

Chapter One

Jax

The city is dark, the world slowly shedding the skin of one day for another. The streets are silent, empty, and still, except for Blake and I. We race through the dead of the 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 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 that we wouldn't find Sephtis' crumpled up 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 even 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 said, 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.*

. . .

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 assuring weight in my arms. Blake swings her axe almost 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 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 it's 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 and reveals 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 just 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 of the main aisle 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.

"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've got your back."

She always has.

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.