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VICTORIA AVEYARD



RED  
QUEEN

POWER IS A  
DANGEROUS GAME

## CHAPTER 3

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 Norta, 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 Norta was the light of the world, a nation made great by our technology and power. All the red queen 2 1 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. 2 2 victoria aveyard 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 red queen 2 3 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 2 4 victoria aveyard 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. red queen 2 5 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. 26 victoria  
aveyard "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 red queen 2 7 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 Summerton, 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." 2 8 victoria  
aveyard 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 red queen 29 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 30 victoria aveyard 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 red queen 3 1 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 3 2 victoria aveyard 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.