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MAAS

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PART ONE

Lady of Shadows

1

There was a thing waiting in the darkness.

It was ancient, and cruel, and paced in the shadows leashing his mind. It was not of his world, and had been brought here to fill him with its primordial cold. Some invisible barrier still separated them, but the wall crumbled a little more every time the thing stalked along its length, testing its strength.

He could not remember his name.

That was the first thing he'd forgotten when the darkness enveloped him weeks or months or eons ago. Then he'd forgotten the names of the others who had meant so much to him. He could recall horror and despair—only because of the solitary moment that kept interrupting the blackness like the steady beat of a drum: a few minutes of screaming and blood and frozen wind. There had been people he loved in that room of red marble and glass; the woman had lost her head—

Lost, as if the beheading were her fault.

A lovely woman with delicate hands like golden doves. It was not her

fault, even if he could not remember her name. It was the fault of the man on the glass throne, who had ordered that guard's sword to sever flesh and bone.

There was nothing in the darkness beyond the moment when that woman's head thudded to the ground. There was nothing *but* that moment, again and again and again—and that thing pacing nearby, waiting for him to break, to yield, to let it in. A prince.

He could not remember if the thing was the prince, or if he himself had once been a prince. Not likely. A prince would not have allowed that woman's head to be cut off. A prince would have stopped the blade. A prince would have saved her.

Yet he had not saved her, and he knew there was no one coming to save him.

There was still a real world beyond the shadows. He was forced to participate in it by the man who had ordered the slaughter of that lovely woman. And when he did, no one noticed that he had become hardly more than a marionette, struggling to speak, to act past the shackles on his mind. He hated them for not noticing. That was one of the emotions he still knew.

I was not supposed to love you. The woman had said that—and then she died. She should not have loved him, and he should not have dared to love her. He deserved this darkness, and once the invisible boundary shattered and the waiting thing pounced, infiltrating and filling him . . . he'd have earned it.

So he remained bound in night, witnessing the scream and the blood and the impact of flesh on stone. He knew he should struggle, knew he *had* struggled in those final seconds before the collar of black stone had clamped around his neck.

But there was a thing waiting in the darkness, and he could not bring himself to fight it for much longer.

2

Aelin Ashryver Galathynius, heir of fire, beloved of Mala Light-Bringer, and rightful Queen of Terrasen, leaned against the worn oak bar and listened carefully to the sounds of the pleasure hall, sorting through the cheers and moans and bawdy singing. Though it had chewed up and spat out several owners over the past few years, the subterranean warren of sin known as the Vaults remained the same: uncomfortably hot, reeking of stale ale and unwashed bodies, and packed to the rafters with lowlifes and career criminals.

More than a few young lords and merchants' sons had swaggered down the steps into the Vaults and never seen daylight again. Sometimes it was because they flashed their gold and silver in front of the wrong person; sometimes it was because they were vain or drunk enough to think that they could jump into the fighting pits and walk out alive. Sometimes they mishandled one of the women for hire in the alcoves flanking the cavernous space and learned the hard way about which people the owners of the Vaults really valued.

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Aelin sipped from the mug of ale the sweating barkeep had slid her moments before. Watery and cheap, but at least it was cold. Above the tang of filthy bodies, the scent of roasting meat and garlic floated to her. Her stomach grumbled, but she wasn't stupid enough to order food. One, the meat was usually courtesy of rats in the alley a level above; two, wealthier patrons usually found it laced with something that left them awakening in the aforementioned alley, purse empty. If they woke up at all.

Her clothes were dirty, but fine enough to mark her as a thief's target. So she'd carefully examined her ale, sniffing and then sipping it before deeming it safe. She'd still have to find food at some point soon, but not until she learned what she needed to from the Vaults: what the hell had happened in Rifthold in the months she'd been gone.

And what client Arobynn Hamel wanted to see so badly that he was risking a meeting here—especially when brutal, black-uniformed guards were roaming the city like packs of wolves.

She'd managed to slip past one such patrol during the chaos of docking, but not before noting the onyx wyvern embroidered on their uniforms. Black on black—perhaps the King of Adarlan had grown tired of pretending he was anything but a menace and had issued a royal decree to abandon the traditional crimson and gold of his empire. Black for death; black for his two Wyrkeys; black for the Valg demons he was now using to build himself an unstoppable army.

A shudder crawled along her spine, and she drained the rest of her ale. As she set down the mug, her auburn hair shifted and caught the light of the wrought-iron chandeliers.

She'd hurried from the docks to the riverside Shadow Market—where anyone could find anything they wanted, rare or contraband or commonplace—and purchased a brick of dye. She'd paid the merchant an extra piece of silver to use the small room in the back of the shop to dye her hair, still short enough to brush just below her collarbones. If those guards had been monitoring the docks and had somehow seen her, they would be looking for

a golden-haired young woman. *Everyone* would be looking for a golden-haired young woman, once word arrived in a few weeks that the King's Champion had failed in her task to assassinate Wendlyn's royal family and steal its naval defense plans.

She'd sent a warning to the King and Queen of Eyllwe months ago, and knew they'd take the proper precautions. But that still left one person at risk before she could fulfill the first steps of her plan—the same person who might be able to explain the new guards by the docks. And why the city was noticeably quieter, tenser. Hushed.

If she were to overhear anything regarding the Captain of the Guard and whether he was safe, it would be here. It was only a matter of listening to the right conversation or sitting with the right card partners. What a fortunate coincidence, then, that she'd spotted Tern—one of Arobynn's favored assassins—buying the latest dose of his preferred poison at the Shadow Market.

She'd followed him here in time to spy several more of Arobynn's assassins converging on the pleasure hall. They never did that—not unless their master was present. Usually only when Arobynn was taking a meeting with someone very, very important. Or dangerous.

After Tern and the others had slipped inside the Vaults, she'd waited on the street for a few minutes, lingering in the shadows to see whether Arobynn arrived, but no such luck. He must have already been within.

So she'd come in on the heels of a group of drunken merchants' sons, spotted where Arobynn was holding court, and done her best to remain unnoticed and unremarkable while she lurked at the bar—and observed.

With her hood and dark clothes, she blended in well enough not to garner much attention. She supposed that if anyone was foolish enough to attempt to rob her, it made them fair game to be robbed right back. She *was* running low on money.

She sighed through her nose. If her people could only see her: Aelin of the Wildfire, assassin and pickpocket. Her parents and uncle were probably thrashing in their graves.

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Still. Some things were worth it. Aelin crooked a gloved finger at the bald barkeep, signaling for another ale.

"I'd mind how much you drink, girl," sneered a voice beside her.

She glanced sidelong at the average-sized man who had slipped up beside her at the bar. She would have known him for his ancient cutlass if she hadn't recognized the disarmingly common face. The ruddy skin, the beady eyes and thick brows—all a bland mask to hide the hungry killer beneath.

Aelin braced her forearms on the bar, crossing one ankle over the other. "Hello, Tern." Arobynn's second in command—or he had been two years ago. A vicious, calculating little prick who had always been more than eager to do Arobynn's dirty work. "I figured it was only a matter of time before one of Arobynn's dogs sniffed me out."

Tern leaned against the bar, flashing her a too-bright smile. "If memory serves, you were always his favorite bitch."

She chuckled, facing him fully. They were nearly equal in height—and with his slim build, Tern had been unnervingly good at getting into even the most well-guarded places. The barkeep, spotting Tern, kept well away.

Tern inclined his head over a shoulder, gesturing to the shadowy back of the cavernous space. "Last banquette against the wall. He's finishing up with a client."

She flicked her gaze in the direction Tern indicated. Both sides of the Vaults were lined with alcoves teeming with whores, barely curtained off from the crowds. She skipped over the writhing bodies, over the gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed women waiting to earn their keep in this festering shit-hole, over the people who monitored the proceedings from the nearest tables—guards and voyeurs and fleshmongers. But there, tucked into the wall adjacent to the alcoves, were several wooden booths.

Exactly the ones she'd been discreetly monitoring since her arrival.

And in the one farthest from the lights . . . a gleam of polished leather boots stretched out beneath the table. A second pair of boots, worn and

muddy, were braced on the floor across from the first, as if the client were ready to bolt. Or, if he were truly stupid, to fight.

He was certainly stupid enough to have let his personal guard stay visible, a beacon alerting anyone who cared to notice that something rather important was happening in that last booth.

The client's guard—a slender, hooded young woman armed to the teeth—was leaning against a wooden pillar nearby, her silky, shoulder-length dark hair shining in the light as she carefully monitored the pleasure hall. Too stiff to be a casual patron. No uniform, no house colors or sigils. Not surprising, given the client's need for secrecy.

The client probably thought it was safer to meet here, when these sorts of meetings were usually held at the Assassins' Keep or one of the shadowy inns owned by Arobynn himself. He had no idea that Arobynn was also a major investor in the Vaults, and it would take only a nod from Aelin's former master for the metal doors to lock—and the client and his guard to never walk out again.

It still left the question of why Arobynn had agreed to meet here.

And still left Aelin looking across the hall toward the man who had shattered her life in so many ways.

Her stomach tightened, but she smiled at Tern. "I knew the leash wouldn't stretch far."

Aelin pushed off the bar, slipping through the crowd before the assassin could say anything else. She could feel Tern's stare fixed right between her shoulder blades, and knew he was aching to plunge his cutlass there.

Without bothering to glance back, she gave him an obscene gesture over her shoulder.

His barked string of curses was far better than the bawdy music being played across the room.

She noted each face she passed, each table of revelers and criminals and workers. The client's personal guard now watched her, a gloved hand slipping to the ordinary sword at her side.

Not your concern, but nice try.

Aelin was half tempted to smirk at the woman. Might have done so, actually, if she wasn't focused on the King of the Assassins. On what waited for her in that booth.

But she was ready—or as ready as she could ever be. She'd spent long enough planning.

Aelin had given herself a day at sea to rest and to miss Rowan. With the blood oath now eternally binding her to the Fae Prince—and him to her—his absence was like a phantom limb. She still felt that way, even when she had so much to do, even though missing her *carranam* was useless and he'd no doubt kick her ass for it.

The second day they'd been apart, she'd offered the ship's captain a silver coin for a pen and a stack of paper. And after locking herself in her cramped stateroom, she'd begun writing.

There were two men in this city responsible for destroying her life and the people she'd loved. She would not leave Rifthold until she'd buried them both.

So she'd written page after page of notes and ideas, until she had a list of names and places and targets. She'd memorized every step and calculation, and then she'd burned the pages with the power smoldering in her veins, making sure every last scrap was nothing more than ash floating out the porthole window and across the vast, night-darkened ocean.

Though she had braced herself, it had still been a shock weeks later when the ship had passed some unseen marker just off the coast and her magic vanished. All that fire she'd spent so many months carefully mastering . . . gone as if it had never existed, not even an ember left flickering in her veins. A new sort of emptiness—different from the hole Rowan's absence left in her.

Stranded in her human skin, she'd curled up on her cot and recalled how to breathe, how to think, how to move her damn body without the immortal grace she'd become so dependent on. She was a useless fool for letting those gifts become a crutch, for being caught unguarded when they were again ripped from her. Rowan definitely would have kicked her

ass for *that*—once he'd recovered himself. It was enough to make her glad she'd asked him to stay behind.

So she had breathed in the brine and the wood, and reminded herself that she'd been trained to kill with her bare hands long before she'd ever learned to melt bones with her fire. She did not need the extra strength, speed, and agility of her Fae form to bring down her enemies.

The man responsible for that initial brutal training—the man who had been savior and tormentor, but never declared himself father or brother or lover—was now steps away, still speaking with his oh-so-important client.

Aelin pushed against the tension threatening to lock up her limbs and kept her movements feline-smooth as she closed the final twenty feet between them.

Until Arobynn's client rose to his feet, snapping something at the King of the Assassins, and stormed toward his guard.

Even with the hood, she knew the way he moved. She knew the shape of the chin poking from the shadows of the cowl, the way his left hand tended to brush against his scabbard.

But the sword with the eagle-shaped pommel was not hanging at his side.

And there was no black uniform—only brown, nondescript clothes, spotted with dirt and blood.

She grabbed an empty chair and pulled it up to a table of card players before the client had taken two steps. She slid into the seat and focused on breathing, on listening, even as the three people at the table frowned at her.

She didn't care.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the guard jerk her chin toward her. "Deal me in," Aelin muttered to the man beside her. "Right now."

"We're in the middle of a game."

"Next round, then," she said, relaxing her posture and slumping her shoulders as Chaol Westfall cast his gaze in her direction.

3

Chaol was Arobynn's client.

Or he wanted something from her former master badly enough to risk meeting here.

What the *hell* had happened while she was away?

She watched the cards being slapped down on the ale-damp table, even as the captain's attention fixed on her back. She wished she could see his face, see anything in the gloom underneath that hood. Despite the splattering of blood on his clothes, he moved as though no injuries plagued him.

Something that had been coiled tightly in her chest for months slowly loosened.

Alive—but where had the blood come from?

He must have deemed her nonthreatening, because he merely motioned to his companion to go, and they both strolled toward the bar—no, toward the stairs beyond. He moved at a steady, casual pace, though the woman at his side was too tense to pass for unconcerned. Fortunately

for them all, no one looked his way as he left, and the captain didn't glance in her direction again.

She'd moved fast enough that he likely hadn't been able to detect that it was her. Good. Good, even if she would have known him moving or still, cloaked or bare.

There he went, up the stairs, not even glancing down, though his companion continued watching her. Who the hell was *that*? There hadn't been any female guards at the palace when she'd left, and she had been fairly certain the king had an absurd no-women rule.

Seeing Chaol changed nothing—not right now.

She curled her hand into a fist, keenly aware of the bare finger on her right hand. It hadn't felt naked until now.

A card landed before her. "Three silvers to join," the bald, tattooed man beside her said as he dealt the cards, inclining his head toward the tidy pile of coins in the center.

Meeting with Arobynn—she'd never thought Chaol was stupid, but *this* . . . Aelin rose from the chair, cooling the wrath that had started to boil in her veins. "I'm dead broke," she said. "Enjoy the game."

The door atop the stone stairs was already shut, Chaol and his companion gone.

She gave herself a second to wipe any expression beyond mild amusement off her face.

Odds were, Arobynn had planned the whole thing to coincide with her arrival. He'd probably sent Tern to the Shadow Market just to catch her eye, to draw her here. Maybe he knew what the captain was up to, whose side the young lord was now on; maybe he'd just lured her here to worm his way into her mind, to shake her up a bit.

Getting answers from Arobynn would come at a price, but it was smarter than running after Chaol into the night, though the urge had her muscles locking up. Months—months and months since she'd seen him, since she'd left Adarlan, broken and hollow.

But no more.

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Aelin swaggered the last few steps to the banquette and paused in front of it, crossing her arms as she beheld Arobynn Hamel, the King of the Assassins and her former master, smiling up at her.

Lounging in the shadows of the wooden banquette, a glass of wine before him, Arobynn looked exactly as he had the last time she'd seen him: a fine-boned aristo face, silky auburn hair that grazed his shoulders, and a deep-blue tunic of exquisite make, unbuttoned with an assumed casualness at the top to reveal the toned chest beneath. No sign at all of a necklace or chain. His long, muscled arm was draped across the back of the bench, and his tanned, scar-flecked fingers drummed a beat in time with the hall music.

"Hello, darling," he purred, his silver eyes bright even in the dimness.

No weapons save for a beautiful rapier at his side, its ornate, twisting guards like a swirling wind bound in gold. The only overt sign of the wealth that rivaled the riches of kings and empresses.

Aelin slid onto the bench across from him, too aware of the wood still warm from Chaol. Her own daggers pressed against her with every movement. Goldryn was a heavy weight at her side, the massive ruby in its hilt hidden by her dark cloak—the legendary blade utterly useless in such tight quarters. No doubt why he'd picked the booth for this meeting.

"You look more or less the same," she said, leaning against the hard bench and tugging back her hood. "Rifthold continues to treat you well."

It was true. In his late thirties, Arobynn remained handsome, and as calm and collected as he'd been at the Assassins' Keep during the dark blur of days after Sam had died.

There were many, many debts to be paid for what happened back then.

Arobynn looked her up and down—a slow, deliberate examination. "I think I preferred your natural hair color."

"Precautions," she said, crossing her legs and surveying him just as slowly. No indication that he was wearing the Amulet of Orynth, the royal heirloom he'd stolen from her when he found her half-dead on the

banks of the Florine. He'd allowed her to believe the amulet that secretly contained the third and final Wyrddkey had been lost to the river. For a thousand years, her ancestors had unwittingly worn the amulet, and it had made their kingdom—*her* kingdom—a powerhouse: prosperous and safe, the ideal to which all courts in all lands were held. Still, she'd never seen Arobynn wear any sort of chain around his neck. He probably had it squirreled away somewhere at the Keep. "I wouldn't want to wind up back in Endovier."

Those silver eyes sparkled. It was an effort to keep from reaching for a dagger and throwing it hard.

But too much was dependent on him to kill him right away. She'd had a long, long while to think this over—what she wanted to do, how she wanted to do it. Ending it here and now would be a waste. Especially when he and Chaol were somehow tangled up.

Perhaps *that* was why he'd lured her here—so she would spy Chaol with him . . . and hesitate.

"Indeed," Arobynn said, "I'd hate to see you back in Endovier, too. Though I will say these past two years have made you even more striking. Womanhood suits you." He cocked his head, and she knew it was coming before he amended, "Or should I say queen-hood?"

It had been a decade since they'd spoken baldly of her heritage, or of the title he had helped her walk away from, had taught her to hate and fear. Sometimes he'd mentioned it in veiled terms, usually as a threat to keep her bound to him. But he had never once said her true name—even when he'd found her on that icy riverbank and carried her into his house of killers.

"What makes you think I have any interest in that?" she said casually.

Arobynn shrugged his broad shoulders. "One can't put much faith in gossip, but word arrived about a month ago from Wendlyn. It claimed that a certain lost queen put on a rather spectacular show for an invading legion from Adarlan. Actually, I believe the title our esteemed friends in the empire now like to use is 'fire-breathing bitch-queen.'"