

Prologue

"Tonight, this kingdom will be rid of two traitors to the crown! Treasonous rebels, who conspired in darkness to ruin the peace brought to us by our gracious king."

Boos echoed in the marketplace, the scaffold normally used for chicken auctions currently in allocation as an executioner's block. Aurelia Vassemond knelt on the blood-stained platform, her small frame shivering in her sodden nightgown. Her wrists had already begun to chafe from the iron manacles wrapped around them, and a soldier's large hand was heavy on her shoulder, making it impossible to stand.

An impatient murmur spread through the crowd as rain drenched them; tonight's storm had scared off all but the cruelest of spectators, the overcast sky casting their gleeful faces in grim shadows. It was near impossible to ignore their gazes, the way they leaned forward in anticipation.

From her limited knowledge of executions, tonight's agenda was particularly lackluster, with only two lives in the balance: Elovina and Kaaroff Vassemond. It was only her youth that saved her from the same fate, instead to be sold off to whoever would take her.

Forced into a lifetime of servitude as penance for her parents' sins.

A sob escaped Aurelia, the soldier's fingers digging harder into her shoulder, this time enough to bruise. A not-so-subtle reminder to stay still, as if she were any sort of real threat. Even if she'd wanted to fight back, she had no chance at success. *Petite*, her mother had always called her; small even for a ten-year-old girl, with entirely uncoordinated limbs. There was some muscle there, sure, but not nearly enough to combat even the weakest soldier on the stage.

She shivered in her drenched nightgown, the tips of her fingers starting to turn blue. The storm was unrelenting and raged around them, a crack of thunder making her flinch. Above her, the soldier chuckled.

Aurelia was young, but she wasn't stupid. She knew there would be no happy ending tonight, no savior to sweep in at the last second and free them, no chance to plead their innocence. Her parents would lose their heads, and as for her?

She'd lose her freedom.

Over the past twenty four hours fear had consumed her, but resentment, too, had begun to creep in as they'd been marched up the dais. For the kingdom, for the rebellion, for her *mother and father*. And with the anger came shame for thinking of her parents in such a way; she'd tried to convince herself not to blame them for this, to place it squarely on the shoulders of the king and his father before him, but still that bitterness seeped into her heart.

The freezing rain continued to hit Aurelia's cheeks, impossible to discern from her tears. Anger, sadness, and fear made them fall nonstop, her loud sniffles lost to the sound of the storm.

Her parents must've been pretty involved to warrant a public execution, though not so important as to make said execution mandatory. Normally rebels were simply slain on the spot, not worth all the fuss. For the higher ups, it was a spectacle put on by the king that *everybody* was forced to attend.

Apparently, her parents' importance placed them somewhere in the middle.

"Tonight two more violent rebels will be eradicated. Death by beheading." Aurelia's eyes moved to the center of the stage and the round man stepping forward. His thick mustache was drenched and dangled limply over chapped lips, a cruel smile blooming across his speckled face.

A startled cry escaped her as reality began to set in, her chest constricting at what was to come.

Whoops of excitement rose from the crowd at his words, their elation only amplifying when a cloaked man stepped forward from the shadows. Though he wore a hood to conceal his features, there was no mistaking the large ax he held in one hand.

The king's executioner.

Another sob, louder this time, flew past Aurelia's lips, lost once again to the howling wind. She couldn't bear to look at her parents, but glancing out at the people gathered wasn't much better. The cold and unrelenting rain had not been enough of a deterrent for the crowd's bloodlust, all of them leaning

forward in eager anticipation of what was to come. Wide, disgusting smiles were plastered on their faces, though when she followed their gaze she realized perhaps it was her mother's now entirely transparent nightgown that had the lot of them smirking.

A shiver ran up her spine, and she knew it had nothing to do with the cold.

In a small stroke of luck, her mother had dressed Aurelia in emerald silk before bed last night; the rain darkened the material instead of turning it sheer, unlike her mother's. She was not so young as to not know of some men's thoughts, the horrors her mother only warned of in passing as she'd gotten older.

Then again, depending on who bought her, those horrors may very well become her reality.

Aurelia's gaze fell back to the large man in charge when he cleared his throat, the sound garbled. He stepped in front of her mother, a few groans from the crowd solidifying that they had, in fact, been leering, and pulled down her mother's gag with no elegance or ceremony.

Straightening, he stepped aside, the whoops starting up again.

Aurelia's heart hurt for her mother, who couldn't cover much with her hands chained as they were. She'd always been so prim and proper, so big on modesty, so the lack of it would've made the situation so much worse.

"Elovina Vassemond, now is the time to address your final words to the citizens of Rhovell."

But it was not at the jeering crowd that Elovina glanced, or even her husband. No, that golden gaze was locked on Aurelia, the eyes puffy and red, a million unspoken words swimming in those amber irises.

Suddenly desperate to be near her mother, Aurelia tried her hardest to stand, only managing to get one foot under her before the soldier slammed her back to her knees.

A flash of agony spiked up Aurelia's spine, though that wasn't the reason the tears fell quicker down her cheeks.

Elovina took a deep breath, no doubt an attempt to steady her voice, and spoke only two loud, clear words. "I'm sorry."

They hit Aurelia like a physical blow, stealing the breath from her lungs. She knew those words were not for the crowd, the executioner, or the kingdom of Itziar—they were spoken to her and for her only, an admission of guilt.

Possibly even regret.

Aurelia's gaze remained trained on her mother as the cloaked man moved, faster than she could track. A lift of his hand, a sweep of the ax, and her mother's head was toppling.

She could barely breathe, the world around her blurring as if it weren't real, as if this nightmare were just a terrible dream from which she'd soon wake. And then, as her brain wrapped around what had happened, something inside of her broke, and even the roaring wind couldn't drown out Aurelia's scream.

A muffled sound slowly drew her attention away, toward where her father knelt. His face remained neutral, though she could see unbearable pain reflected in his dark brown eyes. It was the only feature she hadn't inherited from him, her own pupils the same shade of gold as her mother.

Or, at least, they had been.

That pit in her stomach grew, but she kept her gaze from wandering to the headless corpse of her mom. Watching her father grounded her, though she knew it wouldn't for long. Though there was no attempt at a struggle from her father, no pulling against his bonds, she knew it wasn't because he had some clever plan of escape. He had simply resigned himself to his fate, well aware that even if he ran, he'd never get very far.

Not when the executioner possessed *magic*. One of the few that had been permitted to live after the now-deceased king's massacre that had begun decades ago, one which his son now carried out in the present. Almost all in possession of magic had been put to death, no matter their age or station. Throughout the years, a few particularly powerful men had been spared, forced to swear a blood oath to the king and serve him, granted titles and land for their loyalty—including the executioner. But the women?

They were never given that same offer, never permitted to live.

Aurelia had never understood what a small group of dissenters hoped to accomplish against a man as powerful as the king, nor did she know why her parents had joined such a hopeless cause in the first place. After all, the Vassemond family hadn't lost anybody to the war, nor did any of them possess magic that would make them fearful of the crown. And, truly, what could they, two non-magic users, have possibly hoped to contribute? Was it simple heroism that had spurred them into action, consequences be damned?

Aurelia searched her father's face for some answer to her unasked question, something to make her understand why they'd been willing to risk everything, but he only offered up a sad smile as the gag was pulled from his mouth.

Unlike her mother his gaze did scan out over the crowd as if searching for something. Whatever it was, he must've seen it, giving the smallest of nods before turning back toward her with resignation in his eyes.

Unfathomable sadness swam there. "Look at the stars, Relly Belly. I love you."

The stars. She'd always loved them, had sat in her father's lap uncountable times as he'd explained the different constellations and their meanings. They had always brought her comfort, but before she could look up the executioner had acted. His imperceptible, *magical* speed caused the ax to slice through her father's neck as though it were made of cobwebs, too fast for her to make out.

Just like with mother, his head thunked to the ground first, then his body.

Aurelia wanted to cry out, but no sound came, her throat tight with a grief so deep it seemed to hollow her out from the inside. There were no aunts or uncles, no distant relatives she could depend upon to save her now. *She was all alone.*

Before she could fully process her new orphanhood Aurelia was hauled to her feet and shoved forward, stumbling to a halt at the center of the dais. Sticky red blood coated the wooden planks beneath her bare feet, and suddenly she wished the freezing rain had fallen even harder that night. Then at least it would've washed away the blood before she'd been forced to step in it, coating her skin in the essence of her parents.

It took everything within her not to look down, to keep her gaze out on the people before her and away from the headless bodies by her feet. Best as she could she stifled her sobs and attempted to harden her gaze, looking out at the crowd as though they were all beneath her. *She wouldn't let them get their kicks from any more of her tears.*

It was only because she was looking out that Aurelia witnessed it, the sudden shift in their demeanor. Noticed as the crowd's raucous cries died down, a hushed whisper falling over them.

An imposing woman cut through the crowd, two men flanking her. The citizens parted for this stranger as though she, too, possessed the old king's gift for instantaneous death by touch, all of them averting their gazes.

But Aurelia couldn't look away, confused at why everybody seemed frightened in her presence. The woman was beautiful, despite being sopping wet just like everybody else, and walked with a purpose. Her face was feminine, with soft grayish brown eyes and a rosy tint to her rounded cheeks; in contrast, though, the strange woman's bare arms were chorded with thick muscle, and she looked like she could rip a man entirely in two with her bare hands.

"And now, the auction of the rebel conspirators' daughter, Aurelia Vassemond!" Somehow the portly man appeared to have missed this change in the crowd, clapping his hands together in excitement. A thin soldier stepped forward and presented him with a silver key. "At ten years old, she may not look like much yet, but with the right training, she can be molded for whatever you desire."

He grabbed Aurelia's hair and yanked back, laughing at her surprised cry of pain. "Manual labor would be a waste with a face like this, especially knowing the body that'll grow below it." He let out a boisterous laugh, with a pointed glance at her mother's headless corpse. A fresh wave of grief washed over her, and Aurelia bit her lip to stop the tears from falling, knowing she'd be unable to stop them a second time. "Madame Lauer, with genes like these she'd make a fine courtesan. Or perhaps she could..."

His voice trailed off as the strange woman came to a halt in the front of the crowd, her eyes narrowed at the both of them. Fear quickly replaced the anguish Aurelia felt, some instinct within her urging her to *run*.

"Two thousand gold pieces, right now, for her." A gasp rippled through the crowd at the size of the sum. The taller of the two men stepped forward, opening an ornate chest that no doubt contained precisely that amount.

Aurelia's own experience with money was limited, but even *she* knew that was absurdly large. More gold than most people made in their lifetime. *By a lot.* Aman with eyes as black as his hair was openly gaping at the woman, a white-haired nobleman looked furious as he shook his head in complete disbelief, and a haggard-looking woman with a toddler on her hip was eyeing that chest with blatant envy.

Two thousand gold pieces. That was more than enough to not only buy a lavish home in one of Rhovell's wealthiest districts, but also entirely furnish it. People were killed over sums one tenth that amount.

So why was this woman spending it on her?

"Unless anybody cares to try and outbid me?" A savage smile spread across the intimidating woman's face, warping her innocent features into something that immediately stoked the fear in Aurelia's chest. *Run,* her heart hammered again.

Even if somebody had the funds to match, though, her gut told her they wouldn't speak up. Wouldn't *dare* to covet something that this terrifying woman already had her eyes on.

"You and I both know, Seraphina, that nobody will." The mustached man jerked Aurelia to her feet. She twisted her neck to look at him, frightened by the delight on his ugly face.

He tossed the key in his hands at the woman, one muscular arm flashing out to easily catch it. The man with the large chest stepped closer to the platform, placing the funds directly next to Aurelia on the red-stained wood.

Then he held out his hands as if to embrace her.

She blinked stupidly, frozen in place, until a knee in her back forced her stumbling forward and off the platform. Before her face slammed into the rocks the strange man had caught her, placing her bare feet on the pebbled ground a moment later.

The woman—Seraphina—handed him the key she'd caught, and he stepped behind Aurelia. Rain kissed her chafed skin as the manacles were removed, chains rattling to the ground.

"Aurelia, was it?" The scary woman held out a hand, trepidation rushing through Aurelia as she looked at an intricate tattoo inked into the woman's forearm. A glittering ebony dagger, countless scars raised on the skin around it.

"Yes," she managed to squeak out, trying her best to keep her head low and respectful. She reached out to shake the hand of her new master, her grief forgotten in the face of terror.

But Seraphina's other hand aggressively grabbed her chin, forcing it up until she was looking into the woman's eyes, the brown much closer to gray up close—like the color had been sapped out of it. There was no emotion within them, at least nothing that Aurelia could read. "Welcome to the Crimson Daggers, my pet."

Chapter 1

"So I'm thinking of asking Alys out."

The words were a whisper on the wind, spoken quietly so as not to carry from the roof. The stench of decay hung heavy in the air, mixing with the tang of old, rusted metal. The once-bustling industrial district had long since fallen into disrepair, its crumbling buildings and abandoned warehouses now serving as a haven for those who thrived in the shadows.

Spyglass in hand and still prone, Aurelia shifted slightly, her sharp eyes glancing away from the decrepit structure across the street and toward Maeveen. "You want to ask *Alys* on a date? Alys, with the red hair and matching eyes?" At her best friend's nod, Aurelia furrowed her brows. "You can't possibly be serious, Mae."

"What do you mean I can't be serious?" Maeveen huffed and stood, planting her hands firmly on the generous curves of her hips. Curves Aurelia had always been envious of, her own body much more accurately described as 'short and boxy' or 'off-puttingly muscular' in comparison. "Aren't I your best friend, Lia? Doesn't that come with unwavering support for all my decisions?"

It was generous of Maeveen to specify *best* friend, given it implied the existence of others. Truth be told, she was Aurelia's *only* friend, though even if there had been others, there was no doubt Maeveen would've ranked top of the list.

"Come on, she literally *looks* like a demon, and has the personality to match."

"Hence the phrase, *unwavering* support. Besides, I think she might like me."

Well that was no surprise. *Everybody* loved Maeveen's sweet personality, a rarity amongst the assassins that they were always surrounded by. And because of how much people loved Mae, they somewhat *tolerated* Aurelia, well aware that the two were a package deal. Had been so since day one, when she'd been dragged through the front door in her emerald silk, given a tattoo against her will, and shoved into a small bedroom where Maeveen had eventually found her.

Aurelia looked back through the spyglass at the house they were supposed to be watching. "I give you unwavering *loyalty* and call you out when you're being a fool—which is *exactly* what you're being right now." She tracked the movement of the four men inside as she spoke, their targets for the evening.

The men were a rough-looking bunch, each with the hardened expressions of seasoned thugs. But their background didn't matter, only their deaths. They stared at the table before them, pointing aggressively at various spots on a map sprawled atop it. As Aurelia watched, the tallest one downed a glass of the wine they'd spiked earlier and sloppily wiped his mouth, liquid dripping onto the paper. "That's the third."

"You said the same thing about the last three people I wanted to ask out, too, and they were all fine." A foot nudged Aurelia's ribs, and she wordlessly passed over the spyglass as Maeveen laid down beside her. "Everyone deserves a chance to be understood and cared for, Lia, even if they seem unapproachable. *Present company included.*"

There was that unwavering optimism again. "The fact you think as much just proves you're too good for all of them." With a hefty sigh Aurelia rolled onto her back, eyes scanning the constellations above. The stars were twinkling extra bright tonight, and she traced the constellations absently while Maeveen took over recon.

At least Seraphina had permitted her and Maeveen to take this mission together—a rarity that made the monotony of recon much more tolerable. "Look, Mae; you just have such a huge heart. But Alys..." Aurelia glanced sideways at her friend. "Well, she's ruthless. Plus, I'm quite certain she was born in the pits of the Inferno to Krizzari herself."

Maeveen's pinch was quick and sharp on Aurelia's bicep. "The fourth one just ingested the hallucinogen," she informed, pulling the spyglass away from her eye and collapsing it. Aurelia reached out a callused hand to grab the spyglass, tucking the tool back into her satchel. She pushed herself into a crouch. "And I think that's a bit dramatic, saying she's the spawn of the Demon Queen. Alys isn't *that* bad."

"Come on, she *literally* tortures her targets before killing them, even if she doesn't have to. And, even worse, remember when she shaved my head when I was out with that cold as a teenager? It took *five years* for it to grow back to this length!" That one had wounded Aurelia's pride significantly, especially since Alys had tied her locks up like a bow and left it in an envelope by her bed. "Not to mention she's got the emotional range of, like, a burnt piece of toast."

Maeveen rolled her eyes. "That's bold, coming from the Ice Queen herself." She also pushed onto her feet, squatting beside Aurelia. "Besides, who's to say she won't end up being just like you?"

"Just like me?"

Maeveen's smile widened. "A big ole softy."

"Call me a softy again. See what happens." There was no real malice to the words.

"*Softy.*"

"You're lucky I like you," Aurelia said, lightly smacking the back of her friend's head and standing up. As she straightened, she pulled her mask up over her nose, then grabbed a ribbon to quickly tie her hair back into a low bun. A few tendrils of dark brown fell out and framed her face, just barely too short and stubborn to pull back. "Just remember, Mae, if things don't go as planned and she's the embodiment of evil, I'll be here to console you. But, more importantly, to say, *'I told you so!'*"

"I'd expect nothing less." Maeveen let out a quiet, tinkling laugh. "My room or yours when you're done?"

"Let's do mine; yours is always a mess with all your clothes and books and letters."

"Shall I swipe a lemon tart for you on the way home?"

Aurelia smiled broadly at the proposal. "Obviously."

Maeveen nodded, pulling up her own mask and walking to a different edge of the roof. For a moment, the tawny-skinned assassin cast her gaze up at the sky, posture slightly relaxing when a small bird flew overhead, wings beating silently on a crisp wind. Aurelia had the stars to help her relax, and Maeveen her birds.

The moon glittering off the golden band around her ring finger, Maeveen saluted, turned and leapt across to the next building, leaving Aurelia behind.

With a roll of her eyes she turned, bent her knees, and vaulted across the street and through the window they'd been watching for the past three hours, arms crossed to protect her face from the shards of glass as it shattered.

Four men, all very clearly drugged at this point, stumbled as they took notice of her and tried to draw their swords. *Too slow*. Two daggers flew from her hands before their weapons could be unsheathed: the first embedded directly into the neck of the tallest man, the second into his skull, instantly killing him.

He collapsed to the ground with a loud thud while Aurelia spun on her heel, looking for the next target. This particular mission didn't call for silence or subtlety, just death. Thus, when the remaining three shouted for backup, she didn't bother stopping them, confident she'd be gone before anybody else arrived.

Grabbing two more daggers and giving them a twirl, she lunged forward. Slash. Jab. Throw. The motions were second nature, the men sloppy with their movements due to the drugs Maeveen had put in their wine. There wasn't much impressive about their shoddy swordsmanship, though; even without the drugs, Aurelia didn't think they would've posed a challenge.

The second man fell into the table as her dagger went into his eye and ribs, scattering the map and other pieces of parchment laid atop it. "You guys are no fun," she lamented with a sigh, reaching into her boot to grab her final—and favorite—dagger. Even in the darkness the ruby sparkled, inlaid into a golden pommel.

With a twist, Aurelia faced the remaining two men; both breathed heavily, stumbling toward her with compromised coordination.

She sighed. The hallucinogenic *really* took the challenge out of this.

Aurelia waited until one charged her, ducking and punching up into the man's forearm before stepping to the side. As anticipated, the sword flew out of his hand. She reached up to snag it out of thin

air and stabbed it through his back in one fluid motion, then tugged the weapon up through his ribs to ensure the strike was fatal.

One to go.

"Who are you?" the final man asked, lunging forward. His words slurred, and his slashes were way off the mark, making him unpredictable. He shifted his stance and moved to slash her from the right, only for the sword in his hand to unexpectedly twist. *To the left.*

Aurelia was barely able to swerve out of the weapon's path, the blade whizzing an inch in front of her face. A moment later, a chunk of hair fluttered to the ground.

Her hair, she realized with horror. From one of the loose tendrils that framed her face. *And it was long.*

Annoyed, Aurelia tossed the dagger into her right hand and lunged forward to slice it across his neck before he could recover.

Wiping the blade on her pants, she muttered swears under her breath and moved toward a mirror on the wall. Behind her, she could hear the man gargling, clinging to life with a final few muddled words that she didn't care to make out.

Aurelia's reflection frowned back at her as she came to a halt. The short lock of hair that had formerly touched her shoulder now stopped just shy of her eyebrow, awkwardly sticking out to the side. In a fit of annoyance she sliced the other side to match, immediately regretting the action as wispy bangs fanned out over her forehead.

She looked like she'd incurred the wrath of a vengeful hairdresser.

"Asshole," she grunted, striding back to the man and delivering a swift kick to his ribs. He wheezed, still alive, though experience told her death would come in a handful of seconds.

May he suffer through those final few breaths, the bastard.

Pinching her nose, Aurelia's frustrated had her moving toward the window, desperate to get home and try to fix this travesty, vain as it was. She climbed onto the sill, swiftly jumping toward the

cobblestone two stories below, absorbing the impact with a low squat and an easy roll. Straightening, she shoved her dagger back into the garter on her right thigh.

Her *only* dagger.

Shit. She glanced up at the windowsill, realization slamming into her. She'd left her other four daggers in the bodies of the men above, too distracted by her petty vanity to collect them before leaving. A part of her debated going back up to get them, but the longer she lingered, the more likely she was to get caught, and this whole thing was already enough of a mess without that particular inconvenience.

It was fine that the men were murdered, there'd been no requirement for discretion in the task. And her daggers had been purchased from a random vendor at the market, so it wasn't as if the soldiers would be able to track her from them.

And so, with a sigh, Aurelia faded into the shadows and began to head back toward the hideout.

A trip to the market tomorrow, then.



"No, really, I think it looks nice."

Aurelia's scowl deepened as she fidgeted with the short hairs, face close to the grungy mirror she kept in her room. It had taken a decade, but the cramped space felt a little like home, assorted knick knacks littering the limited space. "I can tell when you're lying, you know."

Maeveen put a hand dramatically to her chest. "*Me?* Why, I'd never." The faux-offense lasted all of two more seconds before her best friend snorted.

"Uh-huh. Just spit it out, Mae."

The facade fully crumpled as her best friend flopped back onto the bed in a fit of giggles. "You look *horrible*."

"Remind me again why I'm friends with you?" Aurelia gave the mirror one last look before sighing and plopping down next to Maeveen, who had rolled onto her stomach.

"Unwavering loyalty, as you established early, does not mean I protect your feelings. As for why you're friends with me, I would say my sunny disposition finally warmed your cold, dead heart, but—" Maeveen's grin widened, crinkling the thick scar that ran from her ear to her lip. "—in reality it's just because we were two kids scared out of our wits."

"Yeah, imagine how scared *I* was when you broke into my room that first night."

"Scared, eh? Nah, that can't be true, you don't have *feelings*, isn't that right?"

"I'm pretty sure I have feelings, Mae." Aurelia stuck out her tongue. "Like right now, I'm *feeling* like I want to wring your pretty little neck."

That only garnered more laughter. "I've been putting up with you for over a decade; if you were going to kill me, you would've done so long before now. Probably that first night when I startled you awake."

"Lucky for you, I hadn't been trained yet. Nowadays? You'd be done for." Aurelia ran her fingers across the tattoo on her forearm, the brand that announced to everyone who saw it how she belonged to Seraphina. How they *all* did. The dagger was so ruby red she was convinced it was tattooed with somebody's blood, rather than ink.

She still wasn't sure if it had been the pain or the trauma of the tattooing process that had knocked her out the moment she'd hit her bed that first night, but she recalled all too clearly how Maeveen's dark brown eyes had been curiously peering down at her when she'd finally awoken.

"Still can't believe you were so desperate for a friend back then," Aurelia teased. Maeveen laughed, rolling over to wrap her long arms around Aurelia's middle and pull her tight for a hug. Though she pretended to fight it at first, secretly, she enjoyed these moments between them, and promptly gave up the fake struggle.

"Crazy enough, Seraphina normally doesn't purchase kids. Not the best assassins, from my understanding." A dark chuckle from Maeveen at that.

"You don't—" An unexpected knock at the door cut Aurelia off, both of them sitting up straight in the bed.

Seraphina didn't bother waiting, opening the door and stepping inside the room—this was *her* house, after all. Even after a decade their master looked identical to how Aurelia had seen that night while kneeling on that executioner's block. Short brown hair, dull grayish brown eyes, thick arm muscles.

"I've got new targets for the both of you, separate this time." Seraphina's voice was sharp, the words concise. With an elegant flick of her fingers, Seraphina produced two scrolls and handed them over. "Aurelia, yours must be completed by tomorrow evening, but Maeveen, you can take a few days on yours."

Tomorrow? Aurelia had to stifle a groan. Was it impossible for her to get one damned day off in this accursed place?

Not bothering to even pretend they were worthy of any more of her time, Seraphina turned and walked toward the door, pausing by the cobalt-colored wood. "Oh," she called over her shoulder, a hint of warning in her tone. "I'll need your monthly dues by the end of the week." There was no need for her to threaten, *'or else'*; Maeveen had missed the deadline one time last year, and gotten a hot poker to the back for it. *Multiple times*, until she'd finally passed out from the pain.

Aurelia ran her hand over her thighs, tracing the scars she knew were beneath the fabric. Far fewer than Maeveen, though there was certainly no lack of them.

Once the door had shut behind Seraphina, the tension leaving with her, both girls let out a relieved breath. Aurelia fell back onto the bed and shut her eyes. "Gods, I hate her."

"Careful Ice Queen, that kind of talk is dangerous."

Aurelia reached behind her to grab a pillow and flung it at Maeveen's face, though it was caught out of the air before it could connect. "She doesn't have magical hearing, Mae. Besides, I only say these sorts of things to you, not anybody else."

"Sounds like you need more friends to vent to."

"Making friends sounds difficult, can't I just steal one of yours?"

Maeveen chuckled. "You could always chat with Ren, you know. It's nice, sometimes, to have an outside perspective on things, and I know he wouldn't mind writing to you."

Aurelia rolled her eyes. "I'll pass, you can keep your little pen pal for yourself." Maeveen had been chatting with this friend of hers since before her days as an assassin, way back when she'd been in training as a courtesan. Aurelia didn't know much about him other than that he lived south somewhere, but any time a letter came Maeveen was even more chipper than normal.

"Well if you change your mind, let me know. He pretty much knows everything about you at this point, at least how I see you." She smirked. "Says your little nickname around here fits, *Ice Queen*."

"You know, my apathy is what makes me better at our job than you."

"Yeah, true, you're the better assassin, but I help you be a better *person*." Maeveen reached over and affectionately patted her cheeks. "We're good for each other!"

"Yeah yeah, if you insist." Fondness flooded her heart, and Aurelia wished they could chat forever. It was so *easy*, talking with Mae. "Anyway, it's probably best to say goodnight now—I've got some studying to do."

The dismissal clear, Maeveen began to walk backward toward the window. "You sure you don't want to join me on the roof first?" she asked, holding out a hand in invitation.

Aurelia considered, then let out a disappointed sigh. "No, I'm sure. How about I meet you up there tomorrow night instead?" she proposed.

Maeveen gave a thumbs up in response before stepping out on the balcony and vanishing up the pipe beside it. With a resigned groan and one last wistful look out the window at the stars, Aurelia moved from the bed to her desk and began reading up on tomorrow's target. *The same as she always did.*