

KILLER QUILL

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Prologue

The First Time She Died

Mondesglantz Imperial Palace, Linxvile City

Quill turned sixteen on the day she died.

Twirling on the empty ballroom floor in his strong arms, she wished this day would never end. The late empress's coronation gown enveloped Quill's bony limbs in rich layers of lace and gossamer. A wealth of gemstones glittered on the neckline. The gold-embroidered bodice hugged her midriff tightly, too delicate for her calloused fingers to touch. Her neck strained under the weight of the *borrowed* crown that a foreign serf like her should have never dreamed of wearing.

The gilded dining table brimmed with more food than the two of them could eat in weeks: candied fruits, sugar-dusted puff pastry, smoked meat so tender it melted on her tongue, and mouthwatering delicacies wafting exotic spices from faraway lands. Archduke Seydest vun Unthece had surprised Quill with a private feast at the palace, showering her with lavish gifts beyond her wildest fantasies and, above all, his undivided attention for her entire birthday.

He was the most powerful man on the planet as regent for his ten-year-old orphan niece, Pixylian. Quill was a kinless maid indentured to the crown. Yet with him, she had felt special, wanted, and even loved.

Now, as the metallic tang of blood filled her mouth, her body used and discarded, Quill's dying wish to scrub Seydest's musky scent off her skin remained unfulfilled. Each wound his knife had carved on her burned as if bleeding molten steel. The tattered gown stuck to her lacerated body, writhing on the frigid marble floor. Her forbidden blood dyed the silk crimson, branding her as a vestige of the people his empire had annihilated.

Draining the last of her meager energy, she stretched her arms towards a side table. Her trembling fingers closed around one of the mahogany legs. She strained her numb muscles and hoisted herself up, groaning through her clenched teeth as the edges of her wounds pulled apart. A fit of wet coughs crushed her chest. Her hands slid, leaving red streaks on the polished wood. She tumbled down into an undignified mass of useless limbs as a puppet with its strings cut. The tears she had been holding back ran down her face.

What was the point? She was as good as dead. He had won. She might as well give up now.

The chamber door flew open. A muffled voice spoke her name, not what the colonizers called her, but the gods-given name whispered in her ear upon leaving the warmth of her mother's womb. Her clan no longer lived. She had only trusted Pixylian with her true

name. The little empress rushed into the room and hunkered beside her, heedless of staining her turquoise dress with the pool of her handmaid's blood.

Pixylian threaded a silver plume through Quill's braid. Its dull end pressed against the nape of the maid's neck, emitting a faint pulse. The outlandish legends of the Imperial Falke's plume, invested with divine powers and kept locked away at the palace treasury, had always fascinated Quill. Now, she took comfort in those tales as her vision swam and the icy claws of death pulled her under.

Lying on the ground for a lifetime, whatever was left of hers, her mind teetered on the edge of consciousness. Until a man in the azure livery of the Archduke's elite guard hefted and carried her paralyzed body over his shoulder like a rolled-up rug. Quill struggled to shout. No sound left her blood-clogged throat. Her head was dizzy from blood loss, her ragged breathing shallow. She no longer felt her limbs, not even the burning of her wounds, nothing except the feeble pulsing at the base of her skull.

The guard descended the steps into the palace cellar and dumped her body onto a cart already caked in blood. Drained of the strength and will to clutch at her life slipping away, she stopped fighting and gave in to the inevitable. A peculiar calm washed over her as she opened up her soul to soar into the arms of her ancestors. Her heart ceased beating. A moment passed, then another.

At the nape of her neck, the silver plume's pulsing quickened, sending a surge of raw power through her veins. Her heart drummed a frenzied, angry rhythm. She gasped, her body bursting alight with an infernal rage urging her to strike. Her eyelids fluttered open. Light blazed through her dilated pupils. Her hand clutched the guard's as the tip of his dagger poked her chest.

He struggled, his free hand squeezing her throat. Her fingers dug deep, bending his wrist with a pop. She rammed his dagger into his neck, cutting off his shout. His blue blood

splattered her face, sticky and revolting. Bile rose in her throat. He sputtered. His body spasmed, then went limp, collapsing atop her. Shuddering, she shoved him aside and dragged herself out of the cart. Her wounds began to reknit, stinging as if crawling with an army of fire ants. She huddled on the cellar floor with her back to the wall, heaving. The tang of oil torches and mildew hung in the damp air.

As boots stomped near, she sat up. Five guards dashed inside and trained their rifles on her. A shot rent the air. Everything lurched to a stop.

The men stood frozen, wide-eyed, and unblinking. Around the bullet suspended before her face, the air shimmered, rippling like the surface of a lake. She reached for it. The gleaming metal seared her fingertips. Her skin instantly healed. She rolled the bullet between her fingers and threw it back at the shooter. It tore through his chest, blood blooming on his breast pocket. The room erupted into motion again.

A primal force took control of her body, a furious tempest that shook off her daze and worked her muscles. She hurled an oak barrel at two guards. The wood shattered, showering the men with brandy. Grabbing a torch from the slate wall, she swung at them in a wide arc, setting their coats ablaze. Their shouts were muffled to her ears as if submerged in water. The fierce stench of scorched flesh made her gag. She bolted down the corridor, panting.

More men rushed at her.

A bearded brute lunged at her, swinging a saber. Ducking beneath an overhand blow, she thrust her hand upward just in time to catch his wrist in a tight squeeze, throwing him off balance. The man staggered. She snatched his saber, the steel cool in her hand, and sent him tumbling to the floor with a kick. A presence approached her from behind. She dodged a bullet whistling past and turned, stabbing the bewildered guard. His rifle clattered to the floor out of his limp hands.

The rest was a blur. She vaguely remembered seizing a guard by the front of his coat and throwing him against the wall, a man's befuddled face as she slit his throat, and the howling of another before her hands wrung his neck.

A hand grabbing her arm from behind prompted her to spin and stab the assailant in the chest. Only then had she seen his youthful face, blood foaming on his lips. Just a boy, about her own age. He clutched the blade impaling him and tumbled onto the hard stone, his body convulsing as his life and blood drained.

Her mind snapped back into control of her body as if a spell had lifted. Corpses littered the floor in mangled heaps. Like liquid sapphire, the guards' blue blood had painted any remnants of the innocent ivory silks still hanging from her healed body. The fetor of death and burning flesh filled her lungs. She gagged, backing away from the carnage. This could not be her, the girl who smuggled her meager rations to hungry hounds in the kennels, could it?

Alarm bells pealed in a frantic rhythm. The clap of boots thundered in the distance, and shouts echoed through the halls above. By some miracle, she was still alive, though not for long if she did not run away from this sordid place. Trapped in the palace underground, her only way out was down.

The line of duchesses on Pixylian's paternal side had built the imperial palace atop the forgotten ruins of an ancient fortress. Pixylian's father had entrusted her with the knowledge of the concealed passages leading to the secret postern called *Porta da Traicio*, the Betrayal Door, in case of a siege. Even the Archduke and the late empress, Pixylian's mother, were not privy to that information. Pixylian had sworn Quill to secrecy when bringing her to play in those corridors.

Now, Quill's feet knew their way to the Betrayal Door and carried her along, even as her heart fought the thought of abandoning Pixylian. What a fool she had been to deny the

rumors that the Archduke had poisoned the empress's father. Gods knew she did not want to leave Pixylian in that monster's claws. As if the gods had heard her wretched heart, the bloodhounds' heavy bay blasted through the musty tunnels.

Oh gods, not the bloodhounds.

She could not allow whatever fiend puppeteered her body to harm them, too. The once naive and innocent maid had died this night, and the beast awakened within her craved vengeance. Her last victim's bloodied face flashed in her mind, churning her stomach.

No more bodies. No more deaths tonight.

She ran for the Betrayal Door. Her bare feet slid on a slick patch of moss. She hit the limestone ground hard and tumbled down a narrow tunnel, scraping her knees and elbows on the rough walls as her limbs struggled to slow her descent. The tunnel deposited her just a few feet from the tight opening at the cliff's edge behind the palace. Cobwebs festooned the vaulted ceiling, undisturbed by time and the elements. A gust of the crisp summer night's air blew her damp hair out of her pain-puckered forehead. With all her energy spent, her cuts and bruises no longer healed fast. Her stomach growled despite the gore making her nauseous.

She crawled the last yard on her hands and knees to the edge. In the fey predawn light, her eyes could almost make out the patch of forest far below. With only sharp jagged rocks to break her fall, not even her fast healing could save her. A hysterical laugh bubbled up her dry throat. Better her dead flesh became food for wild animals than whatever wicked fate the Archduke had planned for her defiled corpse. She had almost made it. Her fingers clawed the cold air, reaching for distant stars. She inhaled a final lungful of the invigorating scent of wildflowers as her eyelids drooped.

The dank air around her roiled, the gold threads frothing on the silk rags left of her gown. Gold particles congealed into twines, weaving into a gleaming rope before her blurry

eyes. One end slithered and fastened to a stone ring at the edge of the cliff, inches from her nose.

Hope flooded through her, more potent than any sorcery. Survival instincts pulled her battered body off the rough stone, dragged her feet the last few steps, and commanded her hands to wrap the golden rope around her waist. She rappelled down the sheer cliff face until her fingertips blistered and continued long after, still. Her knees buckled as soon as the soles of her feet brushed the mossy rocks rimming the ravine. She collapsed into a mound of numb limbs and unraveled rags. The rope disintegrated in a shimmering cloud. Nearby bushes shook as a pack of *dragonels* nestled within thought better of keeping company with whatever possessed her. The dragonels uttered manic caws and unfurled their filmy wings, their onyx scales glittering in the early dawn's light. They took to the air, leaving Quill alone in the whole world once again.



Quill hid in the woods, certain that the Archduke's men would scour the land to apprehend and make an example of her. Yet days passed, and no army came after her. No one bothered to search for the lowly maid who had left a trail of bodies in her wake. Perhaps, they thought her dead or incapable of instigating such carnage. The imperial palace had fought its share of assassins and dissidents. As long as the royal family remained safe, a few dead bodies in the cellar were easy to dismiss.

The plume had healed all of her flesh wounds except the jagged scar on her throat where the Archduke had taken her life, his mark. While her body remained unshackled and

her own at last, she could not escape her ordeal. Each excruciating moment under Seydest's thumb was etched into her mind.

She trudged north for weeks, hoping to reach the coast before winter and procure passage off the continent. Sneaking into tiny settlements, she snatched warm garments hung outside to dry and any food left unattended.

However, the plume's appetite could not be sated with animal blood. She had killed a dozen men the night she had died and been reborn as Quill—the eponymous plume in her hair. Awakened after centuries, the plume had guzzled those lives, developing a taste for more.

Its arcane power had sunk its teeth deep inside her. Even the thought of severing their bond froze her muscles. All that kept her alive was this ancient artifact. Her will to cast it away could not surmount her desire to survive. Parting with the plume hurt more than hacking off her arm.

As the Linxville City's evanescent summer waned, the plume grew ravenous. It demanded vengeance, human sacrifice. At her refusal to murder innocent villagers, it began feeding on her instead, sapping her life force through agonizing nightmares each time she shut her eyes. The look of horror on that young guard's ashen face, coughing up blood, clawed at her insides, haunting her fitful dreams.

Jolting Quill awake from a nightmare one crisp dawn, the plume zapped her scalp until her groggy eyes caught sight of a fur-clad man crouched behind thorny bushes. She lay still on a gnarled branch atop the ancient oak she had tied herself to the previous night to shelter from fellow forest predators.

The man readied his bow, his back to her. He nocked an arrow and drew. She shielded her eyes against the rising light, her gaze narrowing on a hapless doe grazing at a verdant

patch a dozen paces away. The ruddy doe lifted her head, locking beseeching eyes with Quill up in the boughs.

She gasped, the woodsy forest air flooding her nostrils. The hem of the man's green sleeve frothed, pulling his wrist down a heartbeat before he released the arrow. It whooshed toward the clearing, passing a handspan above the doe's head. The animal dashed away into the thicker woods without even a nod of gratitude. Heedless of the escaping prey, the hunter dropped his bow and shook the green cloud of luminescent mist off his sleeve. The dye dissipated, leaving behind bleached cloth as pale as his scraggly beard. He yelped, making the sign for warding off evil by pressing a fist to his sternum, and ran, his pack forgotten.

Craving his blood, the plume took control of Quill's body. She dropped to the forest floor and pursued him for miles. The woodland thinned along the edges of a dried-out riverbed. He slowed down, catching his breath, and crossed a rickety bridge to a cluster of flimsy cottages. She ducked behind wild berries, stalking the hunter from afar.

A boy and a girl in rags dashed toward him.

"Papa," the scrawny girl squealed, jumping into his arms. The boy's spindly limbs wrapped around one of his legs. He kissed the top of the girl's head and ruffled the boy's curls. As if noticing the discolored patch of his sleeve for the first time, he jerked his hand away and dropped to his knees. He pulled his children into a tight embrace and wept.

Quill groaned, burying her face in her palms. She had never wanted to kill, not even an insect, let alone a father trying to provide for his family or a palace guard too young to grow a little stubble on his face. It was the bloodthirsty Archduke's fault. He and Pixylian had forged her into the monster she had become. They were responsible for every drop of blood she shed.

Seydest's mark on Quill's throat served as a reminder that she could never truly be free, not as long as he drew breath.

Faith had failed her time and again. Love had condemned her. Loyalty had broken her. Gone was the inconsequential maid, leaving a killer behind.

Hope was a wondrous feeling. Nothing, however, was as powerful as spite, feeding and stoking the raging fire within her, sustaining her till the day they would meet again. The Archduke might have forgotten her among the countless lives he had destroyed. Her mother had warned her about powerful men. But powerful women could be even more dangerous. Quill would become the name to reckon with.

She vowed to be the last face Archduke Seydest saw before she slit his throat.

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