

“Don’t scream, and I might let you live.”

Aina removed her blade from the spy’s neck and spun her around so fast, the girl almost tripped. The spy flicked her gaze around the empty warehouse, to the shattered windows, to the main door twenty feet away, to the black market entrance where they’d both come from—and then to the dagger still in Aina’s hand.

“You won’t kill me,” the girl said, her voice shallow despite the bold words. “You need as many of us as you can hold on to.”

“Of what?” Aina scoffed. “Traitors?”

The word stung, a bitter poison on her tongue, but it was true. She and her colleague Tannis had fought to own all of Kosín’s tradehouses—businesses that supplied criminal services to any paying client—but the victory meant nothing when some of the tradehouses didn’t trust them and sent spies like this one.

“I’m just doing a job,” the spy said in a rush.

The words echoed in Aina’s mind. She’d given the same excuse countless times in her work as an assassin.

Aina’s old boss, Kohl, had killed her parents on a simple job.

“Everyone is just doing a job,” she spat out, making the spy wince, “but you, your boss, and everyone at the Thunder tradehouse is still a traitor.” While she spoke, Teo appeared at the entrance to the black market, his broad shoulders taking up the entire doorway. “Why did your boss send you to spy on me tonight?”

The spy bent her knees and shot away toward the exit. Aina flung a knife at her and it skimmed against the girl’s elbow, drawing blood but not stopping her. At the same time, Teo brought out a pistol and shot at the spy, but the bullet pinged off the side of the door as the spy ran outside.

Aina raced to the exit, Teo’s footsteps echoing off the floor behind her. The thick, humid summer air hit them when they left the warehouse, the heat rising off concrete in waves that made Aina’s breaths draw short. The towering gray factory buildings and textile mills cast sharp shadows along the street.

The spy was wrong about one thing: Aina would certainly kill her.

On top of the building across the street, movement flickered—the spy’s leg slipping over the edge and onto the roof.

Aina followed, leaping to grab the rungs of the fire escape and hauling herself up. By the time she reached the roof, the spy had run to the other side and jumped across the gap to the next building. Aina sprinted after her, crossing to the next building in a running leap. The spy cast one terrified glance over

her shoulder and ran faster, leading Aina into the Center of the city and veering south into the Stacks—Aina’s home. Flashes of the silver and red crescent moons lit swathes of the rooftops from between the higher buildings around them.

Wind from the south blew in the river’s stench, but even with the humid summer air, a chill slid down her spine. Usually, the lights from shops lit up this part of the city all day and night, the owners never missing an opportunity to earn more kora. But the farther they ran, the fewer lights there were, flickering out around them until soon, they’d be plunged into the darkness of the Stacks.

Last month, Aina had exposed how General Alsane Bautix, a member of the Sentinel—the country’s governing oligarchy—was plotting an assassination against a foreign princess visiting the capital. He’d fled along with the Red Jackals gang and his biggest ally, Kohl. Desperate to regain power, Kohl and Bautix sent the Jackals to extort businesses in the south, killing anyone who refused to pay.

If she looked northward, there were electric lights, shops open at all hours, and Steels—wealthy industrialists—parading around in silk and diamonds. But the south was a sea of black, pinpricked by only a few candles in windows, and growing more invisible to the rest of the city every day. She tried not to imagine the bodies on the ground there now, left to rot after the Jackals had dealt with them.

The spy veered south, and Aina ran faster not to lose sight of her. The spy could easily disappear in the cobweb network of cardboard and rusted metal houses. Aina shifted left, hauling herself up to the fourth floor of another building. She sprinted across the roof until she was parallel with and above the spy, who glanced over her shoulder to check for pursuit. A small, triumphant smile lit her features when the red moon’s light touched her. Her pace slowed a little.

When Aina reached the end of the taller building’s roof, she looked behind her to see Teo a building away, then turned back to the edge of the roof and dropped off smoothly. A deep breath of smoke-tinged night air filled her as she fixed her gaze on the view. The hills wound downward, pockmarked by the gray-and-rust houses ahead, until they met the barely visible greenish tinge of the river at the southern docks.

A moment later, she rolled to her feet on the third-story roof of the building below, quieting her breaths even though she was still panting from the run. A small chimney stood sentinel at the edge of the roof and cast a shadow over one side. She ducked behind it as the other girl drew closer on a parallel path. Soon the spy would have to step onto the roof where Aina waited.

For a moment, Aina breathed in the still air, allowing the shadows to drape over her face. The dark didn’t scare her as much as it used to, but now it surrounded her and cloaked her in its depths as if to warn her that death was coming soon.

Kohl thrived in the dark. Aina stumbled through it, gasping for breath as clues slipped through her fingers like steam curling above a brass train.

Years ago, Kohl promised to give her a tradehouse of her own to manage one day. The hope that she’d

have a real future had never been stronger, and now, her heart clenched at how foolishly she'd believed him. One mistake she'd made on a job last month, and he kicked her out, leaving her to be killed. She'd discovered his plans with Bautix, stopped them, and took the tradehouses for herself when he fled, but now he wanted them back.

The tradehouses were the only proof that her years on the streets after her parents' deaths weren't in vain. They were her success, her home, a sign of her ranking among the city's criminals that left her untouchable. A sign that she'd never be on the streets again, her only solace the paper bags of glue she'd nearly suffocated on. Her hand went to her lips, checking for some remnant of glue, that old fear returning and never leaving—she inhaled now to remind herself she could still breathe. A spy wasn't about to make her lose everything.

Still crouched behind the chimney, Aina held her breath as the spy reached this roof and approached. Her shadow stretched out before her, long and jagged on the concrete. Once she got close enough, Aina struck out with a punch to the gut. The girl exhaled sharply, falling back and doubling over as Aina stepped out in front of her. A snarl rose from the spy's lips, and she pulled a knife from her sleeve. Its blade glinted in the moonlight as she lunged forward. Aina shifted to the side and used the girl's own momentum to shove her away.

The spy's feet skidded across the rooftop. Her eyes widened in fear when she nearly toppled off the edge, but she threw her arms to the side to catch her balance. At the same time, movement from behind Aina, still in the shadows of the building overhead, caught her eye. At first, she thought it was Teo, but then she heard the click of a gun.

Aina rolled out of the way in a single breath, then took a dagger in one hand and a scythe in the other. Her pulse raced as her second attacker stepped into the light: another Thunder employee, this one second-in-command to their boss, Arman—Davide, if she remembered correctly. He must have been watching to make sure their spy got away safely.

A dull thud sounded behind her, but she didn't dare take her eyes off the two in front of her. A moment later, Teo walked up next to her. The wind whipped his waves of dark brown hair around his jaw as he lifted his own gun and faced the other Thunder employee.

Aina's thoughts raced, sweat trickling down the back of her neck. Against any other opponent, she would fight back without a second thought. Hesitation was a death sentence in Kosín.

But these were supposed to be her employees, and the thought of killing them left a bitter taste in her mouth. They were supposed to trust her, but maybe all their years working with Kohl had led them to trust no one but themselves. She couldn't blame them, but she couldn't let them get away with this. No real tradehouse leader would.

The spy began to circle away from the edge of the roof, and Aina followed. The night air crowded around them, heat and humidity making her clothes stick to her skin with sweat. A buzz rose in Aina's ears, making all other sounds fall away, until the only thing left in the world was this fight on this

rooftop.

“If you make one wrong move, Solís,” Davide called over, not taking his eyes off Teo, “I’ll blast your friend’s head off. Arman’s orders.”

Teo let out a sharp laugh. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Him, but not me?” Aina asked, wanting to keep them distracted. “I’m almost insulted, Davide. You don’t think I’m worth your bullets, or is your aim really so bad that you’d just miss?”

He took his eyes off Teo for a moment, an angry retort at the tip of his tongue, and Teo shot out his kneecaps. Davide collapsed, crying out, his strangled yell the only sound in the Stacks, apart from the rats moving in the street below.

The spy gulped then, her eyes wide and bloodshot as she and Aina continued circling each other. Aina made sure her own steps drew her closer to the edge of the building.

“Aina?” Teo called over, his voice casual as though this were a stroll through a park. “Do you need this traitor alive?”

“Keep him there,” she said. “I’ll only be a minute.”

Wind swept through the streets and the hair rose on the back of her neck. Her eyes flicked toward the three-story drop behind her.

Stay steady, she told herself.

Kohl had shown fear when she’d nearly pushed him out of a window last month and placed a blade under his heart. She would show none.

She crouched, angling her body so most of her weight was forward and under the shadow of the chimney. One hand moved to the brace of diamond-edged daggers across her chest, and the spy took the bait.

When she lunged forward, her eyes on Aina’s knives, Aina hooked a foot around the girl’s ankle and pushed.

The girl gasped, her eyes flicking down to see what had tripped her. Her arms windmilled, trying to grab on to something in the dark and failing. A small yelp left her lips but was swallowed by the wind, and a breath later, her body smacked against the ground three stories below. Aina spared her a brief moment of remorse, then turned to her second problem.

Davide’s shouts still echoed off the buildings around them, cursing at them in multiple languages as he bled out on the roof. Aina walked over to him and Teo, who stepped aside to let her face Davide herself.

“Arman’s orders,” she said in a mocking tone. “You’re forgetting one thing: I’m in charge.”

He barely opened his mouth to beg when she slit open his throat. She stepped back so his blood wouldn’t get on her boots, then moved toward the edge of the roof again. The girl’s broken body was surrounded by a pool of golden light from one of the last few streetlamps heading south. Kohl wasn’t Aina’s boss anymore, but she’d always survived by his lessons: Be brutal and exact. Get rid of anyone threatening your position. Cut off loose ends.

As much as she hated him, he’d ruled the tradehouses with a steel-tight grip. She was newer and younger, and needed to hold on even harder.

She tensed when Teo placed a hand on her shoulder, then forced herself to relax. *He’s not Kohl*, she reminded herself. Over the three years they’d known each other, Teo had stayed by her whenever she was injured or in danger, when Kohl kicked her out and the whole city wanted to kill her, before anyone feared or respected her.

His forehead creased in concern when he asked, “Which tradehouse were they from?”

“Thunder, like the other spies.” In the loud, smoke-filled room of the black market moments before catching sight of the spy, Aina had told Teo about the threatening notes left in front of her and her employees when they were out on jobs. They weren’t in Kohl’s handwriting, but she suspected he was sending the Jackals to do it for him, to shake her confidence for whenever he would really strike. “She saw us asking around about Kohl in the market, and she probably heard me tell you about the notes too. The other tradehouses are loyal to us now, but if Arman found out that Kohl is actively trying to take back the Dom, he’d turn against us in an instant and try to get the others to do the same. Right now, Arman is looking for any weaknesses he can find.”

“Traitors don’t deserve mercy,” Teo said, tilting his head toward the light of the silver moon, which lent a soft glow to his golden-brown skin. She breathed in, echoing his words in her head as he continued, “None of them do. Kohl, any of the tradehouses that want to challenge you, the Jackals working for Bautix, the Diamond Guards ... We’ll show them we’re deadlier than all of them put together.” Their eyes met and she felt that same fire building in him, that need to fight all those who threatened them and the refusal to be beaten down. But there was something else too; his gaze seared through her, a silent reminder of how they’d grown closer this past month—and how he wanted more between them than she could give him while Kohl still lived.

Brushing loose strands of black hair behind her ears, she broke their eye contact and looked toward the body on the roof.

“Let’s leave them where Arman can find them,” she said. Together they lifted Davide’s body and carried it down the fire escape, the air growing quieter and pressing closer in the Stacks. Night deepened and the only other sounds besides their footsteps were the fleeting movements of rats and stray dogs on the dirt roads. But the faint sounds of voices, some threatening, some frightened, still reached them here

from a few streets away.

Her limbs ached as she and Teo walked toward the body, and she knew she should rest, but any hour she slept was an hour in which Kohl could be moving against her.

“You know the Jackals are walking around the south like they own it all now,” she said. “Raurie’s uncle’s tavern is close, and she’s been eavesdropping on their conversations. Let’s see if she’s overheard something on where Kohl might be hiding.”

She would use all the lessons Kohl had taught her as an assassin to hunt him down. She’d lie, blackmail, steal, and trick—she’d make him suffer, because death alone wouldn’t be good enough. She’d kill, like she’d done many times while working for him, but this time, she’d kill him too.

A memory of Kohl pointing a gun at her head and then tossing it aside rushed to the front of her thoughts. The cold timbre of his voice every time he reminded her that he’d given her a home and could take it away whenever he wanted. The truth that he’d killed her parents, putting her on the streets in the first place. His fist delivering a blow to her face and then his fingers touching her hair softly.

She would keep this home she’d fought for and finally get his voice out of her head.

Soon, they’d face each other again, and this time, she’d win for good.

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