



the
ASSASSIN
and the
PIRATE
LORD

a **THRONE** *of* **GLASS** *novella*

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BLOOMSBURY

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Chapter One

Seated in the council room of the Assassin's 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 a 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 gray 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 slippered 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 Assassin's Keep was a well-guarded secret, one she'd been trained to keep until her last breath. But even if she told anyone, they were unlikely 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?" she demanded. *Ben*—Ben, the ever-smiling assassin who had trained her as often as Arobynn. 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, his 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 keep

her and Sam from doing serious damage to each other.

“I said *enough*.”

If Sam took one step toward her, raised 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 golden 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.

Chapter Two

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." His brown eyes narrowed at her.

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 Assassin's 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 close

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 dark 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, twirling 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.

“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 Sardothien, 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 as they could with a blade.

"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."

She rolled her eyes, even though he couldn't see. "I've just spent 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 sat 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 of 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 hand’s breadth 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 Rolfe’s men had their wrists tattooed with an image of a multicolored 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—”

“Enough,” Celaena snapped. “I suppose that piece of paper has ten different paltry excuses for your men.” She grabbed the satchel from the floor and yanked out the two sealed documents. “These are for you.” She tossed them on the desk. “From our master.”

A smile tugged on Rolfe’s lips, but he pulled the documents to him, studying the seal. He held it up to the sunlight. “I’m surprised it hasn’t been tampered

with.” His eyes glimmered with mischief. Celaena could sense Sam’s smugness oozing out of him.

With two deft flicks of his wrist, Rolfe sliced open both envelopes with a letter-knife she somehow hadn’t spotted. How had she missed it? A fool’s mistake.

In the silent minutes that passed as Rolfe read the letters, his only reaction was the occasional drumming of his fingers on the wooden desk. The heat was suffocating, and sweat slipped down her back. They were supposed to be here for three days—long enough for Rolfe to gather the money he owed them. Which, judging by the growing frown on Rolfe’s face, was quite a lot.

Rolfe let out a long breath when he finished and shuffled the papers into alignment.

“Your master drives a hard bargain,” Rolfe said, looking from Celaena to Sam. “But his terms aren’t unfair. Perhaps you should have read the letter before you started flinging accusations at me and my men. There will be no retribution for those dead assassins. Whose deaths, your master agrees, were not my fault in the least. He must have some common sense, then.” Celaena quelled the urge to lean forward. If Arobynn wasn’t demanding payment for the death of those assassins, then what *were* they doing here? Her face burned. She’d just looked like a fool, hadn’t she? If Sam smiled just the slightest bit ...

Rolfe drummed his inked fingers again and ran a hand through his shoulder-length dark hair. “As for the trade agreement he’s outlined ... I’ll have my accountant draw up the necessary fees, but you’ll have to tell Arobynn that he can’t expect any profits until *at least* the second shipment. Possibly the third. And if he has an issue with that, then he can come down here himself to tell me.”

Profits? Shipment? For once, Celaena was grateful for the mask. It sounded like they’d been sent for some sort of business investment. She flicked her eyes to Sam, who nodded at Rolfe—as if he knew exactly what the Pirate Lord was talking about. “And when can we tell Arobynn to expect the first shipment?” he asked.

Rolfe stuffed Arobynn’s letters into a desk drawer and locked it. “The slaves will be here in two days—ready for your departure the day after. I’ll even loan you my ship, so you can tell that trembling crew of yours they’re free to return to Rifthold tonight, if it pleases them.”

Celaena stared at him. Arobynn had sent them here for ... for *slaves*? How could he stoop so disgustingly low? And to tell her she was going to Skull’s Bay for one thing, but to really send her here for *this* ... She felt her nostrils flare. Sam had known about this deal, but he’d somehow forgotten to mention the truth

behind their visit—even during the ten days they'd spent at sea. As soon as she got him alone, she'd make him regret it. But for now ... She couldn't let Rolfe catch on to her ignorance.

"You'd better not botch this," Celaena warned the Pirate Lord. "Arobynn won't be pleased if anything goes awry."

Rolfe chuckled. "You have my word that it will all go according to plan. I'm not Lord of the Pirates for nothing, you know."

She leaned forward, flattening her voice into the even tones of a business partner concerned about her investment. "How long, exactly, have you been involved in the slave trade?" It couldn't have been long. Adarlan had only started capturing and selling slaves two years ago—most of them prisoners of war from whatever territories dared rebel against their conquest. Many of them were from Eyllwe, but there were still prisoners from Melisande and Finntierland, or the isolated tribe in the White Fang Mountains. The majority of slaves went to Calaculla or Endovier, the continent's largest and most notorious labor camps, to mine for salt and precious metals. But more and more slaves were making their way into the households of Adarlan's nobility. And for Arobynn to make a filthy trade agreement—some sort of black market deal ... It would sully the Assassins' Guild's entire reputation.

"Believe me," Rolfe said, crossing his arms, "I have enough experience. You should be more concerned about your master. Investing in the slave trade is a guaranteed profit, but he might need to expend more of his resources than he'd like in order to keep our business from reaching the wrong ears."

Her stomach turned over, but she feigned disinterest as best she could and said, "Arobynn is a shrewd businessman. Whatever you can supply, he'll make the most of it."

"For his sake, I hope that's true. I don't want to risk my name and reputation for nothing." Rolfe stood, and Celaena and Sam rose with him. "I'll have the documents signed and returned to you tomorrow. For now ..." He pointed toward the door. "I have two rooms prepared for you."

"We only need one," she interrupted.

Rolfe's eyebrows rose suggestively.

Beneath her mask, her face burned, and Sam choked on a laugh. "One room, two beds."

Rolfe chuckled, striding to the door and opening it for them. "As you wish. I'll have baths drawn for you as well." Celaena and Sam followed him out into the narrow, dark hallway. "You could both use one," he added with a wink.

It took all of her self-restraint to keep from punching him below the belt.

Chapter Three

It took them five minutes to search the cramped room for any spy-holes or signs of danger; five minutes for them to lift the framed paintings on the wood-paneled walls, tap at the floorboards, seal the gap between the door and the floor, and cover the window with Sam's weatherworn black cloak.

When she was certain that no one could either hear or see her, Celaena ripped off her hood, untied the mask from her face, and whirled to face him.

Sam, seated on his small bed—which seemed more like a cot—raised his palms to her. “Before you bite my head off,” he said, keeping his voice quiet just in case, “let me say that I went into that meeting knowing as little as you.”

She glared at him, savoring the fresh air on her sticky, sweaty face. “Oh, really?”

“You're not the only one who can improvise.” Sam kicked off his boots and hoisted himself farther onto the bed. “That man's as much in love with himself as you are; the last thing we need is for him to know that he had the upper hand in there.”

Celaena dug her nails into her palms. “Why would Arobynn send us here without telling us the true reason? Reprimand Rolfe ... for a crime that had nothing to do with him! Maybe Rolfe was lying about the content of the letter.” She straightened. “*That* might very well be—”

“He was *not* lying about the content of the letter, Celaena,” Sam said. “Why would he bother? He has more important things to do.”

She grumbled a slew of nasty words and paced, her black boots clunking against the uneven floorboards. Pirate Lord indeed. *This* was the best room he could offer them? She was Adarlan's Assassin, the right arm of Arobynn Hamel—not some backstreet harlot!

“Regardless, Arobynn has his reasons.” Sam stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes.

“Slaves,” she spat, dragging a hand through her braided hair. Her fingers caught in the plait. “What business does Arobynn have getting involved in the slave trade? We're better than that—we don't *need* that money!”

Unless Arobynn was lying; unless all of his extravagant spending was done with nonexistent funds. She'd always assumed that his wealth was bottomless. He'd spent a king's fortune on her upbringing—on her wardrobe alone. Fur, silk, jewels, the weekly cost of just keeping herself *looking* beautiful ... Of course,

he'd always made it clear that she was to pay him back, and she'd been giving him a cut of her wages to do so, but ...

Maybe Arobynn just wanted to increase what wealth he already had. If Ben were alive, he wouldn't have stood for it. Ben would have been just as disgusted as she was. Being hired to kill corrupt government officials was one thing, but taking prisoners of war, brutalizing them until they stopped fighting back, and sentencing them to a lifetime of slavery ...

Sam opened an eye. "Are you going to take a bath, or can I go first?"

She hurled her cloak at him. He caught it with a single hand and tossed it to the ground. She said, "I'm going first."

"Of course you are."

She shot him a dirty look and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Of all the dinners she'd ever attended, this was by far the worst. Not because of the company—which was, she grudgingly admitted, somewhat interesting—and not because of the food, which looked and smelled wonderful, but simply because she couldn't *eat* anything, thanks to that confounded mask.

Sam, of course, seemed to take second helpings of everything solely to mock her. Celaena, seated at Rolfe's left, half hoped the food was poisoned. Sam had only served himself from the array of meats and stews after watching Rolfe eat some himself, so the likelihood of that wish coming true was rather low.

"Mistress Sardothien," Rolfe said, his dark brows rising high on his forehead. "You must be famished. Or is my food not pleasing enough for your refined palate?"

Beneath the cape and the cloak and the dark tunic, Celaena was not just famished, but also hot and tired. And thirsty. Which, combined with her temper, usually turned out to be a lethal combination. Of course, they couldn't see any of that.

"I'm quite fine," she lied, swirling the water in her goblet. It lapped against the sides, taunting her with each rotation. Celaena stopped.

"Maybe if you took off your mask, you might have an easier time eating," Rolfe said, taking a bite of roast boar. "Unless what lies beneath it will make us lose our appetites."

The five other pirates—all captains in Rolfe's fleet—sniggered, and she straightened.

"Keep talking like that"—Celaena gripped the stem of her goblet—"and I

might give *you* a reason to wear a mask.” Sam kicked her under the table, and she kicked him back, a deft blow to his shins—hard enough that he choked on his water.

Some of the assembled captains stopped laughing, but Rolfe chuckled. She rested her gloved hand atop the stained dining table. The table was freckled with burns and deep gouges; it had clearly seen its fair share of brawls. Didn’t Rolfe have *any* taste for luxury? Perhaps he wasn’t so well off, if he was resorting to the slave trade. But Arobynn ... Arobynn was as rich as the King of Adarlan himself. Why did he need to stoop so low?

Rolfe flicked his sea-green eyes to Sam, who was frowning yet again. “Have you seen her without the mask?”

Sam, to her surprise, grimaced. “Once.” He gave her an all too believably wary look. “And that was enough.”

Rolfe studied Sam for a heartbeat, then took another bite of his meat. “Well, if you won’t show me your face, then perhaps you’ll indulge us with the tale of how, exactly, you became protégée to Arobynn Hamel?”

“I trained,” she said dully. “For years. We aren’t all lucky enough to have a magic map inked on our hands. Some of us had to climb to the top.”

Rolfe stiffened, and the other pirates halted their eating. He stared at her long enough for Celaena to want to squirm, and then set down his fork.

Sam leaned a bit closer to her, but, she realized, only to see better as Rolfe laid both of his hands palm-up on the table for her to observe.

Together, his hands formed a map of their continent—and only that.

“This map hasn’t moved for eight years.” His voice was a low growl. A chill went down her spine. Eight years. Exactly the time that had passed since the Fae had been banished and executed, when Adarlan had conquered and enslaved the rest of the continent and magic had disappeared. “Don’t think,” Rolfe continued, withdrawing his hands, “that I haven’t had to claw and kill my way as much as you.”

If he was nearly thirty, then he’d probably done even more killing than she had. And, from the many scars on his hands and face, it was easy to tell that he’d done a *lot* of clawing.

“Good to know we’re kindred spirits,” she said. If Rolfe was already used to getting his hands dirty, then trading slaves wasn’t a stretch. But he was a filthy pirate. They were Arobynn Hamel’s assassins—educated, wealthy, refined. Slavery was beneath them.

Rolfe gave her that crooked smile. “Do you act like this because it’s actually in your nature, or is it just because you’re afraid of dealing with people?”

“I’m the world’s greatest assassin.” She lifted her chin. “I’m not afraid of anyone.”

“Really?” Rolfe asked. “Because I’m the world’s greatest pirate, and I’m afraid of a great number of people. That’s how I’ve managed to stay alive for so long.”

She didn’t deign to reply. *Slave-mongering pig*. He shook his head, smiling in exactly the same way she smirked at Sam when she wanted to piss him off.

“I’m surprised Arobynn hasn’t made you check your arrogance,” Rolfe said. “Your companion seems to know when to keep his mouth shut.”

Sam coughed loudly and leaned forward. “How did you become Pirate Lord, then?”

Rolfe ran a finger along a deep groove in the wooden table. “I killed every pirate who was better than me.” The three other captains—all older, all more weathered and far less attractive than him—huffed, but didn’t refute it. “Anyone arrogant enough to think they couldn’t possibly lose to a young man with a patchwork crew and only one ship to his name. But they all fell, one by one. When you get a reputation like that, people tend to flock to you.” Rolfe glanced between Celaena and Sam. “You want my advice?” he asked her.

“No.”

“I’d watch your back around Sam. You might be the best, Sardothien, but there’s always someone waiting for you to slip.”

Sam, the traitorous bastard, didn’t hide his smirk. The other pirate captains chuckled.

Celaena stared hard at Rolfe. Her stomach twisted with hunger. She’d eat later—swipe something from the tavern kitchens. “You want *my* advice?”

He waved a hand, beckoning her to go on.

“Mind your own business.”

Rolfe gave her a lazy smile.

“I don’t mind Rolfe,” Sam mused later into the pitch darkness of their room. Celaena, who’d taken first watch, glared toward where his bed lay against the far wall.

“Of course you don’t,” she grumbled, relishing the free air on her face. Seated on her bed, she leaned against the wall and picked at the threads on the blanket. “He told you to assassinate me.”

Sam chuckled. “It *is* wise advice.”

She rolled up the sleeves of her tunic. Even at night, this rotten place was

scorching hot. “Perhaps it isn’t a wise idea for *you* to go to sleep, then.”

Sam’s mattress groaned as he turned over. “Come on—you can’t take a bit of teasing?”

“Where my life is concerned? No.”

Sam snorted. “Believe me, if I came home without you, Arobynn would skin me alive. Literally. If I’m going to kill you, Celaena, it’ll be when I can actually get away with it.”

She scowled. “I appreciate that.” She fanned her sweating face with a hand. She’d sell her soul to a pack of demons for a cool breeze right now, but they had to keep the window covered—unless she wanted some spying pair of eyes to discover what she looked like. Though, now that she thought about it, she’d *love* to see the look on Rolfe’s face if he found out the truth. Most already knew that she was a young woman, but if he knew he was dealing with a sixteen-year-old, his pride might never recover.

They’d only be here for three nights; they could both go without a little sleep if it meant keeping her identity—and their lives—safe.

“Celaena?” Sam asked into the dark. “*Should* I worry about going to sleep?”

She blinked, then laughed under her breath. At least Sam took her threats somewhat seriously. She wished she could say the same for Rolfe. “No,” she said. “Not tonight.”

“Some other night, then,” he mumbled. Within minutes, he was out.

Celaena rested her head against the wooden wall, listening to the sound of his breathing as the long hours of the night stretched by.

Chapter Four

Even when her turn to sleep came, Celaena lay awake. In the hours she'd spent watching over their room, one thought had become increasingly problematic.

The slaves.

Perhaps if Arobynn had sent someone else—perhaps if it was just a business deal that she found out about later, when she was too busy to care—she might not have been so bothered by it. But to send her to retrieve a shipment of slaves ... people who had done nothing wrong, only dared to fight for their freedom and the safety of their families ...

How could Arobynn expect her to do that? If Ben had been alive, she might have found an ally in him; Ben, despite his profession, was the most compassionate person she knew. His death left a vacancy that she didn't think could ever be filled.

She sweated so much that her sheets became damp, and slept so little that when dawn came, she felt like she'd been trampled by a herd of wild horses from the Eyllwe grasslands.

Sam finally nudged her—a none-too-gentle prodding with the pommel of his sword. He took one look at her and said, "You look horrible."

Deciding to let that set the tone for the day, Celaena got out of bed and promptly slammed the bathroom door.

When she emerged a while later, as fresh as she could get using only the washbasin and her hands, she understood one thing with perfect clarity.

There was no way—no way in any realm of Hell—that she was going to bring those slaves to Rifthold. Rolfe could keep them for all she cared, but she wouldn't be the one to transport them to the capital city.

That meant she had two days to figure out how to ruin Arobynn and Rolfe's deal.

And find a way to come out of it alive.

She slung her cape over her shoulders, silently bemoaning the fact that the yards of fabric concealed much of her lovely black tunic—especially its delicate golden embroidery. Well, at least her cape was also exquisite. Even if it was a bit dirty from so much traveling.

"Where are you going?" Sam asked. He sat up from where he lounged on the bed, cleaning his nails with the tip of a dagger. Sam definitely wouldn't help her. She'd have to find a way to get out of the deal on her own.

“I have some questions to ask Rolfe. Alone.” She fastened her mask and strode to the door. “I want breakfast waiting for me when I return.”

Sam went rigid, his lips forming a thin line. “What?”

Celaena pointed to the hallway, toward the kitchen. “Breakfast,” she said slowly. “I’m hungry.”

Sam opened his mouth, and she waited for the retort, but it never came. He bowed deeply. “As you wish,” he said. They swapped particularly vulgar gestures before she stalked down the hallway.

Dodging puddles of filth, vomit, and the gods knew what else, Celaena found it just a *tad* difficult to match Rolfe’s long stride. With rain clouds gathering overhead, many of the people in the street—raggedy pirates swaying where they stood, prostitutes stumbling past after a long night, barefoot orphans running amok—had begun migrating into the various ramshackle buildings.

Skull’s Bay wasn’t known as a beautiful city, and many of the leaning and sagging buildings seemed to have been constructed from little more than wood and nails. Aside from its denizens, the city was most famous for Ship-Breaker, the giant chain that hung across the mouth of the horseshoe-shaped bay.

It had been around for centuries, and was so large that, as its name implied, it could snap the mast of any ship that came up against it. While mostly designed to discourage any attacks, it also kept anyone from sneaking off. And given that the rest of the island was covered with towering mountains, there weren’t many other places for a ship to safely dock. So, any ship that wanted to enter or exit the harbor had to wait for it to be lowered under the surface—and be ready to pay a hefty fee.

“You have three blocks,” Rolfe said. “Better make them count.”

Was he deliberately walking fast? Steadying her rising temper, Celaena focused on the jagged, lush mountains hovering around the city, on the glittering curve of the bay, on the hint of sweetness in the air. She’d found Rolfe just about to leave the tavern to go to a business meeting, and he’d agreed to let her ask her questions as he walked.

“When the slaves arrive,” she asked, trying to sound as inconvenienced as possible, “will I get the chance to inspect them, or can I trust that you’re giving us a good batch?”

He shook his head at her impertinence, and Celaena jumped over the outstretched legs of an unconscious—or dead—drunk in her path. “They’ll arrive tomorrow afternoon. I was *planning* to inspect them myself, but if you’re so worried about the quality of your wares, I’ll allow you to join me. Consider it

a privilege.”

She snorted. “Where? On your ship?” Better to get a good sense of how everything worked, and then build her plan from there. Just knowing how things operated might create some ideas for how to make the deal fall apart with as little risk to herself as possible.

“I’ve converted a large stable at the other end of the town into a holding facility. I usually examine all the slaves there, but since you’re leaving the next morning, we’ll just examine yours on the ship itself.”

She clicked her tongue loudly enough for him to hear it. “And how long can I expect this to take?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You have better things to do?”

“Just answer the question.” Thunder rumbled in the distance.

They reached the docks, which were by far the most impressive thing about the town. Ships of all shapes and sizes rocked against the wooden piers, and pirates scurried along the decks, tying down various things before the storm hit. On the horizon, lightning flashed just above the lone watchtower perched along the northern entrance to the bay—the watchtower from which Ship-Breaker was raised and lowered. In the flash, she’d also seen the two catapults atop one of the tower landings. If Ship-Breaker didn’t destroy a boat, then those catapults finished the job.

“Don’t worry, Mistress Sardothien,” Rolfe said, striding past the various taverns and inns that lined the docks. They had two blocks left. “Your time won’t be wasted. Though getting through a hundred slaves will take a while.”

A hundred slaves on one ship! Where did they all *fit*?

“As long as you don’t try to fool me,” she snapped, “I’ll consider it time well spent.”

“Just so you don’t find reasons to complain—and I’m sure you’ll try your best to do just that—I have another shipment of slaves being inspected at the holding facility tonight. Why don’t you join me? That way, you can have something to compare them to tomorrow.”

That would be perfect, actually. Perhaps she could just claim the slaves weren’t up to par and refuse to do business with him because of it. And then leave, no harm done to either of them. She’d still have to face Sam—and then Arobynn—but ... she’d figure them out later.

She shrugged, waving a hand. “Fine, fine. Just send someone for me when it’s time.” The humidity was so thick she felt as if she were swimming through it. “And after Arobynn’s slaves are inspected?” Any bit of information could later be used as a weapon against him. “Are they mine to look after on the ship, or

will your men be watching them for me? Your pirates might very well think they're free to take whatever slaves they wish."

Rolfe clenched the hilt of his sword. It glinted in the muted light, and she admired the intricate pommel, shaped like a sea dragon's head. "If I give the order that no one is to touch your slaves, then no one will touch them," Rolfe said through his teeth. His annoyance was an unexpected delight. "However, I'll arrange to have a few guards on the ship, if that will make you sleep easier. I wouldn't want Arobynn to think I don't take his investment seriously."

They approached a blue-painted tavern, where several men in dark tunics lounged out front. At the sight of Rolfe, they straightened, saluting him. His guards? Why hadn't anyone escorted him through the streets?

"That will be fine," she said crisply. "I don't want to be here any longer than necessary."

"I'm sure you're eager to return to your clients in Rifthold." Rolfe stopped in front of the faded door. The sign above it, swinging in the growing storm winds, said THE SEA DRAGON. It was also the name of his famed ship, which was docked just behind them, and really didn't look all that spectacular, anyway. Perhaps *this* was the Pirate Lord's headquarters. And if he was making her and Sam stay at that tavern a few blocks away, then perhaps he trusted them as little as they trusted him.

"I think I'm more eager just to return to civilized society," she said sweetly.

Rolfe let out a low growl, and stepped onto the threshold of the tavern. Inside, it was all shadows and murmuring voices—and reeked of stale ale. Other than that, she could see nothing.

"One day," Rolfe said, too quietly, "someone's really going make you pay for that arrogance." Lightning made his green eyes flicker. "I just hope I'm there to see it."

He shut the tavern door in her face.

Celaena smiled, and her smile grew wider as fat drops of rain splattered on the rust-colored earth, instantly cooling the muggy air.

That had gone surprisingly well.

"Is it poisoned?" she asked Sam, plopping down on her bed just as a clap of thunder shook the tavern to its foundations. The teacup rattled in its saucer, and she breathed in the smell of fresh-baked bread, sausage, and porridge as she threw back her hood and removed her mask.

"By them, or by me?" Sam was sitting on the floor, his back against the bed.

Just to needle him, Celaena sniffed all of her food. “Do I detect ... belladonna?”

Sam gave her a flat stare, and Celaena smirked as she tore a bite from the bread. They sat in silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the scrape of her utensils against the chipped plates, the drumming of the rain on the roof, and the occasional groan of a thunderhead breaking.

“So,” Sam said as she drank her tea. “Are you going to tell me what you’re planning, or should I warn Rolfe to expect the worst?”

She sipped daintily at her tea. “I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Sam Cortland.”

“What sort of ‘questions’ did you ask him?”

She set down her teacup. Rain lashed the shutters, muffling the clink of her cup against the saucer. “Polite ones.”

“Oh? I didn’t think you knew what polite meant.”

“I can be polite when it pleases me.”

“When it gets you what you want, you mean. So what is it you want from Rolfe?”

She studied her companion. *He* certainly didn’t seem to have any moral qualms about the deal. While he might not trust Rolfe, it didn’t bother him that a hundred innocent souls were about to be traded like cattle. “I wanted to ask him more about the map on his hands.”

“Damn it, Celaena!” Sam slammed his fist onto the wooden floor. “Tell me the truth!”

“Why?” she asked, giving him a pout. “And how do you know I’m *not* telling the truth?”

Sam got to his feet and began pacing the length of their small room. He undid the top button of his black tunic, revealing the skin beneath. Something about it felt strangely intimate, and Celaena found herself quickly looking away from him.

“We’ve grown up together.” Sam stopped at the foot of her bed. “You think I don’t know how to tell when you’re cooking up some scheme? What do you want from Rolfe?”

If she told him, he’d do everything in his power to keep her from ruining the deal. And having one enemy was enough. With her plan still unformed, she *had* to keep Sam out of it. Besides, if worse came to worst, Rolfe might very well kill Sam for being involved. Or just for knowing her.

“Maybe I’m just unable to resist how handsome he is,” she said.

Sam went rigid. "He's twelve years older than you."

"So?" He didn't think she was *serious*, did he?

He gave her a look so scathing it could have turned her to ash and stalked to the window, ripping his cloak down from the shutters.

"What are you doing?"

He flung open the wooden shutters on a sky full of rain and forked lightning. "I'm sick of suffocating. And if you're interested in Rolfe, he's bound to find out what you look like at some point, isn't he? So why bother slowly roasting to death?"

"Shut the window." He only crossed his arms. "*Shut it*," she growled.

When he made no move to close the window, she jumped to her feet, upsetting the tray of food on her mattress, and shoved him aside hard enough for him to take a step back. Keeping her head down, she shut the window and shutters and threw his cape over the whole thing.

"Idiot," she seethed. "What's gotten into you?"

Sam stepped closer, his breath hot on her face. "I'm tired of all the melodrama and nonsense that happens whenever you wear that ridiculous mask and cloak. And I'm even more tired of you ordering me around."

So *that's* what this was about. "Get used to it."

She made to turn to her bed, but he grabbed her wrist. "Whatever plan you're concocting, whatever bit of intrigue you're about to drag me into, just remember that you're not head of the Assassins' Guild *yet*; you still answer to Arobynn."

She rolled her eyes, yanking her wrist out of his grasp. "Touch me again," she said, striding to her bed and picking up the spilled food, "and you'll lose that hand."

Sam didn't speak to her after that.

Chapter Five

Dinner with Sam was silent, and Rolfe appeared at eight to bring them both to the holding facility. Sam didn't even ask where they were going. He just played along, as if he'd known the whole time.

The holding facility was an enormous wooden warehouse, and even from down the block, something about the place made Celaena's instincts scream at her to get away. The sharp reek of unwashed bodies didn't hit her until they stepped inside. Blinking against the brightness of the torches and crude chandeliers, it took her a few heartbeats to sort out what she was seeing.

Rolfe, striding ahead of them, didn't falter as he passed cell after cell packed with slaves. Instead, he walked toward a large open space in the rear of the warehouse, where a nut-brown Eyllwe man stood before a cluster of four pirates.

Beside her, Sam let out a breath, his face wan. If the smell wasn't bad enough, the people in the cells, clinging to the bars or cowering against the walls or clutching their children—*children*—ripped at every shred of her being.

Aside from some occasional muffled weeping, the slaves—a mix of prisoners from many lands—were silent. Some of their eyes widened slightly at the sight of her. She'd forgotten how she must appear—faceless, cloak waving behind her, striding past them like Death itself. Some of the slaves even sketched invisible marks in the air, warding off whatever evil they thought she was.

She took in the locks on the pens, counting the number of people crammed into each cell. They seemed to hail from all the kingdoms on the continent. There were even some orange-haired, gray-eyed mountain clansmen—wild-looking men who tracked her movements. And women—some of them barely older than Celaena herself. Had they been fighters, too, or just in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Celaena's heart pounded faster. Even after all these years, people still defied Adarlan's conquest. But what right did Adarlan—or Rolfe, or anyone—have to treat them like this? Conquest wasn't enough; no, Adarlan had to *break* them.

Eyllwe, she'd heard, had taken the brunt of it. Though their king had yielded his power to the King of Adarlan, Eyllwe soldiers still could be found fighting in the rebel groups that plagued Adarlan's forces. But the land itself was too vital for Adarlan to abandon. Eyllwe boasted two of the most prosperous cities on the continent; its territory—rich in farmland, waterways, and forests—was a crucial vein in trade routes. Now, it seemed, Adarlan had decided that it might make

money off its people, too.

The men standing around the Eyllwe prisoner parted as Rolfe approached, bowing their heads. She recognized two of the men from dinner the previous night: the short, bald Captain Fairview and the one-eyed, hulking Captain Blackgold. Celaena and Sam stopped beside Rolfe.

The Eyllwe man had been stripped naked, his wiry, lean body already bruised and bleeding.

“This one fought back a bit,” said Captain Fairview. Though sweat gleamed on the slave’s skin, he kept his chin high, his eyes upon some distant sight. He must have been around twenty. Did he have a family?

“Keep him in irons, though, and he’ll fetch a good price,” Fairview went on, wiping his face on the shoulder of his crimson tunic. The gold embroidery was fraying, and the fabric, which had probably once been rich with color, was faded and stained in spots. “I’d send him to the market in Bellhaven. Lots of rich men there needing strong hands to do their building. Or women needing strong hands for something else entirely.” He winked in Celaena’s direction.

Unyielding rage boiled up so fast the breath was knocked from her. She didn’t realize her hand was moving toward her sword until Sam knotted his fingers through hers. It was a casual-enough gesture, and to anyone else, it might have looked affectionate. But he squeezed her fingers tightly enough for her to know that he was well aware of what she was about to do.

“How many of these slaves will actually be deemed useful?” Sam asked, releasing her gloved fingers. “Ours are all going to Rifthold, but you’re dividing this batch up?”

Rolfe said, “You think your master is the first to strike a deal with me? We have other agreements in different cities. My partners in Bellhaven tell me what the wealthy are looking for, and I supply them. If I can’t think of a good place to sell the slaves, I’ll send them to Calaculla. If your master has leftovers, sending them to Endovier might be a good option. Adarlan’s stingy with what they’ll offer when buying slaves for the salt mines, but it’s better than making no money at all.”

So Adarlan wasn’t just snatching prisoners from battlefields and their homes—they were *buying* slaves for the Salt Mines of Endovier, too.

“And the children?” she asked, keeping her voice as neutral as possible. “Where do they go?”

Rolfe’s eyes darkened a bit at that, glimmering with enough guilt that Celaena wondered if the slave trade had been a last resort for him. “We try to keep the children with their mothers,” he said quietly. “But at the auction block, we can’t

control whether they're separated."

She fought the retort on her tongue, and just said, "I see. Are they a burden to sell? And how many children can we expect in our shipment?"

"We have about ten here," Rolfe said. "Your shipment shouldn't contain more than that. And they're not a burden to sell, if you know where to sell them."

"Where?" Sam demanded.

"Some wealthy households might want them for scullery maids or stableboys." Though his voice remained steady, Rolfe studied the ground. "A brothel madam might show up at the auction, too."

Sam's face went white with fury. If there was one thing that set him off, one subject she *knew* she could always rely upon to rile him, it was this.

His mother, sold at eight to a brothel, had spent her too-short twenty-eight years clawing her way up from an orphan to one of the most successful courtesans in Rifthold. She'd had Sam only six years before she'd died—murdered by a jealous client. And though she'd amassed some money, it hadn't been enough to liberate her from her brothel—or to provide for Sam. But she'd been a favorite of Arobynn's, and when he'd learned that she wanted Sam to be trained by him, he'd taken the boy in.

"We'll take that into consideration," Sam said sharply.

It wasn't enough for Celaena to ensure the deal fell apart. No, that wasn't *nearly* enough. Not when all of these people were imprisoned here. Her blood pounded in her veins. Death, at least, was quick. Especially when dealt by her hand. But slavery was unending suffering.

"Very well," she said, lifting her chin. She had to get out of here—and get *Sam* out of here before he snapped. A deadly gleam was growing in his eyes. "I look forward to seeing our shipment tomorrow night." She inclined her head toward the pens behind her. "When will these slaves be sent out?" It was such a dangerous, stupid question.

Rolfe looked to Captain Fairview, who rubbed his dirty head. "This lot? We'll divvy them up, and they'll be loaded onto a new ship tomorrow, probably. They'll sail around the same time you do, I bet. We need to assemble crews." He and Rolfe started off on a conversation about manning the ships, and Celaena took that as her cue to leave.

With a final look at the slave still standing there, Celaena strode out of the warehouse that stank of fear and death.

“Celaena, *wait!*” Sam called, panting as he walked after her.

She couldn’t wait. She’d just started walking, and walking, and walking, and now, as she reached the empty beach far from the lights of Skull’s Bay, she wouldn’t stop walking until she reached the water.

Not too far down the curve in the bay, the watchtower stood guard, Ship-Breaker hanging across the water for the duration of the night. The full moon illuminated the powder-fine sand and turned the calm sea into a silver mirror.

She removed the mask from her face and dropped it behind her, then ripped off her cloak, her boots, and her tunic. The damp breeze kissed her bare skin, fluttering her delicate white undershirt.

“*Celaena!*”

Bath-warm waves flooded past her, and she kicked up a spray of water as she kept walking. Before she could get deeper than her calves, Sam grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. She yanked on her arm, but he held firm.

In a single, swift movement, she twirled, swinging her other arm. But he knew the move—because he’d practiced it right alongside her for years—and he caught her other hand. “*Stop,*” he said, but she swept her foot. She caught him behind the knee, sending him tumbling down. Sam didn’t release her, and water and sand sprayed around them as they hit the ground.

Celaena landed on top of him, but Sam didn’t pause for a moment. Before she could give him a sharp elbow to the face, he flipped her. The air whooshed out of her lungs. Sam lunged for her, and she had the sense to bring her feet up just as he leapt. She kicked him square in the stomach. He cursed as he dropped to his knees. The surf broke around him, a shower of silver.

She sprang into a crouch, the sand hissing beneath her feet as she made to tackle him.

But Sam had been waiting, and he twisted away, catching her by the shoulders and throwing her to the ground.

She knew she’d been caught before he even finished slamming her into the sand. He pinned her wrists, his knees digging into her thighs to keep her from getting her legs under her again.

“*Enough!*” His fingers dug painfully into her wrists. A rogue wave reached them, soaking her.

She thrashed, her fingers curling, straining to draw blood, but they couldn’t reach his hands. The sand shifted enough that she could scarcely get a steady surface to support herself, to flip him. But Sam knew her—he knew her movements, knew what tricks she liked to pull.

“*Stop*,” he said, his breathing ragged. “Please.”

In the moonlight, his handsome face was strained, his eyes wide. “Please,” he repeated hoarsely.

The sorrow—the defeat—in his voice made her pause. A wisp of cloud passed over the moon, illuminating the strong panes of his cheekbones, the curve of his lips; the kind of rare beauty that had made his mother so successful. Far above his head, stars flickered faintly, nearly invisible in the glow of the moon.

“I’m not going to let go until you promise to stop attacking me,” Sam said. His face was inches away, and she felt the breath of every one of his words on her mouth.

She took an uneven breath, then another one. She had no reason to attack Sam. Not when he’d kept her from attacking that pirate in the warehouse. Not when he’d gotten so riled about the slave children. Her legs trembled with pain.

“I promise,” she mumbled.

“Swear it.”

“I swear on my life.”

He watched her for a second longer, then slowly eased off of her. She waited until he was standing, then got to her feet. Both of them were soaked and crusted with sand, and she was fairly certain her hair had come half out of her braid and she looked like a raging lunatic.

“So,” he said, taking off his boots and tossing them onto the sand behind them. “Are you going to explain yourself?” He rolled his pants up to the knees and took a few steps into the surf.

Celaena began pacing, waves splattering at her feet. “I just ... ,” she began, but waved an arm, shaking her head fiercely.

“You what?” His words were almost drowned out by the crashing waves.

She whirled to face him. “How can you bear to look at those people and not do anything?”

“The slaves?”

She resumed her pacing. “It makes me sick. It makes me ... makes me so mad I think I might ...” She couldn’t finish the thought.

“Might what?” Splashing steps sounded, and she looked over her shoulder to see him approaching. He crossed his arms, bracing for a fight. “Might do something as foolish as attacking Rolfe’s men in their own warehouse?”

It was now or never. She hadn’t wanted to involve him, but ... now that her plans had changed, she needed his help.

“I might do something as foolish as freeing the slaves,” she said.

Sam went so still that he might have been turned into a statue. “I knew you were thinking up something—but *freeing* them ...”

“I’m going to do it with or without you.” She’d only intended to ruin the deal, but from the moment she’d walked into that warehouse tonight, she’d known she couldn’t leave them there.

“Rolfe will kill you,” Sam said. “Or Arobynn will, if Rolfe doesn’t first.”

“I have to try,” she said.

“Why?” Sam stepped close enough that she needed to tilt her head back to see his face. “We’re assassins. We *kill* people. We destroy lives every day.”

“We have a choice,” she breathed. “Maybe not when we were children—when it was Arobynn or death—but now ... Now you and I have a *choice* in the things we do. Those slaves were just *taken*. They were fighting for their freedom, or just lived too close to a battlefield, or some mercenaries passed through their town and *took* them. They’re innocent people.”

“And we weren’t?”

Something icy pierced her heart at the glimmer of memory. “We kill corrupt officials and adulterous spouses; we make it quick and clean. These are entire families being ripped apart. Every one of these people used to be somebody.”

Sam’s eyes glowed. “I’m not disagreeing with you. I don’t like the idea of this at all. Not just the slaves, but Arobynn’s involvement in it. And those children ...” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “But we’re just two people—surrounded by Rolfe’s pirates.”

She gave him a crooked grin. “Then it’s good that we’re the best. And,” she added, “it’s good that I’ve been asking him so many questions about his plans for the next two days.”

Sam blinked. “You realize this is the most reckless thing you’ve ever done, right?”

“Reckless, but maybe the most meaningful, too.”

Sam stared at her long enough for heat to flood her cheek, as if he could see right inside of her—see everything. The fact that he didn’t turn away from whatever he saw made her blood thrum in her veins. “I suppose if we’re going to die, it should be for a noble cause,” he said.

She snorted, using it as an excuse to step away from him. “We’re not going to die. At least, not if we follow my plan.”

He groaned. “You already have a plan?”

She grinned at him, then told him everything. When she finished, he only scratched his head. “Well,” he admitted, sitting on the sand, “I suppose that’d

work. We'd have to time it right, but ..."

"But it could work." She sat beside him.

"When Arobynn finds out ..."

"Leave Arobynn to me. I'll figure out how to deal with him."

"We could always just ... *not* return to Rifthold," Sam suggested.

"What, run away?"

Sam shrugged. Though he kept his eyes on the waves, she could have sworn she saw a blush darken his cheeks. "He might very well kill us."

"If we ran away, he'd hunt us for the rest of our lives. Even if we took different names, he'd find us." As if she could leave her entire life behind! "He's invested too much money in us—and we've yet to pay him back entirely. He'd see it as a bad investment."

Sam's gaze drifted northward, as if he could see the sprawling capital city and its towering glass castle. "I think there's more at work here than this trade agreement."

"What do you mean?"

Sam traced circles in the sand between them. "I mean, why send the two of us here in the first place? His excuse for sending us was a lie. We're not instrumental to this deal. He could just as easily have sent two other assassins who aren't at each other's throats all the time."

"What are you implying?"

Sam shrugged. "Perhaps Arobynn wanted us out of Rifthold right now. Needed to get us out of the city for a month."

A chill went through her. "Arobynn wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't he?" Sam asked. "Did we ever find out why Ben was there the night Gregori got captured?"

"If you're implying that Arobynn somehow set Ben up to—"

"I'm not implying anything. But some things don't add up. And there are questions that haven't been answered."

"We're not supposed to question Arobynn," she murmured.

"And since when do you ever follow orders?"

She stood up. "Let's get through the next few days. Then we'll consider whatever conspiracy theories you're inventing."

Sam was on his feet in an instant. "I don't have any *theories*. Just questions that you should be asking yourself, too. *Why* did he want us gone this month?"

"We can trust Arobynn." Even as the words left her mouth, she felt stupid for saying them.

Sam stooped to pick up his boots. “I’m going back to the tavern. Are you coming?”

“No. I’m staying here for a little longer.”

Sam gave her an appraising look, but nodded. “We’re to examine Arobynn’s slaves on their ship at four tomorrow afternoon. Try not to stay out here the whole night. We need all the rest we can get.”

She didn’t reply, and turned away before she could see him head toward the golden lights of Skull’s Bay.

She walked along the curve of the shoreline, all the way to the lone watchtower. After studying it from the shadows—the two catapults near its top, the giant chain anchored above them—she continued on. She walked until there was nothing in the world but the grumble and hiss of the waves, the sigh of the sand beneath her feet, and the glare of the moon on the water.

She walked until a surprisingly cold breeze swept past her. She halted.

Slowly, Celaena turned north, toward the source of the breeze, which smelled of a faraway land she hadn’t seen in eight years. Pine and snow—a city still in winter’s grasp. She breathed it in, staring across the leagues of lonely, black ocean, seeing, somehow, that distant city that had once, long ago, been her home. The wind ripped the strands of hair from her braid, lashing them across her face. Orynth. A city of light and music, watched over by an alabaster castle with an opal tower so bright it could be viewed for miles.

The moonlight vanished behind a thick cloud. In the sudden dark, the stars glowed brighter.

She knew all the constellations by heart, and she instinctively sought out the Stag, Lord of the North, and the immovable star that crowned his head.

Back then, she hadn’t had any choice. When Arobynn offered her this path, it was either that, or death. But now ...

She took a shuddering breath. No, she was as limited in her choices as she’d been when she was eight years old. She was Adarlan’s Assassin, Arobynn Hamel’s protégée and heir—and she would always be.

It was a long walk back to the tavern.

Chapter Six

After yet another miserably hot and sleepless night, Celaena spent the following day with Sam, walking through the streets of Skull's Bay. They kept their pace leisurely, pausing at various vendors' carts and popping into the occasional shop, but all the while physically tracing each step of their plan, going over every detail that they'd need to orchestrate perfectly.

From the fishermen along the docks, they learned that the rowboats tied to the piers belonged to nobody in particular, and that tomorrow's morning tide came in just after sunrise. Not advantageous, but better than midday.

From flirting with the harlots along the main street, Sam learned that every once in a while, Rolfe covered the tab for all the pirates in his service, and the revelry lasted for days. Sam also picked up a few other pointers that he refused to tell Celaena about.

And from the half-drunk pirate languishing in an alley, Celaena learned how many men guarded the slave ships, what manner of weapons they carried, and where the slaves were kept.

When four o'clock rolled around, Celaena and Sam were standing aboard the ship Rolfe had promised them, watching and counting as the slaves stumbled onto the wide deck. Ninety-three. Mostly men, most of them young. The women were a broader range of ages, and there were only a handful of children, just as Rolfe had said.

"Do they meet your refined tastes?" Rolfe asked as he approached.

"I thought you said there'd be more," she replied coldly, keeping her eyes upon the chained slaves.

"We had an even hundred, but seven died on the journey."

She bit back the anger that flared inside her. Sam, knowing her far too well for her liking, cut in. "And how many can we expect to lose on the journey to Rifthold?" His face was relatively neutral, though his brown eyes flashed with annoyance. Fine—he was a good liar. As good as she was, maybe.

Rolfe ran a hand through his dark hair. "Don't you two ever stop *questioning*? There's no way of predicting how many slaves you'll lose. Just keep them watered and fed."

A low growl slipped through her teeth, but Rolfe was already walking to his group of guards. Celaena and Sam followed him, observing as the last of the slaves were shoved onto the deck.

“Where are the slaves from yesterday?” Sam asked.

Rolfe waved a hand. “Most are on that ship, and will leave tomorrow.” He pointed to a nearby ship and ordered one of the slave drivers to start the inspection.

They waited until a few slaves had been looked over, offering remarks on how fit a slave was, where he’d fetch a good price in Rifthold. Each word tasted fouler than the last.

“Tonight,” she said to the Pirate Lord, “you can guarantee that this ship’s protected?” Rolfe sighed loudly and nodded. “That watchtower across the bay,” she pressed. “I assume that they’ll also be responsible for monitoring this ship, too?”

“Yes,” Rolfe snapped. Celaena opened her mouth, but he interrupted. “And before you ask, let me say that we change the watch just before dawn.” So they’d have to target the morning watch instead, to avoid any alarm being raised at dawn—at high tide. Which was a slight hitch in her plan, but they could easily fix it.

“How many of the slaves speak our language?” she asked.

Rolfe raised a brow. “Why?”

She could feel Sam tense beside her, but she shrugged. “It might add to their value.”

Rolfe studied her a bit too closely, then whirled to face a slave woman standing nearby. “Do you speak the common tongue?”

Her eyes widened, and she looked this way and that, clutching her scraps of clothing to her—a mix of fur and wool undoubtedly worn to keep her warm in the frigid mountain passes of the White Fangs.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Rolfe demanded. The woman lifted her shackled hands. Raw, red skin lay around the iron.

“I think the answer is no,” Sam offered.

Rolfe glared at him, then walked through the stables. “Can any of you speak the common tongue?” He repeated himself, and was about to turn back when an older Eyllwe man—reed thin and covered with cuts and bruises—stepped forward.

“I can,” he said.

“That’s it?” Rolfe barked at the slaves. “No one else?” Celaena approached the man who had spoken, committing his face to memory. He recoiled at her mask and her cloak.

“Well, at least he might fetch a higher price,” Celaena said over her shoulder

to Rolfe. Sam summoned Rolfe with a question about the mountain-woman in front of him, providing enough distraction. “What’s your name?” Celaena asked the slave.

“Dia.” His long, frail fingers trembled slightly.

“You’re fluent?”

He nodded. “My—my mother was from Bellhaven. My father was a merchant from Banjali. I grew up with both languages.”

And he’d probably never worked a day in his life. How had *he* gotten caught up in this mess? The other slaves on the deck hung back, huddling together, even some of the larger men and women whose scars and bruises marked them as fighters—prisoners of war. Had they already seen enough of slavery to break them? For both her sake and theirs, she hoped not.

“Good,” she said, and strode away.

Hours later, no one noticed—or if they did, they certainly didn’t care—when two cloaked figures slipped into two rowboats and headed toward the slave ships hovering several hundred yards offshore. A few lanterns illuminated the behemoth vessels, but the moon was bright enough for Celaena to easily make out the *Golden Wolf* as she rowed toward it.

To her right, Sam rowed as quietly as he could to the *Loveless*, where the slaves from yesterday were being held. Silence was their only hope and ally, though the town behind them was already in the midst of revelry. It hadn’t taken long for word to get out that Arobynn Hamel’s assassins had opened a celebratory tab at the tavern, and even as they had strode to the docks, pirates were already streaming the other way toward the inn.

Panting through her mask, Celaena’s arms ached with each stroke. It wasn’t the town she was worried about, but the solitary watchtower to her left. A fire burned in its jagged turret, faintly illuminating the catapults and the ancient chain across the narrow bay mouth. If they were to be caught, the first alarm would be sounded from there.

It might have been easier to escape now—take down the watchtower, overpower the slave ships, and set sail—but the chain was only the first in a line of defenses. The Dead Islands were nearly impossible to navigate at night, and at low tide ... They’d get a few miles and run aground on a reef or a sandbank.

Celaena drifted the last few feet to the *Golden Wolf* and grasped the rung of a wooden ladder to keep the boat from thudding too hard against the hull.

They were better off at first light tomorrow, when the pirates would be too

drunk or unconscious to notice, and when they had high tide on their side.

Sam flashed a compact mirror, indicating he'd made it to the *Loveless*. Catching the light in her own mirror, she signaled him back, then flashed twice, indicating that she was ready.

A moment later, Sam returned the same signal. Celaena took a long, steadying breath. It was time.

Chapter Seven

Nimble as a cat and smooth as a snake, Celaena climbed the wooden ladder built into the side of the ship.

The first guard didn't notice she was upon him until her hands were around his neck, striking the two points that sent him into unconsciousness. (After all, she was an assassin, not a murderer.) He slumped to the deck, and she caught him by his filthy tunic, softening his fall. Quiet as mice, quiet as the wind, quiet as the grave.

The second guard, stationed at the helm, saw her coming up the staircase. He managed to emit a muffled cry before the pommel of her dagger slammed into his forehead, knocking him out, too. Not as neat, and not as quiet: he hit the deck with a thud that made the third guard, stationed at the prow, whirl to see.

But it was shadowy, and there were yards of ship between them. Celaena crouched low to the deck, covering the fallen guard's body with her cloak.

"Jon?" the third guard called across the deck. Celaena winced at the sound. Not too far away, the *Loveless* was silent.

Celaena grimaced at the reek from Jon's unwashed body.

"Jon?" the guard said, and thumping steps followed. Closer and closer. He'd see the first guard soon.

Three ... Two ... One ...

"What in *hell*?" The guard tripped over the first guard's prostrate body.

Celaena moved.

She swung over the railing fast enough that the guard didn't look up until she'd landed behind him. All it took was a swift blow to the head and she was easing his body down atop the first guard's. Her heart hammering through every inch of her, she sprinted to the prow of the ship. She flashed the mirror three times. Three guards down.

Nothing.

"Come on, Sam." She signaled again.

Far too many heartbeats later, a signal greeted her. The air rushed from her lungs in a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The guards on the *Loveless* were unconscious, too.

She signaled once. The watchtower was still quiet. If the guards were up there, they hadn't seen anything. They had to be quick, had to get this done before their disappearance was noticed.

The guard outside the captain's quarters managed to kick the wall hard enough to wake the dead before she knocked him out, but it didn't stop Captain Fairview from squealing when she slipped into his office and shut the door.

When Fairview was secured in the brig, gagged and bound and fully aware that his cooperation and the cooperation of his guards meant his life, she crept down to the cargo area.

The passages were cramped, but the two guards at the door still didn't notice her until she took the liberty of rendering them unconscious.

Silently as she could, she grabbed a lantern hanging from a peg on the wall and opened the door.

The ceiling was so low she almost grazed it with her head. The slaves had all been chained, sitting, to the floor. No latrines, no source of light, no food or water.

The slaves murmured, squinting against the sudden brightness of the torchlight leaking in from the hallway.

Celaena took the ring of keys she'd stolen from the captain's quarters and stepped into the cargo chamber. "Where is Dia?" she asked. They said nothing, either because they didn't understand, or out of solidarity.

Celaena sighed, stepping farther into the chamber, and some of the wild-eyed mountain-men murmured to each other. While they might have only recently declared themselves Adarlan's enemies, the people of the White Fang Mountains had long been known for their unyielding love of violence. If she were to meet with any trouble in here, it would be from them. "Where is Dia?" she asked more loudly.

A trembling voice came from the back of the cargo area. "Here." Her eyes strained in the darkness to see his narrow, fine features. "I'm here."

She strode carefully through the crowded darkness. They were so close together that there was no room to move, and hardly any air to breathe. No wonder seven had died on the voyage here.

She took out Captain Fairview's key and freed the shackles at Dia's feet, then his manacles, before offering him a hand up. "You're going to translate for me." The mountain-folk and whoever else didn't speak either the common tongue or Eyllwe could figure out enough on their own.

Dia rubbed his wrists, which were bleeding and scabbed in places. "Who are you?"

Celaena unlocked the chains of the too-thin woman beside Dia, then held out the keys in her direction. "A friend," she said. "Tell her to unlock everyone, but tell them *not* to leave this room."

Dia nodded, and spoke in Eyllwe. The woman, mouth slightly open, looked at Celaena, then took the keys. Without a word, she set about freeing her companions. Dia then addressed the entire cargo bay, his voice soft but fierce.

“The guards are unconscious,” she said. Dia translated. “The captain has been locked in the brig, and tomorrow, should you choose to act, he will guide you through the Dead Islands and to safety. He knows that the penalty for bad information is death.”

Dia translated, his eyes growing wider and wider. Somewhere near the back, one of the mountain-men began translating. And then two others translated, too—one in the language of Melisande, and another in a language she didn’t recognize. Had it been clever or cowardly of them not to speak up last night when she asked who spoke the common tongue?

“When I am done explaining our plan of action,” she said, her hands shaking a bit as she suddenly recalled what, exactly, lay before them, “you may leave this room, but do not set foot on the decks. There are guards in the watchtower, and guards monitoring this ship from land. If they see you on the deck, they will warn everyone.”

She let Dia and the others finish before going on.

“My colleague is already aboard the *Loveless*, another slave ship set to sail tomorrow.” She swallowed hard. “When I am done here, he and I will return to the town and create a distraction large enough that when the dawn breaks, you will have enough time to sail out of the harbor. You need the full day to sail out of the Dead Islands before dark—or else you’ll be caught in their labyrinth.”

Dia translated, but a voice spoke from nearby. A woman. Dia frowned as he turned to Celaena. “She has two questions. What of the chain at the entrance to the bay? And how will we sail the ship?”

Celaena nodded. “Leave the chain to us. We’ll have it down before you reach it.”

When Dia and the others translated, murmurs broke out. Shackles were still thudding to the ground as slave after slave was unlocked.

“As for sailing the ship,” she went on above the noise, “are any of you sailors? Fishermen?”

Some hands went up. “Captain Fairview will give you specific instructions. You’ll have to row out of the bay, though. Everyone who has the strength will be needed on the oars, or you won’t have a shot of outrunning Rolfe’s ships.”

“What of his fleet?” another man asked.

“Leave it to me.” Sam was probably already rowing over to the *Golden Wolf*. They had to get back to shore *now*. “No matter if the chain is still up, no matter

what might be happening in town, the moment the sun slips over the horizon, you start rowing like hell.”

A few voices objected to Dia’s translation, and he gave a sharp, short reply before turning to her. “We will sort out specifics on our own.”

She lifted her chin. “Discuss it among yourselves. Your fate is yours to decide. But no matter what plan you choose, I *will* have the chain down, and will try to buy you as much time as I can at dawn.”

She bowed her head in farewell as she left the cargo hold, beckoning Dia along with her. Discussion started behind them—muffled, at least.

In the hallway, she could see how thin he was, how filthy. She pointed down the hall. “That is where the brig is; there you’ll find Captain Fairview. Get him out before dawn, and don’t be afraid to bloody him up a bit if he refuses to talk. There are three unconscious guards tied up on the deck, a guard outside Fairview’s quarters, and the two here. Do whatever you want with them; the choice is yours.”

“I’ll have someone take them to the brig,” Dia said quickly. He rubbed at the stubble on his face. “How much time will we have to get away? How long before the pirates notice?”

“I don’t know. I’ll try to disable their ships, which might slow them down.” They reached the narrow stairs that led to the upper decks. “There’s one thing I need you to do,” she continued, and he looked up at her, his eyes bright. “My colleague doesn’t speak Eyllwe. I need you to take a rowboat to the other ship and tell them all that I’ve told you, and unlock their chains. We have to return to shore now, so you’ll have to go alone.”

Dia sucked in a breath, but nodded. “I will.”

After Dia told the people in the cargo bay to take the unconscious guards to the brig, he crept with Celaena onto the empty deck. He cringed at the sight of the unconscious guards, but didn’t object when she swept Jon’s cloak over his shoulders and concealed his face in the folds of the cloak. Or when she gave him Jon’s sword and dagger.

Sam was already waiting at the side of the ship, hidden from the far-seeing eyes of the watchtower. He helped Dia into the first rowboat before climbing into the second and waiting for Celaena to get aboard.

Blood gleamed on Sam’s dark tunic. They’d both packed a change of clothes. Silently, Sam picked up the oars, but Celaena cleared her throat. Dia turned back to her.

She inclined her head east, toward the mouth of the bay. “Remember: you *must* start rowing at sunrise, even if the chain is up. Every moment you delay

means losing the tide.”

Dia grasped the oars. “We will be ready.”

“Then good luck,” she said. Without another word, Dia began rowing to the other ship, his strokes a bit too loud for her liking, but not loud enough to be detected.

Sam, too, started rowing, slipping around the curve of the prow and heading toward the docks at a casual, unsuspecting pace.

“Nervous?” he asked, his voice barely audible above the steady slice of his oars through the calm bay.

“No,” she lied.

“Me, too.”

Ahead of them were the golden lights of Skull’s Bay. Hoots and cheers echoed across the water. Word had certainly spread about the free ale.

She smiled slightly. “Get ready to unleash hell.”

Chapter Eight

Though the chant of the crowd roared around them, Rolfe and Sam had their eyes closed in concentration as their throats moved up and down, down and up, chugging their mugs of cold ale. And Celaena, watching it from behind her mask, could not stop laughing.

It wasn't that hard to pretend Sam was drunk and they were having the grandest time in the world. Mostly because of her mask, but also because Sam played the part very, very well.

Rolfe slammed his mug on the table, letting out a satisfied "Ah!" and wiping his wet mouth on his sleeve as the gathered crowd cheered. Celaena cackled, her masked face oozing sweat. Like everywhere else on this island, the tavern was suffocatingly hot, and the odor of ale and unwashed bodies poured from every crevice and stone.

It was packed to capacity. A three-man ensemble made up of an accordion, a fiddle, and a tambourine played raucously in the corner by the hearth. Pirates swapped stories and called for their favorite songs. Peasants and lowlifes drank themselves into oblivion and gambled on rigged games of chance. Harlots patrolled the room, milling around tables and sitting on laps.

Across from her, Rolfe grinned, and Sam drained the last from his mug. Or so Rolfe thought. Given how often drinks were spilled and splashed, no one really noticed the constant puddle around Sam's mug, and the hole he'd drilled into the bottom of it was too small to detect.

The crowd dispersed, and Celaena laughed as she raised her hand. "Another round, gentlemen?" she cried, signaling for the barmaid.

"Well," Rolfe said, "I think it's safe to say that I like you much better like this than when we're discussing business."

Sam leaned in, a conspirator's grin on his face. "Oh, I do, too. She's horrible most of the time."

Celaena kicked him—hard enough, because she knew it wasn't entirely a lie—and Sam yelped. Rolfe chuckled.

She flipped the barmaid a copper as the woman refilled Rolfe's and Sam's mugs.

"So, will I ever get to see the face behind the legendary Celaena Sardothien?" Rolfe leaned forward to rest his arms on the sodden table. The clock behind the bar read three thirty in the morning. They had to act soon. Given how crowded

the tavern was, and how many of the pirates were already halfway unconscious, it was a miracle there was any ale left in Skull's Bay. If Arobynn and Rolfe didn't kill her for freeing the slaves, then Rolfe might very well murder her for starting a tab with not nearly enough money to pay for it all.

She leaned closer to Rolfe. "If you make my master and me as much money as you claim, I'll show you my face."

Rolfe glanced at the tattooed map on his hands.

"Did you really sell your soul for that?" she asked.

"When you show me your face, I'll tell you the truth."

She extended her hand. "Deal." He shook it. Sam raised his mug—already drained half an inch from the small hole in the bottom—and saluted their promise before both men drank. She fished out a pack of cards from a cloak pocket. "Care for a game of kings?"

"If you aren't broke by the time this night is over," Rolfe said, "then playing against me will guarantee it."

She clicked her tongue. "Oh, I highly doubt that." She broke and shuffled the deck three times, and dealt the cards.

The hours passed by in a series of clanking glasses and perfect card suites, group singing sessions and tales of lands far and near, and as the clock was silenced by the never-ending music, Celaena found herself leaning into Sam's shoulder, laughing as Rolfe finished his crude and absurd story of the farmer's wife and her stallions.

She banged her fist on the table, howling—and that wasn't entirely an act, either. As Sam slipped a hand around her waist, his touch somehow sending a bright-hot flame through her, she had to wonder if he was still pretending, too.

In terms of cards, it turned out to be Sam who took them for everything they were worth, and by the time the clock hands pointed to five, Rolfe had shifted into a foul mood.

Unfortunately for him, that mood wasn't about to improve. Sam gave Celaena a nod, and she tripped a passing pirate, who spilled his drink on an already belligerent man, who in turn tried to punch him in the face but hit the man next to him instead. By luck, at that moment, a trick card fell out of a man's sleeve, a prostitute slapped a pirate wench, and the tavern exploded into a brawl.

People wrestled each other to the ground, some pirates drawing swords and daggers to try to duel their way across the floor. Others jumped from the mezzanine to join the fight, swinging themselves across the railing, either attempting to land on tables or aiming for the iron chandelier and missing badly.

The music still played, and the musicians rose and backed farther into the

corner. Rolfe, half-standing, put a hand on his hilt. Celaena gave him a nod before drawing her sword and charging into the brawling crowd.

With deft flicks of her wrist, she cut someone's arm and ripped another's leg open, but didn't actually kill anyone. She just needed to keep the fight going—and escalate it enough—to keep all eyes on the town.

As she made to slip toward the exit, someone grabbed her around the waist and threw her into a wooden pillar so hard she knew she'd have a bruise. She squirmed in the red-faced pirate's grasp, nearly gagging as his sour breath seeped through her mask. She got her arm free enough to thrust the pommel of her sword between his legs. He dropped to the ground like a stone.

Celaena barely got a step away before a hairy fist slammed into her jaw. Pain blinded her like lightning, and she tasted blood in her mouth. She quickly felt her mask to ensure it wasn't cracked or about to fall off.

Dodging the next blow, she swept her foot behind the man's knee and sent him careening into a yowling cluster of harlots. She didn't know where Sam had gone, but if he was sticking to the plan, then she didn't need to worry about him. Weaving through the snarls of fighting pirates, Celaena headed toward the exit, clashing her blade against several unskilled swords.

A pirate with a frayed eye patch raised a clumsy hand to strike her, but Celaena caught it and kicked him in the stomach, sending him flying into another man. They both hit a table, flipped over it, and began fighting between themselves. *Animals*. Celaena stalked through the crowd and out the front door of the tavern.

To her delight, the streets weren't much better. The fight had spread with astonishing speed. Up and down the avenue, pouring out of the other taverns, pirates wrestled and dueled and rolled on the ground. Apparently, she hadn't been the only one eager for a fight.

Reveling in the mayhem, she was halfway down the street, headed toward the meet-up point with Sam, when Rolfe's voice boomed out from behind her.

“ENOUGH!”

Everyone lifted whatever they had in their hands—a mug, a sword, a clump of hair—and saluted.

And then promptly resumed fighting. What did Rolfe expect?

Laughing to herself, Celaena hurried down an alley. Sam was already there, blood seeping from his nose, but his eyes were bright.

“I'd say that went pretty well,” he said.

Celaena returned the look. “I never knew you were such an expert card player.” She looked him up and down. His stance was steady. “Or an expert

drunkard.”

He grinned. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Celaena Sardothien.” He grabbed her shoulder, suddenly closer than she’d like. “Ready?” he asked, and she nodded, her heart pounding as she looked to the lightening sky.

“Let’s go.” She pulled out of his grasp and yanked off her gloves, stuffing them in her pocket. “The watch at the tower must have changed by now. We’ve got until dawn to disable that chain and the catapults.” They’d debated for a while about whether it would be more useful to just destroy the chain from its unguarded opposite side. But even if they did, they’d still have the catapults to contend with. It was better to risk the guards and take out both the chain and the catapults at once.

Sam stared at her for a moment longer. “If we live through this, Celaena,” he said, heading toward the side street that led to the docks, “remind me to teach you how to play cards properly.”

She cursed colorfully enough to make him laugh, and launched into a run.

They turned onto a quiet street just as someone stepped out of the shadows.

“Going somewhere?”

It was Rolfe.

Chapter Nine

Down the slope of the street, Celaena could perfectly see the two slave ships sitting—still unmoving—in the bay. And the mast-snapping chain not too far from them. Unfortunately, from his angle, so could Rolfe.

The sky had turned light gray. Dawn.

Celaena bowed her head to the Pirate Lord. “I’d rather not get my hands dirty in that mess.”

Rolfe’s lips formed a thin line. “Funny, given that you tripped the man who started the brawl.”

Sam glared at her. She’d been subtle, damn it!

Rolfe drew his sword, the dragon’s eyes gleaming in the growing light. “And also funny, since you’ve been spoiling for a fight for days, that you suddenly decided to vanish when everyone’s attention is elsewhere.”

Sam raised his hands. “We don’t want any trouble.”

Rolfe chuckled, a harsh, humorless sound. “Maybe you don’t, Sam Cortland, but *she* does.” Rolfe stepped toward her, his sword dangling at his side. “She’s wanted trouble since the moment she got here. What was your plan? Steal treasure? Information?”

From the corner of her eye, something shifted in the ships. Like a bird flexing its wings, a row of oars shot out from their sides. They were ready. And the chain was still up.

Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look ...

But Rolfe looked, and Celaena’s breathing turned shallow as he scanned the ships.

Sam tensed beside her, his knees bending slightly.

“I am going to kill you, Celaena Sardothien,” Rolfe breathed. And he meant it.

Celaena’s fingers tightened around her sword, and Rolfe opened his mouth, lungs filling with air as he prepared to shout a warning.

Quick as a whip, she did the only thing she could think of to distract him.

Her mask clattered to the ground, and she shook off her hood. Her golden hair gleamed in the growing light.

Rolfe froze. “You ... You’re ... What sort of trickery is this?”

Beyond them, the oars began moving, churning the water as the boats turned

toward the chain—and the freedom beyond it. “Go,” she murmured to Sam. “*Now.*”

Sam only nodded before he sprinted down the street.

Alone with Rolfe, Celaena raised her sword. “Celaena Sardothien, at your service.”

The pirate was still staring at her, his face pale with rage. “How *dare* you deceive me?”

She sketched a bow. “I did nothing of the sort. I *told* you I was beautiful.”

Before she could stop him, Rolfe shouted, “Thieves! They’re trying to steal our ships! To your boats! To the watchtower!”

A roar erupted around them, and Celaena prayed that Sam could reach the watchtower before the pirates reached him.

Celaena began circling the Pirate Lord. He circled her, too. He wasn’t drunk in the least.

“How old are you?” Each of his steps was carefully placed, but she noticed that he kept shifting to expose his left side.

“Sixteen.” She didn’t bother to keep her voice low and gravelly.

Rolfe swore. “Arobynn sent a sixteen-year-old to deal with me?”

“He sent the best of the best. Consider that an honor.”

With a growl, the Pirate Lord lunged.

She danced back, swinging up her sword to block the blow he aimed for her throat. She didn’t need to kill him right away—just to distract him long enough to prevent him from further organizing his men. And keep him away from the ships. She had to buy Sam enough time to disable the chain and the catapults. The ships were already turning toward the mouth of the bay.

Rolfe launched himself again, and she let him land two strikes on her sword before she ducked the third blow and slammed into him. She swept her foot, and Rolfe staggered back a step. Not missing a beat, she pulled out her long hunting knife, slashing for his chest. She let her blow fall short, ripping through the fine blue material of his tunic instead.

Rolfe stumbled into the wall of a building behind him, but caught his footing and dodged the blow that would have taken off his head. The vibrations of her sword hitting stone stung her hand, but she kept hold of the hilt.

“What was the plan?” Rolfe panted above the roar of the pirates rushing toward the docks. “Steal my slaves and take all the profit?”

She laughed, feinting to his right, but sweeping for his unprotected left with her dagger. To her surprise, Rolfe deflected both moves in a swift, sure motion.

“To free them,” she said. Beyond the chain, beyond the mouth of the bay, the clouds on the horizon began to color with the light of the coming dawn.

“Fool,” Rolfe spat, and this time fainted so well that even Celaena couldn’t avoid the rake of his sword across her arm. Warm blood seeped through her black tunic. She hissed, darting away a few steps. A careless mistake.

“You think freeing two hundred slaves will solve anything?” Rolfe kicked a fallen bottle of liquor at her. She knocked it aside with the flat of her sword, her right arm screaming in pain at the motion. Glass shattered behind her. “There are thousands of slaves out there. Are you going to march into Calaculla and Endovier and free them, too?”

Behind him, the steady strokes of the oars propelled the ships toward the chain. Sam had to hurry.

Rolfe shook his head. “Stupid girl. If I don’t kill you, your master will.”

Not him giving the luxury of a warning, she threw herself at him. She ducked, twirling at the last moment, and Rolfe barely turned before she slammed the pommel of her sword into the back of his head.

The Pirate Lord crumpled to the dirt street just as a crowd of bloodied and filthy pirates appeared around the corner. Celaena only had time to throw her hood over her head, hoping the shadows concealed enough of her face, before she took off at run.

It didn’t take much to get away from a group of half-drunk battle-crazed pirates. She just had to lead them down a few twisted streets, and then she lost them. But the wound on her arm still slowed her considerably as she ran for the watchtower. Sam was already far ahead of her. Releasing the chain was now in his hands.

Pirates raged up and down the docks, seeking *any* boat that was in working order. That had been the final leg of her journey last night: disabling the rudders in all of the ships along the docks, including Rolfe’s own ship, the *Sea Dragon*—which honestly deserved to be tampered with, given that security on board had been so lax. But, despite the damage, some pirates managed to find rowboats and piled into them, brandishing swords or cutlasses or axes and shouting profanities to the high heavens. The ramshackle buildings blurred as she sprinted toward the watchtower. Her breath was ragged in her throat, a night of no sleep already taking its toll. She burst past pirates on the docks, too busy bemoaning their ruined boats to notice her.

The slaves still rowed for the chain as if demons from every Hell-realm were upon them.

Celaena charged down the road, heading for the edge of the town. With the sloping, wide-open road, she could see Sam racing far ahead of her—and a large group of pirates not too far behind him. The cut on her arm throbbed, but she pushed herself to run faster.

Sam had mere minutes to get that chain down, or else the slaves' ships would shatter upon it. Even if the slaves' ships were able to stop before they hit it, there were enough smaller boats heading out that the pirates would overpower them. The pirates had weapons. Aside from whatever was onboard the ships, the slaves were mostly unarmed, even if many of them had been warriors and rebels.

There was a flash of movement from the half-crumbling tower. Steel glimmered, and there was Sam, charging up the staircase that wound up the outside of the tower.

Two pirates rushed down the steps, swords raised. Sam dodged one, knocking him down with a swift strike to the spine. Before the pirate had even finished falling, Sam's blade skewered the other man clean through the middle.

But there was still Ship-Breaker to disable, along with the two catapults, and

—
And the dozen pirates who had now reached the foot of the tower.

Celaena cursed. She was still too far. There was no way she could make it in time to disable the chain—the ships would smack into it long before she got there.

She swallowed the pain in her arm, focusing on her breathing as she ran and ran, not daring to take her eyes off the tower ahead. Sam, still a tiny figure in the distance, reached the top of the tower and the expanse of open stone where the anchor to the chain lay. Even from here, she could tell it was gargantuan. And as Sam rushed around it, hacking at whatever he could, throwing himself against the enormous lever, both of them realized the horrible truth, the one thing she'd overlooked: the chain was too heavy for one man to move.

The slaves' ships were close now. So close that stopping ... stopping was impossible.

They were going to die.

But the slaves didn't cease rowing.

The dozen pirates were climbing the stairs. Sam had been trained to engage multiple men in combat, but a dozen pirates ... Damn Rolfe and his men for delaying her!

Sam glanced toward the stairs. He knew about the pirates, too.

With a quarter of a mile left, she could see everything with such maddening clarity. Sam remained atop the tower. A level below him, perched on a platform

jutting out over the sea, sat the two catapults. And in the bay, the two ships that rowed with increasing speed. Freedom or death.

Sam slung himself down to the catapult level, and Celaena staggered a step as she saw him hurl himself against the rotating platform on which the catapult sat, pushing, pushing, pushing until the catapult began to move—not toward the sea, but toward the tower itself, toward the spot in the stone wall where the chain was anchored.

She didn't dare take her attention from the tower as Sam heaved the catapult into position. A boulder had already been loaded, and in the glare of the rising sun, she could just make out the rope stretched taut to secure the catapult.

The pirates were almost at the catapult level. The two ships rowed faster and faster, the chain so close that its shadow loomed over them.

Celaena sucked in a breath as pirates poured onto the catapult landing, weapons held high.

Sam raised his sword. Light from the sunrise gleamed off the blade, bright as a star.

A warning cry broke from her lips as a pirate's dagger flipped toward Sam.

Sam brought his sword down on the catapult rope, doubling over. The catapult snapped so fast she could hardly follow the motion. The boulder slammed into the tower, shattering stone, wood, and metal. Rock exploded, dust clouding the air.

And with a boom that echoed across the bay, the chain collapsed, taking out a chunk of the tower—taking out the spot where she'd last seen Sam.

Celaena, at the tower at last, paused to watch as the white sails of the slaves' ships unfurled, glowing golden in the sunrise.

The wind filled their sails and set them cruising, flying swiftly from the mouth of the bay and into the ocean beyond it. By the time the pirates fixed their ships, the slaves would be too far away to catch.

She murmured a prayer for them to find a safe harbor, her words carrying on the wings of the wind, and wished them well.

A block of stone crashed near her. Celaena's heart gave a lurch. Sam.

He couldn't be dead. Not from that dagger, or those dozen pirates, or from the catapult. No, Sam couldn't be so stupid that he'd get himself killed. She'd ... she'd ... Well, she'd kill him if he was dead.

Drawing her sword despite the ache in her arm, she made to rush into the half-wrecked tower, but a dagger pressed against her neck halted her in her tracks.

“I don’t think so,” Rolfe whispered in her ear.

Chapter Ten

“You make a move, and I’ll spill your throat on the ground,” Rolfe hissed, his free hand ripping Celaena’s dagger from its sheath and tossing it into the brush. Then he took her sword, too.

“Why not just kill me right now?”

Rolfe’s breathy laugh tickled her ear. “Because I want to take a long, long while to enjoy killing you.”

She stared at the half-ruined tower, at the dust still swirling from the catapult’s destruction. How could Sam have survived that?

“Do you know how much your attempt at playing hero cost me?” Rolfe pushed his blade into her neck, and her skin split open with a stinging burst. “Two hundred slaves, plus two ships, plus the seven ships you disabled in the harbor, plus countless lives.”

She snorted. “Don’t forget the ale from last night.”

Rolfe shifted his blade, digging in and making Celaena wince despite herself. “I’ll take that from your flesh, too, don’t worry.”

“How’d you find me?” She needed time. Needed something to work with. If she moved the wrong way, she’d find herself with a cut throat.

“I knew you’d follow Sam. If you were so set on freeing the slaves, then you certainly wouldn’t leave your companion to die alone. Though I think you arrived a bit too late for that.”

In the dense jungle, the cries of birds and beasts slowly returned. But the watchtower remained silent, interrupted only by the hiss of crumbling stone.

“You’re going to return with me,” Rolfe said. “And after I’m done with you, I’ll contact your master to come pick up the pieces.”

Rolfe took a step, pivoting them toward the town, but Celaena had been waiting.

Throwing her back into his chest, she hooked her foot behind his. Rolfe stumbled, tripping over her leg, and she wedged her hand between her neck and his dagger just as he remembered to act on his promise to slit her throat.

Blood from her palm splattered down her tunic, but she shoved the pain aside and butted her elbow into his stomach. Rolfe’s breath whooshed out of him, and he doubled over, only to meet her knee slamming into his face. A faint *crack* sounded as her kneecap connected with his nose. When she hurled Rolfe to the dirt, blood was on her pant leg—his blood.

She grabbed his fallen dagger as the Pirate Lord reached for his sword. He scrambled to his knees, lunging for her, but she stomped her foot down upon his sword, sending it crashing to the ground. Rolfe raised his head just in time for her to knock him onto his back. Crouching over him, she held his dagger to his throat.

“Well, *that* didn’t go the way you expected, did it?” she asked, listening for a moment to ensure no pirates were about to come crashing down the road. But the animals still hooted and screeched, the insects still hummed. They were alone. Most of the pirates were probably still brawling in the town.

Her hand throbbed, blood pouring out as she grasped the collar of his tunic to lift his head closer to hers.

“So,” she said, her smirk widening at the blood dripping from his nose. “This is what’s going to happen.” She dropped his collar and fished out the two papers from inside her tunic. Compared to the pain in her hand, the injury on her arm had faded to a dull pulsing. “You are going to sign these and stamp each with your seal.”

“I refuse,” Rolfe seethed.

“You don’t even know what they say.” She pushed the tip of his dagger into his heaving throat. “So allow me to clarify: one of these is a letter to my master. It says that the deal is over, that you won’t be sending him slaves, and if you catch him entering into another slave-trade agreement with anyone else, you’ll bring your whole armada to punish him.”

Rolfe choked. “You’re insane.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’m not done yet.” She picked up the second letter. “This one ... I wrote this one for you. I did my best to try to write it in *your* voice, but you’ll forgive me if it’s a tad more elegant than you’re used to being.” Rolfe struggled, but she pushed the blade a little harder, and he stopped. “Basically,” she said, sighing dramatically, “this one says that you, Captain Rolfe, bearer of the magical map inked on your hands, will never, *ever* sell a slave again. And if you catch any pirates selling or transporting or trading slaves, you’ll hang, burn, or drown them yourself. And that Skull’s Bay is forevermore a safe haven for any slaves fleeing Adarlan’s clutches.”

Rolfe practically had steam blowing out his ears. “I won’t sign either of them, you stupid girl. Don’t you know who I am?”

“Fine,” she said, angling the blade to sink into his neck more easily. “I memorized your signature when I was in your office that first day. It won’t be hard to forge. And as for your seal ring ...” She removed something else from her pocket. “I also took that the first day in your office, just in case I needed it.

Turns out I was right.” Rolfe croaked as she held it up in her free hand, the garnet flashing in the light. “I figure I can return to town and tell your cronies that you decided to set sail after those slaves, and to expect you back in ... I don’t know—six months? A year? Long enough that they won’t notice the grave I’ll dig for you right off the road here. Frankly, you’ve seen who I am, and I *should* end your life for it. But consider it a favor—and a promise that if you *don’t* follow my orders, I’ll change my decision to spare you.”

Rolfe’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Why?”

“You’ll have to clarify that.”

He took a breath. “Why go to so much trouble for slaves?”

“Because if we don’t fight for them, who will?” She pulled a fountain pen from her pocket. “Sign the papers.”

Rolfe raised an eyebrow. “And how will you know that I’m holding true to my word?”

She removed the dagger from his throat, using the blade to brush back a strand of his dark hair. “I have my sources. And if I hear that you’re trading slaves, no matter where you go, no matter how far you run, I *will* hunt you down. That’s twice now I’ve disabled you. The third time, you won’t be so lucky. I swear that on my name. I’m almost seventeen, and I can already wallop you; imagine how good I’ll be in a few years.” She shook her head. “I don’t think you’ll want to try me now—and certainly not then.”

Rolfe stared at her for a few heartbeats. “If you ever set foot in my territory again, your life is forfeit.” He paused, then muttered, “May the gods help Arobynn.” He took the pen. “Any other requests?”

She eased off him, but kept the dagger in her hand. “Why, yes,” she said. “A ship would be nice.”

Rolfe only glared at her before he grabbed the documents.

When Rolfe had signed, stamped, and handed the documents to Celaena, she took the liberty of knocking him out again. Swift blows to two points in his neck did the trick, and he’d be out long enough for her to accomplish what she needed: to find Sam.

She raced up the half-crumbling stairs of the tower, leaping over pirate corpses and chunks of stone, not stopping until she found the crushed bodies of the dozen pirates who were closest to Sam and the ruins of the catapults. Blood, bone, squished bits of flesh that she didn’t particularly care to look at for too long ...

“Sam!” she shouted, slipping over a bit of debris. She heaved a slab of wood off the side, scanning the landing for any sign of him. “Sam!”

Her hand began bleeding again, leaving smears of blood as she turned over stone and wood and metal. Where *was* he?

It had been *her* plan. If one of them had to die for it, it should have been her. Not him.

She reached the second catapult, its entire frame snapped in half from a fallen piece of tower. She’d last seen him here. A slab of stone jutted up from where it had hit the landing. It was large enough to have squashed someone beneath.

She hurled herself against it, her feet sliding against the ground as she pushed and pushed and pushed. The stone didn’t move.

Grunting, gasping, she shoved harder. Still the stone was too large.

Cursing, she beat a fist against the gray surface, her injured hand aching in protest. The pain snapped something open, and she struck the stone again and again, clenching her jaw to keep the building scream inside of her.

“For some reason, I don’t think that’s going to make the rock move,” said a voice, and Celaena whirled.

Emerging from the other side of the landing was Sam. He was covered head to toe in gray dust, and blood leaked from a cut in his forehead, but he was ...

She lifted her chin. “I’ve been shouting for you.”

Sam shrugged, sauntering over to her. “I figured you could wait a few minutes, given that I saved the day and all.” His brows rose high on his ash-covered face.

“Some hero.” She gestured to the ruin of the tower around them. “I’ve never seen such sloppy work.”

Sam smiled, his brown eyes turning golden in the dawn. It was such a *Sam* look, the twinkle of mischief, the hint of exasperation, the kindness that would always, *always* make him a better person than she was.

Before she knew what she was doing, Celaena threw her arms around him and held him close.

Sam stiffened, but after a heartbeat, his arms came around her. She breathed him in—the smell of his sweat, the tang of the dust and rock, the metallic odor of his blood ... Sam rested his cheek on her head. She couldn’t remember—honestly couldn’t recall—the last time anyone had held her. No, wait—it had been a year ago. With Ben, after she’d come back from a mission two hours late and with a sprained ankle. He’d been worried, and given how close she’d come to being captured by the royal guards, she was more than a bit shaken.

But embracing Sam was different, somehow. Like she wanted to curl into his warmth, like for one moment, she didn't have to worry about anything or anybody.

"Sam," she murmured into his chest.

"Hmm?"

She peeled away from him, stepping out of his arms. "If you ever tell anyone about me embracing you ... I'll gut you."

Sam gaped at her, then tipped his head back and laughed. He laughed and laughed, until dust lodged in his throat and he launched into a coughing fit. She let him suffer through it, not finding it very funny at all.

When he could breathe again, Sam cleared his throat. "Come on, Sardothien," he said, slinging an arm around her shoulders. "If you're done liberating slaves and destroying pirate cities, then let's go home."

Celaena glanced at him sidelong and grinned.

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