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**PART ONE**

*Heir of Ash*

## 1

Gods, it was boiling in this useless excuse for a kingdom.

Or maybe it felt that way because Celaena Sardothien had been lounging on the lip of the terra-cotta roof since midmorning, an arm flung over her eyes, slowly baking in the sun like the loaves of flatbread the city's poorest citizens left on their windowsills because they couldn't afford brick ovens.

And gods, she was sick of flatbread—*teggya*, they called it. Sick of the crunchy, oniony taste of it that even mouthfuls of water couldn't wash away. If she never ate another bite of *teggya* again, it would be too soon.

Mostly because it was all she'd been able to afford when she landed in Wendlyn two weeks ago and made her way to the capital city, Varese, just as she'd been ordered by his Grand Imperial Majesty and Master of the Earth, the King of Adarlan.

She'd resorted to swiping *teggya* and wine off vendors' carts since

her money ran out, not long after she'd taken one look at the heavily fortified limestone castle, at the elite guards, at the cobalt banners flapping so proudly in the dry, hot wind and decided *not* to kill her assigned targets.

So it had been stolen teggya . . . and wine. The sour red wine from the vineyards lining the rolling hills around the walled capital—a taste she'd initially spat out but now very, very much enjoyed. Especially since the day when she decided that she didn't particularly care about anything at all.

She reached for the terra-cotta tiles sloping behind her, groping for the clay jug of wine she'd hauled onto the roof that morning. Patting, feeling for it, and then—

She swore. Where in hell was the wine?

The world tilted and went blindingly bright as she hoisted herself onto her elbows. Birds circled above, keeping well away from the white-tailed hawk that had been perched atop a nearby chimney all morning, waiting to snatch up its next meal. Below, the market street was a brilliant loom of color and sound, full of braying donkeys, merchants waving their wares, clothes both foreign and familiar, and the clacking of wheels against pale cobblestones. But where in hell was the—

Ah. There. Tucked beneath one of the heavy red tiles to keep cool. Just where she'd stashed it hours before, when she'd climbed onto the roof of the massive indoor market to survey the perimeter of the castle walls two blocks away. Or whatever she'd thought sounded official and useful before she'd realized that she'd rather sprawl in the shadows. Shadows that had long since been burned away by that relentless Wendlyn sun.

Celaena swigged from the jug of wine—or tried to. It was empty, which she supposed was a blessing, because *gods* her head was spinning. She needed water, and more teggya. And perhaps something for the gloriously painful split lip and scraped cheekbone she'd earned last night in one of the city's *tabernas*.

Groaning, Celaena rolled onto her belly and surveyed the street forty feet below. She knew the guards patrolling it by now—had marked their faces and weapons, just as she had with the guards atop the high castle walls. She'd memorized their rotations, and how they opened the three massive gates that led into the castle. It seemed that the Ashryvers and their ancestors took safety very, very seriously.

It had been ten days since she'd arrived in Varese itself, after hauling ass from the coast. Not because she was particularly eager to kill her targets, but because the city was so damn large that it seemed her best chance of dodging the immigration officials, whom she'd given the slip instead of registering with their oh-so-benevolent work program. Hurrying to the capital had also provided welcome activity after weeks at sea, where she hadn't really felt like doing anything other than lying on the narrow bed in her cramped cabin or sharpening her weapons with a near-religious zeal.

*You're nothing but a coward*, Nehemia had said to her.

Every slice of the whetting stone had echoed it. *Coward, coward, coward*. The word had trailed her each league across the ocean.

She had made a vow—a vow to free Eyllwe. So in between moments of despair and rage and grief, in between thoughts of Chaol and the Wyrdkeys and all she'd left behind and lost, Celaena had decided on one plan to follow when she reached these shores. One plan, however insane and unlikely, to free the enslaved kingdom: find and obliterate the Wyrdkeys the King of Adarlan had used to build his terrible empire. She'd gladly destroy herself to carry it out.

Just her, just him. Just as it should be; no loss of life beyond their own, no soul stained but hers. It would take a monster to destroy a monster.

If she had to be here thanks to Chaol's misplaced good intentions, then at least she'd receive the answers she needed. There was one person in Erilea who had been present when the Wyrdkeys were wielded by a conquering demon race that had warped them into three tools of

such mighty power that they'd been hidden for thousands of years and nearly wiped from memory. Queen Maeve of the Fae. Maeve knew everything—as was expected when you were older than dirt.

So the first step of her stupid, foolish plan had been simple: seek out Maeve, get answers about how to destroy the Wyrdkeys, and then return to Adarlan.

It was the least she could do. For Nehemia—for . . . a lot of other people. There was nothing left in her, not really. Only ash and an abyss and the unbreakable vow she'd carved into her flesh, to the friend who had seen her for what she truly was.

When they had docked at the largest port city in Wendlyn, she couldn't help but admire the caution the ship took while coming to shore—waiting until a moonless night, then stuffing Celaena and the other refugee women from Adarlan in the galley while navigating the secret channels through the barrier reef. It was understandable: the reef was the main defense keeping Adarlan's legions from these shores. It was also part of her mission here as the King's Champion.

That was the other task lingering in the back of her mind: to find a way to keep the king from executing Chaol or Nehemia's family. He'd promised to do it should she fail in her mission to retrieve Wendlyn's naval defense plans and assassinate its king and prince at their annual midsummer ball. But she'd shoved all those thoughts aside when they'd docked and the refugee women had been herded ashore for processing by the port's officials.

Many of the women were scarred inside and out, their eyes gleaming with echoes of whatever horrors had befallen them in Adarlan. So even after she'd vanished from the ship during the chaos of docking, she'd lingered on a nearby rooftop while the women were escorted into a building—to find homes and employment. Yet Wendlyn's officials could later bring them to a quiet part of the city and do whatever they wanted. Sell them. Hurt them. They were refugees: unwanted and without any rights. Without any voice.



But she hadn't lingered merely from paranoia. No—Nehemia would have remained to ensure they were safe. Realizing that, Celaena had wound up on the road to the capital as soon as she was certain the women were all right. Learning how to infiltrate the castle was merely something to occupy her time while she decided how to execute the first steps of her plan. While she tried to stop thinking about Nehemia.

It had all been fine—fine and easy. Hiding in the little woods and barns along the way, she passed like a shadow through the countryside.

Wendlyn. A land of myths and monsters—of legends and nightmares made flesh.

The kingdom itself was a spread of warm, rocky sand and thick forest, growing ever greener as hills rolled inland and sharpened into towering peaks. The coast and the land around the capital were dry, as if the sun had baked all but the hardiest vegetation. Vastly different from the soggy, frozen empire she'd left behind.

A land of plenty, of opportunity, where men didn't just take what they wanted, where no doors were locked and people smiled at you in the streets. But she didn't particularly care if someone did or didn't smile at her—no, as the days wore on, she found it suddenly very difficult to bring herself to care about anything at all. Whatever determination, whatever rage, whatever *anything* she'd felt upon leaving Adarlan had ebbed away, devoured by the nothingness that now gnawed at her.

It was four days before Celaena spotted the massive capital city built across the foothills. Varese, the city where her mother had been born; the vibrant heart of the kingdom.

While Varese was cleaner than Rifthold and had plenty of wealth spread between the upper and lower classes, it was a capital city all the same, with slums and back alleys, whores and gamblers—and it hadn't taken too long to find its underbelly.

On the street below, three of the market guards paused to chat, and Celaena rested her chin on her hands. Like every guard in this kingdom, each was clad in light armor and bore a good number of weapons.

Rumor claimed the Wendlynite soldiers were trained by the Fae to be ruthless and cunning and swift. And she didn't want to know if that was true, for about a dozen different reasons. They certainly seemed a good deal more observant than the average Rifthold sentry—even if they hadn't yet noticed the assassin in their midst. But these days, Celaena knew the only threat she posed was to herself.

Even baking in the sun each day, even washing up whenever she could in one of the city's many fountain-squares, she could still feel Archer Finn's blood soaking her skin, into her hair. Even with the constant noise and rhythm of Varese, she could still hear Archer's groan as she gutted him in that tunnel beneath the castle. And even with the wine and heat, she could still see Chaol, horror contorting his face at what he'd learned about her Fae heritage and the monstrous power that could easily destroy her, about how hollow and dark she was inside.

She often wondered whether he'd figured out the riddle she'd told him on the docks of Rifthold. And if he had discovered the truth . . . Celaena never let herself get that far. Now wasn't the time for thinking about Chaol, or the truth, or any of the things that had left her soul so limp and weary.

Celaena tenderly prodded her split lip and frowned at the market guards, the movement making her mouth hurt even more. She'd deserved that particular blow in the brawl she'd provoked in last night's taberna—she'd kicked a man's balls into his throat, and when he'd caught his breath, he'd been enraged, to say the least. Lowering her hand from her mouth, she observed the guards for a few moments. They didn't take bribes from the merchants, or bully or threaten with fines like the guards and officials in Rifthold. Every official and soldier she'd seen so far had been similarly . . . good.

The same way Galan Ashryver, Crown Prince of Wendlyn, was good.

Dredging up some semblance of annoyance, Celaena stuck out her

tongue. At the guards, at the market, at the hawk on the nearby chimney, at the castle and the prince who lived inside it. She wished that she had not run out of wine so early in the day.

It had been a week since she'd figured out how to infiltrate the castle, three days after arriving in Varese itself. A week since that horrible day when all her plans crumbled around her.

A cooling breeze pushed past, bringing with it the spices from the vendors lining the nearby street—nutmeg, thyme, cumin, lemon verbena. She inhaled deeply, letting the scents clear her sun-and-wine-addled head. The pealing of bells floated down from one of the neighboring mountain towns, and in some square of the city, a minstrel band struck up a merry midday tune. Nehemia would have loved this place.

That fast, the world slipped, swallowed up by the abyss that now lived within her. Nehemia would never see Wendlyn. Never wander through the spice market or hear the mountain bells. A dead weight pressed on Celaena's chest.

It had seemed like such a perfect plan when she'd arrived in Varese. In the hours she'd spent figuring out the royal castle's defenses, she'd debated how she'd find Maeve to learn about the keys. It had all been going smoothly, flawlessly, until . . .

Until that gods-damned day when she'd noted how the guards left a hole in their defense in the southern wall every afternoon at two o'clock, and grasped how the gate mechanism operated. Until Galan Ashryver had come riding out through those gates, in full view of where she'd been perched on the roof of a nobleman's house.

It hadn't been the sight of him, with his olive skin and dark hair, that had stopped her dead. It hadn't been the fact that, even from a distance, she could see his turquoise eyes—*her* eyes, the reason she usually wore a hood in the streets.

No. It had been the way people cheered.

*Cheered* for him, their prince. Adored him, with his dashing smile and his light armor gleaming in the endless sun, as he and the soldiers behind him rode toward the north coast to continue blockade running. *Blockade running*. The prince—her target—was a gods-damned blockade runner against Adarlan, and his people *loved* him for it.

She'd trailed the prince and his men through the city, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, and all it would have taken was one arrow through those turquoise eyes and he would have been dead. But she followed him all the way to the city walls, the cheers growing louder, people tossing flowers, everyone beaming with pride for their perfect, perfect prince.

She'd reached the city gates just as they opened to let him through. And when Galan Ashryver rode off into the sunset, off to war and glory and to fight for good and freedom, she lingered on that roof until he was a speck in the distance.

Then she had walked into the nearest taberna and gotten into the bloodiest, most brutal brawl she'd ever provoked, until the city guard was called in and she vanished moments before everyone was tossed into the stocks. And then she had decided, as her nose bled down the front of her shirt and she spat blood onto the cobblestones, that she wasn't going to do *anything*.

There was no point to her plans. Nehemia and Galan would have led the world to freedom, and Nehemia should have been breathing. Together the prince and princess could have defeated the King of Adarlan. But Nehemia was dead, and Celaena's vow—her stupid, pitiful vow—was worth as much as mud when there were beloved heirs like Galan who could do so much more. She'd been a fool to make that vow.

Even Galan—Galan was barely making a dent against Adarlan, and he had an entire armada at his disposal. She was one person, one complete waste of life. If Nehemia hadn't been able to stop the king . . . then that plan, to find a way to contact Maeve . . . that plan was absolutely useless.

Mercifully, she still hadn't seen one of the Fae—not a single damn one—or the faeries, or even a lick of magic. She'd done her best to avoid it. Even before she'd spotted Galan, she'd kept away from the market stalls that offered everything from healing to trinkets to potions, areas that were usually also full of street performers or mercenaries trading their gifts to earn a living. She'd learned which tabernas the magic-wielders liked to frequent and never went near them. Because sometimes she felt a trickling, writhing *thing* awaken in her gut if she caught a crackle of its energy.

It had been a week since she'd given up her plan and abandoned any attempt to care at all. And she suspected it'd be many weeks more before she decided she was truly sick of teggya, or brawling every night just to feel something, or guzzling sour wine as she lay on rooftops all day.

But her throat was parched and her stomach was grumbling, so Celaena slowly peeled herself off the edge of the roof. Slowly, not because of those vigilant guards, but rather because her head was well and truly spinning. She didn't trust herself to care enough to prevent a tumble.

She glared at the thin scar stretching across her palm as she shimmed down the drainpipe and into the alley off the market street. It was now nothing more than a reminder of the pathetic promise she'd made at Nehemia's half-frozen grave over a month ago, and of everything and everyone else she'd failed. Just like her amethyst ring, which she gambled away every night and won back before sunrise.

Despite all that had happened, and Chaol's role in Nehemia's death, even after she'd destroyed what was between them, she hadn't been able to forfeit his ring. She'd lost it thrice now in card games, only to get it back—by whatever means necessary. A dagger poised to slip between the ribs usually did a good deal more convincing than actual words.

Celaena supposed it was a miracle she made it down to the alley, where the shadows momentarily blinded her. She braced a hand on the cool stone wall, letting her eyes adjust, willing her head to stop

spinning. A mess—she was a gods-damned mess. She wondered when she'd bother to stop being one.

The tang and reek of the woman hit Celaena before she saw her. Then wide, yellowed eyes were in her face, and a pair of withered, cracked lips parted to hiss, "Slattern! Don't let me catch you in front of my door again!"

Celaena pulled back, blinking at the vagrant woman—and at her door, which . . . was just an alcove in the wall, crammed with rubbish and what had to be sacks of the woman's belongings. The woman herself was hunched, her hair unwashed and teeth a ruin of stumps. Celaena blinked again, the woman's face coming into focus. Furious, half-mad, and filthy.

Celaena held up her hands, backing away a step, then another. "Sorry."

The woman spat a wad of phlegm onto the cobblestones an inch from Celaena's dusty boots. Failing to muster the energy to be disgusted or furious, Celaena would have walked away had she not glimpsed herself as she raised her dull gaze from the glob.

Dirty clothes—stained and dusty and torn. Not to mention, she smelled *atrocious*, and this vagrant woman had mistaken her for . . . for a fellow vagrant, competing for space on the streets.

Well. Wasn't that just *wonderful*. An all-time low, even for her. Perhaps it'd be funny one day, if she bothered to remember it. She couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed.

At least she could take some comfort in knowing that it couldn't get worse.

But then a deep male voice chuckled from the shadows behind her.

## 2

The man—male—down the alley was Fae.

After ten years, after all the executions and burnings, a Fae male was prowling toward her. Pure, solid Fae. There was no escaping him as he emerged from the shadows yards away. The vagrant in the alcove and the others along the alley fell so quiet Celaena could again hear those bells ringing in the distant mountains.

Tall, broad-shouldered, every inch of him seemingly corded with muscle, he was a male blooded with power. He paused in a dusty shaft of sunlight, his silver hair gleaming.

As if his delicately pointed ears and slightly elongated canines weren't enough to scare the living shit out of everyone in that alley, including the now-whimpering madwoman behind Celaena, a wicked-looking tattoo was etched down the left side of his harsh face, the whorls of black ink stark against his sun-kissed skin.

The markings could easily have been decorative, but she still

remembered enough of the Fae language to recognize them as words, even in such an artistic rendering. Starting at his temple, the tattoo flowed over his jaw and down his neck, where it disappeared beneath the pale surcoat and cloak he wore. She had a feeling the markings continued down the rest of him, too, concealed along with at least half a dozen weapons. As she reached into her cloak for her own hidden dagger, she realized he might have been handsome were it not for the promise of violence in his pine-green eyes.

It would have been a mistake to call him young—just as it would have been a mistake to call him anything but a warrior, even without the sword strapped across his back and the vicious knives at his sides. He moved with lethal grace and surety, scanning the alley as if he were walking onto a killing field.

The hilt of the dagger was warm in her hand, and Celaena adjusted her stance, surprised to be feeling—fear. And enough of it that it cleared the heavy fog that had been clouding her senses these past few weeks.

The Fae warrior stalked down the alley, his knee-high leather boot silent on the cobblestones. Some of the loiterers shrank back; some bolted for the sunny street, to random doorways, anywhere to escape his challenging stare.

Celaena knew before his sharp eyes met hers that he was here for her, and who had sent him.

She reached for her Eye amulet, startled to find it was no longer around her neck. She'd given it to Chaol—the only bit of protection she could grant him upon leaving. He'd probably thrown it away as soon as he figured out the truth. Then he could go back to the haven of being her enemy. Maybe he'd tell Dorian, too, and the pair of them would both be safe.

Before she could give in to the instinct to scuttle back up the drainpipe and onto the roof, she considered the plan she'd abandoned. Had some god remembered she existed and decided to throw her a bone? She'd needed to see Maeve.

Well, here was one of Maeve's elite warriors. Ready. Waiting.

And from the vicious temper emanating from him, not entirely happy about it.

The alley remained as still as a graveyard while the Fae warrior surveyed her. His nostrils flared delicately, as if he were—

He was getting a whiff of her scent.

She took some small satisfaction in knowing she smelled horrific, but it wasn't that smell he was reading. No, it was the scent that marked her as *her*—the smell of her lineage and blood and what and who she was. And if he said her name in front of these people . . . then she knew that Galan Ashryver would come running home. The guards would be on high alert, and *that* was not part of her plan at all.

The bastard looked likely to do such a thing, just to prove who was in charge. So she summoned her energy as best she could and sauntered over to him, trying to remember what she might have done months ago, before the world had gone to hell. "Well met, my friend," she purred. "Well met, indeed."

She ignored the shocked faces around them, focusing solely on sizing him up. He stood with a stillness that only an immortal could achieve. She willed her heartbeat and breathing to calm. He could probably hear them, could probably smell every emotion raging through her. There'd be no fooling him with bravado, not in a thousand years. He'd probably lived that long already. Perhaps there'd be no beating him, either. She was Celaena Sardothien, but he was a Fae warrior and had likely been one for a great while.

She stopped a few feet away. Gods, he was huge. "What a lovely surprise," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear. When was the last time she'd sounded that pleasant? She couldn't even remember the last time she'd spoken in full sentences. "I thought we were to meet at the city walls."

He didn't bow, thank the gods. His harsh face didn't even shift. Let him think what he wanted. She was sure she looked nothing like what