

DRAGON ASSASSIN

ARTHUR SLADE

Cover art by
Sally Gottschalk

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*For Tanaya,
who loves clever dragons*

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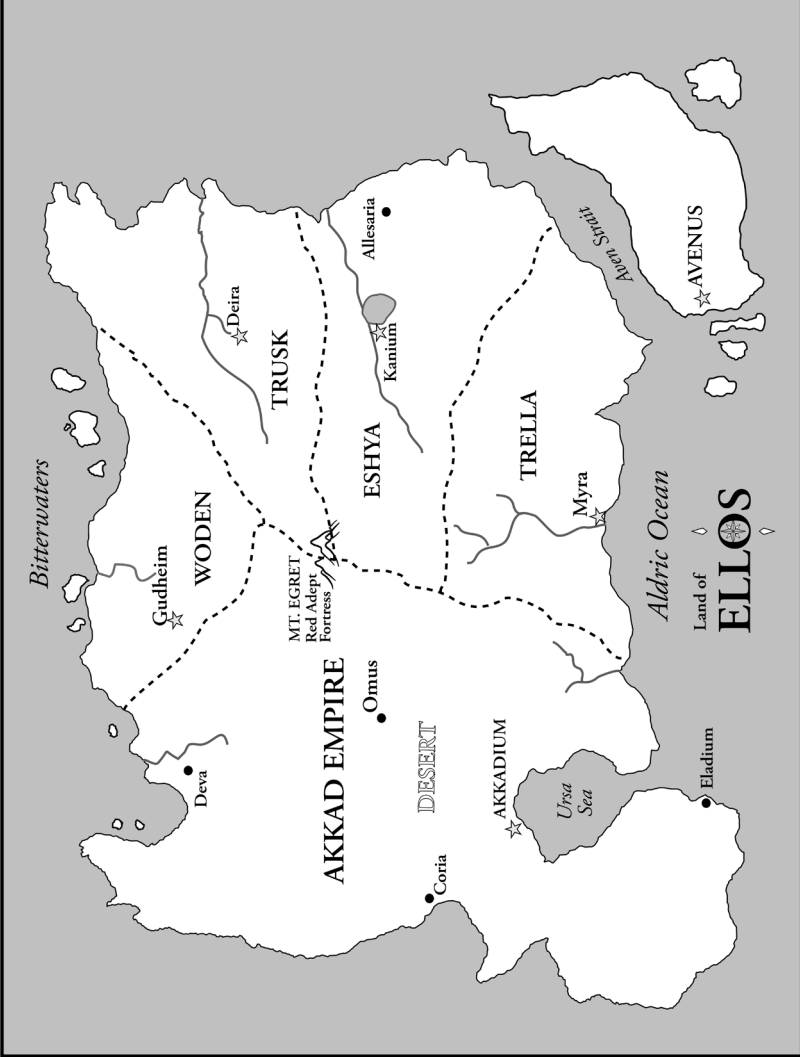


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BOOK ONE: TWIN FURY



Chapter 1

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

I lost my left eye during blades training at assassin school. My twin brother did the deed using a clever feint and a quick cross-wise cut that caught me by surprise.

“Well, Carmen, that’ll leave a scar,” Corwin had said. Then he’d laughed that snorty, snotty laugh that had grated on my nerves a thousand times since childhood.

My vision had been too blurry to aim a cutting blow at him, and I wasn’t certain if I even wanted to. He was the only family I had. And despite his laughter, he may not have known how deep the wound was. He often made a silly joke when he’d done something stupid.

But when I stumbled and fell toward the floor, Corwin dropped his blade and caught me. “Aw, sorry, sis,” he said, holding me against his chest. Then the healers rushed in with

their bandages and salves and led me to the healing room. Maestru Alesius — my master — soon brought these bad news: “You will lose that eye, Carmen.”

I was thirteen. I’d been ahead of my brother on the honour roll — the top of the class. I often wondered if a bout of jealousy inspired my blinding. The blades were sharp, but we students weren’t supposed to cut each other — the idea was to keep the mind sharp too. And I’d love to know where he’d learned the move. I’d never seen it before, and I was better with the sword than him. Did he have a secret teacher?

Everything was harder with only one eye — the sword fights, the dagger throws, learning to avoid traps; even the poisons and potions were more difficult to pour.

A half-blind assassin was a joke. I was pretty certain my fellow students had chuckled and celebrated as my position on the honour roll slipped. I had the knowledge and the skill, but the patch over my eye meant I had a weakness, and assassins were trained to exploit weaknesses.

I’d have quit, perhaps to be a scullery maid or to work in the massive wheat fields of the Akkad Empire, if only to get away from the other apprentice assassins who now scorned me. I especially wanted to flee from the kinder ones who looked at me with pity.

But Maestru Alesius had insisted I stay.

“Adversity will toughen your mental bones,” he’d promised. His support and my perseverance had kept me in school. Three years had passed since the incident. I was finally sixteen, in my final week of classes.

Corwin would graduate at the top of the honour roll. He was the best with bladed weapons, the best at hiding in shadows, the best assassin the school had seen in many years. He may even be better than the legendary Banderius. All the kings, queens, and archons would seek to hire Corwin. Maybe even Emperor Rima himself.

I'd be lucky to get hired at all.