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SARAH J.
MAAS

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THE
ASSASSIN
AND THE
PIRATE LORD

1

Seated in the council room of the Assassins' Keep, Celaena Sardothien leaned back in her chair. "It's past four in the morning," she said, adjusting the folds of her crimson silk dressing gown and crossing her bare legs beneath the wooden table. "This had better be important."

"Perhaps if you hadn't been reading all night, you wouldn't be so exhausted," snapped the young man seated across from her. She ignored him and studied the four other people assembled in the underground chamber.

All male, all far older than she, and all refusing to meet her stare. A chill that didn't have to do with the drafty room ran down her spine. Picking at her manicured nails, Celaena schooled her features into neutrality. The five assassins gathered at the long table—including herself—were five of Arobynn Hamel's seven most trusted companions.

This meeting was undeniably important. She'd known that from the moment the serving girl pounded on her door, insisting Celaena come downstairs and not even bother to get dressed. When Arobynn summoned you, you didn't keep him waiting. Thankfully, her sleepwear was as exquisite as her daytime wardrobe—and cost nearly as much. Still, being sixteen in a room with men made her keep an eye on the neckline of her robe. Her beauty was a weapon—one she kept honed—but it could also be a vulnerability.

Arobynn Hamel, King of the Assassins, lounged at the head of the table, his auburn hair shining in the light from the glass chandelier. His silver eyes met hers, and he frowned. It might have just been the late hour, but Celaena could have sworn that her mentor was paler than usual. Her stomach twisted.

"Gregori's been caught," Arobynn finally said. Well, that would explain one person missing from this meeting. "His mission was a trap. He's now being held in the royal dungeons."

Celaena sighed through her nose. *This* was why she'd been awakened? She tapped a slippers foot on the marble floor. "Then kill him," she said.

She'd never liked Gregori, anyway. When she was ten, she'd fed his horse a bag of candy and he'd thrown a dagger at her head for it. She'd caught the dagger, of course, and ever since, Gregori had borne the scar on his cheek from her return throw.

"Kill Gregori?" demanded Sam, the young man seated at Arobynn's left—a place that usually went to Ben, Arobynn's second-in-command. Celaena knew very well what Sam Cortland thought of her. She'd known since they were children, when Arobynn took her in and declared her—not Sam—to be his protégée and heir. That hadn't stopped Sam from trying to undermine her at every turn. And now, at seventeen, Sam was still a year older than she, and he still hadn't forgotten that he would always be second best.

She bristled at the sight of Sam in Ben's seat. Ben would probably throttle Sam for it when he arrived. Or she could just save Ben the effort and do it herself.

Celaena looked to Arobynn. Why hadn't *he* reprimanded Sam for sitting in Ben's place? Arobynn's face, still handsome despite the silver starting to show in his hair, remained impassive. She hated that unreadable mask, especially when controlling her own expressions—and temper—remained a tad difficult.

"If Gregori's been caught," Celaena drawled, brushing back a strand of her long, golden hair, "then the protocol's simple: send an apprentice to slip something into his food. Nothing painful," she added as the men around her tensed. "Just enough to silence him before he talks."

Which Gregori might very well do, if he was in the royal dungeons. Most criminals who went in there never came out again. Not alive. And not in any recognizable shape.

The location of the Assassins' Keep was a well-guarded secret, one she'd been trained to keep until her last breath. But even if she didn't, no one was likely to believe that an elegant manor house on a very respectable street in Rifthold was home to some of the greatest assassins in the world. What better place to hide than in the middle of the capital city?

"And if he's already talked?" challenged Sam.

"And if Gregori's already talked," she said, "then kill everyone who heard." Sam's brown eyes flashed as she gave him a little smile that she knew made him irate. Celaena turned to Arobynn. "But you didn't need to drag us here to decide this. You already gave the order, didn't you?"

Arobynn nodded, his mouth a thin line. Sam choked back his objection and looked toward the crackling hearth beside the table. The firelight cast the smooth, elegant panes of Sam's face into light and

shadow—a face, she'd been told, that could have earned him a fortune if he'd followed in his mother's footsteps. But Sam's mother had opted instead to leave him with assassins, not courtesans, before she died.

Silence fell, and a roaring noise filled her ears as Arobynn took a breath. Something was wrong.

"What else?" she asked, leaning forward. The other assassins focused on the table. Whatever had happened, they knew. Why hadn't Arobynn told her first?

Arobynn's silver eyes became steel. "Ben was killed."

Celaena gripped the arms of her chair. "What?" *Ben*—Ben, the ever-smiling assassin who had trained her as often as Arobynn had. Ben, who had once mended her shattered right hand. Ben, the seventh and final member of Arobynn's inner circle. He was barely thirty years old. Celaena's lips pulled back from her teeth. "What do you mean, 'killed'?"

Arobynn eyed her, and a glimmer of grief flashed across his face. Five years Ben's senior, Arobynn had grown up with Ben. They'd been trained together; Ben had seen to it that his friend became the unrivaled King of the Assassins, and never questioned his place as Arobynn's Second. Her throat closed up.

"It was supposed to be Gregori's mission," Arobynn said quietly. "I don't know why Ben was involved. Or who betrayed them. They found his body near the castle gates."

"Do you have his body?" she demanded. She had to see it—had to see him one last time, see how he'd died, how many wounds it had taken to kill him.

"No," Arobynn said.

"Why the hell not?" Her fists clenched and unclenched.

"Because the place was swarming with guards and soldiers!" Sam burst out, and she whipped her head to him. "How do you think we learned about this in the first place?"

Arobynn had sent *Sam* to see why Ben and Gregori were missing? "If we'd grabbed his body," Sam said, refusing to back down from her glare, "it would have led them right to the Keep."

"You're assassins," she growled at him. "You're *supposed* to be able to retrieve a body without being seen."

"If you'd been there, you would have done the same."

Celaena pushed her chair back so hard it flipped over. "If I'd been there, I would have killed *all of them* to get Ben's body back!" She slammed her hands on the table, rattling the glasses.

Sam shot to his feet, a hand on the hilt of his sword. "Oh, listen to you. Ordering us about like *you* run the Guild. But not yet, Celaena." He shook his head. "Not yet."

"*Enough*," Arobynn snapped, rising from his chair.

Celaena and Sam didn't move. None of the other assassins spoke, though they gripped their various weapons. She'd seen firsthand what fights at the Keep were like; the weapons were as much for the bearers' own safety as they were to prevent her and Sam from doing serious damage to each other.

"I said, *enough*."

If Sam took one step toward her, drew his sword a fraction of an inch, that concealed dagger in her robe would find itself a new home in his neck.

Arobynn moved first, grabbing Sam's chin in one hand, forcing the young man to look at him. "Check yourself, or I'll do it for you, boy," he murmured. "You're a fool for picking a fight with her tonight."

Celaena bit down on her reply. She could handle Sam tonight—or any other night, for that matter. If it came down to a fight, she'd win—she always beat Sam.

But Sam released the hilt of his sword. After a moment, Arobynn removed his grip on Sam's face, but didn't step away. Sam kept his gaze on the floor as he strode to the far side of the council room.

Crossing his arms, he leaned against the stone wall. She could still reach him—one flick of her wrist, and his throat would spout blood.

“Celaena,” Arobynn said, his voice echoing in the silent room.

Enough blood had been spilled tonight; they didn’t need another dead assassin.

Ben. Ben was dead and gone, and she’d never again run into him in the halls of the Keep. He’d never set her injuries with his cool, deft hands, never coax a laugh from her with a joke or a lewd anecdote.

“Celaena,” Arobynn warned again.

“I’m done,” Celaena snapped. She rolled her neck, running a hand through her hair. She stalked to the door, but paused on the threshold.

“Just so you know,” she said, speaking to all of them but still watching Sam, “I’m going to retrieve Ben’s body.” A muscle feathered in Sam’s jaw, though he wisely kept his eyes averted. “But don’t expect me to extend the same courtesy to the rest of you when your time comes.”

With that, she turned on her heel and ascended the spiral staircase to the manor above. Fifteen minutes later, no one stopped her when she slipped out the front gate and into the silent city streets.

2

Two months, three days, and about eight hours later, the clock on the mantel chimed noon. Captain Rolfe, Lord of the Pirates, was late. Then again, so were Celaena and Sam, but Rolfe had no excuse, not when they were already two hours behind schedule. Not when they were meeting in *his* office.

And it wasn’t *her* fault for being tardy. She couldn’t control the winds, and those skittish sailors had certainly taken their time sailing into the archipelago of the Dead Islands. She didn’t want to think about how much gold Arobynn had spent bribing a crew to sail into the heart of pirate territory. But Skull’s Bay was on an island, so they hadn’t really had a choice about their mode of transportation.

Celaena, concealed behind a far-too-stuffy black cloak, tunic, and ebony mask, rose from her seat before the Pirate Lord’s desk. How dare he make her wait! He knew precisely why they were here, after all.

Three assassins had been found murdered by pirate hands, and Arobynn had sent her to be his personal dagger—to extract retribution, preferably the gold kind, for what their deaths would cost the Assassins' Guild.

"With every minute he makes us wait," Celaena said to Sam, the mask making her words low and soft, "I'm adding an extra ten gold pieces to his debt."

Sam, who didn't wear a mask over his handsome features, crossed his arms and scowled. "You'll do no such thing. Arobynn's letter is sealed, and it's going to remain that way."

Neither of them had been particularly happy when Arobynn announced that Sam would be sent to the Dead Islands with Celaena. Especially when Ben's body—which Celaena *had* retrieved—had barely been in the ground for two months. The sting of losing him hadn't exactly worn off.

Her mentor had called Sam an escort, but Celaena knew what his presence meant: a watchdog. Not that she'd do anything bad when she was about to meet the Pirate Lord of Erilea. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Even though the tiny, mountainous island and ramshackle port city hadn't really made much of an impression so far.

She'd been expecting a manor house like the Assassins' Keep, or at least a fortified, aging castle, but the Pirate Lord occupied the entire top floor of a rather suspect tavern. The ceilings were low, the wooden floors creaked, and the cramped room combined with the already-sizzling temperature of the southern islands meant Celaena was sweating buckets beneath her clothing. But her discomfort was worth it: as they'd strode through Skull's Bay, heads had turned at the sight of her—the billowing black cape, the exquisite clothing, and the mask transformed her into a whisper of darkness. A little intimidation never did any harm.

Celaena walked to the wooden desk and picked up a piece of paper, her black-gloved hands turning it over to read the contents. A weather log. How dull.

"What are you doing?"

Celaena lifted another piece of paper. "If His Pirateness can't be bothered to clean for us, then I don't see why I can't have a look."

"He'll be here any second," Sam hissed. She picked up a flattened map, examining the dots and markings along the coastline of their continent. Something small and round gleamed beneath the map, and she slipped it into her pocket before Sam could notice.

"Oh, hush," she said, opening the hutch on the wall adjacent to the desk. "With these creaky floors, we'll hear him a mile off." The hutch was crammed with rolled scrolls, quills, the odd coin, and some very old, very expensive-looking brandy. She pulled out a bottle, swirling the amber liquid in the sunlight streaming through the tiny porthole window. "Care for a drink?"

"No," Sam snapped, half-twisting in his seat to watch the door. "Put it back. *Now*."

She cocked her head, twirled the brandy once more in its crystal bottle, and set it down. Sam sighed. Beneath her mask, Celaena grinned.

"He can't be a very good lord," she said, "if *this* is his personal office." Sam gave a stifled cry of dismay as Celaena plopped into the giant armchair behind the desk and set about opening the pirate's ledgers and turning over his papers. His handwriting was cramped and near-illegible, his signature nothing more than a few loops and jagged peaks.

She didn't know what she was looking for, exactly. Her brows rose a bit at the sight of a piece of purple, perfumed paper, signed by someone named Jacqueline. She leaned back in the chair, propping her feet on the desk, and read it.

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"Damn it, Celaena!"

She raised her brows, but realized he couldn't see. The mask and clothes were a necessary precaution, one that made it far easier to protect her identity. In fact, all of Arobynn's assassins had been sworn to secrecy about who she was—under the threat of endless torture and eventual death.

Celaena huffed, though her breath only made the interior of the insufferable mask hotter. All that the world knew about Celaena Sardothen, Adarlan's Assassin, was that she was female. And she wanted to keep it that way. How else would she be able to stroll the broad avenues of Rifthold or infiltrate grand parties by posing as foreign nobility? And while she wished that Rolfe could have the chance to admire her lovely face, she had to admit that the disguise also made her rather imposing, especially when the mask warped her voice into a growling rasp.

"Get back in your seat." Sam reached for a sword that wasn't there. The guards at the entrance to the inn had taken their weapons. Of course, none of them had realized that Sam and Celaena were weapons themselves. They could kill Rolfe just as easily with their bare hands.

"Or you'll fight me?" She tossed the love letter onto the desk. "Somehow, I don't think that'd make a favorable impression on our new acquaintances." She crossed her arms behind her head, gazing at the turquoise sea visible between the dilapidated buildings that made up Skull's Bay.

Sam half-rose from his chair. "Just get back in your seat."

"I've spent the past ten days at sea. Why should I sit in that uncomfortable chair when this one's far more suited to my tastes?"

Sam let out a growl. Before he could speak, the door opened.

Sam froze, but Celaena only inclined her head in greeting as Captain Rolfe, Lord of the Pirates, entered his office.

"I'm glad to see you've made yourself at home." The tall,

dark-haired man shut the door behind him. Bold move, considering who was waiting in his office.

Celaena remained where she sat. Well, *he* certainly wasn't what she'd expected. It wasn't every day that she was surprised, but . . . she'd imagined him to be a bit dirtier—and far more flamboyant. Considering the tales she'd heard of Rolfe's wild adventures, she had trouble believing that this man—lean but not wiry, well dressed but not overtly so, and probably in his late twenties—was the legendary pirate. Perhaps he, too, kept his identity a secret from his enemies.

Sam stood, bowing his head slightly. "Sam Cortland," he said by way of greeting.

Rolfe extended a hand, and Celaena watched his tattooed palm and fingers as they clasped Sam's broad hand. The map—*that* was the mythic map that he'd sold his soul to have inked on his hands. The map of the world's oceans—the map that changed to show storms, foes . . . and treasure.

"I suppose *you* don't need an introduction." Rolfe turned to her.

"No." Celaena leaned back farther in his desk chair. "I suppose I don't."

Rolfe chuckled, a crooked smile spreading across his tanned face. He stepped to the hutch, giving her the chance to examine him further. Broad shoulders, head held high, a casual grace to his movements that came with knowing he had all the power here. He didn't have a sword, either. Another bold move. Wise, too, given that they could easily use his weapons against him. "Brandy?" he asked.

"No, thank you," Sam said. Celaena felt Sam's eyes hard upon her, willing her to take her feet off Rolfe's desk.

"With that mask on," Rolfe mused, "I don't think you could have a drink, anyway." He poured brandy for himself and took a long sip. "You must be boiling in all that clothing."

Celaena lowered her feet to the ground as she ran her hands

along the curved edge of his desk, stretching out her arms. "I'm used to it."

Rolfe drank again, watching her for a heartbeat over the rim of his glass. His eyes were a striking shade of sea green, as bright as the water just a few blocks away. Lowering the glass, he approached the end of the desk. "I don't know how you handle things in the North, but down here, we like to know who we're speaking to."

She cocked her head. "As you said, I don't need an introduction. And as for the privilege of seeing my beautiful face, I'm afraid that's something few men receive."

Rolfe's tattooed fingers tightened on the glass. "Get out of my chair."

Across the room, Sam tensed. Celaena examined the contents of Rolfe's desk again. She clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "You really need to work on organizing this mess."

She sensed the pirate grabbing for her shoulder and was on her feet before his fingers could graze the black wool of her cloak. He stood a good head taller than her. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she crooned.

Rolfe's eyes gleamed with the challenge. "You're in *my* city, and on *my* island." Only a handbreadth separated them. "You're not in any position to give me orders."

Sam cleared his throat, but Celaena stared up into Rolfe's face. His eyes scanned the blackness beneath the hood of her cloak—the smooth black mask, the shadows that concealed any trace of her features. "Celaena," Sam warned, clearing his throat again.

"Very well." She sighed loudly, and stepped around Rolfe as if he were nothing but a piece of furniture in her way. She sank into the chair beside Sam, who flashed her a glare that burned enough to melt the entirety of the Frozen Wastes.

She could feel Rolfe watching their every movement, but he merely adjusted the lapels of his midnight-blue tunic before sitting

down. Silence fell, interrupted only by the cry of gulls circling above the city and the shouting of pirates calling to one another in the filthy streets.

"Well?" Rolfe rested his forearms on the desk.

Sam glanced at her. Her move.

"You know precisely why we're here," Celaena said. "But perhaps all that brandy's gone to your head. Shall I refresh your memory?"

Rolfe gestured with his green, blue, and black hand for her to continue, as if he were a king on his throne listening to the complaints of the rabble. *Ass.*

"Three assassins from our Guild were found dead in Bellhaven. The one that got away told us they were attacked by pirates." She draped an arm along the back of her chair. "*Your* pirates."

"And how did the survivor know they were *my* pirates?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps it was the tattoos that gave them away." All of Rolfe's men had their wrists tattooed with an image of a multi-colored hand.

Rolfe opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a piece of paper and reading the contents. He said, "Once I caught wind that Arobynn Hamel might blame me, I had the shipyard master of Bellhaven send me these records. It seems the incident occurred at three in the morning at the docks."

This time Sam answered. "That's correct."

Rolfe set down the paper and lifted his eyes skyward. "So if it was three in the morning, and it took place at the docks—which have no street lamps, as I'm sure you know"—she didn't—"then *how* did your assassin see all of their tattoos?"

Beneath her mask, Celaena scowled. "Because it happened three weeks ago—during the full moon."

"Ah. But it's early spring. Even up in Bellhaven, nights are still cold. Unless my men were without coats, there was no way for—"