

VICTORIA AVEYARD



RED

QUEEN

POWER IS A DANGEROUS GAME

RED
QUEEN

VICTORIA AVEYARD

HARPER **TEEN**
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad, and Morgan, who wanted to know what happened next, even when I didn't.

CONTENTS

Dedication

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

[Twenty-Six](#)
[Twenty-Seven](#)
[Twenty-Eight](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)
[Back Ad](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Credits](#)
[Copyright](#)
[About the Publisher](#)



ONE

I hate First Friday. It makes the village crowded, and now, in the heat of high summer, that's the last thing anyone wants. From my place in the shade it isn't so bad, but the stink of bodies, all sweating with the morning work, is enough to make milk curdle. The air shimmers with heat and humidity, and even the puddles from yesterday's storm are hot, swirling with rainbow streaks of oil and grease.

The market deflates, with everyone closing up their stalls for the day. The merchants are distracted, careless, and it's easy for me to take whatever I want from their wares. By the time I'm done, my pockets bulge with trinkets and I've got an apple for the road. Not bad for a few minutes' work. As the throng of people moves, I let myself be taken away by the human current. My hands dart in and out, always in fleeting touches. Some paper bills from a man's pocket, a bracelet from a woman's wrist—nothing too big. Villagers are too busy shuffling along to notice a pickpocket in their midst.

The high, stilt buildings for which the village is named (the Stilts, very original) rise all around us, ten feet above the muddy ground. In the spring the lower bank is underwater, but right now it's August, when dehydration and sun sickness stalk the village. Almost everyone looks forward to the first Friday of each month, when work and school end early. But not me. No, I'd rather be in school, learning nothing in a classroom full of children.

Not that I'll be in school much longer. My eighteenth birthday is coming, and with it, conscription. I'm not apprenticed, I don't have a job, so I'm going to be sent to the war like all the other *idle* ones. It's no wonder there's no work left, what with every man, woman, and child trying to stay out of the army.

My brothers went to war when they turned eighteen, all three of them sent to fight Lakelanders. Only Shade can write worth a lick, and he sends

me letters when he can. I haven't heard from my other brothers, Bree and Tramy, in over a year. But no news is good news. Families can go years without hearing a thing, only to find their sons and daughters waiting on the front doorstep, home on leave or sometimes blissfully discharged. But usually you receive a letter made of heavy paper, stamped with the king's crown seal below a short thank-you for your child's life. Maybe you even get a few buttons from their torn, obliterated uniforms.

I was thirteen when Bree left. He kissed me on the cheek and gave me a single pair of earrings for my little sister, Gisa, and me to split. They were dangling glass beads, the hazy pink color of sunset. We pierced our ears ourselves that night. Tramy and Shade kept up the tradition when they went. Now Gisa and I have one ear each set with three tiny stones to remind us of our brothers fighting somewhere. I didn't really believe they'd have to go, not until the legionnaire in his polished armor showed up and took them away one after another. And this fall, they'll come for me. I've already started saving—and stealing—to buy Gisa some earrings when I go.

Don't think about it. That's what Mom always says, about the army, about my brothers, about everything. *Great advice, Mom.*

Down the street, at the crossing of Mill and Marcher roads, the crowd thickens and more villagers join the current. A gang of kids, little thieves in training, flutters through the fray with sticky, searching fingers. They're too young to be good at it, and Security officers are quick to intervene. Usually the kids would be sent to the stocks, or the jail at the outpost, but the officers want to see First Friday. They settle for giving the ringleaders a few harsh knocks before letting them go. *Small mercies.*

The tiniest pressure at my waist makes me spin, acting on instinct. I grab at the hand foolish enough to pickpocket me, squeezing tight so the little imp won't be able to run away. But instead of a scrawny kid, I find myself staring up at a smirking face.

Kilorn Warren. A fisherman's apprentice, a war orphan, and probably my only real friend. We used to beat each other up as children, but now that we're older—and he's a foot taller than me—I try to avoid scuffles. He has his uses, I suppose. Reaching high shelves, for example.

"You're getting faster." He chuckles, shaking off my grip.

"Or you're getting slower."

He rolls his eyes and snatches the apple out of my hand.

“Are we waiting for Gisa?” he asks, taking a bite of the fruit.

“She has a pass for the day. Working.”

“Then let’s get moving. Don’t want to miss the show.”

“And what a tragedy that would be.”

“Tsk, tsk, Mare,” he teases, shaking a finger at me. “This is supposed to be fun.”

“It’s *supposed* to be a warning, you dumb fool.”

But he’s already walking off with his long strides, forcing me to almost trot to keep up. His gait weaves, off balance. *Sea legs*, he calls them, though he’s never been to the far-off sea. I guess long hours on his master’s fishing boat, even on the river, are bound to have some effect.

Like my dad, Kilorn’s father was sent off to war, but whereas mine returned missing a leg and a lung, Mr. Warren came back in a shoe box. Kilorn’s mother ran off after that, leaving her young son to fend for himself. He almost starved to death but somehow kept picking fights with me. I fed him so that I wouldn’t have to kick around a bag of bones, and now, ten years later, here he is. At least he’s apprenticed and won’t face the war.

We get to the foot of the hill, where the crowd is thicker, pushing and prodding on all sides. First Friday attendance is mandatory, unless you are, like my sister, an “essential laborer.” As if embroidering silk is essential. But the Silvers love their silk, don’t they? Even the Security officers, a few of them anyway, can be bribed with pieces sewn by my sister. Not that I know anything about that.

The shadows around us deepen as we climb up the stone stairs, toward the crest of the hill. Kilorn takes them two at a time, almost leaving me behind, but he stops to wait. He smirks down at me and tosses a lock of faded, tawny hair out of his green eyes.

“Sometimes I forget you have the legs of a child.”

“Better than the brain of one,” I snap, giving him a light smack on the cheek as I pass. His laughter follows me up the steps.

“You’re grouchier than usual.”

“I just hate these things.”

“I know,” he murmurs, solemn for once.

And then we’re in the arena, the sun blazing hot overhead. Built ten years ago, the arena is easily the largest structure in the Stilts. It’s nothing compared to the colossal ones in the cities, but still, the soaring arches of

steel, the thousands of feet of concrete, are enough to make a village girl catch her breath.

Security officers are everywhere, their black-and-silver uniforms standing out in the crowd. This is First Friday, and they can't wait to watch the proceedings. They carry long rifles or pistols, though they don't need them. As is customary, the officers are Silvers, and Silvers have nothing to fear from us Reds. Everyone knows that. We are not their equals, though you wouldn't know it from looking at us. The only thing that serves to distinguish us, outwardly at least, is that Silvers stand tall. Our backs are bent by work and unanswered hope and the inevitable disappointment with our lot in life.

Inside the open-topped arena is just as hot as out, and Kilorn, always on his toes, leads me to some shade. We don't get seats here, just long concrete benches, but the few Silver nobles up above enjoy cool, comfortable boxes. There they have drinks, food, *ice* even in high summer, cushioned chairs, electric lights, and other comforts I'll never enjoy. The Silvers don't bat an eye at any of it, complaining about the "wretched conditions." I'll give them a wretched condition, if I ever have the chance. All we get are hard benches and a few screechy video screens almost too bright and too noisy to stand.

"Bet you a day's wages it's another strongarm today," Kilorn says, tossing his apple core toward the arena floor.

"No bet," I shoot back at him. Many Reds gamble their earnings on the fights, hoping to win a little something to help them get through another week. But not me, not even with Kilorn. It's easier to cut the bookie's purse than try to win money from it. "You shouldn't waste your money like that."

"It's not a waste if I'm right. It's *always* a strongarm beating up on someone."

Strongarms usually make up at least one-half of the fights, their skills and abilities better suited to the arena than almost any other Silver. They seem to revel in it, using their superhuman strength to toss other champions around like rag dolls.

"What about the other one?" I ask, thinking about the range of Silvers that could appear. Telkies, swifts, nymphs, greenys, stoneskins—all of them terrible to watch.

"Not sure. Hopefully something cool. I could use some fun."

Kilorn and I don't really see eye to eye on the Feats of First Friday. For me, watching two champions rip into each other is not enjoyable, but Kilorn loves it. *Let them ruin each other*, he says. *They're not our people*.

He doesn't understand what the Feats are about. This isn't mindless entertainment, meant to give us some respite from grueling work. This is calculated, cold, a message. Only Silvers can fight in the arenas because only a Silver can *survive* the arena. They fight to show us their strength and power. *You are no match for us. We are your betters. We are gods*. It's written in every superhuman blow the champions land.

And they're absolutely right. Last month I watched a swift battle a telky and, though the swift could move faster than the eye could see, the telky stopped him cold. With just the power of his mind, he lifted the other fighter right off the ground. The swift started to choke; I think the telky had some invisible grip on his throat. When the swift's face turned blue, they called the match. Kilorn cheered. He'd bet on the telky.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Silvers and Reds, welcome to First Friday, the Feat of August." The announcer's voice echoes around the arena, magnified by the walls. He sounds bored, as usual, and I don't blame him.

Once, the Feats were not matches at all, but executions. Prisoners and enemies of the state would be transported to Archeon, the capital, and killed in front of a Silver crowd. I guess the Silvers liked that, and the matches began. Not to kill but to entertain. Then they became the Feats and spread out to the other cities, to different arenas and different audiences. Eventually the Reds were granted admission, confined to the cheap seats. It wasn't long until the Silvers built arenas everywhere, even villages like the Stilts, and attendance that was once a gift became a mandatory curse. My brother Shade says it's because arena cities enjoyed a marked reduction in Red crime, dissent, even the few acts of rebellion. Now Silvers don't have to use execution or the legions or even Security to keep the peace; two champions can scare us just as easily.

Today, the two in question look up to the job. The first to walk out onto the white sand is announced as Cantos Carros, a Silver from Harbor Bay in the east. The video screen blares a clear picture of the warrior, and no one needs to tell me this is a strongarm. He has arms like tree trunks, corded and veined and straining against his own skin. When he smiles, I can see all his

teeth are gone or broken. Maybe he ran afoul of his own toothbrush when he was a growing boy.

Next to me, Kilorn cheers and the other villagers roar with him. A Security officer throws a loaf of bread at the louder ones for their trouble. To my left, another hands a screaming child a bright yellow piece of paper. 'Lec papers—extra electricity rations. All of it to make us cheer, to make us scream, to force us to watch, even if we don't want to.

“That's right, let him hear you!” the announcer drawls, forcing as much enthusiasm into his voice as he can. “And here we have his opponent, straight from the capital, Samson Merandus.”

The other warrior looks pale and weedy next to the human-shaped hunk of muscle, but his blue steel armor is fine and polished to a high sheen. He's probably the second son of a second son, trying to win renown in the arena. Though he should be scared, he looks strangely calm.

His last name sounds familiar, but that's not unusual. Many Silvers belong to famous families, called houses, with dozens of members. The governing family of our region, the Capital Valley, is House Welle, though I've never seen Governor Welle in my life. He never visits it more than once or twice a year, and even then, he *never* stoops to entering a Red village like mine. I saw his riverboat once, a sleek thing with green-and-gold flags. He's a greeny, and when he passed, the trees on the bank burst into blossom and flowers popped out of the ground. I thought it was beautiful, until one of the older boys threw rocks at his boat. The stones fell harmlessly into the river. They put the boy in the stocks anyway.

“It'll be the strongarm for sure.”

Kilorn frowns at the small champion. “How do you know? What's Samson's power?”

“Who cares, he's still going to lose,” I scoff, settling in to watch.

The usual call rings out over the arena. Many rise to their feet, eager to watch, but I stay seated in silent protest. As calm as I might look, anger boils in my skin. Anger, and jealousy. *We are gods*, echoes in my head.

“Champions, set your feet.”

They do, digging in their heels on opposite sides of the arena. Guns aren't allowed in arena fights, so Cantos draws a short, wide sword. I doubt he'll need it. Samson produces no weapon, his fingers merely twitching by his side.

A low, humming electric tone runs through the arena. *I hate this part.* The sound vibrates in my teeth, in my bones, pulsing until I think something might shatter. It ends abruptly with a chirping chime. *It begins.* I exhale.

It looks like a bloodbath right away. Cantos barrels forward like a bull, kicking up sand in his wake. Samson tries to dodge Cantos, using his shoulder to slide around the Silver, but the strongarm is quick. He gets hold of Samson's leg and tosses him across the arena like he's made of feathers. The subsequent cheers cover Samson's roar of pain as he collides with the cement wall, but it's written on his face. Before he can hope to stand, Cantos is over him, heaving him skyward. He hits the sand in a heap of what can only be broken bones but somehow rises to his feet again.

"Is he a punching bag?" Kilorn laughs. "Let him have it, Cantos!"

Kilorn doesn't care about an extra loaf of bread or a few more minutes of electricity. That's not why he cheers. He honestly wants to see blood, Silver blood—*silverblood*—stain the arena. It doesn't matter that the blood is everything we aren't, everything we can't be, everything we *want*. He just needs to see it and trick himself into thinking they are truly human, that they can be hurt and defeated. But I know better. Their blood is a threat, a warning, a promise. *We are not the same and never will be.*

He's not disappointed. Even the box seats can see the metallic, iridescent liquid dripping from Samson's mouth. It reflects the summer sun like a watery mirror, painting a river down his neck and into his armor.

This is the true division between Silvers and Reds: the color of our blood. This simple difference somehow makes them stronger, smarter, *better* than us.

Samson spits, sending a sunburst of silverblood across the arena. Ten yards away, Cantos tightens his grip on his sword, ready to incapacitate Samson and end this.

"Poor fool," I mutter. It seems Kilorn is right. *Nothing but a punching bag.*

Cantos pounds through the sand, sword held high, eyes on fire. And then he freezes midstep, his armor clanking with the sudden stop. From the middle of the arena, the bleeding warrior points at Cantos, with a stare to break bone.

Samson flicks his fingers and Cantos walks, perfectly in time with Samson's movements. His mouth falls open, like he's gone slow or stupid. *Like his mind is gone.*

I can't believe my eyes.

A deathly quiet falls over the arena as we watch, not understanding the scene below us. Even Kilorn has nothing to say.

"A whisper," I breathe aloud.

Never before have I seen one in the arena—I doubt anyone has. Whispers are rare, dangerous, and powerful, even among the Silvers, even in the *capital*. The rumors about them vary, but it boils down to something simple and chilling: they can enter your head, read your thoughts, and *control your mind*. And this is exactly what Samson is doing, having whispered his way past Cantos's armor and muscle, into his very brain, where there are no defenses.

Cantos raises his sword, hands trembling. He's trying to fight Samson's power. But strong as he is, there's no fighting the enemy in his mind.

Another twist of Samson's hand and silverblood splashes across the sand as Cantos plunges his sword straight through his armor, into the flesh of his own stomach. Even up in the seats, I can hear the sickening squelch of metal cutting through meat.

As the blood gushes from Cantos, gasps echo across the arena. We've never seen so much blood here before.

Blue lights flash to life, bathing the arena floor in a ghostly glow, signaling the end of the match. Silver healers run across the sand, rushing to the fallen Cantos. Silvers aren't supposed to die here. Silvers are supposed to fight bravely, to flaunt their skills, to put on a good show—but not *die*. After all, they aren't Reds.

Officers move faster than I've ever seen before. A few are swifts, rushing to and fro in a blur as they herd us out. They don't want us around if Cantos dies on the sand. Meanwhile, Samson strides from the arena like a titan. His gaze falls on Cantos's body, and I expect him to look apologetic. Instead, his face is blank, emotionless, and so cold. The match was nothing to him. *We* are nothing to him.

In school, we learned about the world before ours, about the angels and gods that lived in the sky, ruling the earth with kind and loving hands. Some say those are just stories, but I don't believe that.

The gods rule us still. They have come down from the stars. And they are no longer kind.



TWO

Our house is small, even by Stilts standards, but at least we have a view. Before his injury, during one of his army leaves, Dad built the house high so we could see across the river. Even through the haze of summer you can see the cleared pockets of land that were once forest, now logged into oblivion. They look like a disease, but to the north and west, the untouched hills are a calm reminder. *There is so much more out there*. Beyond us, beyond the Silvers, beyond everything I know.

I climb the ladder up to the house, over worn wood shaped to the hands that ascend and descend every day. From this height I can see a few boats heading upriver, proudly flying their bright flags. *Silvers*. They're the only ones rich enough to use private transportation. While they enjoy wheeled transports, pleasure boats, even high-flying airjets, we get nothing more than our own two feet, or a push cycle if we're lucky.

The boats must be heading to Summerton, the small city that springs to life around the king's summer residence. Gisa was there today, aiding the seamstress she is apprenticed to. They often go to the market there when the king visits, to sell her wares to the Silver merchants and nobles who follow the royals like ducklings. The palace itself is known as the Hall of the Sun, and it's supposed to be a marvel, but I've never seen it. I don't know why the royals have a second house, especially since the capital palace is so fine and beautiful. But like all Silvers, they don't act out of need. They are driven by want. And what they want, they get.

Before I open the door to the usual chaos, I pat the flag fluttering from the porch. Three red stars on yellowed fabric, one for each brother, and room for more. *Room for me*. Most houses have flags like this, some with black stripes instead of stars in quiet reminder of dead children.

Inside, Mom sweats over the stove, stirring a pot of stew while my father glares at it from his wheelchair. Gisa embroiders at the table, making

something beautiful and exquisite and entirely beyond my comprehension.

“I’m home,” I say to no one in particular. Dad answers with a wave, Mom a nod, and Gisa doesn’t look up from her scrap of silk.

I drop my pouch of stolen goods next to her, letting the coins jingle as much as they can. “I think I’ve got enough to get a proper cake for Dad’s birthday. And more batteries, enough to last the month.”

Gisa eyes the pouch, frowning with distaste. She’s only fourteen but sharp for her age. “One day people are going to come and take everything you have.”

“Jealousy doesn’t become you, Gisa,” I scold, patting her on the head. Her hands fly up to her perfect, glossy red hair, brushing it back into her meticulous bun.

I’ve always wanted her hair, though I’d never tell her that. Where hers is like fire, my hair is what we call river brown. Dark at the root, pale at the ends, as the color leeches from our hair with the stress of Stilts life. Most keep their hair short to hide their gray ends but I don’t. I like the reminder that even my hair knows life shouldn’t be this way.

“I’m not jealous,” she huffs, returning to her work. She stitches flowers made of fire, each one a beautiful flame of thread against oily black silk.

“That’s beautiful, Gee.” I let my hand trace one of the flowers, marveling at the silky feel of it. She glances up and smiles softly, showing even teeth. As much as we fight, she knows she’s my little star.

And everyone knows I’m the jealous one, Gisa. I can’t do anything but steal from people who can actually do things.

Once she finishes her apprenticeship, she’ll be able to open her own shop. Silvers will come from all around to pay her for handkerchiefs and flags and clothing. Gisa will achieve what few Reds do and live well. She’ll provide for our parents and give me and my brothers menial jobs to get us out of the war. Gisa is going to save us one day, with nothing more than needle and thread.

“Night and day, my girls,” Mom mutters, running a finger through graying hair. She doesn’t mean it as an insult but a prickly truth. Gisa is skilled, pretty, and sweet. I’m a bit rougher, as Mom kindly puts it. The dark to Gisa’s light. I suppose the only common things between us are the shared earrings, the memory of our brothers.

Dad wheezes from his corner and hammers his chest with a fist. This is common, since he has only one real lung. Luckily the skill of a Red medic saved him, replacing the collapsed lung with a device that could breathe for him. It wasn't a Silver invention, as they have no need for such things. They have the healers. But healers don't waste their time saving the Reds, or even working on the front lines keeping soldiers alive. Most of them remain in the cities, prolonging the lives of ancient Silvers, mending livers destroyed by alcohol and the like. So we're forced to indulge in an underground market of technology and inventions to help better ourselves. Some are foolish, most don't work—but a bit of clicking metal saved my dad's life. I can always hear it ticking away, a tiny pulse to keep Dad breathing.

"I don't want cake," he grumbles. I don't miss his glance toward his growing belly.

"Well, tell me what you *do* want, Dad. A new watch or—"

"Mare, I do not consider something you stole off someone's wrist to be *new*."

Before another war can brew in the Barrow house, Mom pulls the stew off the stove. "Dinner is served." She brings it to the table, and the fumes wash over me.

"It smells great, Mom," Gisa lies. Dad is not so tactful and grimaces at the meal.

Not wanting to be shown up, I force down some stew. It's not as bad as usual, to my pleasant surprise. "You used that pepper I brought you?"

Instead of nodding and smiling and thanking me for noticing, she flushes and doesn't answer. She knows I stole it, just like all my gifts.

Gisa rolls her eyes over her soup, sensing where this is going.

You'd think by now I'd be used to it, but their disapproval wears on me.

Sighing, Mom lowers her face into her hands. "Mare, you know I appreciate—I just wish—"

I finish for her. "That I was like Gisa?"

Mom shakes her head. Another lie. "No, of course not. That's not what I meant."

"Right." I'm sure they can sense my bitterness on the other side of the village. I try my best to keep my voice from breaking. "It's the only way I can help out before—before I go away."

Mentioning the war is a quick way to silence my house. Even Dad's wheezing stops. Mom turns her head, her cheeks flushing red with anger. Under the table, Gisa's hand closes around mine.

"I know you're doing everything you can, for the right reasons," Mom whispers. It takes a lot for her to say this, but it comforts me all the same.

I keep my mouth shut and force a nod.

Then Gisa jumps in her seat, like she's been shocked. "Oh, I almost forgot. I stopped at the post on the way back from Summerton. There was a letter from Shade."

It's like setting off a bomb. Mom and Dad scramble, reaching for the dirty envelope Gisa pulls out of her jacket. I let them pass it over, examining the paper. Neither can read, so they glean whatever they can from the paper itself.

Dad sniffs the letter, trying to place the scent. "Pine. Not smoke. That's good. He's away from the Choke."

We all breathe a sigh of relief at that. The Choke is the bombed-out strip of land connecting Nortia to the Lakelands, where most of the war is fought. Soldiers spend the majority of their time there, ducking in trenches doomed to explode or making daring pushes that end in a massacre. The rest of the border is mainly lake, though in the far north it becomes tundra too cold and barren to fight over. Dad was injured at the Choke years ago, when a bomb dropped on his unit. Now the Choke is so destroyed by decades of battle, the smoke of explosions is a constant fog and nothing can grow there. It's dead and gray, like the future of the war.

He finally passes the letter over for me to read, and I open it with great anticipation, both eager and afraid to see what Shade has to say.

Dear family, I am alive. Obviously.

That gets a chuckle out of Dad and me, and even a smile from Gisa. Mom is not as amused, even though Shade starts every letter like this.

We've been called away from the front, as Dad the Bloodhound has probably guessed. It's nice, getting back to the main camps. It's Red as the dawn up here, you barely even see the Silver officers. And without the Choke smoke, you can actually see the sun rise

stronger every day. But I won't be in for long. Command plans to repurpose the unit for lake combat, and we've been assigned to one of the new warships. I met a medic detached from her unit who said she knew Tramy and that he's fine. Took a bit of shrapnel retreating from the Choke, but he recovered nicely. No infection, no permanent damage.

Mom sighs aloud, shaking her head. "No permanent damage," she scoffs.

Still nothing about Bree but I'm not worried. He's the best of us, and he's coming up on his five-year leave. He'll be home soon, Mom, so stop your worrying. Nothing else to report, at least that I can write in a letter. Gisa, don't be too much of a show-off even though you deserve to be. Mare, don't be such a brat all the time, and stop beating up that Warren boy. Dad, I'm proud of you. Always. Love all of you.

Your favorite son and brother, Shade.

Like always, Shade's words pierce through us. I can almost hear his voice if I try hard enough. Then the lights above us suddenly start to whine.

"Did no one put in the ration papers I got yesterday?" I ask before the lights flicker off, plunging us into darkness. As my eyes adjust, I can just see Mom shaking her head.

Gisa groans. "Can we not do this again?" Her chair scrapes as she stands up. "I'm going to bed. Try not to yell."

But we don't yell. Seems to be the way of my world—*too tired to fight*. Mom and Dad retreat to their bedroom, leaving me alone at the table. Normally I'd slip out, but I can't find the will to do much more than go to sleep.

I climb up yet another ladder to the loft, where Gisa is already snoring. She can sleep like no other, dropping off in a minute or so, while it can sometimes take me hours. I settle into my cot, content to simply lie there and hold Shade's letter. Like Dad said, it smells strongly of pine.

The river sounds nice tonight, tripping over stones in the bank as it lulls me to sleep. Even the old fridge, a rusty battery-run machine that usually

whines so hard it hurts my head, doesn't trouble me tonight. But then a birdcall interrupts my descent into sleep. *Kilorn*.

No. Go away.

Another call, louder this time. Gisa stirs a little, rolling over into her pillow.

Grumbling to myself, hating Kilorn, I roll out of my cot and slide down the ladder. Anyone else would have tripped over the clutter in the main room, but I have great footing thanks to years of running from officers. I'm down the stilt ladder in a second, landing ankle-deep in the mud. Kilorn is waiting, appearing out of the shadows beneath the house.

"I hope you like black eyes because I have no problem giving you one for this—"

The sight of his face stops me short.

He's been crying. *Kilorn does not cry*. His knuckles are bleeding too, and I bet there's a wall hurting just as hard somewhere nearby. In spite of myself, in spite of the late hour, I can't help but feel concerned, even scared for him.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Without thinking, I take his hand in mine, feeling the blood beneath my fingers. "What happened?"

He takes a moment to respond, working himself up. Now I'm terrified.

"My master—he fell. He died. I'm not an apprentice anymore."

I try to hold in a gasp, but it echoes anyway, taunting us. Even though he doesn't have to, even though I know what he's trying to say, he continues.

"I hadn't even finished training and now—" He trips over his words. "I'm eighteen. The other fishermen have apprentices. I'm not working. I can't *get* work."

The next words are like a knife in my heart. Kilorn draws a ragged breath, and somehow I wish I wouldn't have to hear him.

"They're going to send me to the war."