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## Chapter 1

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### Kaelia

**K**aelia's eyes opened at the sound of the lock on her cage clanging, harsh metal against metal, and then the whine of the door swinging open. Why had they come for her, at this hour? With guns pointed at her head they shackled her ankles and cuffed her wrists, and then dragged her down the long, stark hallway of the cell block, her thin slippers doing little to deflect the cold from the floor seeping up into her bones. She shivered as she was roughly shoved into the warden's office, stumbling and tripping, catching herself at the last moment to confront who'd she'd been brought before.

"You've been selected."

The warden spoke as he always spoke, as if to nobody, like she wasn't there. Kaelia blinked back sleep as her brain tried to catch up to her body. Selected? Selected for what? Was she being transferred to a different prison system, given another work assignment? Or worse, perhaps... execution. No, no, no, Kaelia struggled to slow the rush of adrenaline as she tried to assure herself it couldn't be that.

The convicts of the Krakian work prisons were almost never put to death.

They didn't have to be. The atrocious living conditions and backbreaking labor they were subjected to often killed them quickly enough. After three years of mining in the caves of some isolated undisclosed northern coast, it was a wonder Kaelia was still standing upright, let alone alive.

"Selected?" Kaelia dared to venture, searching for some clarification. She eyed the warden and several guards' electric rods, knowing speaking out of turn could easily earn her a shock from one. She could dodge it, of course, if she wanted – but that would only stir up more trouble.

"The Amity's People Party's Competition." The warden grunted the words so abruptly Kaelia barely understood them. When her mind finally started to register what might be happening, her heart lurched so hard she had to swallow it back. Could this be real, or was she dreaming? But, no, she didn't dream anymore, not since coming here.

It had been nearly a year since she'd been allowed to apply to The Amity's People Party's Competition, a reality TV show contest for the world's most high-profile convicts. The qualifications for entry had been in her favor: no rapists, no child killers, and no one who'd murdered more than two of their own family members. A photo and a short bio would be submitted on behalf of each entry, though Kaelia hadn't seen what was sent. Undoubtedly, it had been her mugshot, along with her prison stats: Name – Kaelia Elowyn Nemesis, Height – 5 foot 6 inches, Weight – 110 pounds. And conviction – Hit-person-for-hire, professional killing machine, murderess, cutthroat, assassin.

But none of that mattered anymore. She'd been selected for a chance to erase those crimes from her name, a chance for her freedom, a chance for the means to live out the rest of her life in relative peace and simplicity.

No, not a chance. Kaelia was going to win this competition,

because if she didn't it would mean being sent back here, to the Krakian work camps, and that was the last thing she ever planned to do again.

Walking back with the guards, Kaelia smiled to herself, the expression foreign and strange on her face after three long years of pure hell. When the ensemble reached the hall leading back to her cell, Kaelia continued that way, though the guards pivoted her in the opposite direction, one on either side, clutching her elbows though she was still shackled. They ushered her into an elevator instead, only instead of going down into the caves like she did every day, one of the guards pushed the letter R button, *roof*.

The numbers ticked off agonizingly slow, and Kaelia couldn't help being nervous about the elevator's destination. Why the roof? Were they going to throw her off it so she couldn't enter the competition after all? The guards at Krakian were nobody's friend, but they possessed a special kind of hatred for Kaelia.

She could hear the noise of propellers filling her ears and reverberating through her insides before she saw what was making it. Kaelia's eyes widened in astonishment as the guards pushed her roughly through the elevator as it opened, jabbing her side, slamming a hand into the small of her back. There was a helicopter, waiting just for her.

Kaelia ground her teeth together and kept straight as she was shoved towards it, refusing to give them the satisfaction of stumbling again. Once they boarded, one of the guards held his gun to her head while the other one unshackled her wrist long enough to cuff her to the metal arm of the seat inside.

"How long will the ride be?" Kaelia asked politely, and then forced herself not to flinch, knowing she just risked having the butt of a gun slammed into her jaw. But the guards must have been feeling lazy today, or perhaps they'd been instructed not to harm her. They didn't answer as they shuffled back to the door

of the helicopter, surveying her one last time, perhaps to make sure she was properly secured.

“Don’t get too excited,” one of them grunted as he hovered in the doorway. “You’ll be back.”

Shrugging, Kaelia smiled saccharinely at them, and waved her fingertips as daintily as she could, with her wrists shackled to the seat, as a last parting gesture. Then, just before the guards shut the door behind them, she flipped her hand around and flashed the middle finger and a smug smirk, enjoying the disgruntled looks on both their faces as they disappeared from view. From outside the window, she could see them trying to get back in, undoubtedly to knock her a couple times upside the head, but the door apparently locked behind them, the chopper already taking her away.

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## Callan

Callan Merone sat in the very back of the auditorium, watching the elimination ceremony of the competing criminals. Today, there were 100 of them, but by tomorrow, just the twenty finalists would remain. Most of them had arrived just yesterday, from work prisons all over the world. Haggard and hungry, if not half-starved, Callan could tell none of them were at their best, disoriented and tired from jet lag, though Callan figured that was part of the showrunner’s intentions.

He watched a stocky, tattooed man aim a bow and arrow, and then miss the entire target board. It was his first challenge, and he was out immediately. It was no shocker when the man threw the bow down, swearing violently as he stalked off the stage. Contestant No. 57, Callan surveyed the list in front of him until he came to the name behind the number – Riddark Hayes, though he was nobody now. Callan read the man’s conviction,

another rebel soldier and prisoner of war, as the majority of them were.

Callan sighed, bored, though many other spectators in the audience sat with rapt attention, for some reason utterly fascinated. But Callan had seen more skill in a little finger from the time he was five years old. This was nothing to him.

Callan straightened when another one of the few women contestants entered the stage, though he controlled his expression to remain impassive. Lauza LaRue, No. 58. Platinum blonde, big busted, and legs for days, Ms. LaRue had been the center of a drunken conversation among the other trainers in the bar last night. Despite being a convicted serial killer, who lured her victims into a place of vulnerability by sleeping with them first, several of the trainers were hoping to be paired with her. But Callan wasn't interested in Lauza. He wanted someone who had a chance at winning, and he didn't think Lauza was it.

Despite Callan's judgments, Lauza passed her tests well enough, not amazingly by any means, but the judges still deemed her fit enough to join the ranks of the final twenty. Callan couldn't help but think her reputation, or perhaps her looks, might have had something to do with her passing. Lauza waved to the audience as she walked off to stand with the other finalists, obviously pleased with herself, though her victory was met with mixed results. Many booed and hissed, though some clapped politely, and a few men catcalled. Callan frowned at the clappers. These were criminals, after all. Celebrating them seemed inappropriate.

Callan suppressed a yawn on the back of his hand as he counted down the names on his list. Forty contestants left, with fifteen selected so far. The lucky fifteen stood in a booth to one side of the auditorium, uncuffed, wearing normal street clothes, and most of them scrubbed somewhat clean. A few of them had been easy picks for finalists, like the rogue, brutish Elgren Farrow, another rebel soldier, who had aced all the tests with an arrogant

ease, or the mountainous Grady Lair, who was the size of a small bulldozer with the same stamina. Others took him by surprise, like the tiny, pixie-like Indigo Steele, a convicted cat burglar who'd stolen millions of dollars of priceless artifacts and paintings.

After contestant No. 65, Callan was ready for this whole thing to be over. It had gone on for almost two hours already, with no intermission or breaks. Why had he signed up to be the personal trainer of some dishonored, lowlife, criminal again? Oh, right... cash. Not only would Callan receive a hefty salary for training his, er, client during the competition, but there'd be prize money in it for him if his contestant won. It wouldn't be a life changing amount or anything, but it would help... his mother needed that back surgery, and their family home needed several repairs. Callan used to bring in a pretty decent salary, but he couldn't do the same work he used to, not since the accident.

Callan must have zoned out for longer than he thought, because the next thing he knew two more finalists had been selected. Another guy, No. 69, long and lanky, with swept back blond hair, along with the third girl to join the finalists. Callan studied her, disappointed he'd missed her audition. But besides her very pale skin, there was nothing extraordinary about her, and Callan had to wonder how she passed.

He scanned his sheet for her number, 72, his eye catching on her name and conviction. Kaelia Elowyn Nemesis, the assassin, responsible for the deaths of several prominent political figures. Callan glanced up at her again, confused. Her? Really? She looked just like a regular person. No one could have ever guessed. Callan supposed that's what made a good assassin.

He leaned back in his chair as No. 73 picked up a throwing knife, hoping the judges wouldn't take too long in selecting the last three finalists.