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RED
QUEEN

POWER IS A
DANGEROUS GAME

CHAPTER 4

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, 3 4 victoria aveyard 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." red queen 3 5 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 3 6 victoria aveyard 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 queen 3 7 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 3 8 victoria aveyard 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, red queen 3 9 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 40 victoria aveyard 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." red queen 4 1 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.