

## ATTENTION READER

What follows is an excerpt of the book *Solemn Vow* by Emma K. C. Couette, releasing to the public on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. I have made the the first three chapters of the book available for free ahead of time here on my website as an introduction to *Solemn Vow*.

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Thank you for your understanding.

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ALSO BY EMMA K. C. COUETTE

**The Guild Trilogy:**

Silent Night

Sacred Ruse

Solemn Vow

**The Fidalian Chronicles:**

Summer's Revenge

## TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains content/themes that may not be suitable for all readers, including: death, graphic violence, suicide, scenes of intimacy, strong language, abuse, manipulation, alcoholism, family trauma, and mental health issues.

Please read at your own discretion.

*To Allan, the Ajax to my Quinn.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Haven City, 08/2110

Jax

**The city is dark**, the world slowly shedding one day's skin for another. The streets are silent, empty, and still, except for Blake and I. We race through the dead of night, our footsteps echoing loud and clear.

*Oh God, please don't let it be too late.*

We found Quinn's note twenty minutes ago, after we'd left the hospital. We figured she'd probably had enough time to calm down, after seeing the state Trey was in. Honestly, I don't know why I was surprised to find her room empty. I even understand why she went after him, but gods above, why didn't she take us with her? Did she forget what happened last time, how close to death the both of us came? We only escaped with our lives because of Trey and Kuen,

both of whom are currently indisposed. What was she thinking?

And did she really think we wouldn't find Sephtis' crumpled note in the garbage? For a professional assassin, that was an amateur move. She must be losing her touch. Then again, she was weighed down by so many emotions, I doubt she was thinking straight.

Blake and I run towards the opera house on the far side of town, where Quinn is meeting with the most dangerous man in this city.

*I've never been much good at this, saying goodbye, Quinn's note had read, and this won't be goodbye, if I have any say in it.*

*Not if I have any say either.*

*Hold on, Quinn. We're coming.*

## Quinn

In spite of everything, I'm not afraid to die. Death and I have met several times now, though I've never stayed to chat. No, I am not afraid of dying, but I'm not ready to leave.

I swallow back my screams as the Demon's Breath serum is forced into me, not willing to let Sephtis have the satisfaction of seeing me crumble. Never will I fall before him. I may die when this is all over, but not without taking him with me. We go out together or not at all.

The serum burns as it seeps into my bloodstream, but I remain still, as if accepting my fate. Sephtis pulls the syringe out and I gasp at the sudden chill that strikes me.

"Feel that?" Sephtis says, grinning. "That's the sensation of your fate being sealed. Oh, I can't wait to see what your

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monster will do." He takes a step back and I remain defiant, eyes stabbing into his.

"This day isn't over," I tell him.

He frowns. "What?"

"You told me to say goodnight, but I won't, because I'm going to fight this. If you think you've won, you're horribly wrong."

"You can fight it all you want, daughter," he scoffs, "but it will get you in the end. There is no escape."

I refuse to believe that. I will find a way, and when I do, he will be sorry.

"Say hello to your friends for me," he goes on, "that is, if you don't kill them on sight." He flashes his white teeth and then turns on his heel and walks away, disappearing into the depths of the opera house. A few minutes later, I hear the sound of a door closing and know he is gone.

All my bravado falls away and I slump against the door, or as much as I can with my own knife still shoved through my forearm. God, the pain is unbelievable, a burning and a dull ache all at once. I don't dare look at it to assess the damage—that'll only send me into panic mode—but I know from experience that there is a significant amount of blood pooling on the floor, and, if I don't do something, the blood loss will kill me before I ever have to worry about the virus.

I take a few deep breaths.

*Guild, this is going to hurt.*

Then I close my eyes, reach across with my right hand, and curl my fingers around the hilt of the knife.

*Just get it over with, I urge myself. One... Two... Three!*

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I wrench the knife out of my flesh and grit my teeth at the sudden, burning agony as I stumble forward, nearly falling to my knees before I catch myself.

*Steady.*

I can feel the blood, hot and thick, spilling twice as fast from the wound now. Ignoring the protests in my mind, I risk a glance at it.

*Assassins below...*

It's not a clean cut, that much is certain. Sephtis must've twisted the blade as he shoved it in. I shudder at the thought. Blood coats my arm from elbow to wrist, the gash in between the two.

I rotate my arm to inspect the other side.

*There's so much blood...*

As an ex-assassin, I should be used to it, but I'm not accustomed to being on the receiving end of the violence, and when I am, I usually pass out before I can realize how serious the injury is. That being said, if I don't find something to wrap this up quickly, I *will* be unconscious. Plain and simple.

I press my hand against the wound, the pressure multiplying the pain tenfold.

*You've been through worse, I remind myself. Much worse. Hell, you're missing half your leg and almost drowned to death. Get it together.*

I stumble down the main aisle of the auditorium, the blood loss already blurring my vision and stealing my strength. My arm burns, but everywhere else my veins are ice. The serum isn't painful, but it's uncomfortable and I don't like that I can actually feel it spreading.



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I drop to my knees in front of the first assassin I killed tonight and tear off the bottom half of their shirt. They're not going to need it anymore. I rip another strip and use it to clear away some of the blood before wrapping the larger piece around my arm in a tourniquet, thanking the gods that it's my left arm. I may be an ambidextrous fighter, but even I couldn't manage a proper tourniquet with my non-dominant hand. I use my teeth to pull the other side and cinch it tight, gasping at the sting.

The strip of cloth turns crimson in seconds and my head spins.

Worry sinks its teeth into me.

*What if this is how it ends?*

*It can't.*

Sephtis wouldn't have dealt me a killing blow with the plans he has. Would he? Yet, maybe his mind is so far gone that he didn't realize what he was doing, didn't realize his mistake.

*Oh God, please.*

I sink to the floor beside the dead assassin, my worn and weary limbs splaying out. I fight to keep my eyes open, but my lids are so heavy... My breathing slows as I fade.

*No.*

My eyes close.

*No, I'm not afraid to die, but this can't be the end. I'm not ready.*

I might have imagined it, in my half-dead state, but as my consciousness leaves completely, I swear I hear someone calling my name.

Part of me begs to be saved, for whoever it is to reach me in time, while the other part of me fears what might happen if they do.

Perhaps it is best for me to fade into nothing, to end the chaos before it begins.

### Jax

The front doors to the opera house are wide open when we arrive. They scream “trap,” but there’s no time to find another entrance. Quinn could be dying inside. At an unspoken signal, Blake and I slow to a walk and draw our weapons. My rifle is a familiar and reassuring weight in my arms. Blake swings her axe absentmindedly.

“What’s the plan?” she whispers.

The streets around us are dead. A storm last night finally succeeded in dampening the rest of the fires and we stand in the leftover puddles. Thick clouds block out the moon. Blake’s face is lost to the shadows, but I know the expressions she wears.

“Don’t get caught, find Quinn, save her, and get out,” I reply. “Don’t die.”

“Sounds foolproof,” she muses.

“Come on, we’re wasting time.” I usher her forward and together we creep into the dark, foreboding opera house, brushing away huge cobwebs as we go.

Silence greets us. It’s the silence of a tomb, the kind of silence that speaks of dark and unholy things. Something happened here, that much is certain, something horrible. Even in the dim light it is easy to see how grand the building had

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once been, but now the bright red paint is faded, the golden door trim dry and cracked. Off to the side, a ticket booth still stands though its glass is shattered. Shards litter the floor around it.

No one jumps out of the shadows to repel us, and it makes me wonder if there's anyone left to do so.

"Quinn!" I yell. I know it's unwise, but I don't care. Nothing answers but the echo of my voice.

We reach the doors to the auditorium still unscathed, and that is when I know for certain that whatever happened is over and whoever was involved is either long gone or dead.

*Maybe Quinn's not even here, I tell myself. Maybe she escaped.* Yet the knot in my stomach won't let me believe that.

The doors are locked and I notice a slit in the wood where a knife must've gone through. The smell of iron is heavy in the air. I'm not sure I'm ready to see what lies beyond that door, but I have no choice.

I take a deep breath, aim at the lock, and fire. The bang echoes through the entire building, painting a red-hot target on our backs if anyone is listening.

Blake kicks the doors in the rest of the way, revealing a truly gruesome scene, lit by the broken chandelier high above. "Gods," she breathes.

My sentiments exactly.

Bodies litter the floor, some draped awkwardly across the cracked leather seats. I can't see any from where I'm standing, but I know that blood spatter must decorate everything. Various weapons lay discarded beside their owners, having been useless to protect them from whatever had cut them

down. A glass cage stands atop the stage, and it gives me pause, until I see the man lying in a heap in front of it.

“Avery?”

*Vyrin, I remind myself.*

Avery Norin, leader of the Resistance, was a farce. Still, after serving beneath him for years, the sight of him dead gives me a start.

*What the hell happened here?*

“Quinn,” Blake says, breaking me out of the spell.

“What? Where?” I ask, but Blake’s already down the aisle, dark braid flying behind her.

I sling my rifle over my shoulder and tail after her. No one is there to steady me when I slip and lose my balance, landing in something sticky and wet.

Cold dread seeps into my bones. I hold my hand up to my face and shudder at the crimson droplets adorning it.

I’m lying in a pool of blood.

*Gods, there’s so much of it...*

“Jax!”

I push myself to my feet and try to ignore the blood painting me, try to ignore the memory of a similar experience when it was Bast’s life on the line instead. I keep my gaze off the crimson carpet beneath my feet as I walk to where Blake is kneeling beside Quinn’s broken and bloody form. The slow rise and fall of her chest is the only thing keeping me from screaming.

*Why are you so stubborn? Why did you insist on going alone?*

I drop to my knees on her other side and put a hand to her face.

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“This wound on her arm could be fatal if we don’t get her home, and fast,” Blake says. “She’s lost so much blood.”

Blood that we’re both covered in now, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t care. She is alive and we’re going to make sure she stays that way.

I pull off my shirt and rip it in half, tying the two strips around her arm, side by side, overtop of the one she tied herself that’s now soaked through.

She whimpers in her unconscious state as I pull the cloth tight.

“It’s okay,” I murmur. “We’ve got you. It’s going to be okay. We’ve got you.”

Her breath hitches once and then settles.

I slide my arms under her and lift her up, getting awkwardly to my feet. She’s ice cold.

Blake puts a hand against my shoulder to steady me.

“We have to hurry,” I say.

“Agreed.”

“My hands are full. So if we meet any trouble...”

She nods, her gaze steady and centering. “I’ll watch your back.”

She always does.

Quinn is a dead weight in my arms as we leave the carnage of the opera behind and step back into the silent streets. A breeze snakes through the night and I shiver.

*I’ve got you, Quinn. We’re going to get you home. Just hold on.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Quinn

**My head feels fuzzy** when my consciousness returns, like the static of an old radio. My limbs are like bricks and my eyes don't want to open. It's as if they're sewn shut. Even still, I think I'm awake, though it's hard to tell when every sense is muted and I'm not aware of my surroundings. The sensation is suffocating, like the glass tank situation all over again, except this time, I have no idea what's going on and there's no one here to save me.

*Am I dead? Is it all over?*

*Of course not, I chide myself. You're stronger than this, and if you can question your existence, it's a pretty good sign you're not dead yet. Pull yourself together, Quinn. Don't you dare give up this fight.*

*I won't.*

There are too many people who need me: Jax, Blake, Bast, Trey, and even Kuen.

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My heart misses a beat when I think of Trey, and that, more than anything, convinces me that I'm alive. I just have to wake up.

*Trey, I repeat to myself. Trey who is your sister. Trey who saved your life. Trey who sacrificed everything to warn the Resistance of Vyrin's plot.*

Thinking about her hurts, and I focus on that pain, praying that it will bring me back to reality.

*Trey who is dying.*

*Because of you,* a dark voice in my head adds.

*No!*

I slam my fist against the bed.

*Oh my god, the bed.*

I can feel the sheets beneath my skin and the light weight of the ones on top of me. I did it. I uncurl my fist, relishing in the movement.

*"Quinn?"*

My head is settled now, and the voice is loud and clear. It's Jax and I know that I am safe, but for a moment, I wonder if he is.

*Say hello to your friends for me, that is, if you don't kill them on sight.*

I wince at the memory.

I feel fine now, but how long will that last? Will I lay eyes on Jax and leap for his throat? Part of me wishes I had stayed unconscious, but it would only be delaying the inevitable. I will just have to see how things play out. Vyrin did say the virus affects everyone differently. Hopefully I can keep it at

bay long enough to talk to Jax, long enough to tell him I'm okay, for now.

*One moment at a time, Quinn, I remind myself.*

Finally, I open my eyes and study my surroundings. I'm lying in bed in an all-too-familiar hospital room, the pink wallpapered walls still as plain as ever. I'm not hooked up to any machines at the moment, but they're all standing against the sidewall as if waiting for me to start dying again.

Jax is sitting on the edge of the bed, his blue eyes boring into mine.

"Hi," I say, relieved that I don't want to kill him, yet.

"Next time you try to get yourself killed," he replies, "I'm not coming to save you, understand?"

I wince but don't blame him for a second. "I..." I start, but he holds up a hand.

"I wasn't finished," he says. "Next time, I won't be coming to save you because next time, I'll already be there by your side and it won't be a suicide mission. Is that clear?" His tone is stern, but I can sense a hint of warmth beneath it.

"I'm sorry," I reply, "I never meant..."

He runs a hand through his hair. "Don't apologize, Quinn, just promise me you won't do it again, that I don't have to spend every waking moment wondering if you've run off to your death. I'm not angry with you. I want to be, but I'm not. I just..." He half clenches his fists, but then lets his hands fall, as if whatever he was trying to catch isn't worth holding onto.

"Why don't you trust us?" he goes on. "Why can't you let us help? How do you think running off on your own will solve anything, especially when you were so shaken and tired



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from everything that had already happened? You've tried one on one with Sephtis before. You might not remember how that went, but I certainly do. We can't beat him like that and it's pointless to try. Why can't you see that?"

"I..." I don't know what to say. It feels like we are constantly coming back to this, back to the discussion of my stupid mistakes, but if I can't own up to them, I will never grow. If I can't own up to them, everything will be for naught.

"I think that after two failures, it is safe to say I won't attempt this again," I reply.

Jax's shoulders slacken.

"And it's not... I don't have a death wish, Jax," I tell him, trying not to think of the death warrant now flowing through my veins. "I did once, but you've helped me see that living is worth it, that this world and these people are worth it. I didn't go to meet Sephtis because I wanted to die, but I think you're right; I think my mind was so clouded after everything that I wasn't thinking straight, and I was afraid. Dammit, it sucks to admit that, but it's the truth.

"I was afraid that no one was safe, now that he'd snuck into our base, into my *room*. Who knew what might come next? I wanted to protect all of you, especially after...after Trey. I couldn't watch anybody else die because of him. That's why I went alone. You guys have already been through so much. I didn't want to lead you into any more danger."

Jax shakes his head. "Quinn, I would *gladly* follow you into danger if it meant keeping you safe, keeping you alive. God, I don't want to lose you, dammit. Can't you understand that? You're not protecting me by flinging yourself onto the guillotine. I'd rather die..."

"I know. I know you would."

"And after everything we've been through, you'd leave me with a body and a note?" His voice breaks and I'm shocked when tears start falling down his face. I've really done it this time. The sorrow in his eyes runs bone deep.

"Jax..." I start, but I can't go on. I have no idea what to say.

Jax doesn't notice. He swipes viciously at his tears and continues on, heedless of the ones that continue to fall. "I held it together during the train battle. We were still new and I probably could have survived without you, though I never wanted you to die.

"I came back for you during the Guild battle because I knew that I *couldn't* let you die, not when the last words I said to you had been so harsh, and when we were put in that tank... It crushed me, but I was relieved that we would die together because at that point I realized I couldn't live without you.

"When your leg almost killed you, parts of me died with every passing second. God, I thought *that* was painful. I thought *that* was the first time I felt real fear..." Jax laughs. It is an awful, chilling sound.

I am beginning to see where he is going with this, and my heart constricts as I piece his story together.

"All of that was nothing, *nothing* compared to the agony and terror I felt when I read the letter you left us, when I found that note crumpled up in your garbage can. It felt like my heart had been crushed in someone's fist, because it was the first time I wouldn't be there to help you. You'd gone in alone and no one had your back... And all you left me was a

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single ink paragraph. *I'll be home soon*, you said..." He puts a hand to his face, trying to dry some of the tears, but his cheeks are slick with them and his shirt is spotted with droplets. He swallows slowly.

"You said you'd be home soon, and do you know how Blake and I found you?"

I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"We found you lying on the opera house carpet like a broken marionette doll. I've seen a lot of horrifying things in my life, but that night will forever be burned in my memory. It's there every time I close my eyes. So don't you dare talk about protecting me. I'd rather die than go through that again. Do you hear me? I will not be left behind with a dead girl's words for company. We leave this world together or not at all."

I am stunned into silence by the sheer force behind his words, the agony. I don't think I've ever heard Jax speak with such fervour, with such fear. If I ever questioned his loyalty before, the past few minutes have eradicated all doubt. Jax is willing to die with me. I want to fold into his arms and never move again. I want to kiss him senseless because he is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, but I can't. He's still angry with me, and I... I have yet another secret I can't bear to voice.

"I'm sorry," I say again, realizing how empty those words are, how weak they always are. "I hear you; I hear you loud and clear. I won't... I won't do it again. I promise."

He shifts where he sits, blue eyes locking with mine as if trying to see through a lie. "You better be telling the truth," he replies, "or God help me..."

The threat remains unvoiced, but it hangs in the air between us, daring me to invoke it. I pray to any god that listens that I remain true to my word.

Jax takes a deep breath to clear his head and says, "All that aside, I'm glad you're okay."

"Me too," I reply. "Thanks for saving me, again."

"Don't mention it." I take that to mean, *Please don't bring the matter up again.*

"How many days?" I ask.

He scrunches his face as he thinks and then says, "Three? You had to get a blood transfusion, which was difficult, given the state of the hospital. You were lucky to get one in time."

His words bring back the memory of that bloody night at the Resistance. Assassins everywhere, bodies multiplying, walls painted crimson... A shudder works its way down my spine and I cinch my eyes tight, hoping to dispel the horrible images flashing through my mind.

"But," Jax goes on, "on the bright side, we didn't have to amputate your arm."

I breathe a sigh of relief. *Thank the gods.*

"So I won't have any lasting damage?"

"Fortunately, no," he replies, "though if you don't take it easy for at least a week, there will be. Not to mention the fact that I will strangle you if you don't show some sense of self-preservation."

"Right. I'll do my best."

"You better."

I pull myself into a sitting position, swinging my feet over the edge of the bed. The sudden motion makes my head whirl, and I grasp onto the mattress to steady myself, fingers digging

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into the sheets. I hang my head down and close my eyes again, begging the world to stop spinning, breathing in through my nose to dispel the nausea building inside me.

Jax reaches out and grasps my shoulder. His warm hand is calming and I feel the sickness fading. "Quinn? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I reply. "I think I moved too fast. Guild, I'm getting too old for this."

Jax laughs at that and I manage a smile.

"How are the others?" I ask, opening my eyes and lifting my head to meet his gaze again. "Is the Resistance secure?" I'm almost afraid to hear the answers.

"The others are okay, as much as they can be, I guess," Jax says. He swings his legs up to sit properly beside me.

"Jenson's out of the infirmary. He's been having a bit of a rough time coping with the sudden turn of events, but I figure he'll be back into game mode in a few more days. He wants to see you when you're ready."

I nod. I figured as much.

"Natalie is being released today," Jax goes on, "and Bast only stayed the night. He refused to stay longer, even when Blake threatened to break his other shoulder." Jax shakes his head, grinning at his best friend's stubbornness.

"So he did break his shoulder then?"

"Unfortunately," he replies. "He cracked it in a couple of places, but he escaped surgery and all the hassle that goes with that, somehow. Shirley only prescribed him a sling and copious amounts of pain medications. On the other hand, he won't be picking up a bow anytime soon, if ever again."

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I grimace. Poor Bast. If I lost my ability to sword fight or shoot a gun, I'd lose my mind. "Is he okay though," I ask, "like in spirit?"

Jax waves a hand. "Oh yeah, he's been in a great mood, making all his jokes, driving Blake crazier than usual. I'm so glad they finally admitted defeat. Everyone could see it but them. It was agonizing."

I laugh. "I know, right? I wanted to strangle both of them. They were so stubborn."

"Reminds me of someone else I know," he replies, giving me a pointed look.

I elbow him in the ribs and then wish I hadn't.

"Assassin's below," I gasp, "that was the bad arm! Ahhhh... That kills." I grit my teeth against the searing pain and it dissipates after a few moments.

Jax's brow crinkles. "What with the amount of pain medication you're on, you shouldn't feel anything yet. Odd that it would wear off already."

I glance at him. "Maybe it was the sudden movement?" I suggest, but deep down, I blame the virus. It must enhance pain for a while before it fades that emotion out completely.

"Maybe," Jax allows, but his frown dissolves into a grin as he adds, "Speaking of pain meds... I wish you'd been awake when they first gave Bast some. They got the dosage all wrong and he was drugged to the point of delirium. Nothing harmful, mind you, but apparently Bast is very sensitive to medication, unlike alcohol. He kept going on about fluffy bunnies and talking flowers..." Jax laughs. "It was priceless."

"Oh my god," I reply, grinning along with him. "That sounds hilarious. Remind me to tease him about it later."

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“Oh, I will; I’m never going to let him live it down.”

My injured arm twinges again and I take a moment to study it. Bandages wrap tightly around it from just above the elbow to the wrist like a paper cast. Faded spots of blood mar the otherwise pristine white fabric. A dull, throbbing ache emanates from the centre and the severe wound they no doubt stitched up.

I wiggle my fingers, testing my freedom of movement. Everything seems to be working still, which is a miracle. I was expecting nerve severance, but I’m glad to see my expectations haven’t been met.

“I’m lucky, aren’t I?” I ask Jax.

He gives me a solemn look. “More than you know, Quinn. That dagger went right through your arm. You’re stitched up on both sides, and eighty percent of the blood in you right now is not your own. By all accounts, you should be dead, but somehow you refuse to give in. You keep fighting, and that’s why you’re still here. You’re resilient. The afterlife keeps trying to claim you, and you spit at its feet, daring it to try again.”

His eyes light up in admiration, and I know what he’s thinking.

“You stubborn, reckless, beautiful girl,” he sighs. “You’ll be the death of me. You know that, right? And yet, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I lean involuntarily towards him, touching my forehead to his.

He closes his eyes and breathes me in.

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“Don’t worry,” I whisper, “I won’t let it claim you. You’re mine.” I grab his collar with my good hand and pull him to me.

Our lips meet and all control slips away, along with my worries. Nothing else matters. His fingers tangle in my hair and mine dig into his shirt, trying to bring him even closer, never wanting to let go.

Our breaths come in ragged gasps and I find myself wishing we could spend all our time like this, but it’s a selfish wish. There are so many things we have to do, so many people counting on us to lead the way. Silent Night would’ve said to hell with everyone else, but I am no longer that girl, and my responsibilities weigh heavy on my shoulders.

*Make no mistake, Silent Night, you will destroy this city, but not before you’ve destroyed yourself and everything you love.*

I break away from the kiss with a jolt and nestle my face into Jax’s shoulder, trying not to shudder. He rests his chin on the top of my head and wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. We are both breathing heavily and my heart is thudding wildly in my chest.

God, when I left a few nights ago to confront Sephtis, I was afraid I’d never get to do that again, that I’d die with the taste of his lips a distant, fading memory.

Now, I’m afraid that I’ll kill him.

“Are you okay, love?” Jax says softly.

“I am now that I’m with you,” I reply, but for how much longer, I don’t know.

He chuckles, and I force a smile even though he can’t see my face.

“I love you, Jax,” I whisper.



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"I love you too, Quinn, more than you know."

## CHAPTER THREE

**The two of us** have a few minutes to talk before a nurse attendant comes in to check on me. I'm used to seeing Shirley, but after the state the base was in when I left, I understand why she's not here. There are much more dire injuries for her to deal with, many more patients to attend to. The young girl doesn't say much, but she does at least look me in the eyes when speaking to me, which I appreciate.

She goes through the whole routine and then claps her hands together lightly. "Well, Ms. Ballinger, your vital signs are looking wonderful, and I think you'll make a full recovery. Lana will be in later to check on your mobility, but I've been asked to notify Jenson when you woke. Are you okay with seeing him now? I can postpone him a little longer if you need more time."

I take a deep breath. As long as Jenson doesn't say anything stupid, I should be fine. Nothing has happened yet.

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I smile at the girl. "I should be good to see him now, but thank you for asking; it's not often that I get a choice in the matter."

Jax laughs.

The girl smiles awkwardly before saying, "Well, I'll be back in a moment then."

Jax turns to me when she's gone. "Are you nervous?"

I shake my head. "Jenson doesn't bother me anymore. I think in a lot of ways we were both wrong about things, and also right. I'm glad the Resistance has him, especially after what happened to Avery."

Jax frowns. "I can't believe he was in league with Sephtis this whole time."

"Just be lucky the entire Resistance wasn't assassins in disguise or we would be screwed."

He nods solemnly, and there's a knock at the door before we can say anything further.

"Come in," I call.

We turn to watch as Jenson walks into the room. I get a glimpse of the young nurse walking away before the door shuts behind him. Jenson looks more worn than I've ever seen him. Grey hairs are woven through his familiar gold strands, and there's a certain defeat behind his eyes, but he still attempts a smile.

"Good to see you, Assassin," he says. "For a skilled warrior, I do believe you spend more time in the hospital than any of my other soldiers."

Jax snorts at that. "Tell me about it."

Even I crack a smile. "Touché, Jenson, touché. I'm not going to bother explaining why I ran into danger again, the

story is quite old I'm sure. I suppose there's another reason you wanted to see me anyway."

He nods and walks closer to the bed. There's a chair on the far side of the room, but he ignores it. "I want to know what happened at the opera house. Who attacked you and why? Ajax told me Avery is dead."

"Vyrin is dead, yes," I reply, reminding Jenson who he truly was. "Sephtis shot him when he arrived. I was expecting my father from the start, as per his note to me, but I should've known he'd lead me on before showing his face. Vyrin was a distraction, so that I wouldn't be ready for the true battle."

Jenson rubs his chin. "Why would Sephtis kill him? They were brothers. They had just executed the perfect attack."

I hesitate.

*How much of the truth should I tell them? Would Jenson have me killed if he knew what Sephtis has done to me?*

I feel fine at the moment, but...

I bite my lip. If Vyrin had made more of the virus, I would tell them in an instant, but seeing as I'm now the only carrier, I don't want to worry them yet. Sephtis and Vyrin may have been lying.

"Ms. Ballinger, are you okay?"

I shake my head to clear it. "Yes, sorry. It's been a difficult few days. The answer is simple: Vyrin had outlived his usefulness. There was no point keeping him around once the ruse was revealed, and besides, Sephtis wants no competition in the end. Vyrin was pretty arrogant himself. I wouldn't have put it past him to attack Sephtis directly, so Sephtis took care of the threat before it could even manifest."

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Jenson shrugs. "I suppose, but what did it all have to do with you?"

I snort. "That's even simpler. He wanted me dead and he knew I might be weak enough to get the job done that time, what with everything I had gone through — Trey's condition, the attack on the base... He knew I would want revenge and so he lured me out into the open."

"And you just went?" There's a scolding in his tone but also a silent acceptance, as if he didn't expect anything different.

I hang my head. "I wanted to end it, Jenson. I know it was...foolish, and I know I shouldn't have gone alone, but I did what I did. I just hope I can learn from it."

Beside me, Jax sighs. "You and me both."

Jenson huffs a breath in amusement. "Well, Assassin, it never is a dull moment with you, I'll say that. Did Sephtis reveal anything to you while you were with him, any inklings of his future plans?"

I shake my head, again refusing to acknowledge the virus. "Nothing concrete, I'm afraid, though he assured me he wants us all dead and that he'll be ruling over the ashes of Haven soon enough."

Jenson rolls his eyes. "Arrogant bastard." He clenches his fists and then brushes his palms against the side of his pants. "Well, it's not much to go on, but we'll keep fighting. I'll be calling a meeting shortly to discuss our next steps. At the very least, we can surprise the Master Assassin when he finds out you're still alive."

Jenson grins and I force one of my own.

It was never Sephtis' intention to kill me, at least not yet. Letting me die might've been more of a thorn in his side. I suppose time will tell though.

"I will see the two of you later then," Jenson says. "Please try to be careful who you challenge in the future, Assassin. I have few good soldiers left."

I catch the faintest smile at the edge of his lips before he turns and heads out the door, closing it gently behind him.

I smile at his back. "The old man is growing soft."

Jax shrugs. "Like I said, he's been through a lot lately, but he didn't ask how you were doing, so he hasn't gone that soft."

I laugh. "Very true. I guess if I'm still breathing, that's good enough for him."

The two of us talk for a few minutes before the door opens and Lana—my old physiotherapist—walks in. I look up, and Jax shifts over so that he's sitting at a more respectable distance.

"Lana?" I say.

"Ms. Ballinger," she replies, clasping her hands behind her back. "I trust you're doing well?" Her blonde hair is less styled than usual and there is an exhaustion behind her eyes that I've never seen her wear. This city saps everyone of their strength; it is only a matter of time.

"I'm doing great," I answer, "luckily." I give her a sheepish smile.

She nods. "How's the arm feeling? Any pain? Any restriction of movement?"

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"It feels better than I expected actually," I reply, rotating my wrist back and forth a couple times. "There's a dull ache in the wound, but I can move my fingers and everything just fine." I decide not to tell her about the sharp twinges. It'll only prolong my stay, and I doubt she'll be able to do anything for it anyway.

She smiles, the light returning to her brown eyes a bit. "That's wonderful news. We were worried there for a while, but you've pulled through yet again. We'll get you some more medication for the pain. Be sure to read the label and take the doses as ordered."

I nod.

"I trust Mr. Forrester will keep an eye on that?" She looks pointedly at Jax, and I frown.

It's true that Lana makes me think of my mother, but I'm not a child. I don't need a babysitter.

"I'll watch over her," Jax assures her. "Quinn is in good hands." He smirks at me and I blush despite myself, resisting the urge to elbow him again. It wouldn't do my still-healing arm any good.

Lana claps her hands together. "Well, everything is in order then. I'd like to see you tomorrow around six o'clock to take another look at your arm and give you fresh bandages."

I perk up at that. "Wait, I'm not confined to this room indefinitely?"

She frowns. "Of course not, you're free to go as soon as you're ready."

"Thank you so much," I say, surprising even myself. I must loathe the infirmary more than I thought.

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Lana smiles. "Don't thank me, thank Shirley. She's the one who made the executive decision. She said it was high time we trusted you and that the only person who can convince you to take it easy is yourself; anyone else merely has a death wish."

I laugh at that, and even Jax joins in. Guild, it's amazing how much that cantankerous old nurse has grown on me. I guess that's what happens when someone saves your life multiple times instead of threatening it. Aside from that, I think we both have an understanding of one another. She knows I will do whatever it takes to accomplish my goals, and I know that no matter what I do, she could never be afraid of me. Shirley is fearless. I wish I could say the same for myself.

"Well then," Lana says, "I'll grab the medication and leave you guys to it."

She disappears for a minute, returning with a couple bottles which she hands to Jax.

I scowl.

*I am not a child.*

I glare at her back as she walks out, and then I say, "Shirley might trust me, but Lana certainly doesn't."

Jax raises an eyebrow. "How do you figure that?"

"She gave the pills to you, not me."

"I wouldn't put any stock in it, Quinn. It's probably just a safety measure. Your injuries might've muddled your brain a bit, so it's safer that I hold onto these." He shakes the bottles.

My scowl deepens. "Are you implying that I'm mentally ill?"

He holds his hands up. "I would never..."

"You're a liar, Ajax Forrester, and a terrible one at that," I reply, leaning over to poke my finger into his nose.



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He laughs. "And you're the most stubborn individual I've ever met."

"What do you say we get out of here?" I ask, ignoring his comment. "I'm sick of this place."

"That makes two of us."

He jumps to his feet and I follow suit, albeit slower, careful to dispel any nausea. My body has been through so much these past few months, and the deterioration is starting to show. I just hope I can end Sephtis' life before mine crumbles to dust, before the serum takes away everything that makes me human.

I shudder.

"What's wrong?" Jax has stopped in the doorway, waiting for me to follow.

I know he can sense the fear in my stance, but I also know that now is not the time or place to tell him about what's running through my veins. I just escaped death again; I can't tell him that it might have been for naught, that it might have been better for everyone if he'd let me die. The news might kill him.

Instead, I force a smile and assure him I'm fine.

He recognizes the lie for what it is but doesn't press the issue. He trusts that I'll tell him when I'm ready, but I'm not so sure I will this time.

I'm not sure if I can bring myself to do it.

As soon as we step out of my room, the sights and sounds of the hospital assault me. The place is filled to the brim with the injured and dying. There are even stretchers sitting in the halls, and I immediately feel guilty over my private room. We

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pass by people with missing limbs and eyes, people with pale skin and head bandages. The smell of death and blood is thick in the air, like a solid wall of pain.

And then there are the sounds. I'm not sure which is worse: those screaming in agony, those crying over their loved ones, or the comatose patients lying in their beds silent like the grave has already claimed them.

I am glad when we leave the hospital behind.

We head to my room so I can change out of the hospital gown. People stare as we pass, but I pay them no heed. My various states of disarray are practically a given at this point. If they're not used to it, that's their problem.

Jax takes my hand in his, and we continue on without a word, my metal foot tapping along the floor as I walk.

I close the door to my room behind me, leaving Jax in the hall, and sink onto the bed. Relief floods through me as the rest of the world is locked out, but the room no longer feels as safe. The evidence of Sephtis' visit may have been removed, but the atmosphere has changed. I know safety is but a figment of my imagination, and I won't sleep deeply again until Sephtis is dead and gone. Maybe not even then.

How is it that one man can incite so much fear? I used to relish in the terror I caused, but it had been nothing compared to the nightmare Sephtis was and still is. I always had the capacity for change; Sephtis will take his ideals to the grave.

I sigh and shuffle over to my closet, perusing the options. My heart yearns for the comfort of black, but I settle for one of the grey outfits instead, silencing the darker parts of me. I pull on the suit, smiling at the ragged end above what used to be

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my knee. When I try to tug it over my arm though, it gets stuck on the bandages and starts to pull.

I suck in a breath at the sharp pain that follows and stop.  
*I guess the sleeve is going too.*

I grab my mattress knife and try my tailoring skills again, tearing the right sleeve off just past the elbow. The outfit looks even more lopsided now, but the arm slides on with ease.

“You can come in now, Jax,” I call out.

The door doesn’t make a sound as he enters and comes over to stand beside me. He regards the torn arm of my suit.

I wonder if his gaze lingers on the ink that is now visible.

“Maybe you should start ordering them that way, instead of shredding perfectly good fabric,” he muses.

“Maybe you should mind your own business,” I retort, but my smile ruins the effect I’m going for.

“On the other hand, the ragged look does suit you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“That you, Quinnifer, are a whiny little assassin who asks way too many questions,” a voice that is not Jax’s replies.

We look over to see Bast leaning against the door frame, his one arm hung in a loose sling. The sight of him makes me smile and yet chills me to the bone at the same time.

*I will kill you, but not until you’ve watched all your friends die.*

Maybe Jax won’t be the first. Maybe it’ll be Bast or Blake or Kuen...

I shake my head to clear it and turn back to Bast.

“Well,” I say, “if it isn’t Sebetha.”

He grimaces. “That’s a new one.”

“You like it?”

"Not a chance, Quinnby."

I shake my head. "It's good to see you, Bast."

"Same to you. Glad to see you're still kicking around, taking up all of Jax's time..."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Well, I hear you're keeping Blake rather busy."

Bast's face turns scarlet. "That's not... What I mean to say is, we..."

I've never seen him tongue-tied. The novelty sends Jax and I into a fit of laughter.

"I'm just teasing, Seb," I say when I sober up.

"Oh shut up," he mutters.

"Speaking of," Jax says, "where *is* Blake?"

"Talking with Jenson and Natalie last I heard," Bast replies, brushing his hair out of his eyes. His brown curls are even wilder than usual, sticking up around his ears and tickling the edges of his eyebrows.

"Whatever for?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Apparently, she's helping Natalie tell her tale of woe to Jenson. I guess her highness is too fragile to do it on her own."

"I don't blame her, Bast," I say. "She's gone through a lot."

He cocks an eyebrow. "Are you feeling okay, Quinnby? Because I think you just defended her."

"I'm fine," I sigh. "You weren't there for it, but Natalie and I have...reached an understanding. We may have had our differences, and we'll certainly never be close friends, but if we want to survive what's coming, we're going to have to work together."

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Bast narrows his eyes at me. "Who are you, and what have you done to Quinn?"

"Oh shut up."

He grins. "Fine, whatever you say, but I'm not about to start bowing in her presence."

"Neither am I, Bast," I reply. "Honestly, who do you take me for?"

"Would the two of you cut it out?" Jax says finally.

"You're exhausting."

I give him a look. "You're just upset at being left out."

"As if," he scoffs.

"Don't worry, Jax man," Bast says. "You don't have to be jealous. I'm not going to take your girl. Broody assassins aren't my type."

He shrugs and I go to smack him, but we both stop mid-motion as pain lances through us.

"Stupid shoulder," he spits out through clenched teeth.

"Ah, fuck, my arm," I gasp at the same time.

"Language, Quinn," Jax chides, smiling. "You two make quite the pair, actually."

We both scowl at him.

He sighs. "Come on, let's get you two invalids something to eat."

"Wouldn't mind if I do," Bast replies. He all but skips out of my room and down the hall, despite his injury.

I smack Jax in the arm with my good one and say, "Watch your tongue."

He smirks and we follow Bast out.

A few minutes later, Bast freezes and turns around. "Wait a second, who are you calling an invalid?"

Jax and I share a look before erupting with laughter once again.

...

The cafeteria is silent. No one looks up when we enter and our chatter turns to whispers to match the mood of the room. The place is full of haunted faces, picking at the food, sitting alone at tables that used to be full. It reminds me of a tomb.

I notice an elderly man at one table with a long, fresh scar down the side of his face. He was too old to fight this war but too brave to stand aside and watch it happen. At another table, a young woman eats a bowl of soup, holding the spoon at an odd angle. Her right arm is in a cast, and I realize she must be right-handed.

No one in the room appears unscathed, but there are precious few people to scrutinize.

Is this all that was left? How many agents had lost friends, family? How many were betrayed and left in the dust? How many had to kill people they would've died for?

"Jax?" I ask as we head over to our empty table with our food.

"Yeah?"

"How many did we lose that night?" There's a tightness in my chest, a need to know despite the pain the answer might bring.

He grimaces. "Too many, Quinn, far too many."

Bast nods. "From what I've seen, the majority of those left are still in the hospital, and a fair amount of them will soon be joining the death count."

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“Assassin’s below, why do we always have to lose? Why do good people always get punished?” I slam my tray onto the table.

Around the room, a few people jump, but nobody looks in my direction. Everybody is so comatose. They need to wake up, or we’re going to have no chance at winning this war.

Jax places his hand over mine. “Take it easy, Quinn.”

I take a deep breath and let him pry my clenched fingers from the tray, taking my hand in his.

He squeezes it. “We’ll figure something out; we always do. We’re not about to roll over and die. As long as we’re still fighting, we still have a chance. Don’t give in to the voice of doubt. That’s what Sephtis wants. He wants you to feel helpless.”

*But I am, I am helpless, and when this virus hits, I’ll be powerless to stop it.*

I glance at the tray I slammed against the table. Was that the start of it? Was the aggression beginning already or was that the normal me?

*How am I supposed to tell the difference?*

My legs are shaking, and Jax squeezes my hand again to steady me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, willing myself to still. “A lot of stress lately.”

Bast snorts. “Isn’t that the understatement of a lifetime.”

He’s right. I think I can count the number of stress-free moments I’ve ever had on one hand. Yet, positivity is the root of success, right?

I take another deep breath and sit down at the table.

We eat in silence for the most part, Bast breaking it a couple times to lighten the mood with idle chatter. I start to relax, if only a little, but the calm ends when Blake enters the cafeteria, Natalie in tow.

I'm glad to see everyone together again, but I can't help thinking that every additional person in my midst will be another casualty when I finally snap.

Bast's eyes narrow in their direction, and he sets down his fork. "This should be fun."

I give him a look.

"What?" he asks. "I haven't forgotten the way she treated you, or the way she treated Blake."

I sigh. "I know, but everyone...everyone deserves a second chance, and if I got one after everything *I've* done, then certainly Natalie can."

He rolls his eyes. "Whatever you say, Quinn."

I sigh again.

Jax squeezes my knee under the table as Natalie and Blake approach.

"I was hoping I'd find you guys here," Blake says with a smile. "It's good to see you healed again, Quinn."

I nod. "Thank you for coming for me."

"Well, I couldn't let Jax go alone. He might've run into another burning building."

Jax winces at the jab.

Natalie is hovering behind Blake as if unsure of her place, but Jax saves her.

"I see you've brought a guest?" he says.



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“Yes,” Blake replies, “and, well, I understand that we’ve all had a great deal of animosity with each other, but I think it’s time to move past that.”

“You really think we can all forgive and forget?” Bast demands to know. There is a rigidness in him I haven’t seen before.

Natalie flinches, and from the look on Blake’s face, I can tell Bast is going to get an earful later.

“I think it would be a crime to forget,” Blake says, “but we can certainly forgive. This world could use a little more forgiveness, a little more kindness.”

“I, for one, agree with that,” I say, raising my glass.

Blake smiles and so does Natalie.

Bast says nothing.

“Sit down and stay a while, would you?” Jax says.

Blake plunks down beside Bast but doesn’t look at him, and Natalie perches on Blake’s other side, a spooked bird ready for flight.

I stab a hunk of watermelon with my fork, and somehow, that breaks the tension.

“So how was Jenson?” Jax asks Blake. “He came to see Quinn earlier, but it was a short visit, and I didn’t get a good read on him.”

“Much better,” she replies. “His confidence has returned, and he’s cleared his head a bit. I think he’s realized that wallowing in our own pity will do us no good; we have to keep moving forward.”

“He never once suspected the betrayal,” Natalie adds, surprising us all. She looks up at us with wide eyes, as if she didn’t mean to speak, as if expecting a blow.

I only nod. "He trusted Ross; that wound is going to run deep for a while. He's going to blame himself, but he's not the only one who fell for the act."

Natalie looks at me. "I told him the truth. All of it."

I raise my eyebrow. "What did he say?"

Natalie grimaces. "He threw a stapler at the wall and then told me he was sorry."

I think back to our conversation in his hospital room, about how he had promised to protect every child of the Resistance, about how he had no choice but to cast me aside after what I almost did to Natalie.

It must've broken his already battered heart to hear that Natalie hadn't been safe in years.

"He said..." Natalie pauses. "He said that he wishes he'd been stronger, that I hadn't had to deal with such a life. He asked for my forgiveness."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him there was nothing to forgive. I told him that if he was weak, then he wasn't alone in that weakness. I didn't speak up about the lies any more than he allowed himself to be blind to them."

I nod.

There's a silence at the table for a minute, the kind of silence that wraps you up in sorrow and regret.

*You could've done something*, it whispers, yet you know nothing can change what happened.

"So he didn't doubt your story at all?" I ask her. "He believed everything you told him?"

"He asked questions, but he didn't *question* it. He told me that he made a lot of bad decisions when it came to trust and

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that it was about time he made some good ones. I think... I think he regrets the way he treated you."

"We've both made mistakes," I reply, "but like Blake said, we need to move past that if we want any hope of winning this war."

Natalie's eyes light up. "You really think we can still win, after everything?"

I shrug. "I think we'd be fools not to try, and if I am to die, I want to die fighting, don't you?"

She nods, and in that one movement, I see a different side of her. I see a strong young woman who is willing to fight for herself instead of cower in the shadows. I see an ally. I told Bast that we'd never be friends, and that much is true; we've given each other too much grief for that, but I see in her a fellow soldier ready to fight. I see hope.

"Speaking of Jenson," Blake says, "he's requested a meeting with all of us as soon as we're available."

"And by all of us, you mean...?" Bast asks.

"The five of us at this table," she replies, "and he wants to speak with Kuen."

I blink. "He wants Kuen in the same room as him after all the death threats Kuen gave him? Did he hit his head during the battle?"

"I mentioned that to him," Blake goes on. "He said he's aware of the danger, but that he also recognizes Kuen is an asset and that he is willing to take a risk if it means a better chance at saving us all."

"Are you *sure* he didn't hit his head?" I ask after a moment, and our table dissolves into laughter.

“Well, if he did, Quinnby,” Bast says when he sobers up, “then we better thank the gods for it because he is so much easier to deal with now.”

I smile. “I guess so, Bast. I guess so.”

“So who wants to find Kuen?” Blake asks.

I sigh. “I’ll do it; I’m probably the only one he can stand to talk to these days.”

“True enough,” Blake replies. “We’ll finish eating and meet you two at the Council room.”

“Sounds good to me.” I get up and grab my tray.

Jax mirrors me, and I raise an eyebrow in question.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” he says, but the look in his eyes tells me he has something he wishes to discuss.

I deposit my tray on the counter, and he follows me out into the hall, the two of us stopping to the side of the doors.

I cross my arms. “What is it?”

He narrows his eyes. “How did you...?”

“I have a pretty good read of you now, Mr. Forrester,” I tell him, crossing my arms. “Nothing gets by me.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I just wanted to...prepare you I guess is the word.”

I raise an eyebrow. “For?”

“Kuen is going to be in the hospital, Quinn, with Trey.”

*Oh.*

My heart clenches.

He places a hand on my shoulder.

“She’s not getting any better, is she?” I say, my head hanging low.

He shakes his head, the sadness in his eyes profound.

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I realize then that Trey means as much to him as she does to me. When I first met her, she'd called him kiddo. They were close, and she saved both of us. Kuen and I aren't the only ones losing a sister.

*Losing her...*

I'm not ready to let go. We haven't had enough time, but it's selfish to beg for more when each minute only brings her more suffering.

Jax touches my chin, jolting me out of my thoughts. "Are you okay?"

I take a deep breath. "I can handle it. After everything we've been through, the least I can do is not run away from her. How long... How long do you think she has?"

He shakes his head. "The doctors won't say, but for her sake, I hope it's soon. No one deserves that fate."

I take a deep breath. "Hopefully, no one else will have to face it again."

"Are you sure you'll be okay with Kuen? I can come with you, if you want."

"I'll be fine," I reply. "I doubt he'd be all too happy to see you. If I know him at all, he partially blames you for her state."

He frowns. "How?"

"You protected me that day and stood by my decision."

"Wouldn't he blame you too?"

I grimace. "Yes, but... It's not the same. I don't know how I know that, but I do."

He looks into my eyes. "I trust you."

I smile sadly. "Thank you."

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He wraps me in a quick hug and says, "I'll see you in the council room then. Stay safe."

"I will. See you in a few."

I hope against hope that my words are not a lie.

Thank you so much for reading this excerpt!

I hope you enjoyed this small taste of Solemn Vow and that it has enticed you to pick up the full book when it releases this February 23<sup>rd</sup>.

You can preorder it now in ebook and paperback at my website below and enter to win some big prizes in my presale giveaway.

Emma K. C. Couette

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Emma Couette* is a Canadian wordsmith whose second passion is wood working. She has written a few award-winning short stories and dabbles in poetry when the inspiration strikes her. Her dreams include travelling the world, being a mom, and owning a small library. *Solemn Vow* is her fourth novel, the conclusion to the Guild Trilogy.

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