

# SACRED RUSE

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The Guild Trilogy book 2

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## **Chapter One**

*Haven City, 06/2110*

In the end, death comes for us all. Even assassins are not exempt from its cold, eternal embrace. I knew my time would come, but I never thought I'd die like this.

I don't bother to hold my breath; I let the water flood me. My lungs scream, expecting oxygen and receiving tidal waves. They rage against me, both inside and out. I've lost the feeling in my limbs. I've stopped fighting.

A part of me resents my choice, wants to live, but I don't remember what life is like. I don't remember anything. Death and frigid water are all I know and they carry me, slow but sure, into the dark.

Something is beating on my chest, a constant rhythm of stabbing pain tearing me away from oblivion. I don't know much about Hell, but it should be a lot more painful than this and if, by some twisted luck, I'd managed to slip into heaven, there should be no pain at all.

*I should be dead.*

*Why am I not dead?*

The pounding quickens, becoming more urgent, and I hear distant voices.

*Get up, I will myself. Life is a gift; you better take it.*

The next blow slams into me and my eyes fly open before fluttering shut again. The voice comes into focus. Someone is screaming.

I go to answer, recognizing they are calling for me, but instead, I choke on the water and bile that spews out of my mouth.

Someone rolls me onto my side.

"Oh God," they breathe. "Oh Guild, you're all right. You're going to be all right. Just get it out." I recognize the voice, but it takes me a second to place it.

*Trey.*

Trey is here. She saved me.

I throw up again and her voice is there to comfort me. My thoughts swirl in my head as my shredded brain tries to piece together the details of the life I almost lost. Tragedies play behind my lids as I continue to wretch. Darkness invades my thoughts; a life of horror takes up residence in my memories once more and then....

A face. A bright face and memories bursting with light and heat and love.

A name.

"Ajax," I gasp and then I hold back a scream.

My throat feels as though it has been skinned with rusty knives. The pain moves to the front of my mind and I lose myself to it. My lungs heave with the effort of drawing oxygen into their ravaged cells. My entire body shakes. Pricks of agony flare up in random places with no warning.

*Oh God, I'm dying.*

Finally, mercifully, the pain fades. It doesn't disappear, but it becomes something I can manage.

"Ajax," I say again, ignoring the fire it ignites in my throat. My voice is raspy and sounds nothing like me. I would laugh at myself, but that would only cause more pain.

"What?" Trey says.

"Ajax," I try for the third time. "Where...?" My words fail me.

"Safe," an unfamiliar voice replies.

I try to look up, but my head and eyes are both too heavy for the motion. I can barely focus on Trey sitting beside me, her face nothing more than a dark blur.

The voice belongs to a man, that much is certain.

*Why is he here?*

“We pulled him out too,” the man continues, “but don’t worry. Rest for a second.”

I try to sit up. “No. I need....see.”

White fire consumes my lungs and throat. I stay glued to the floor, my strength failing me. There is an ache in my bones, a deep exhaustion in every muscle. My eyes don’t want to stay open, but I fight the urge to close them.

“I told you she was stubborn,” Trey says.

The man shrugs and walks away, leaving my line of sight.

Trey pins her stare on me. “Relax, Night. You’re going to hurt yourself even more.”

I shake my head, the movement slow and difficult. The air around us smells like iron and mildew. I try not to throw up again as I remember the bodies that must still litter the area.

Trey sighs. “Fine. He’s over there.” She points to my left and I turn my head.

Ajax is propped up against the remains of the glass tank we were held in.

I muster all my remaining energy to focus my gaze on him and my heart clenches.

He looks terrible. His clothes cling to his frame, which looks thinner than I remember, and his head slumps on his shoulder. Chunks of glass litter the ground around him. If it wasn’t for the rise and fall of his chest, I would’ve thought he was dead.

“Jax,” I cry out, tears threatening to spill over my cheeks. I hold them back.

Ajax lifts his head and opens his eyes a fraction. “Silent?”

“It’s okay. I... I’m...here.” I try to prop myself up again, but Trey pushes me back.

“No,” she snaps. “You’re not strong enough. I practically raised you from the dead.”

I slump to the floor in defeat, feeling exhaustion taking over. The floor is cold and I start to shiver. My still-wet clothes do nothing to help. “Trey...” I try. “How...did you...save us? How did...you...know?”

“Later,” she replies. “What matters is you’re safe now.”

I bristle.

*Why can’t they give me a damn answer?*

I hear footsteps and the mystery man enters the room a moment later. The torchlight doesn’t reach his face, his features left in shadow. “The Charger’s men are coming,” he says. “We have to go.”

My eyes widen as much as they can and Trey looks up sharply. “We can’t,” she replies. “The move might kill them.”

“Well, we certainly can’t stay here.”

She looks torn.

“Trey,” he snaps. “We have to *go. Now.*”

The man walks over to Ajax.

“Wait,” I call out to him. “Who...*are* you?” My words are slurred, my focus fading.

The man glances at me and smiles. “They call me Kuen.”

Kuen. *The Kuen.* The *legendary* Kuen is helping Ajax and I escape the Charger’s clutches. What on earth has my world turned into?

I watch as Kuen picks Ajax up and slings him over one shoulder.

Jax tenses, but doesn’t cry out. I can tell he’s barely conscious.

I turn back to Trey as she reaches for me.

“This will probably hurt,” she says.

“Doesn’t...matter,” I mumble. “Pain and I are...something like...friends now.”

She doesn't laugh. She only picks me up and cradles me in her arms like I'm an infant.

I gasp.

Everything hurts.

"Ready?" Kuen asks.

Trey only nods.

The two break into a run and we soon disappear into a dark tunnel, leaving the Assassin's Guild behind. I surrender the battle to stay awake and let my exhaustion claim me. Maybe tomorrow I'll find this entire endeavour has been a horrible nightmare, but some part of me knows I'll have no such luck.

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I must sleep for a while, because when I wake, I feel refreshed and the pain has faded to the back of my mind. I take a deep breath without a problem and can't help but smile. It's never felt so good to breathe before.

I open my eyes. Trey sits in a chair at the foot of my bed. She looks ruffled, as if she slept there, her black hair sticking up in several places.

"How are you feeling?" she asks me.

I shimmy into a seated position and shrug. "I've been worse, but I've also been better."

She smiles ruefully. "I know the feeling." Her dark circles almost match the shade of her eyes.

I take a moment to study the room and it doesn't take me long to realize I don't recognize the yellow walls. The bed is too big and the chest of drawers too ancient for us to be in the Resistance, but the window is the deciding factor. The Resistance is underground.

I narrow my eyes at the floral print drapes, feeling vulnerable with the outside world only separated from us by less than an inch of glass.

I push the window out of my mind and return my gaze to Trey. "Where are we?"

"We're in a safe house, somewhere in the west end of the city. We have to lay low until things settle down. It's not safe to travel."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "You know why. You planned it."

I swallow. "The attack didn't go so well, did it?"

She doesn't answer, but her eyes scream the truth. "Night," she says, "what happened to you? How did you end up in that tank? I thought you left."

I look at my feet. "I did leave. I ran, but then I realized running away from my problems has never solved anything and I still wanted my revenge, so when the bombs woke me up, I returned to my original plan. I went in search of the Charger, naturally, and I..."

I falter, remembering the horrible truth he revealed to me.

"Long story short," I go on, "I lost. Ajax came to help me and we ended up in that tank. How did you manage to get us out?"

"I had a feeling you would come back, but I knew you couldn't win, not alone. I went to Kuen for help and he showed me the secret tunnel that led to the Charger's private chamber. We arrived just in time, Night. Any longer and the two of you wouldn't have made it. Kuen smashed the glass with his axe and we dragged you guys out. You know the rest."

"Is Jax okay?"

She nods. "He has a will of steel, but the battle took its toll. He was asleep last I checked on him. It's the best thing for him, though, especially if he wants to heal that hand of his."

I nod and fall silent. I'm afraid to say what's on my mind, afraid talking about it will make it real. Truth sears through the comforts of life, sews despair and mistrust into our skin. Yet, I know I should ask her. I hid from the truth of who I was for years. I'm not going to hide again.

"Trey," I say.

"Yes?"

"The Charger he... He said that I... I didn't believe him, but..."

She looks at me curiously and I take a deep breath.

"He said he's my father."

She regards me with solemn eyes. "He finally told you then."

My eyes widen. "You...you *knew*? How? Why am I the last to know?"

Fire ignites in her eyes and she spits her answer out. "Because our father is a sadistic bastard."

Oh.

*Oh my God.*

"We're sisters?" I gasp.

She nods and tears build in her brown eyes. "I wanted to tell you sooner, but...it wasn't the time. You wouldn't have believed me."

"You're probably right."

I remember her reaction when we first met. She knew even then who I was, what we were meant to be.

I smile. "Even though it's the Charger that connects us, I'm glad you're my sister."

She smiles back, brushing the tears out of her eyes and I remember something else.

*"That's why you were so upset when I almost died during the train attack."*

She nods. "I couldn't bear the thought of losing you after finding you again, that you would die after finally finding yourself. It was too cruel. So, when I learned that you left on the eve of the attack, I knew I had to find you. You escaped death once; I knew you couldn't do it again without help and I didn't want to lose you. I came too close to that horror before."

It's hard to wrap my still-healing brain around this new concept. "Well," I say, "at least I know why you want to destroy him."

She shrugs. "Anybody with an ounce of heart would. It's not because he's my father, Night. You wanted to kill him long before you knew."

"I guess."

Something else clicks in my head then. Trey wasn't the only one who acted weird after the train attack. Avery had also come all the way from the Barn to see me and Trey... Trey had once said he was her uncle.

A memory flashes: the meeting with Avery all those weeks ago. What was it he said? Something about his name...

I asked him how he knew who the Charger really was and why he hadn't told anyone. He had answered cryptically, something about the how being the reason why and...

*Avery Norin is not my true name either, but it's in there.*

Oh.

*Oh.*

I rearrange the letters quickly in my head and have my answer in a heartbeat: Vyrin Aeron.

"Holy shit," I breathe.

"What?" Trey says nearly jumping out of her chair. "What's wrong?"

"Avery and the Charger are brothers."

“Guild, Night, you scared me half to death.” She lets out a sigh and settles back into her seat. “Yes, they’re brothers. So?”

“How come you never mentioned it? This is huge!”

“I was sworn to secrecy,” she replies, “though I should’ve known you’d figure it out.”

“It makes so much sense,” I exclaim. “That’s how he knew everything and why he wouldn’t tell anyone. That’s why the Charger said they went back a long way. Guild, what if they’re working together?”

Trey looks at me, cocking her head as if to say, are you serious? When she realizes I am, she laughs. “Oh, Night,” she gasps, “that’s too good. Why the hell would Avery be in league with the assassins? He renounced them, and his brother, decades ago.”

“But how can we be sure? How can we trust him when he doesn’t trust his agents with his true identity?”

“Think about it,” Trey replies. “How would Jenson react to the truth? Look at how *you* reacted. No one would trust him. Avery wouldn’t be able to run an anti-assassin organization with everyone worried he’d turn on them at any second.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You worry too much, kiddo. Everything is under control. I should go. Let you rest. This conversation is doing nothing for your stress levels.”

I scowl. “I don’t want to rest.”

“You don’t have a choice, Night. You’re not recovered yet.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Before she can react, I tear off my covers, swing my legs over the side of the bed, and jump to my feet.

In an instant, I’m writhing on the floor, screaming in blood-burning agony.

*My leg.*

*My leg.*

*Oh God.*

My vision blackens.

When I come to, I’m back in bed. Trey is standing over me, body tense and eyes frantic.

“What the hell happened, Night?” she demands to know. “Are you okay?”

“I...” I try. “Ahhh...” I gasp. The pain is still there. “I had a...run in with Hai...during the attack and he...” I take another deep, shaky breath. “He re-broke my shin or rather, he finished the job.”

“Shit,” she breathes. “We don’t have a hospital to fix it. The Charger didn’t think putting you in a tank was punishment enough?”

“Oh, this wasn’t...his idea. Hai did it long before I reached the Charger.”

Her dark skin blanches. “You mean you...walked on that? You fought for your life on a broken leg?” I nod and she shakes her head in disbelief. “How the hell are you still alive?”

“I don’t know. Luck?”

The door swings open, slamming into the wall, and the mystery man flies in.

*Kuen, I remind myself.*

“What’s going on? I heard screaming. Are you guys okay?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Trey replies. “Night’s leg is broken.”

Kuen swears under his breath. “This isn’t good. Go get the kit.”

“She’s not strong enough, Kuen,” Trey argues. “She needs a doctor.”

“Well, we don’t have that luxury, do we?” I can hear the anger and desperation in his voice.

Trey sighs and leaves the room to retrieve the “kit”, whatever that is.

I turn to Kuen, taking a minute to finally study his face. He’s pale, but not nearly as much as I am and his hair is a dusty blond mop on his head. I can’t tell if he’s taller than Ajax, but he’s definitely broader. He’s not the type of person you would think to mess with on the streets.

He gives me a look, piercing me with his blue eyes. “Are you done staring?”

I blink. “I’m seeing if we have any similarities. Trey told me a while ago that you’re her brother and I just discovered her and I are sisters. So you must be...”

He smiles sadly. “It’s been a long time, sister.”

“That’s an understatement,” I say coolly. “We’ve never even spoken, and you think you can walk into my life and call me sister?”

He frowns at me. “And Trey says you’ve changed. If this is the new you, I’d hate to see the old.”

I scowl. “Watch it. I may be bed-ridden, but I can find a way to make your life miserable.”

“Yes,” he says to himself, “still the ruthless assassin I remember.”

“I am *not*,” I snap.

“Whatever,” he says, waving a hand. “We don’t need to discuss your morals right now.

Who broke the leg?”

I’m surprised he can change the subject so quickly. Clearly, he wants to know more about my morals. I wonder what’s holding him back?

“It was an assassin with an axe originally,” I reply. “More recently...Hai, my—our brother.”

“The bastard,” he seethes. “I’ll kill him.”

I snort. “Good luck with that.”

“What?” he snaps, clearly offended.

“He’s already dead.”

He narrows his eyes. “How?”

“I...shot him. In the head.”

He doesn’t say anything to that. I’m not sure either one of us would’ve broken the silence if Trey hadn’t walked in, towing a large bag behind her.

“Oh, good,” Kuen says. “What took you so long?”

“Well, first I had to find it and then I had trouble lugging it up the stairs. I could’ve used some help.”

Kuen winces under the glare she sends him. “Sorry.”

“Just get over here and help me. That leg isn’t going to mend itself.”

“Right.” He walks over to her and they start pulling instruments out of the bag, instruments that look painful.

“Uh...Trey,” I say, “what are you going to do, exactly? How much will it hurt?”

“We’re going to try to reset the leg and then brace it,” she replies. “Why does the pain matter? I thought you guys were something like friends?”

“I...um... I might have exaggerated a bit.” Sweat drips down my back as I anticipate what’s to come. “We’re more like acquaintances,” I go on, “met once on the street and made eye contact before going our separate ways.”

Trey laughs then. “Only you could turn pain into a joke.”

“Well, if you don’t, then you let it control you.”

“Lie back, Night,” she says, ignoring my comment. “We better get started.” She looks over at Kuen. “Hold her down.”

Oh, this is definitely not going to be fun.



Kuen comes over to my side of the bed and leans over me, bracing his hands against my shoulders. The weight of his body presses against me, making escape impossible.

“All right,” he says, “do it.”

“Wait!” I gasp. “Trey, do you even know what you’re doing? You’re not a doctor.”

“I did some training at the Resistance. Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine.”

“*Some?*” I try to rear up, but Kuen keeps me from moving. “How much does *some* entail? I swear, if you kill me...”

“Relax, Night,” Trey says. “Honestly, you’re not helping by raising your blood pressure.”

“Just get on with it,” Kuen says. He hands me a cloth ball. “Here, bite down on this.”

The reality of the situation hits me then. They’re going to give me mock surgery without any sort of sedative.

*Oh Guild. Oh please, God, have mercy. I know I’ve done terrible things, I know I don’t deserve your grace, but...*

Trey doesn’t give me a warning. One minute, I’m waiting for the axe to fall, and the next, something cold and metallic is beneath my skin, prodding at my wound.

I can’t help but scream.

The sound is muffled by the cloth and my clenched teeth around it, but neither prevents the shriek from escaping.

“Hey,” Kuen says sharply. “Look at me. Look at me!”

My eyes snap to him and I let out a shuddering gasp.

“You’re going to be okay,” he tells me. “You got that? You’re going to be fine.”

Trey digs further into my broken limb and I shudder.

I feel the bone shift.

I see white.

And then, nothing.

• • •

I drift on an endless sea of pain. How long I lay drowning in it, I’m not sure. Sometimes it fades enough that I can feel my senses returning. Voices poke at my eardrums, but never loud enough for me to discern what they are saying. Someone sits on a chair beside my bed; I can feel them holding my hand. Yet, whenever I try to squeeze their hand in mine, to tell them I’m okay, the pain pulls me back. Waves of agony crash over me and I am lost again.

## Chapter Two

This time, when the pain relinquishes me, it does not come back. I know it remains somewhere, waiting for the right time to attack, but I am free for now, which means it's time to get up.

It takes more strength than it should to open my eyes, but I manage it. The room is bright, sunlight sneaking in through the cracks between the curtains. There is a hand in mine. I squeeze it.

Beside me, someone jumps.

I look over and find Ajax sitting in the chair, which is now at my bedside.

"Gods above, Silent," he breathes. "You scared me."

I grimace. "Sorry?"

He shakes his head. "I'm glad you're finally awake. How are you feeling?"

I close my eyes again and groan. "Like death," I reply. "Thanks for asking."

"Well, you're alive," he says, "so look on the bright side."

"Oh shush." I would grab a pillow and smack him with it, but I don't have one. He must've removed them while I was out. I'm touched that he remembered my phobia.

"Seriously, though," he prods. "How are you?"

"Tired, agonized, and hungry. Not necessarily in that order."

He laughs nervously. "Having an appetite is a good sign. It could be worse."

"Says you." Then I take a good look at him.

He looks ragged. Dark circles lurk under his eyes and he seems drained, like he hasn't slept in days. Cuts and bruises still cling to his knuckles from trying to break out of the tank.

"Are *you* okay?" I ask him.

"Oh, yeah," he replies, "I'm fine, just worried about you."

He doesn't look fine, but I decide not to press it. "Well, you can quit worrying about me. I'm okay. I feel like I've been run over—twice—but I'm inching towards recovery."

He grimaces. "Does it hurt that bad?"

"Yeah." I don't try to deny it. I can't lie to him, not after everything we've been through. "What exactly did Trey do to me?"

He scratches the back of his head. "As I understand it, she, uh...reached inside your leg and pushed the bone back together. Then she and Kuen tied a flat piece of wood on either side to keep the bone in place. They hope it'll fuse itself back together now that it's set properly."

Now that he mentions it, I can feel the wood against my leg. The rhythmic throbbing in my shin must be from the constant pressure of the homemade brace.

"What happened to my other brace?"

"It sustained damage during the fighting and then the water ruined it. Trey threw it out as soon as we arrived here from what I was told."

*Shame.*

"How long was I out this time?"

He scrunches up his eyebrows as he thinks. "About four days," he finally says. "You were in and out of consciousness though, as far as we could tell."

I groan. Another four days lost. How many more will I spend like this or will death claim me next? What am I even doing? Do I have a plan for this “life”? I want a future, but like everything else in this damn city, I have to fight for it. Will the nightmare ever end?

I sigh.

There are so many cards stacked against me.

Ajax’s voice pierces through my thoughts before I can dig too deep. “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing.”

He gives me a look. “No, it’s not nothing. You have your brooding look on, as if you had the chance to save the world, but lost by a fingertip. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I sigh again. “I just... Oh, Jax, everything is a mess. My life has been turned upside down and shaken until the contents are scattered everywhere. I discovered things about myself that I never wanted to know and now I... I’m scared. I’m terrified. What if, after everything, he still wins? I can’t...”

“Hey,” he says, touching my arm as I trail off into silent tears. “It’s going to be okay.”

“But what if it isn’t?” I counter, pulling myself together and wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “What is the point of all of this anyway, of fighting back? Why are we here? What are we supposed to *do*?”

“The point?” He laughs. “Isn’t that the question? No one knows, Silent, and I think that’s why we’re here, why we go through so many trials. We do it to discover the point, to find our purpose. We all have a place; we just have to get there.”

I snort. “And where is yours?”

“Right now?”

I nod.

“Well, right now my place is at your side because after all those near-death experiences, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Even after everything I’ve done?” I want to smile at his words, but I remember our last conversation, remember where we stood before the Guild attack.

“Like I said in that tank,” he replies. “It’s not all forgiven. We both have healing to do, but I don’t want to give up on us yet. In the meantime, I still care about you, as a friend, and I’m going to do my best to keep you from getting yourself killed, okay?”

I smile. “Good luck.”

He laughs.

Silence surrounds us then and in it, I start to dwell on what happened at the Guild. I think about the secret I now carry, the burden weighing me down. I’m not sure how much Jax heard when he came to my rescue, but he deserves to know the truth and he deserves to hear it from me.

“Jax,” I start, “there’s something you should know.”

He looks up at me. “What is it?”

“The Charger told me something, when I found him at the Guild. I think it was before you arrived. I didn’t want to believe him, but it makes so much sense, ties up so many loose ends from my past that it has to be true. I *know* it is true, but I wish it wasn’t.” My stomach is a ball of nerves inside me as I talk.

Jax looks concerned. “What did he tell you, Silent?”

“He told me that...” I take a deep breath. “He’s my father, Jax.”

Jax goes white, his eyes widening in what I assume is fear and shock. He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. I know I’ve lost him, but I’m glad I got to see him one last time.

I look away, toward the curtains and the city beyond. “I understand, if you hate me now,” I tell him, “but don’t make this any harder. Just go.”

“What?” he manages to say.

I turn back to him. “I said I understand if—”

He cuts me off. “No, no. I heard you, but I don’t... Why on earth would I hate you, Silent?”

“Because the Charger is the darkest man to ever live and I have his cursed blood running through my veins,” I choke out, feeling my chest tighten with the pain of the truth. “I am the spawn of that *monster*.”

“That may be true, but—”

I ignore him. “And it all makes sense now, why I am the way I am, why it’s so damn hard to let the assassin go. The bane of Haven City is my father.” I put my head in my hands, squeezing my eyes shut. “This world is such a cruel place. Go now, Jax, before I beg you not to.”

“Silent, you’re not listening to me,” he says. His hands wrap around my wrists. “Look at me.”

I stay where I am, not wanting to see the disappointment in his gaze.

“Look at me,” he snaps, yanking my arms away from my head so I’m forced to face him. There is more...frustration in his eyes than anger and something soft that might be...sympathy. “I don’t care, Silent,” he says.

I tilt my head as if to get a better look at him and narrow my eyes. “I... You what?”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. It’s sticking up in more places than usual. “I don’t give a damn that he’s your father, Silent. You’re not him. You’ve always been your own person. You stepped away from his influence. You started fresh. You changed and left him to deal with the consequences of his choices. You were always of his blood; knowing that now, why should it change things? He treated you like a servant, not a daughter. Don’t forget that. Don’t let him lay claim to you now because it suits him.

“You are your mother’s daughter through and through. Sure, you might share some of his genes, some of his traits, but don’t think for a second that means he owns you. You can make your own decisions and you have. Don’t think about it for a second, Silent because it doesn’t change things, especially not for me.”

I blink back tears as I say, “Why are you so supportive?”

He shrugs. “Because I see the real you, the version of yourself that’s never quite within reach. I see your potential, the amazing woman you can grow to be if you step out of your comfort zone. I see you, Silent. The Charger doesn’t know the real you, not like I do.”

I wipe my eyes again. “Thank you. You are more than I deserve.”

He squeezes my arm. “I know you can’t forget the truth, but don’t let it control you.”

I nod and take a deep breath to clear my head. “There’s something else you should know,” I tell him. “The Charger isn’t the only relation I discovered. I also found two brothers and a sister, three half-siblings actually.”

He raises an eyebrow. "The Master Assassin has more children? He doesn't strike me as the fatherly type."

"Oh, he's not," I assure him. "As far as I know, there are four of us and he killed all of our mothers."

"Oh my God," Jax breathes, "that's horrible. Does he have nothing better to do with his time?"

I shrug. "Apparently not. He makes deals with his mistresses: give up the child they conceive or their life. My mother refused him. The others must've done the same because he slaughtered them as well."

"He is so twisted," Jax replies, disgust evident in his face. "Why does he need the children anyway? Having him as a father is bad enough."

"He says he wanted an heir, someone to run the Guild after his eventual death. The first three grew up and he decided they weren't up to the task, so he tried again with me and I betrayed him."

Jax laughs a little. "So much for his luck. Who were the other three?"

I swallow slowly.

*This isn't going to go over well.*

"One was Hai, the guy who re-broke my leg and tried to snap your arm off."

Jax winces. "Well, *he* definitely inherited his father's personality."

I snort. "Tell me about it. Even the Charger wanted to be rid of him."

He raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I was ordered to kill him the day before I left the Guild."

Jax shakes his head. "Man, nothing like having your children kill each other for you so you don't have to get your hands dirty."

"I know."

"What about the other two? Another brother and a sister you said?"

I take a deep breath. "Please don't freak out."

He gives me a look. "Why would I freak out?"

"Because the other two are Kuen and Trey."

"What?" His voice is high and breathless. "Trey is your sister? That man is your brother? But he has to be like..."

"Thirty-one."

He narrows his eyes. "How do you know that?"

"He was somewhat of a legend at the Guild, a mystery. So naturally, we all knew everything about him." I smile. "He was the only assassin to walk out on the Charger without a single scratch or trace. He left one night and never returned. There was no explanation, no clues as to where he went or why. The strangest part was that the Charger didn't send anyone out after him. In fact, he ordered us not to look for him and the punishments for infractions on that order were severe. I never understood why the Charger would let him walk free, but I get it now. Kuen is his son and he trusts him somehow, the same way he once trusted me."

"So yeah, I know he's thirty-one. Trey is twenty-nine, I believe, and Hai was thirty, one of the older assassins. I'm so much younger than them because I was his last chance and still, he failed."

“Which means he can be beaten,” Jax adds. “Silent, he’s not invincible.”

“He’s the very definition of invincible,” I counter. “I was this close to killing him,” I hold my thumb and pointer finger a sliver apart, “this close. I had my knife against his throat and he still slipped through my fingers.”

“But Silent, you got closer than anyone ever has. Who else can say they’ve done what you did, had the Charger anywhere close to being in their grasp like that? If Hai hadn’t been there, the Charger would be six feet under right now.”

“But Hai *was* there,” I say. “There’s no point arguing about what ifs. The Charger is still alive and I have to live with my mistakes.”

“It’s not your burden to carry alone, Silent. You—”

I hold up a hand. “Please don’t. I know my burdens and I don’t want to hear that wretched name anymore.”

“What?”

“Silent. I’m done with that identity. It’s full of dried blood—none of it my own. I no longer want to be associated with that monster. Black Death’s servant is dead. My name is Quinn Marie Ballinger and I am a Resistance agent intent on bringing the Guild to its knees.”

Jax claps. “Well said, Quinn. Well said.” He smiles.

Goosebumps travel across my skin when he says my name. I want to kiss him, want to show him how much I appreciate his continued support, in a way words can’t convey, but I know I can’t. There is still tension between us, words we said and can’t take back. That kiss in the tank was nothing more than the desperation of two people who thought they were going to die. We have a lot to fix before that can happen again, if ever.

“What does the aftermath of the attack look like?” I ask him, wanting to change the subject.

“Not good,” he says, “not good at all.”

I grimace. “What happened?”

“Well, for starters, the assassins have disappeared.”

My stomach drops. “What?”

“There isn’t a trace of them left in the city. Trey returned to the Guild while you were unconscious and she says they must’ve left and taken everything with them. You wouldn’t know anybody had ever been there, if not for the bodies.”

I shiver. “Well, that’s wonderful. They could be anywhere by now.”

“I know.”

“Have you heard anything from Blake and Bast?” I’m afraid to ask the question. The fact that he hasn’t brought them up yet suggests the news isn’t good.

“No,” he says, his face a mixture of sorrow and fear. “It’s not safe to send messages to the Resistance, not when the assassins’ whereabouts are unknown. Not to mention that Haven is a war-zone.”

“What?”

“It’s complete chaos out there, Si—Quinn. People don’t know who to trust anymore, not that they ever did. They’re terrified of both the assassins and the Resistance. Parts of the city are still burning from our bombs and the citizens are killing each other trying to defend themselves from a faceless threat.” He wrings his hands. “Bast and Blake... They could be dead, or they

could be okay, but they need me and your damn brother won't let me go out and find them." He spits out the last sentence and I bristle.

"My *brother* is trying to protect us. You just finished telling me it's chaos out there. What good would it do getting yourself killed? What would Blake and Bast think of that?"

He sighs. "I just want to know if they're okay. Your so-called brother might seem like he's looking out for us, but we don't know what his real motives are. We just met him."

"Don't judge him before you know him, Jax. Trey trusts him."

"Trey isn't infallible, Quinn," he reminds me.

"I know that," I reply, "but we want Kuen on our side and he *did* save our lives."

"Because Trey told him to."

I give him an exasperated look. "She *asked* him to help and he did. Can we drop this? I don't want to fight."

"We're not fighting," he argues. "We're discussing."

"But you're itching for a fight. You've contradicted everything I've said."

He throws his hands out. "Because I don't *agree* with anything you've said. I know you're excited to have found your family, Quinn, but you can't let that lull you into a false sense of security. Kuen is a stranger and an assassin. We have to be careful."

I tense, discomfort crawling across my skin. "So, what, he's guilty until proven innocent? He left the Guild years ago. We would be dead if he hadn't led Trey back into the Guild. If he hadn't known where that throne room was... I think we owe him a little bit more than this."

I can't believe him. What happened to his compassion?

"Exactly, Quinn," he breathes. "We *owe* him. That's what scares me."

I frown. "He's not going to—"

"You don't know that!" His voice isn't raised, but each word hits me.

I shrink back in the bed.

"You don't know, Quinn. I know that might be hard for you to believe, but you don't have the answers right now. He is a question mark we have to ponder carefully. We are a long way from the safety of the Resistance."

"Well, you don't know either," I point out. "Who's to say you have the answers?"

"That's not—"

I throw my hands up. "Listen to yourself, Jax. I might have reverted back to my old ways before I left the Guild, but so did you. You see an assassin and automatically see the worst. You see a killer, a monster, when he could be as much a victim as I was. You're a hypocrite."

His eyes darken. "That's not fair."

I cross my arms. "Isn't it? How is it any less fair than what you've said about him?"

He scowls. "Why are you defending him, against *me*?"

"I'm not," I reply. "I'm pointing out how ridiculous you're being."

Before he can retort, the bedroom door swings open and Trey walks in. She looks back and forth between the two of us, noting our defensive positions. My arms are still crossed and Ajax's fists are clenched. Our bodies are tense, leaning towards each other in frustration.

Trey clears her throat.

I manage to relax my stance. I can become business-like with a flick of a switch. Personality is just another weapon in an assassin's arsenal.

Yet, I'm not an assassin anymore.

I close my eyes.

*God, what am I doing?*

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but Ajax speaks first.

"We'll discuss this later," he says. "I'll give you two some time alone."

He walks out, letting the door swing shut behind him and I watch him go with a heavy heart.

Trey looks concerned. "Night, are you sure you guys are okay?"

I sigh. "We've been better."

"What happened?"

"We're not on the same page and he still hasn't forgiven me for killing his mother. That wound will take a while to heal."

She grimaces. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you can find Blake and Bast."

She sits down on the edge of the bed. "They'll be okay. They're tougher than Ajax realizes. He's just so used to them being by his side, so used to protecting them, that their absence scares him."

"I hope you're right."

"He'll come around, Night, I know it."

I sigh. "I don't think our situation is helping us any. We're all tense. Near-death experiences do that to people. Our emotions are on overdrive. The three of you are worried about me, I'm worried about you guys, Ajax is mad at Kuen, he and I are at odds with each other, and we're all afraid of what might come next."

"I know what you mean," she says. "This isn't at all easy. Never has been and I'm afraid it never will be."

We don't talk for a second.

Then she says, "Are you doing okay, Night?"

I shrug. "I've been worse and um... Don't call me Night anymore, okay? I'm done being the Charger's puppet. I want to be me."

She smiles. "Who are you then?"

"My name is Quinn."

She smiles wider. "Nice to meet you, Quinn." She gives me a wink, causing the slightest tug at the edge of my lips.

"Thanks."

"Well, Quinn, now that that's settled, I have to be on my way." She stands.

I frown. "Where are you going?"

"Scouting. You'll be okay with the boys?"

"I think so, but could you help me out of bed before you go, move me somewhere else for a bit?"

"Sure," she says, "I can bring you into the kitchen."

"How do you want to do it?" I gesture to myself.

She furrows her brow. "Well, take the covers off to start."

I throw the sheet off and then she helps me into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. It feels great to move again, but I'm ready for the pain that's bound to come.

"Good so far?" she asks.

"Yes. What now?"

"You'll have to stand up. Put your weight on the good leg and wrap your arm over my shoulder so I can support your bad side."

"Okay," I reply and then I do as she says. I keep my bad leg off the ground; there's a little pain in keeping it raised, but not much.

"Still good?"

I nod.

"Okay, then let's go."



She starts walking to the door and I hop after her, each bounce shaking my injured leg and sending dull fire through it. I clench my teeth.

*I'm stronger than this.*

Slowly, we make our way out of the room and down the hall.

We stop when the hall opens into the kitchen. Counter and cupboards line one wall and a table and chairs hug the other. Ajax sits at the head of the table and Kuen is fixing something in the kitchen. From where I'm standing, it looks like a rifle. Metal parts and tools are scattered across the stone counter.

Ajax looks up when we come in, but feigns disinterest.

Trey gives me an encouraging smile. "Kuen can get you something to eat if you're hungry. Right, Kuen?" She raises her voice for the last sentence and Kuen looks over, setting down his screwdriver.

"What?" he says.

"If Ni—Quinn is hungry, you'll get her something, right?"

"Oh," he replies, "yeah, sure. Don't you have somewhere to be?" He bends back over his work.

Trey shakes her head. "I'm going in a minute." She heads over to the table with me in tow and pulls out a chair.

I collapse into it gratefully and try to regulate my breathing. It's sharper after the exercise.

"All right," Trey says, "I should go. You'll be okay?"

"Yeah," I reply.

She leans closer and whispers, "Don't let the boys get you down. Kuen can be a real mother hen when he wants to be."

I laugh. "I can deal with them, but I do want to ask... What's with the rifle?"

"Oh, Kuen likes to collect broken things and fix them up, after tearing them apart even further to see how they work." She glances across the room at his current project. "I think he's trying to modify the scope on that one."

"Huh," I reply.

*So my brother is a repairman. Cool.*

"Well, I'll be seeing you then," Trey says. She leaves through a doorway on the other side of the room and I hear a door slam shut after her as she leaves us behind, leaves *me* behind with my brother, who is mostly a stranger, and the man I want more than anything, who isn't happy with me at the moment.

I sigh.

*Well, this should be fun.*