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Opening extract from

# Crown of Midnight

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# 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 Rifthold. 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.

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