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RED
QUEEN

POWER IS A
DANGEROUS GAME

CHAPTER 5

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.

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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." 4 4 victoria aveyard 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. red queen 4
5 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. I don't take it, remembering the blazing heat of his skin. Instead, I set off down the road, my steps quick and quiet. "Mare Barrow," I tell him over my shoulder, and it doesn't take much for his long legs to catch up. "So are you always this pleasant?" he prods, and for some reason, I feel very much like I'm being examined. But the cold silver in my hand keeps me calm, reminding me of what else he has in his pockets. Silver for Farley. How fitting. "The lords must pay well for you to carry whole crowns," I retort, hoping to scare him off the topic. It works beautifully and he retreats. "I have a good job," he explains, trying to brush it off. "That makes one of us." "But you're—" 46 victoria aveyard "Seventeen," I finish for him. "I still have some time before conscription." He narrows his eyes, lips twisting into a grim line. Something hard creeps into his voice, sharpening his words. "How much time?" "Less every day." Just saying it aloud makes

my insides ache. And Kilorn has even less than me. His words die away and he's staring again, surveying me as we walk through the woods. Thinking. "And there are no jobs," he mutters, more to himself than me. "No way for you to avoid conscription." His confusion puzzles me. "Maybe things are different where you're from." "So you steal." I steal. "It's the best I can do," falls from my lips. Again, I remember that causing pain is all I'm good for. "My sister has a job though." It slips out before I remember—No she doesn't. Not anymore.

Because of you. Cal watches me battle with the words, wondering whether or not to correct myself. It's all I can do to keep my face straight, to keep from breaking down entirely in front of a complete stranger. But he must see what I'm trying to hide. "Were you at the Hall today?" I think he already knows the answer. "The riots were terrible." "They were." I almost choke on the words. "Did you . . . ," he presses in the quietest, calmest way. It's like poking a hole in a dam, and it all comes spilling out. I couldn't stop the words even if I wanted to. I don't mention Farley or the Scarlet Guard or even Kilorn. Just that my sister slipped me into Grand Garden, to help me steal the money we needed to survive. Then came Gisa's mistake, her injury, what it meant to us. What I've done to my family. What I have been doing, disappointing my mother, embarrassing my father, stealing from the people red queen 4 7 I call my community. Here on the road with nothing but darkness around me, I tell a stranger how terrible I am. He doesn't ask questions, even when I don't make sense. He just

listens. "It's the best I can do," I say again before my voice gives out entirely. Then silver shines in the corner of my eye. He's holding up another coin. In the moonlight, I can just see the outline of the king's flaming crown stamped into the metal. When he presses it into my hand, I expect to feel his heat again, but he's gone cold. I don't want your pity, I feel like screaming, but that would be foolish. The coin will buy what Gisa no longer can. "I'm truly sorry for you, Mare. Things shouldn't be like this." I can't even summon the strength to frown. "There are worse lives to live. Don't feel sorry for me." He leaves me at the edge of the village, letting me walk through the stilt houses alone. Something about the mud and shadows makes Cal uncomfortable, and he disappears before I get a chance to look back and thank the strange servant. My home is quiet and dark, but even so, I shudder in fear. The morning seems a hundred years away, part of another life where I was stupid and selfish and maybe even a little bit happy. Now I have nothing but a conscripted friend and a sister's broken bones. "You shouldn't worry your mother like that," my father's voice rumbles at me from behind one of the stilt poles. I haven't seen him on the ground in more years than I care to remember. My voice squeaks in surprise and fear. "Dad? What are you doing? How did you—?" But he jabs a thumb over his shoulder, to the pulley rig dangling from the house. For the first time, he used it. "Power went out. Thought I'd give it a look," he says, gruff as ever. 4 8 victoria aveyard He wheels past me, stopping in front of the utility box piped into the ground. Every house has one,

regulating the electric charge that keeps the lights on. Dad wheezes to himself, his chest clicking with each breath. Maybe Gisa will be like him now, her hand a metallic mess, her brain torn and bitter with the thought of what could have been. "Why don't you just use the 'lec papers I get you?" In response, Dad pulls a ration paper from his shirt and feeds it into the box. Normally, the thing would spark to life, but nothing happens. Broken. "No use," Dad sighs, sitting back in his chair. We both stare at the utility box, at a loss for words, not wanting to move, not wanting to go back upstairs. Dad ran just like I did, unable to stay in the house, where Mom was surely crying over Gisa, weeping for lost dreams, while my sister tried not to join her. He bats the box like hitting the damn thing can suddenly bring light and warmth and hope back to us. His actions become more harried, more desperate, and anger radiates from him. Not at me or Gisa but the world. Long ago he called us ants, Red ants burning in the light of a Silver sun. Destroyed by the greatness of others, losing the battle for our right to exist because we are not special. We did not evolve like them, with powers and strengths beyond our limited imaginations. We stayed the same, stagnant in our own bodies. The world changed around us and we stayed the same. Then the anger is in me too, cursing Farley, Kilorn, conscription, every little thing I can think of. The metal box is cool to the touch, having long lost the heat of electricity. But there are vibrations still, deep in the mechanism, waiting to be switched back on. I lose myself in trying to find the electricity, to bring it back and prove that

even one red queen 4 9 small thing can go right in a world so wrong. Something sharp meets my fingertips, making my body jolt. An exposed wire or faulty switch, I tell myself. It feels like a pinprick, like a needle spiking in my nerves, but the pain never follows. Above us, the porch light hums to life. "Well, fancy that," Dad mutters. He spins in the mud, wheeling himself back to the pulley. I follow quietly, not wanting to bring up the reason we are both so afraid of the place we call home. "No more running," he breathes, buckling himself into the rig. "No more running," I agree, more for myself than him. The rig whines with the strain, hoisting him up to the porch. I'm quicker on the ladder, so I wait for him at the top, then wordlessly help detach him from the rig. "Bugger of a thing," Dad grumbles when we finally unsnap the last buckle. "Mom will be happy you're getting out of the house." He looks up at me sharply, grabbing my hand. Though Dad barely works now, repairing trinkets and whittling for kids, his hands are still rough and callused, like he just returned from the front lines. The war never leaves. "Don't tell your mother." "But—" "I know it seems like nothing, but it's enough of something. She'll think it's a small step on a big journey, you see? First I leave the house at night, then during the day, then I'm rolling around the market with her like it's twenty years ago. Then things go back to the way they were." His eyes darken as he speaks, fighting to keep his voice low and level. "I'm never getting better, Mare. I'm never going to feel better. I can't let her hope for that, not when I know it'll never happen. Do you understand?" 5 0

victoria aveyard All too well, Dad. He knows what hope has done to me and softens. "I wish things were different." "We all do." Despite the shadows, I can see Gisa's broken hand when I get up to the loft. Normally she sleeps in a ball, curled up under a thin blanket, but now she lies on her back, with her injury elevated on a pile of clothes. Mom reset her splint, improving my meager attempt to help, and the bandages are fresh. I don't need light to know her poor hand is black with bruises. She sleeps restlessly, her body tossing, but her arm stays still. Even in sleep, it hurts her. I want to reach out to her, but how can I make up for the terrible events of the day? I pull out Shade's letter from the little box where I keep all his correspondences. If nothing else, this will calm me down. His jokes, his words, his voice trapped in the page always soothe me. But as I scan the letter again, a sense of dread pools in my stomach. "Red as the dawn . . ." the letter reads. There it is, plain as the nose on my face. Farley's words from her video, the Scarlet Guard's rallying cry, in my brother's handwriting. The phrase is too strange to ignore, too unique to brush off. And the next sentence, "see the sun rise stronger . . ." My brother is smart but practical. He doesn't care about sunrises or dawns or witty turns of phrase. Rise echoes in me, but instead of Farley's voice in my head, it's my brother speaking. Rise, red as the dawn. Somehow, Shade knew. Many weeks ago, before the bombing, before Farley's broadcast, Shade knew about the Scarlet Guard and tried to tell us. Why? Because he's one of them.