

Chapter 83 - Back Together

PoV: Jade

“She’s making you go to the 38th?! I’m going to fucking kill that bitch!” Sapphira raged, much as Jade had expected after breaking the news.

It had only been a few days since the big showdown involving Ela, herself, Sapphira, Ruby, and Vega, during which she had ended up becoming the official liaison between the Clawed Beasts—or rather, Vega specifically—and the enigmatic girl that went by Ela.

Jade had secretly hoped that Ela would simply forget all about it until Vega decided to offer her a mission, but unfortunately for her, it seemed she wouldn’t get so lucky.

Ela had definitely remembered; not just the agreement with Vega, that she’d allow Jade to continue to look over her shoulder and keep an eye on her, but apparently also the fact that Jade had somewhat betrayed her.

If the location that Ela was bringing her to was any indication, the girl still had some grudges.

While they had never really been in an alliance of any sort, or friends for that matter, the fact that she had spied on Ela was clearly a sore spot for the girl; much to Jade’s chagrin.

“You know that Vega won’t let you do that, Sapphi,” Ruby replied with her typical nonchalance.

“He wants that girl in his pocket, and I can’t blame him. You saw her just disappear from the office yourself. Let’s be entirely real here: Do you even *truly* believe you could kill her if you tried? We know absolutely nothing about her, except that even Vega is on guard around her.”

Jade was glad to have the level-headed Ruby in the same room for this, as her calm and logical demeanour always served as a balm for Sapphira’s more boisterous and hot-headed one.

When she had been called by Ela, the three of them had been relaxing in their shared apartment inside the Clawed Beasts’ territory on the 21st floor, so Jade hadn’t exactly had the chance to keep the fact that she was going to meet with the girl again quiet.

The moment she had ended the call, Sapphira had been all up in her business, asking what it was all about, immediately getting very overprotective of her—as per usual.

Now, she was simply looking from the sidelines as she gathered her equipment to meet Ela on the 38th, seeing Sapphira shoot a venomous look at Ruby, who simply met her gaze with a raised eyebrow as if to repeat her previous inquiry.

“Ah, fuck!” Sapphira finally conceded, kicking the nearby sofa in frustration. “I don’t know! Alright?! I don’t fucking know. But that’s the point, isn’t it? We don’t fucking know *anything* about that bitch! Except that she keeps putting our Jade in danger; how can we just let her do that? How can Vega?!”

Sliding the combat knife into its holster at her back, Jade turned towards Sapphira, ready to defend herself. “You know, I can look out for myself as well! You don’t have to always baby me like this! I spoke up during the meeting and got myself in this position. Vega trusts me to do this! So let me do this, Sapphi. You heard Ela during the talks too. She wouldn’t take me anywhere she wouldn’t go herself, and we’re literally meeting up there to go together. It’s just a pickup of some sort, so there’s not even any real danger involved...”

She deflated a bit at the end, as she didn’t actually believe most of what she had just said, specifically the part where she claimed there was no real danger, considering that she was literally being asked to walk around on one of the main floors of their rival gangs without any real backup.

But she still felt that Sapphira was being unnecessarily overprotective as she always was.

Sure, the last time Ela and she had been on a mission like this, she had nearly died, but those were different circumstances. She had simply messed up once—and that was primarily because she hadn’t gone with Ela but rather tried to trail her and failed miserably as she hadn’t fully understood the difference in their skill levels.

Jade had played through that entire series of events hundreds of times in her head by now, realising all the stupid mistakes she had made, to make sure they would never happen again.

Now that she didn’t have to worry about Ela finding out about her spying on the girl, however, the majority of instances where she had messed up the last time around were already removed.

Having to hide from two different sources was a lot harder than from one, after all.

Not to mention, Ela wanted to pick something up for some kind of mission, so it was unlikely that the girl would allow anything to get between her and her goal—which meant that, as long as Jade seemed eager to help out, Ela would likely be on her side for this.

A bit of wishful thinking, sure, but at least it was an educated wish.

Taking a deep breath, Jade finished packing her gear and headed for the door but was stopped by a worry-faced Sapphira, who pulled her into a bear hug.

“Don’t risk anything for this bitch, you hear me?” the tall woman mumbled into her hair from above, as Jade was pressed firmly into her chest. “First sign of trouble, you run and call us. We’ll be on standby. I’ll get Rico, Law, and Mivol ready as well, just in case. Promise me?”

Her voice completely muffled by her cheeks being squished into Sapphira’s bosom, Jade replied, “P’omi’sh!”

With one last squeeze that robbed Jade of her breath, Sapphira finally let her go, sending her stumbling back and breathing heavily—her face flushed and slightly sweaty from nearly getting choked to death.

“You need to stop doing that to Jade, Sapphi,” Ruby chastised, lounging on the large sofa and watching TV. “You’re gonna end up actually suffocating her at some point, you absolute blank.”

“I would never!” Sapphira immediately replied, her face a picture of shock.

Turning towards Jade, she added, “Jade, tell her I would never! You’re fine!”

Dodging past the incredulous, stunlockd Sapphira and out the door, Jade rushed down the stairs and yelled back, “Sorry, Sapphi, I gotta go! Don’t wanna be late!”

She heard a final “Jade! Tell her!” echoing from the staircase as she left the apartment building and hurried toward the elevator that Ela had designated as their meeting place, a big grin plastered on her face.

Sapphira had her moments of being overprotective and annoying, but she only meant well. It was reassuring and endearing to know that her big sister always had her back, even if it was a little suffocating at times—sometimes quite literally.

Her worries about the mission were squarely laid to rest for now, thanks to her sister’s antics, so she could fully focus on making sure she didn’t mess anything up unnecessarily.

On the way to the elevator, she quickly prepared an emergency message to Sapphira, Ruby, and Vega, just in case. She had promised her sister, after all.

And if there was one thing Jade was sure of, it was that breaking promises was a big no-go between sisters...

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Her nerves returned with a vengeance as the elevator ascended towards the 38th floor.

Jade double-checked her gear, making sure her hood was properly covering her hair and casting the rest of her face in shadows so no Red Snakes or Golden Phoenix members would be able to identify her at first glance—not that they should be able to anyway.

Much like Sapphira, Ruby, Citrina, and Emira, she wasn’t exactly a public figure of the Clawed Beasts.

They were Vega’s “pet project,” as the higher-ups liked to offhandedly insult them.

But that was fine with Jade. Better the higher-ups underestimated them than be forced to be part of the gang nonsense that got them nowhere.

Vega’s plans were a lot larger than that, and to realise them, he needed a group of elites to make things work from the shadows—Jade and her sisters.

While it sometimes led to issues with members of the Byte Wolves and Clawed Beasts as well, since Jade and her sisters couldn’t exactly pull any rank outside of name-dropping Vega, more often than not, being unknown was more of a help than a hindrance.

It was what Jade was banking on in agreeing to meet up with Ela for her mission.

She could, theoretically, have refused the offer to accompany the girl, but that would have brought with it quite a number of consequences that she couldn't quite foresee herself yet.

She had put herself in this situation when she had spoken up during the meeting with Vega, completely taken aback by the fact that Ela had somehow managed to get Vega to owe her something before the two of them had ever even met.

So she would have to see this through now, one way or another.

As the elevator dinged and the doors slid open, Jade took a deep breath and stepped out onto the 38th floor for the first time. She kept her head low but scanned the area carefully, both to look for Ela and to keep an eye out for any potential Golden Phoenix or Red Snake members that might get her into trouble.

The 38th floor was a bustling market, but one that was held in stark contrast to the one on the 21st floor, that Jade was most familiar with.

Directly opposite the elevators, a myriad of shops and stores lined the wide walkway thoroughfares, their neon advertisements flashing prominently. Unlike the 21st floor, which featured a lot of stalls, this floor opted for more sophisticated methods of selling equipment and gear to people.

Her eyes caught on a number of store names and symbols, each with vibrant displays showcasing their offerings.

The majority of stores in her field of view peddled clothing and equipment, their holographic ads highlighting the latest in tactical wear and high-tech gadgets. However, a few rare ones appeared to be straight-up weapon shops, causing Jade to raise an interested eyebrow.

She hadn't known that the Golden Phoenix and Red Snakes had connections allowing them to openly present weapon stores on their floors.

'Vega undoubtedly knows about this; but I should let my sisters know, at least,' she thought to herself as she made a mental note to mention it to Sapphira and the rest.

As Jade blended in with the crowd, she continued to scan the area.

The people here moved with purpose, creating a dynamic and slightly chaotic atmosphere.

The air was filled with a cacophony of voices, the hum of neon lights, and the occasional sharp bark of a vendor trying to attract customers. The smell of various street foods from the rare food stalls near the thoroughfare wafted through the air as well, mingling with the scent of people and the musk of clothing.

She searched for Ela for quite a while, her nerves causing her to jump at every little sound and movement. Just as she was beginning to worry she might have missed her, a hand landed on her shoulder, making her startle and move to defend herself.

She almost pulled out her knife when she heard a familiar voice.

“Good to see you made it, Jade. Let’s go,” Ela said, her tone calm and composed.

Jade let out a shaky breath, releasing the tension in her muscles and pushing the knife fully back into its holster. “Yeah, sure,” she muttered, falling in step beside Ela as they navigated through the throng of people.

“Sorry about that,” Ela replied coolly. “Feared I’d lose you in the crowd.”

‘Yeah, right. Like that would fucking happen,’ Jade thought to herself, annoyed at the girl’s obvious lie. Ela had undoubtedly scared her like that, just to reiterate the standing between them; Jade being the one that had been invited to the ride-along, with Ela being in the lead.

They weaved through the crowded thoroughfares, Ela leading the way with seemingly practised ease. Jade followed closely, trying her best to emulate the girl’s downright effortless movement through the crowd, as her eyes were still darting around, taking in the various stores and the people milling about—scanning for any potential threats.

But luckily, she found none that were immediately problematic to her. While her eyes managed to snatch on a few obvious gang members; wearing the colours or even insignia’s of the Golden Phoenix and Red Snakes, none were close-by or paid her any attention.

As they continued to make their way to their destination, Ela slowed down and glanced back at Jade. “Remember, we’re here to pick something up and get out. Keep your head down and your eyes open. Got it?”

“Got it,” Jade nodded, despite feeling a bit confused.

‘Why the fuck did she tell me that now? Is she worried that I forgot why we’re here or something?’ she thought to herself, trying to make sense of Ela’s sudden reiteration of their game plan. *‘And “Keep your head down and eyes open”...?’*

A realisation dawned on her that made her flinch slightly, hunching down just a bit further to try and blend in with the crowd even more. *‘Fuck! She must’ve seen somebody looking at me for longer than necessary! How did I mess up like this already?!’*

She bumped into a couple of people as her thoughts spiralled, before she managed to catch herself and focus back on dodging the myriad of people in the thoroughfare, following behind the hooded figure of Ela, who seemed to wade through the crowd like she was made of water.

Jade’s frustrations rose as they continued moving through the floor, feeling like she was being made fun of by the other girl. Despite them being seemingly around the same age, Jade had long realised that Ela was worlds beyond her own skill level in a lot of things.

The fact that she struggled to keep up with the other girl inside the crowd, while Ela refused to even consider slowing down, was downright infuriating.

'Do you want to show off and have me fuck up on purpose or something?! What the fuck is wrong with you; slow the fuck down!' Jade cursed out the other girl inside her own mind, breathing heavily as she focused down even further on dodging the vast number of people in the thoroughfare, trying to keep up with Ela, who seemed to just speed up every time she managed to get closer.

Finally, Ela veered out of the crowd ahead of her, and the two of them slipped into a narrow alleyway between two stores nearby, the sounds of the market fading slightly as they moved further away from the main thoroughfare.

The dimly lit alley was a stark contrast to the bustling market-street outside, the air cooler and carrying the faint smell of damp concrete and haphazardly discarded trash.

Ela abruptly stopped as they got about twenty metres into the alley and turned around, pulling back the hood of her cloak to reveal her strikingly colourful hair, a mix of hues that Jade still thought were utterly ridiculous, considering their price tags.

"Alright, so here's the plan," Ela started without giving Jade any time to think. "We gotta head to a store called Salt 'N' Guns; it's about three blocks south-west of us. I need to pick up something from that location, so I want you to help me keep an eye on things and warn me if you see anything suspicious."

As if struck by an idea mid-rundown, Ela interjected herself and asked, "Any Golden Phoenix or Red Snakes members that might give us trouble, that you know of?"

Jade was caught off-guard by the abrupt question but tried her best to think of anything that could help; she didn't want to be dead weight on this mission, lest Ela decided she wasn't cut out to be the liaison between her and Vega after all. She had already messed up her very first solo mission from him once, and she wasn't about to do it again.

"None that immediately come to mind for this floor," Jade replied after a brief moment. "Their heavy hitters are usually closer to the contested floors, in case somebody starts shit. I'll admit I've not been to the 38th before, so I'm not too versed in who might be here and who might not. As long as we keep a low profile, get in and out quickly, we should be good."

Ela stared at her briefly, almost making Jade fidget under the intense gaze, before nodding to herself.

"Good, good. Very good. Yeah, we can work with that," she muttered, turning away for a brief moment as if to check something, then turning back to continue her rundown.

"I have a passcode for the drop-box at the shop. The owner's working with us, to a degree. So we just swoop by, open the box, take the stuff, and leave. It should be simple; just stay on your guard, yeah?"

'Is she worried I'll mess it up again? Is that why she's giving me another rundown?' Jade thought to herself as she looked at the other girl's face—a perfect mask of coolness plastered on it.

'Great. You mess up once, and everyone thinks you're a complete blank!'

“Yeah, should be easy,” Jade replied, trying to mirror the coolness in Ela’s voice. “Get there, get the stuff, leave. Easy enough.”

Ela nodded multiple times, a weird tick that Jade hadn’t noticed before.

Then, Ela removed her cloak and gestured for Jade to do the same.

“We’ll be too conspicuous walking up to a gun store in hooded cloaks. Best if we lose them here. Pack the cloak away or just toss it. We’ll pretend we’re just friends out shopping and interested in taking a shooting class or something,” Ela ordered, crumpling up her own cloak and packing it into a small backpack she had brought.

Jade cursed under her breath, realising she hadn’t thought about bringing anything like that.

She ended up taking off her cloak and folding it into a thick scarf, draping it around her neck.

The light cloth of the cloak thankfully wasn’t too problematic to wear this way.

As her eyes darted back up, she took in Ela’s mission outfit up close for the first time—not counting the time the two of them had run for their lives and were being riddled with gunshot wounds, of course.

The girl was wearing a sleek, practical, and surprisingly sturdy set of clothes, with a bandolier of dangerous-looking throwing knives attached to her chest. They were mostly hidden underneath her top, but Jade still caught a glimpse of them while the girl was packing away her cloak.

On her back, much like Jade herself, she had a holster for a combat knife as well.

What struck Jade the most, however, was that every piece looked downright pristine—like this was the first time she had brought any of it out, which, for all intents and purposes, might be true.

Ela had been playing her cards close to the chest so far, clearly hiding a lot of her assets, connections, and skills. It made sense that she’d only now start showing off some of her better gear, now that both Ela and Vega were aware of each other’s presence in such a way.

Jade felt a bit out of her depth with this whole situation, but she reminded herself that Ela, despite the gap in their skills, was still around her age—unless she truly was some kind of black-project corpo agent that just looked like a teenager through some messed up experiment or another.

What truly unnerved Jade, however, was the fact that the girl was packing some serious heat in the form of those throwing knives. While she was usually more afraid of guns in general and Ela seemingly only had five knives on her person, Jade had seen first-hand what the freakish girl could do with random scrap picked up from an alley.

Her hand was still not fully healed from where the random shrapnel the girl had thrown at her captors had pierced straight through—a painful reminder of the true level of danger this girl represented.

She didn't even want to imagine what kind of destruction Ela could wreak with those throwing knives she had holstered.

'I really hope we don't run into anyone... That girl's a loose cannon. She straight-up murdered those guys that caught me; no hesitation at all,' Jade thought to herself apprehensively, remembering Ela's words during the discussion with Vega.

'I don't have much sympathy for a lot of the trash in the Golden Phoenix or Red Snakes, but they're mostly just kids with nowhere else to go—much like any kids joining gangs in this city. I would hate to see them die just because they ran into this lunatic on the wrong day...'

Her thoughts were broken when Ela ushered her forward. "Let's go. No more time to waste."

Jade continued to follow Ela through the alleyways of the 38th floor for another ten minutes, until they stopped again between another two stores. She had kept her eyes open the entire time, carefully scanning any and all people on the streets whenever they crossed into another alley.

Most of the time, they were ignored, but a few times, eyes had followed them.

It was to be expected, really, considering that two teenagers were just rushing from one alley to another—it was bound to draw some kind of attention from somebody; but Jade figured that Ela had it under control.

She was the expert, after all.

When they finally stopped, Ela turned to face her, her expression as cool and composed as ever. "Alright, this is the spot. Salt 'N' Guns is just up ahead. Stick close, we'll play teenagers looking to get some lessons on guns. Just pretend we're friends; should be second-nature to you."

Jade almost flinched at those last words, but when she scanned Ela's emotionless facade, she realised that it had been meant more as a compliment—not any real bad blood between them for the brief period she had posed as Aki.

"You got it," Jade replied, nodding earnestly. This was something she was good at, Ela was right.

Hooking her arm into Ela's, she felt the girl tighten up for just a moment as their arms touched—likely a natural defensive response from the experienced infiltrator. The two of them headed out onto the street, leisurely strolling towards the nearest store.

"I think you could really do with a new pair of shoes, Mabel," Jade said, gesturing towards a pair being shown on an advertisement in one of the screens of the store in front of them.

"You've been using these truly horrendous boots for quite a while now. Don't you think it's time to be more fashionable?"

Ela seemed to freeze up momentarily at that, likely surprised by how natural Jade had taken to the role, before she finally answered, almost mumbling, “I don’t—I like them. What’s wrong with my boots...?”

Jade noted how sad and offended Ela’s voice sounded and couldn’t help but be impressed at the girl’s ability to conjure up such immaculate emotions on the fly.

‘She’s good... Very good,’ she thought to herself with a bit of bitterness.

She had always been one of the best at the interpersonal charade compared to the rest of the sisters, so she had hoped to have finally found something that she was unequivocally better at than Ela, but now, it seemed that Ela was also an expert at this.

Jade wasn’t going to give up this easily on her specialty, however.

Ela *had* to have a weak spot in her skill set somewhere.

The girl was too young to be an expert at absolutely everything, corpo black-site project or not.

“Oh, come on, Mabel,” Jade replied with some fake exasperation. “Have you even been hit on by any boys since you started wearing those boots? What kind of guy would want someone with such trash taste in shoes, huh? Do some thinking, girl! Look at those, they would be way better!”

She pointed at one of the advertised pairs of shoes, a garish neon-yellow colour with medium-sized heels underneath. They were absolutely hideous, of course, but Jade was just trying to keep up the conversation. They’d move on to the gun store soon after.

“You... You think they’d suit me better?” Ela replied, her voice drenched in a level of uncertainty that made Jade envious.

‘How does she do it?!’

“Absolutely! Although I think a teal or a cyan would work better, considering your hair,” she replied with an eager nod, obviously looking around the place as if to search for anyone to drag into the conversation and onto her side—secretly just to keep an eye on any potential gangers, of course.

Ela remained silent for an awkwardly long time—really selling the uncertainty from before—until she finally spoke up again, “Ah—! Maybe another time. Let’s go to the gun store and get that lesson. Dad said he wouldn’t let me try the Mirik until I had a certificate of attending at least one class.”

Breathing a theatrical, loud, and defeated sigh, Jade let herself get pulled toward the Salt ‘N’ Guns store by Ela, trying to come up with another cover story or two, should the owner not be as much in Ela’s pocket as the girl might have thought.

Planning for too many things and overthinking was one of Jade’s specialties.

She'd make absolutely sure this mission was a success, or at the very least, she wouldn't be an obstacle. The interaction just now was a good start, but they were far from done with Ela's collection mission...