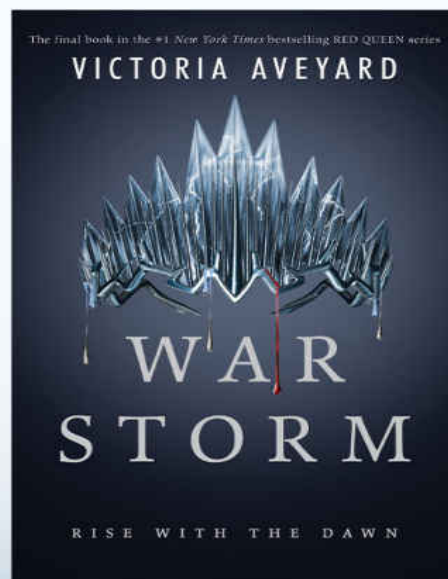
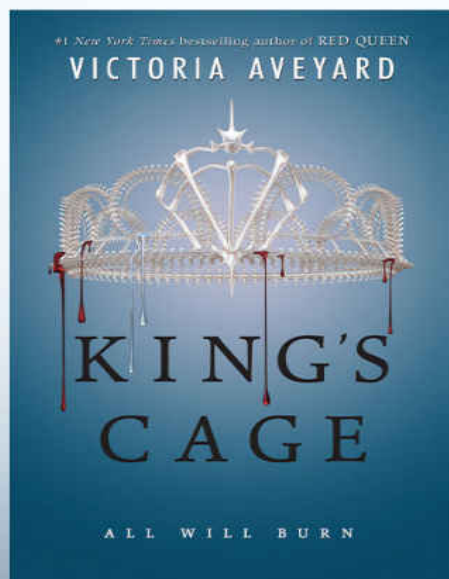
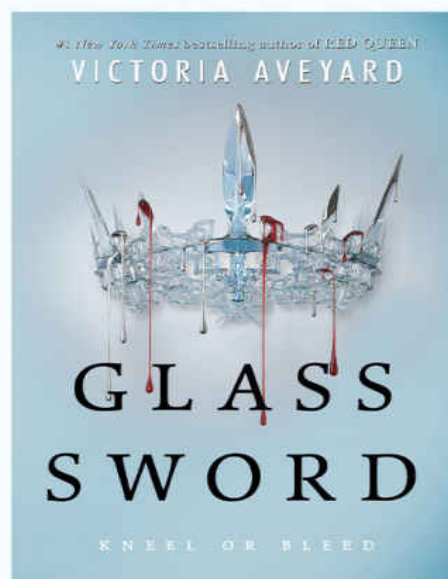


VICTORIA AVEYARD

RED

QUEEN

4 - B O O K C O L L E C T I O N



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THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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.*

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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 Nortta 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."



THREE

It's been going on for the better part of the last hundred years. I don't think it should even be called a war anymore, but there isn't a word for this higher form of destruction. In school they told us it started over land. The Lakelands are flat and fertile, bordered by immense lakes full of fish. Not like the rocky, forested hills of Nortá, where the farmlands can barely feed us. Even the Silvers felt the strain, so the king declared war, plunging us into a conflict neither side could really win.

The Lakelander king, another Silver, responded in kind, with the full support of his own nobility. They wanted our rivers, to get access to a sea that wasn't frozen half the year, and the water mills dotting our rivers. The mills are what make our country strong, providing enough electricity so that even the Reds can have some. I've heard rumors of cities farther south, near the capital, Archeon, where greatly skilled Reds build machines beyond my comprehension. For transport on land, water, and sky, or weapons to rain destruction wherever the Silvers might need. Our teacher proudly told us Nortá was the light of the world, a nation made great by our technology and power. All the rest, like the Lakelands or Piedmont to the south, live in darkness. We were lucky to be born here. *Lucky*. The word makes me want to scream.

But despite our electricity, the Lakelander food, our weapons, their numbers, neither side has much advantage over the other. Both have Silver officers and Red soldiers, fighting with abilities and guns and the shield of a thousand Red bodies. A war that was supposed to end less than a century

ago still drags on. I always found it funny that we fought over food and water. Even the high-and-mighty Silvers need to eat.

But it isn't funny now, not when Kilorn is going to be the next person I say good-bye to. I wonder if he'll give me an earring so I can remember him when the polished legionnaire takes him away.

"One week, Mare. One week and I'm gone." His voice cracks, though he coughs to try to cover it up. "I can't do this. They—they won't take me."

But I can see the fight going out of his eyes.

"There must be something we can do," I blurt out.

"There's nothing anyone can do. No one has escaped conscription and lived."

He doesn't need to tell me that. Every year, someone tries to run. And every year, they're dragged back to the town square and hanged.

"No. We'll find a way."

Even now, he finds the strength to smirk at me. "*We?*"

The heat in my cheeks surges faster than any flame. "I'm doomed for conscription same as you, but they're not going to get me either. So we run."

The army has always been my fate, my punishment, I know that. But not his. It's already taken too much from him.

"There's nowhere we can go," he sputters, but at least he's arguing. At least he's not giving up. "We'd never survive the north in winter, the east is the sea, the west is more war, the south is radiated to all hell—and everywhere in between is crawling with Silvers and Security."

The words pour out of me like a river. "So is the village. Crawling with Silvers and Security. And we manage to steal right under their noses and escape with our heads." My mind races, trying my hardest to find something, anything, that might be of use. And then it hits me like a bolt of lightning. "The black-market trade, the one *we* help keep running, smuggles everything from grain to lightbulbs. Who's to say they can't smuggle people?"

His mouth opens, about to spout a thousand reasons why this won't work. But then he smiles. And nods.

I don't like getting involved with other people's business. I don't have time for it. And yet here I am, listening to myself say four dooming words.

"Leave everything to me."

The things we can't sell to the usual shop owners we have to take to Will Whistle. He's old, too feeble to work the lumberyards, so he sweeps the streets by day. At night, he sells everything you could want out of his moldy wagon, from heavily restricted coffee to exotics from Archeon. I was nine with a fistful of stolen buttons when I took my chances with Will. He paid me three copper pennies for them, no questions asked. Now I'm his best customer and probably the reason he manages to stay afloat in such a small place. On a good day I might even call him a friend. It was years before I discovered Will was part of a much larger operation. Some call it the underground, others the black market, but all I care about is what they can do. They have fences, people like Will, everywhere. Even in Archeon, as impossible as that sounds. They transport illegal goods all over the country. And now I'm betting that they might make an exception and transport a person instead.

"Absolutely not."

In eight years, Will has never said no to me. Now the wrinkled old fool is practically slamming shut the doors of his wagon in my face. I'm happy Kilorn stayed behind, so he doesn't have to see me fail him.

"Will, *please*. I know you can do it—"

He shakes head, white beard wagging. "Even if I *could*, I am a tradesman. The people I work with aren't the type to spend their time and effort shuttling another runner from place to place. It's not our business."

I can feel my only hope, Kilorn's only hope, slipping right through my fingers.

Will must see the desperation in my eyes because he softens, leaning against the wagon door. He heaves a sigh and glances backward, into the darkness of the wagon. After a moment, he turns back around and gestures, beckoning me inside. I follow gladly.

“Thank you, Will,” I babble. “You don’t know what this means to me—”

“Sit down and be quiet, girl,” a high voice says.

Out of the shadows of the wagon, hardly visible in the dim light of Will’s single blue candle, a woman rises to her feet. Girl, I should say, since she barely looks older than me. But she’s much taller, with the air of an old warrior. The gun at her hip, tucked into a red sash belt stamped with suns, is certainly not authorized. She’s too blond and fair to be from the Stilts, and judging by the light sweat on her face, she’s not used to the heat or humidity. She is a foreigner, an outlander, and an outlaw at that. *Just the person I want to see.*

She waves me to the bench cut into the wagon wall, and she sits down again only when I have. Will follows closely behind and all but collapses into a worn chair, his eyes flitting between the girl and me.

“Mare Barrow, meet Farley,” he murmurs, and she tightens her jaw.

Her gaze lands on my face. “You wish to transport cargo.”

“Myself and a boy—” But she holds up a large, callused hand, cutting me off.

“*Cargo*,” she says again, eyes full of meaning. My heart leaps in my chest; this Farley girl might be of the helping kind. “And what is the destination?”

I rack my brain, trying to think of somewhere safe. The old classroom map swims before my eyes, outlining the coast and the rivers, marking cities and villages and everything in between. From Harbor Bay west to the Lakelands, the northern tundra to the radiated wastes of the Ruins and the Wash, it’s all dangerous land for us.

“Somewhere safe from the Silvers. That’s all.”

Farley blinks at me, her expression unchanging. “Safety has a price, girl.”

“Everything has a price, *girl*,” I fire back, matching her tone. “No one knows that more than me.”

A long beat of silence stretches through the wagon. I can feel the night wasting away, taking precious minutes from Kilorn. Farley must sense my unease and impatience but makes no hurry to speak. After what seems like an eternity, her mouth finally opens.

“The Scarlet Guard accepts, Mare Barrow.”

It takes all the restraint I have to keep from jumping out of my seat with joy. But something tugs at me, keeping a smile from crossing my face.

“Payment is expected in full, to the equivalent of one thousand crowns,” Farley continues.

That almost knocks the air from my lungs. Even Will looks surprised, his fluffy white eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. “A *thousand?*” I manage to choke out. No one deals in that amount of money, not in the Stilts. That could feed my family for a year. *Many years.*

But Farley isn’t finished. I get the sense that she enjoys this. “This can be paid in paper notes, tetrarch coins, or the bartering equivalent. Per item, of course.”

Two thousand crowns. A fortune. Our freedom is worth a fortune.

“Your cargo will be moved the day after tomorrow. You must pay then.”

I can barely breathe. Less than two days to accumulate more money than I have stolen in my entire life. *There is no way.*

She doesn’t even give me time to protest.

“Do you accept the terms?”

“I need more time.”

She shakes her head and leans forward. I smell gunpowder on her. “Do you accept the terms?”

It is impossible. It is foolish. *It is our best chance.*

“I accept the terms.”

The next moments pass in a blur as I trudge home through the muddy shadows. My mind is on fire, trying to figure out a way to get my hands on anything worth even close to Farley’s price. There’s nothing in the Stilts, that’s for sure.

Kilorn is still waiting in the darkness, looking like a little lost boy. I suppose he is.

“Bad news?” he says, trying to keep his voice even, but it trembles anyway.

“The underground can get us out of here.” For his sake, I keep myself calm as I explain. Two thousand crowns might as well be the king’s throne, but I make it seem like nothing. “If anyone can do it, we can. We *can*.”

“Mare.” His voice is cold, colder than winter, but the hollow look in his eyes is worse. “It’s over. We lost.”

“But if we just—”

He grabs my shoulders, holding me at an arm’s length in his firm grip. It doesn’t hurt but it shocks me all the same. “Don’t do this to me, Mare. Don’t make believe there’s a way out of this. Don’t give me hope.”

He’s right. It’s cruel to give hope where none should be. It only turns into disappointment, resentment, rage—all the things that make this life more difficult than it already is.

“Just let me accept it. Maybe—maybe then I can actually get my head in order, get myself trained properly, give myself a fighting chance out there.”

My hands find his wrists and I hold on tight. “You talk like you’re already dead.”

“Maybe I am.”

“My brothers—”

“Your father made sure they knew what they were doing long before they went away. And it helps that they’re all the size of a house.” He forces a smirk, trying to get me to laugh. It doesn’t work. “I’m a good swimmer and sailor. They’ll need me on the lakes.”

It’s only when he wraps his arms around me, hugging me, that I realize I’m shaking. “Kilorn—,” I mumble into his chest. But the next words won’t come. *It should be me*. But my time is fast approaching. I can only hope Kilorn survives long enough for me to see him again, in the barracks or in a trench. Maybe then I’ll find the right words to say. Maybe then I’ll understand how I feel.

“Thank you, Mare. For everything.” He pulls back, letting go of me far too quickly. “If you save up, you’ll have enough by the time the legion comes for you.”

For him, I nod. But I have no plans of letting him fight and die alone.

By the time I settle down into my cot, I know I will not sleep tonight. There must be something I can do, and even if it takes all night, I'm going to figure it out.

Gisa coughs in her sleep and it's a courteous, tiny sound. Even unconscious, she manages to be ladylike. No wonder she fits in so well with the Silvers. She's everything they like in a Red: quiet, content, and unassuming. It's a good thing she's the one who has to deal with them, helping the superhuman fools pick out silk and fine fabrics for clothes they'll wear just once. She says you get used to it, to the amount of money they spend on such trivial things. And at Grand Garden, the marketplace in Summertown, the money increases tenfold. Together with her mistress, Gisa sews lace, silk, fur, even gemstones to create wearable art for the Silver elite who seem to follow the royals everywhere. The parade, she calls them, an endless march of preening peacocks, each one more proud and ridiculous than the next. All Silver, all silly, and all status-obsessed.

I hate them even more than usual tonight. The stockings they lose would probably be enough to save me, Kilorn, and half the Stilts from conscription.

For the second time tonight, lightning strikes.

"Gisa. Wake up." I do not whisper. The girl sleeps like the dead. "*Gisa.*"

She shifts and groans into her pillow. "Sometimes I want to kill you," she grumbles.

"How sweet. Now *wake up!*"

Her eyes are still closed when I pounce, landing on her like a giant cat. Before she can start yelling and whining and get my mother involved, I clamp a hand on her mouth. "Just listen to me, that's all. Don't talk, just listen."

She huffs against my hand but nods all the same.

"Kilorn—"

Her skin flushes bright red at the mention of him. She even giggles, something she never does. But I don't have time for her schoolgirl crush, not now.

“Stop that, Gisa.” I take a shaky breath. “Kilorn is going to be conscripted.”

And then her laughter is gone. Conscription isn't a joke, not to us.

“I've found a way to get him out of here, to save him from the war, but I need your help to do it.” It hurts to say it, but somehow the words pass my lips. “I need you, Gisa. Will you help me?”

She doesn't hesitate to answer, and I feel a great swell of love for my sister.

“Yes.”

It's a good thing I'm short, or else Gisa's extra uniform would never fit. It's thick and dark, not at all suited to the summer sun, with buttons and zippers that seem to cook in the heat. The pack on my back shifts, almost taking me over with the weight of cloth and sewing instruments. Gisa has her own pack and constricting uniform, but they don't seem to bother her at all. She's used to hard work and a hard life.

We sail most of the distance upriver, squashed between bushels of wheat on the barge of a benevolent farmer Gisa befriended years ago. People trust her around here, like they can never trust me. The farmer lets us off with a mile still to go, near the winding trail of merchants heading for Summerton. Now we shuffle with them, toward what Gisa calls the Garden Door, though there are no gardens to be seen. It's actually a gate made of sparkling glass that blinds us before we even get a chance to step inside. The rest of the wall looks to be made of the same thing, but I can't believe the Silver king would be stupid enough to hide behind glass walls.

“It isn't glass,” Gisa tells me. “Or at least, not entirely. The Silvers discovered a way to heat diamond and mix it with other materials. It's totally impregnable. Not even a bomb could get through that.”

Diamond walls.

“That seems necessary.”

“Keep your head down. Let me do the talking,” she whispers.

I stay on her heels, my eyes on the road as it fades from cracked black asphalt to paved white stone. It's so smooth I almost slip, but Gisa grabs my arm, keeping me steady. Kilorn wouldn't have a problem walking on this, not with his sea legs. But then Kilorn wouldn't be here at all. He's already given up. *I will not.*

As we get closer to the gates, I squint through the glare to see to the other side. Though Summerton only exists for the season, abandoned before the first frostfall, it's the biggest city I've ever seen. There are bustling streets, shops, cantina bars, houses, and courtyards, all of them pointed toward a shimmering monstrosity of diamondglass and marble. And now I know where it got its name. The Hall of the Sun shines like a star, reaching a hundred feet into the air in a twisting mass of spires and bridges. Parts of it darken seemingly at will, to give the occupants privacy. Can't have the peasants looking at the king and his court. It's breathtaking, intimidating, magnificent—and this is just the *summer* house.

"Names," a gruff voice barks, and Gisa stops short.

"Gisa Barrow. This is my sister, Mare Barrow. She's helping me bring some wares in for my mistress." She doesn't flinch, keeping her voice even, almost bored. The Security officer nods at me and I shift my pack, making a show of it. Gisa hands over our identification cards, both of them torn, dirty things ready to fall apart, but they suffice.

The man examining us must know my sister because he barely glances at her ID. Mine he scrutinizes, looking between my face and my picture for a good minute. I wonder if he's a whisper too and can read my mind. That would put an end to this little excursion very quickly and probably earn me a cable noose around my neck.

"Wrists," he sighs, already bored with us.

For a moment, I'm puzzled, but Gisa sticks out her right hand without a thought. I follow the gesture, pointing my arm at the officer. He slaps a pair of red bands around our wrists. The circles shrink until they're tight as shackles—there's no removing these things on our own.

“Move along,” the officer says, gesturing with a lazy wave of the hand. Two young girls are not a threat in his eyes.

Gisa nods in thanks but I don't. This man doesn't deserve an ounce of appreciation from me. The gates yawn open around us and we march forward. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, drowning out the sounds of Grand Garden as we enter a different world.

It's a market like I've never seen, dotted with flowers and trees and fountains. The Reds are few and fast, running errands and selling their own wares, all marked by their red bands. Though the Silvers wear no band, they're easy to spot. They drip with gems and precious metals, a fortune on every one of them. One slip of a hook and I can go home with everything I'll ever need. All are tall and beautiful and cold, moving with a slow grace no Red can claim. We simply don't have the time to move that way.

Gisa guides me past a bakery with cakes dusted in gold, a grocer displaying brightly colored fruits I've never seen before, and even a menagerie full of wild animals beyond my comprehension. A little girl, Silver judging by her clothes, feeds tiny bits of apple to a spotted, horselike creature with an impossibly long neck. A few streets over, a jewelry store sparkles in every color of the rainbow. I make note of it but keeping my head straight here is difficult. The air seems to pulse, vibrant with life.

Just when I think there could be nothing more fantastic than this place, I look closer at the Silvers and remember exactly who they are. The little girl is a telky, levitating the apple ten feet into the air to feed the long-necked beast. A florist runs his hands through a pot of white flowers and they explode into growth, curling around his elbows. He's a greeny, a manipulator of plants and the earth. A pair of nymphs sits by the fountain, lazily entertaining children with floating orbs of water. One of them has orange hair and hateful eyes, even while kids mill around him. All over the square, every type of Silver goes about their extraordinary lives. There are so many, each one grand and wonderful and powerful and so far removed from the world I know.

“This is how the other half lives,” Gisa murmurs, sensing my awe. “It’s enough to make you sick.”

Guilt ripples through me. I’ve always been jealous of Gisa, her talent and all the privileges it affords her, but I’ve never thought of the cost. She didn’t spend much time in school and has few friends in the Stilts. If Gisa were normal, she would have many. She would smile. Instead, the fourteen-year-old girl soldiers through with needle and thread, putting the future of her family on her back, living neck-deep in a world she hates.

“Thank you, Gee,” I whisper into her ear. She knows I don’t just mean for today.

“Salla’s shop is there, with the blue awning.” She points down a side street, to a tiny store sandwiched between a pair of cafés. “I’ll be inside, if you need me.”

“I won’t,” I answer quickly. “Even if things go wrong, I won’t get you involved.”

“Good.” Then she grabs my hand, squeezing tight for a second. “Be careful. It’s crowded today, more than usual.”

“More places to hide,” I tell her with a smirk.

But her voice is grave. “More officers too.”

We continue walking, every step bringing us closer to the exact moment she’ll leave me alone in this strange place. A thrum of panic goes through me as Gisa gently lifts the pack from my shoulders. We’ve reached her shop.

To calm myself, I ramble under my breath. “Speak to no one, don’t make eye contact. Keep moving. I leave the way I came, through the Garden Door. The officer removes my band and I keep walking.” She nods as I speak, her eyes wide, wary and perhaps even hopeful. “It’s ten miles to home.”

“Ten miles to home,” she echoes.

Wishing for all the world I could go with her, I watch Gisa disappear beneath the blue awning. She’s gotten me this far. Now it’s my turn.



FOUR

I've done this a thousand times before, watching the crowd like a wolf does a flock of sheep. Looking for the weak, the slow, the foolish. Only now, I am very much the prey. I might choose a swift who'll catch me in half a heartbeat, or worse, a whisper who could probably sense me coming a mile away. Even the little telky girl can best me if things go south. So I will have to be faster than ever, smarter than ever, and worst of all, luckier than ever. It's maddening. Fortunately, no one pays attention to another Red servant, another insect wandering past the feet of gods.

I head back to the square, arms hanging limp but ready at my sides. Normally this is my dance, walking through the most congested parts of a crowd, letting my hands catch purses and pockets like spiderwebs catching flies. I'm not stupid enough to try that here. Instead, I follow the crowd around the square. Now I'm not blinded by my fantastic surroundings but looking beyond them, to the cracks in the stone and the black-uniformed Security officers in every shadow. The impossible Silver world comes into sharper focus. Silvers barely look at each other, and they *never* smile. The telky girl looks bored feeding her strange beast, and merchants don't even haggle. Only the Reds look alive, darting around the slow-moving men and women of a better life. Despite the heat, the sun, the bright banners, I have never seen a place so cold.

What concern me most are the black video cameras hidden in the canopy or alleyways. There are only a few at home, at the Security outpost or in the arena, but they're all over the market. I can just hear them humming in firm reminder: *someone else is watching here.*

The tide of the crowd takes me down the main avenue, past taverns and cafés. Silvers sit at an open-air bar, watching the crowd pass as they enjoy their morning drinks. Some watch video screens set into walls or hanging from archways. Each one plays something different, ranging from old arena matches to news to brightly colored programs I don't understand, all blending together in my head. The high whine of the screens, the distant sound of static, buzzes in my ears. How they can stand it, I don't know. But the Silvers don't even blink at the videos, almost ignoring them entirely.

The Hall itself casts a glimmering shadow over me, and I find myself staring in stupid awe again. But then a droning noise snaps me out of it. At first it sounds like the arena tone, the one used to start a Feat, but this one is different. Low and heavier somehow. Without a thought, I turn to the noise.

In the bar next to me, all the video screens flicker to the same broadcast. Not a royal address but a news report. Even the Silvers stop to watch in rapt silence. When the drone ends, the report begins. A fluffy blond woman, Silver no doubt, appears on the screen. She reads from a piece of paper and looks frightened.

“Silvers of Norta, we apologize for the interruption. Thirteen minutes ago there was a terrorist attack in the capital.”

The Silvers around me gasp, bursting into fearful murmurs.

I can only blink in disbelief. Terrorist attack? On the Silvers?

Is that even possible?

“This was an organized bombing of government buildings in West Archeon. According to reports, the Royal Court, the Treasury Hall, and Whitefire Palace have been damaged, but the court and the treasury were not in session this morning.” The image changes from the woman to footage of a burning building. Security officers evacuate the people inside while nymphs blast water onto the flames. Healers, marked by a black-and-red cross on their arms, run to and fro among them. “The royal family was not in residence at Whitefire, and there are no reported casualties at this time. King Tiberias is expected to address the nation within the hour.”

A Silver next to me clenches his fist and pounds on the bar, sending spider cracks through the solid rock top. *A strongarm.* “It’s the Lakelanders! They’re losing up north so they’re coming down south to scare us!” A few jeer with him, cursing the Lakelands.

“We should wipe them out, push all the way through to Prairie!” another Silver echoes. Many cheer in agreement. It takes all my strength not to snap at these cowards who will never see the front lines or send their children to fight. Their Silver war is being paid for in Red blood.

As more and more footage rolls, showing the marble facade of the courthouse explode into dust or a diamondglass wall withstanding a fireball, part of me feels happy. The Silvers are not invincible. They have enemies, enemies who can hurt them, and for once, they aren’t hiding behind a Red shield.

The newscaster returns, paler than ever. Someone whispers to her offscreen and she shuffles through her notes, her hands shaking. “It seems that an organization has taken responsibility for the Archeon bombing,” she says, stumbling a bit. The shouting men quiet quickly, eager to hear the words on-screen. “A terrorist group calling themselves the Scarlet Guard released this video moments ago.”

“The Scarlet Guard?” “Who the hell—?” “Some kind of trick—?” and other confused questions rise around the bar. No one has heard of the Scarlet Guard before.

But I have.

That’s what Farley called herself. Her and Will. But they are *smugglers*, both of them, not terrorists or bombers or whatever else the broadcast might say. *It’s a coincidence, it can’t be them.*

On-screen, I’m greeted by a terrible sight. A woman stands in front of a shaky camera, a scarlet bandanna tied around her face so only her golden hair and keen blue eyes shine out. She holds a gun in one hand, a tattered red flag in another. And on her chest, there’s a bronze badge in the shape of a torn-apart sun.

“We are the Scarlet Guard and we stand for the freedom and equality of all people—,” the woman says. I recognize her voice.

Farley.

“—starting with the Reds.”

I don’t need to be a genius to know that a bar full of angry, violent Silvers is the last place a Red girl wants to be. But I can’t move. I can’t tear my eyes away from Farley’s face.

“You believe you are the masters of the world, but your reign as kings and gods is at an end. Until you recognize us as *human*, as *equal*, the fight will be at your door. Not on a battlefield but in your cities. In your streets. In your homes. You don’t see us, and so we are everywhere.” Her voice hums with authority and poise. “And we will rise up, Red as the dawn.”

Red as the dawn.

The footage ends, cutting back to the slack-jawed blonde. Roars drown out the rest of the broadcast as Silvers around the bar find their voices. They scream about Farley, calling her a terrorist, a murderer, a Red devil. Before their eyes can fall on me, I back out into the street.

But all down the avenue, from the square to the Hall, Silvers boil out from every bar and café. I try to rip off the red band around my wrist, but the stupid thing holds firm. Other Reds disappear into alleys and doorways, trying to flee, and I’m smart enough to follow. By the time I find an alleyway, the screaming starts.

Against every instinct, I look over my shoulder to see a Red man being held up by the neck. He pleads with his Silver assailant, begging. “Please, I don’t know, I don’t know who the hell those people are!”

“What is the Scarlet Guard?” the Silver yells into his face. I recognize him as one of the nymphs who was playing with children not half an hour ago. “Who are they?”

Before the Red can answer, a spray of water pounds against him, stronger than falling hammers. The nymph raises a hand and the water rises up, splashing him again. Silvers surround the scene, jeering with glee, cheering him on. The Red sputters and gasps, trying to catch his breath. He proclaims

his innocence with every spare second, but the water keeps coming. The nymph, wide-eyed with hate, shows no signs of stopping. He pulls water from the fountains, from every glass, raining it down again and again.

The nymph is drowning him.

The blue awning is my beacon, guiding me through the panicked streets as I dodge Reds and Silvers alike. Usually chaos is my best friend, making my work as a thief that much easier. No one notices a missing coin purse when they're running from a mob. But Kilorn and two thousand crowns are no longer my top priority. I can only think about getting to Gisa and getting out of the city that will certainly become a prison. *If they close the gates . . .* I don't want to think about being stuck here, trapped behind glass with freedom just out of reach.

Officers run back and forth in the street—they don't know what to do or who to protect. A few round up Reds, forcing them to their knees. They shiver and beg, repeating over and over that they don't know anything. I'm willing to bet I'm the only one in the entire city who had even *heard* of the Scarlet Guard before today.

That sends a new stab of fear through me. If I'm captured, if I tell them what little I know—what will they do to my family? To Kilorn? To the Stilts?

They cannot catch me.

Using the stalls to hide, I run as fast as I can. The main street is a war zone, but I keep my eyes forward, on the blue awning beyond the square. I pass the jewelry store and slow. Just one piece could save Kilorn. But in the heartbeat it takes me to stop, a hail of glass scrapes my face. In the street, a telky has his eyes on me and takes aim again. I don't give him the chance and take off, sliding under curtains and stalls and outstretched arms until I get back to the square. Before I know it, water sloshes around my feet as I sprint through the fountain.

A frothing blue wave knocks me sideways, into the churning water. It's not deep, no more than two feet to the bottom, but the water feels like lead. I can't move, I can't swim, *I can't breathe*. I can barely think. My mind can

only scream *nymph*, and I remember the poor Red man on the avenue, drowning on his own two feet. My head smacks the stone bottom and I see stars, *sparks*, before my vision clears. Every inch of my skin feels electrified. The water shifts around me, normal again, and I break the surface of the fountain. Air screams back into my lungs, searing my throat and nose, but I don't care. *I'm alive.*

Small, strong hands grab me by the collar, trying to pull me from the fountain. *Gisa.* My feet push off the bottom and we tumble to the ground together.

"We have to go," I yell, scrambling to my feet.

Gisa is already running ahead of me, toward the Garden Door. "Very perceptive of you!" she screams over her shoulder.

I can't help but look back at the square as I follow her. The Silver mob pours in, searching through the stalls with the voracity of wolves. The few Reds left behind cower on the ground, begging for mercy. And in the fountain I just escaped from, a man with orange hair floats facedown.

My body trembles, every nerve on fire as we push toward the gate. *Gisa* holds my hand, pulling us both through the crowd.

"Ten miles to home," *Gisa* murmurs. "Did you get what you needed?"

The weight of my shame comes crashing down as I shake my head. There was no time. I could barely get down the avenue before the report came through. *There was nothing I could do.*

Gisa's face falls, folding into a tiny frown. "We'll figure out something," she says, her voice just as desperate as I feel.

But the gate looms ahead, growing closer with every passing second. It fills me with dread. Once I pass through, once I leave, Kilorn will really be gone.

And I think that's why she does it.

Before I can stop her, grab her, or pull her away, *Gisa's* clever little hand slips into someone's bag. Not just any someone though, but an escaping Silver. A Silver with lead eyes, a hard nose, and square-set shoulders that scream "don't mess with me." *Gisa* might be an artist with a needle and

thread, but she's no pickpocket. It takes all of a second for him to realize what's happening. And then someone grabs Gisa off the ground.

It's the same Silver. There are *two* of them. *Twins?*

"Not a wise time to start picking Silver pockets," the twins say in unison. And then there are three of them, four, five, six, surrounding us in the crowd. *Multiplying. He's a cloner.*

They make my head spin. "She didn't mean any harm, she's just a stupid kid—"

"I'm just a stupid kid!" Gisa yells, trying to kick the one holding her.

They chuckle together in a horrifying sound.

I lunge at Gisa, trying to pry her away, but one of them pushes me back to the ground. The hard stone road knocks the air from my lungs, and I gasp for breath, watching helplessly as another twin puts a foot on my stomach, holding me down.

"Please—," I choke out, but no one's listening to me anymore. The whining in my head intensifies as every camera spins to look at us. I feel electrified again, this time by fear for my sister.

A Security officer, the one who let us inside earlier this morning, strides over, his gun in hand. "What's all this?" he growls, looking around at the identical Silvers.

One by one, they meld back together, until only two remain: the one holding Gisa and the one pinning me to the ground.

"She's a thief," one says, shaking my sister. To her credit, she doesn't scream.

The officer recognizes her, his hard face twitching into a frown for a split second. "You know the law, girl."

Gisa lowers her head. "I know the law."

I struggle as much as I can, trying to stop what's coming. Glass shatters as a nearby screen cracks and flashes, broken by the riot. It does nothing to stop the officer as he grabs my sister, pushing her to the ground.

My own voice screams out, joining the din of the chaos. "It was me! It was my idea! Hurt me!" But they don't listen. They don't care.

I can only watch as the officer lays my sister next to me. Her eyes are on mine as he brings the butt of his gun down, shattering the bones in her sewing hand.



FIVE

Kilorn will find me anywhere I try to hide, so I keep moving. I sprint like I can outrun what I've done to Gisa, how I've failed Kilorn, how I've destroyed everything. But even I can't outrun the look in my mother's eyes when I brought Gisa to the door. I saw the hopeless shadow cross her face, and I ran before my father wheeled himself into view. I couldn't face them both. *I'm a coward.*

So I run until I can't think, until every bad memory fades away, until I can only feel the burning in my muscles. I even tell myself the tears on my cheeks are rain.

When I finally slow to catch my breath, I'm outside the village, a few miles down that terrible northern road. Lights filter through the trees around the bend, illuminating an inn, one of the many on the old roads. It's crowded like it is every summer, full of servants and seasonal workers who follow the royal court. They don't live in the Stilts, they don't know my face, so they're easy prey for pickpocketing. I do it every summer, but Kilorn is always with me, smiling into a drink as he watches me work. *I don't suppose I'll see his smile for much longer.*

A bellow of laughter rises as a few men stumble from the inn, drunk and happy. Their coin purses jingle, heavy with the day's pay. *Silver money*, for serving, smiling, and bowing to monsters dressed as lords.

I caused so much harm today, so much hurt to the ones I love most. I should turn around and go home, to face everyone with at least some courage. But instead I settle against the shadows of the inn, content to remain in darkness.

I guess causing pain is all I'm good for.

It doesn't take long to fill the pockets of my coat. The drunks filter out every few minutes and I press against them, pasting on a smile to hide my hands. No one notices, no one even cares, when I fade away again. I'm a shadow, and no one remembers shadows.

Midnight comes and goes and still I stand, waiting. The moon overhead is a bright reminder of the time, of how long I've been gone. *One last pocket*, I tell myself. *One more and I'll go*. I've been saying it for the past hour.

I don't think when the next patron comes out. His eyes are on the sky, and he doesn't notice me. It's too easy to reach out, too easy to hook a finger around the strings of his coin purse. I should know better by now that nothing here is easy, but the riot and Gisa's hollow eyes have made me foolish with grief.

His hand closes around my wrist, his grip firm and strangely hot as he pulls me forward out of the shadows. I try to resist, to slip away and run, but he's too strong. When he spins, the fire in his eyes puts a fear in me, the same fear I felt this morning. But I welcome any punishment he might summon. I deserve it all.

"Thief," he says, a strange surprise in his voice.

I blink at him, fighting the urge to laugh. I don't even have the strength to protest. "Obviously."

He stares at me, scrutinizing everything from my face to my worn boots. It makes me squirm. After a long moment, he heaves a breath and lets me go. Stunned, I can only stare at him. When a silver coin spins through the air, I barely have the wits to catch it. *A tetrarch. A silver tetrarch worth one whole crown*. Far more than any of the stolen pennies in my pockets.

"That should be more than enough to tide you over," he says before I can respond. In the light of the inn, his eyes glint red-gold, the color of warmth. My years spent sizing people up do not fail me, even now. His black hair is too glossy, his skin too pale to be anything but a servant. But his physique seems more like a woodcutter's, with broad shoulders and strong legs. He's

young too, a little older than me, though not nearly as assured of himself as any nineteen- or twenty-year-old should be.

I should kiss his boots for letting me go *and* giving me such a gift, but my curiosity gets the better of me. It always does.

“Why?” The word comes out hard and harsh. After a day like today, how can I be anything else?

The question takes him aback and he shrugs. “You need it more than I do.”

I want to throw the coin back in his face, to tell him I can take care of myself, but part of me knows better. *Has today taught you nothing?* “Thank you,” I force out through gritted teeth.

Somehow, he laughs at my reluctant gratitude. “Don’t hurt yourself.” Then he shifts, taking a step closer. *He is the strangest person I’ve ever met.* “You live in the village, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I reply, gesturing to myself. With my faded hair, dirty clothes, and defeated eyes, what else could I be? He stands in stark contrast, his shirt fine and clean, and his shoes are soft, reflective leather. He shifts under my gaze, playing with his collar. I make him nervous.

He pales in the moonlight, his eyes darting. “Do you enjoy it?” he asks, deflecting. “Living there?”

His question almost makes me laugh, but he doesn’t look amused. “Does anyone?” I finally respond, wondering what on earth he’s playing at.

But instead of retorting swiftly, snapping back like Kilorn would, he falls silent. A dark look crosses his face. “Are you heading back?” he says suddenly, gesturing down the road.

“Why, scared of the dark?” I drawl, folding my arms across my chest. But in the pit of my stomach, I wonder if I should be afraid. *He’s strong, he’s fast, and you’re all alone out here.*

His smile returns, and the comfort it gives me is unsettling. “No, but I want to make sure you keep your hands to yourself for the rest of the night. Can’t have you driving half the bar out of house and home, can we? I’m Cal, by the way,” he adds, stretching out a hand to shake.