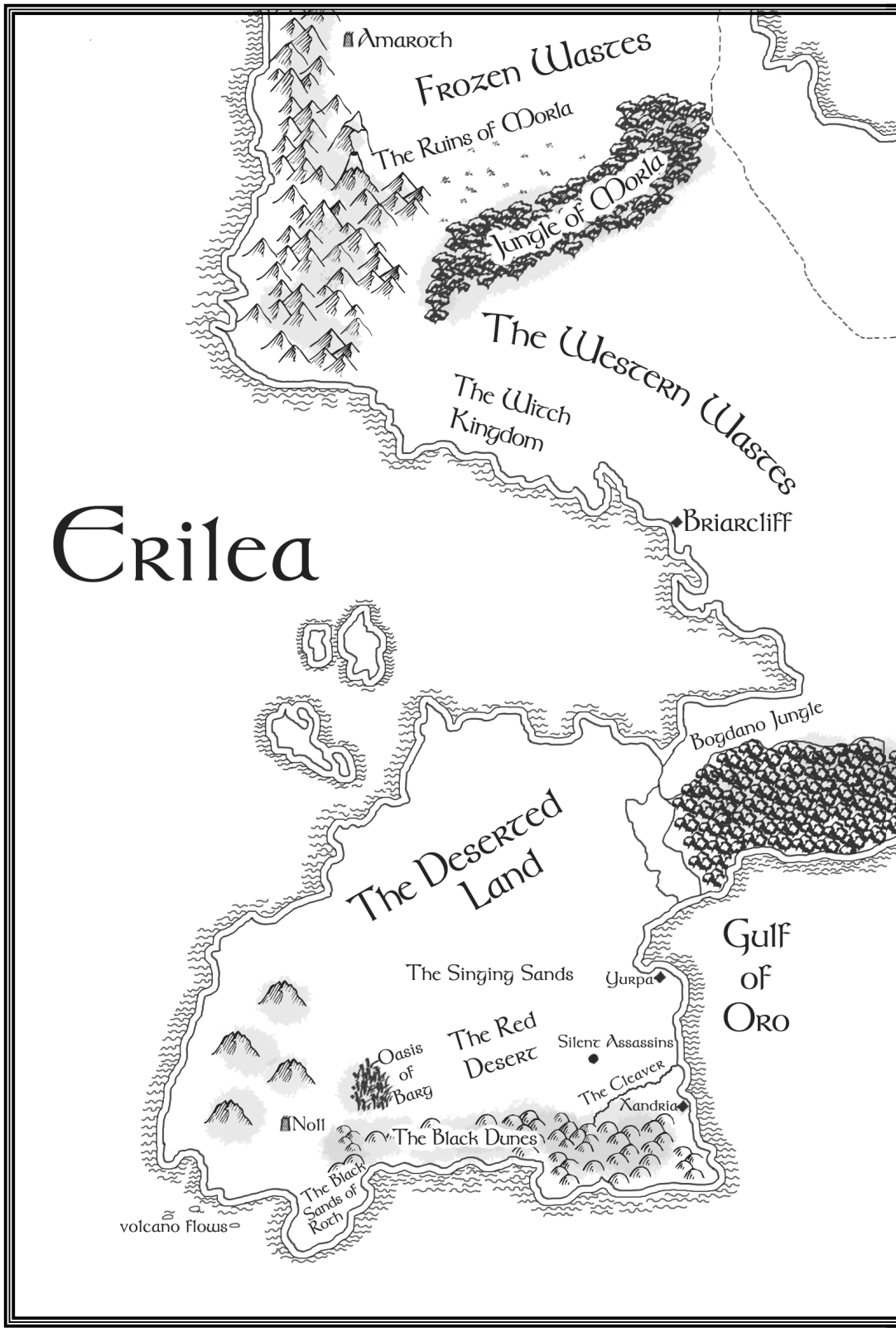
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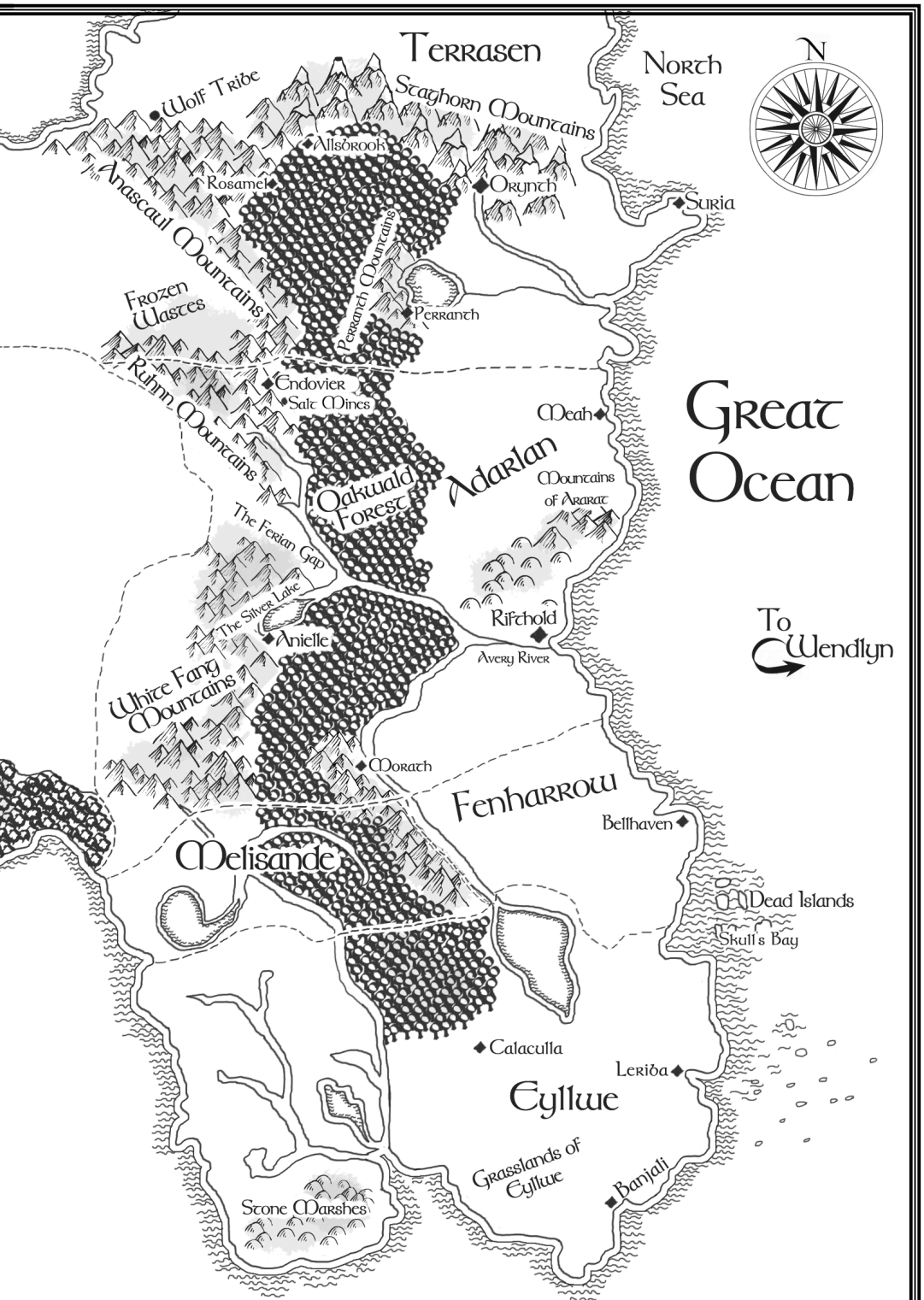
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for being with me at the beginning and staying long after the end.
Thank you for everything.


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Chapter 1

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

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

At least, that was her escort's intention, because she hadn't failed to notice when they went up and down the same staircase within a matter of minutes. Nor had she missed when they zigzagged between levels, even though the building was a standard grid of hallways and stairwells.

As if she'd lose her bearings that easily. She might have been insulted if he wasn't trying so hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The halls echoed too loudly for her to attack him without alerting the whole building. She hadn't seen where he'd put the key to her

irons, and the six guards who trailed them would be nuisances. Not to mention the shackles.

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

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

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

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

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

The captain's grip tightened until it hurt. He yanked Celaena closer,

but her feet seemed made of lead and she pulled against him. "You'd rather stay in the mines?" he asked, sounding faintly amused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

Bow to him indeed! If she were bound for the gallows, she would

most certainly *not* spend the last moments of her life in groveling submission.

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

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

The assassin hissed, baring her teeth as she twisted her head to look at the kneeling bastard. He was almost as large as her overseer, clothed in reds and oranges that matched his thinning hair. His obsidian eyes glittered as his grip tightened on her neck. If she could move her right arm just a few inches, she could throw him off balance and grab his sword . . . The shackles dug into her stomach, and fizzing, boiling rage turned her face scarlet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet there was something in his eyes, strikingly blue—the color of the waters of the southern countries—and the way they contrasted with his raven-black hair that made her pause. He was achingly handsome, and couldn't have been older than twenty.

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

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

At a passing glance, one might think her eyes blue or gray, perhaps even green, depending on the color of her clothing. Up close, though,

these warring hues were offset by the brilliant ring of gold around her pupils. But it was her golden hair that caught the attention of most, hair that still maintained a glimmer of its glory. In short, Celaena Sardothien was blessed with a handful of attractive features that compensated for the majority of average ones; and, by early adolescence, she'd discovered that with the help of cosmetics, these average features could easily match the extraordinary assets.

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

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

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

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

Arrogant ass.

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

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

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

The Crown Prince turned to his captain. "She has somewhat of a

tongue, doesn't she? And she doesn't sound like a member of the rabble."

"I should hope not!" Celaena interjected.

"Your Highness," Chaol Westfall snapped at her.

"What?" Celaena asked.

"You will address him as 'Your Highness.'"

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

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

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

"And you never tried to escape?"

A slow, wicked smile spread across her lips. "Once."

The prince's brows rose, and he turned to Captain Westfall. "I wasn't told that."

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

"Four months," she interrupted.

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

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

"There's a 'best part'?" the Crown Prince said, face caught between a wince and a smile.

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

"But you're alive," the prince said to her.

Celaena's smile faded as the memory struck her. "Yes."

"What happened?" Dorian asked.

Her eyes turned cold and hard. "I snapped."

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

"So?" Dorian said.

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

"So?" Dorian repeated.

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

"Three feet," he muttered. "Endovier sentries usually shoot a man down before he's moved three feet."

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

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

"But they didn't kill you."

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

"Do you bear many scars?" asked the prince. She shrugged and he smiled, forcing the mood to lift as he stepped from the dais. "Turn around, and let me view your back." Celaena frowned, but obeyed as he walked to her, Chaol stepping closer. "I can't make them out

clearly through all this dirt," the prince said, inspecting what skin showed through the scraps of her shirt. She scowled, and scowled even more when he said, "And what a terrible stench, too!"

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

The Crown Prince clicked his tongue and circled her slowly. Chaol—and all the guards—watched them with hands on their swords. As they should. In less than a second, she could get her arms over the prince's head and have her shackles crushing his windpipe. It might be worth it just to see the expression on Chaol's face. But the prince went on, oblivious to how dangerously close he stood to her. Perhaps she should be insulted. "From what I can see," he said, "there are three large scars—and perhaps some smaller ones. Not as awful as I expected, but . . . well, the dresses can cover it, I suppose."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And why is that?" Chaol replied.

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

She looked from one man to another and squared her shoulders. "Because there's something you want from me, something you want

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

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

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

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

"I'm listening," was all she said.